Taste, Enthusiasm and Hard Work: A Script for Success.

An interview with Lizie Gower by Emily Caston.

Lizie Gower is widely regarded as having identified, nurtured and financed some of the UK's top filmmaking talent. In 1985, she pioneered a new business model for producing screen advertising with her award-winning film company, Academy. That model has since been emulated by companies across the globe. Academy remains an acclaimed industry leader. The company is home to Jonathan Glazer whose film, *Zone of Interest* (2023), won Best International Feature Film and Best Sound at the 2024 Academy Awards. A Jury member of BAFTA, Chairman of the British Advertising Arrows awards since 2009, and member of the executive committee of the Advertising Producers' Association, Lizie Gower is regarded as one of the most influential game-changers of British screen advertising.

For her forthcoming book on London's media production industries, Emily Caston interviewed Lizie about the key strategies and decisions in her 42-year career.

EC: Lizie, why did you launch Academy in 1985?

LG: Well, it all began in 1977 when, after breaking both my legs in turn (!) after three years in drama school, I took a job as a receptionist in an advertising production company called Messenger Page for a yearly salary of £3,200 (because I couldn't take my job at the theatre company with legs in a plaster cast).

I didn't know much about the world of television advertising, and it was all quite new to me: I'd been to boarding school where there wasn't a television, and in the school-holidays would return to my family who lived on military bases in Europe without a television, so I hadn't grown up watching commercials. Advertising seemed so exciting, and I quickly loved those 30 second films.

After a year of being a receptionist, I moved to Cotswold Management to become a junior PA [production assistant], and then had a further few promotions to PA and PM [production manager]. At the age of 28, I joined a company called The Shooting Lodge as a junior producer; however, this was short lived as the partners of the company decided to go their separate ways and dissolved the company, leaving me without a job.

It was 1984 and I decided, rather on a whim, to open my own small production company with an editor from Rushes called Richard Simpson who was wanting to turn his skills to directing. Patrick Hayes at Studio Lambert kindly offered me a desk in his office to help get the company going and keep the initial overheads low. It wasn't expensive then to open a company: I had a desk, a phone and a production assistant. Thankfully, I got two jobs confirmed in the first month of business. Our very first commercial was for Anglian double glazing, so we were soon able to move to our own offices in St Anne's Court in Soho [London].

EC: How did you want your new company to differ from the standard model?

LG: In those days, production companies had a director as sole- or part-owner - Alan Parker Films and Ridley Scott Associates, for instance. That's why, when I first opened the company, it was with director-partner Richard Simpson, and I called the company Simpson Gower. Increasingly, however, I felt conflicting responsibilities because, as a producer, I felt obliged to favour the selling of my director-partner rather than the other non-owner directors I represented. As I signed more directors to the company, they all wanted to have their name over the door - even though they weren't owners - and the company began to sound like a bunch of solicitors.

When, after a year of trading, Richard Simpson decided that directing wasn't for him and left the business, I felt fortunate that I could now change the premise of the company. I re-named the company Academy, putting an end to the tradition of the names of the directors above the door, and I became the first sole owner of a production company as a woman producer.

From the start, I tried to keep to a policy of internal recruitment and promotion. When a person first arrived, they could choose between starting as a runner or a receptionist. Then they would be my PA [production assistant] for one year (I reckon that could have to be the hardest job of all). If they survived that, they were on their way up the promotion ladder, to junior PA, PA, PM, producer, and executive producer. It never made sense to me to train up staff and then lose them to other companies. I had to move companies when I was training because many other companies did not promote internally. But we very rarely hired people outside the company at a level higher than runner or receptionist. I believe If you've done every job within the company, you make a better manager because you know what it's like sitting on reception, you know what it's like being the last person on a shoot as a runner, and you've done all the jobs on the way.

This policy creates immense loyalty. Many of Academy's producers have worked their entire careers within the company. We were a family. In fact, Simon Cooper who took over the company (with Medb Riordan) when I retired, had joined Academy fresh from university.

EC: Do you think it was harder because you were a woman?

LG: No, I don't. I wish I could say I did because it would be a better story to tell that I'd had to fight to get accepted, but I didn't. It was slightly a boys' club, but only in the sense that the production company heads back then were mostly guys. The companies competing with me were Brookes Fulford, Park Village, Spots, Ridley Scott Associates - they were the big players. But I never felt compromised as a producer or defined by being a woman. I didn't feel uncomfortable, or that they were unwelcoming.

I think only once in my whole career did it happen; when I was a junior assistant, I asked a producer if he would teach me how to budget and his response disappointingly was, "I wouldn't worry your pretty head about it, you're just going to get married to someone in the army and arrange flowers." I said, "Well I might do, but I might not, and even if I do get married, I might still want to carry on working in film." It was a sweet day years later when he phoned me to ask if I could give him any freelance work at Academy.

I never found agencies or film crew to be difficult because I was a woman. I was very surprised that there was a distinct lack of woman as creative directors in the advertising agencies. Barbara Noakes was the first, I think, and, even now, women creative directors only account for 12 or 13% of all creative directors in London. In the '80s and '90s, women copywriters and art directors were rare and those that did exist often drew the short straw and were given the archetypal female briefs that the male creatives didn't want to work on. Thankfully that is changing now so maybe the next generation will reflect a better gender split.

EC: Today, many people feel nervous about starting a company. Did you?

LG: I really didn't think very hard about it. It didn't seem a big deal. I didn't know what was involved and my business skills were sketchy at best: I was ignorant about how to calculate VAT or what a trial balance sheet was. I'd been to drama school not business school. What I thought I did have was *taste*, *enthusiasm* and a hunger to *work hard.*

I learned the financial basics on the job with a patient accountant as my guide. To start with I did all the bookkeeping, and I did everything myself. I worked seven days a week. It was hard but rewarding seeing the company grow. It never felt particularly brave. I just got on with it. No-one ever said, "Oh god, that's so courageous especially because you are a woman" so I just took it for granted that was my job. It wasn't until I started winning awards that people began to give the company, and in turn myself, recognition.

The turning point for the company came in the early '90s with a director called Geoff Posner. I was constantly looking for new directors - especially directors who came from a varied background. Geoff was a television director and he had made a very funny TV programme called *Norbert Smith* [Hat Trick, C4, 1989] with Harry Enfield. I thought his work not only made me laugh but had a strong visual style. HCCL [Howell, Henry, Chaldicott, Lury & Partners] were doing a series of commercials on Mercury telephones. I put Geoff forward, and he got them. The commercials were all heavily stylised and shot in black and white. They were original and funny and won loads of awards at the Arrows. And when you've won an award, you're on the radar and it's easier to win another award because people take you more seriously. That's why I took awards seriously too.

EC: Did you have any guiding strategic principles?

LG: I had two mantras at Academy: develop talent, and win awards.

After our win at the Arrows with the HCCL spots, it really became my mission not to make money, but to get the creative recognition that I felt that would bring the company longevity by winning awards. After 39 years, Academy has more awards than any other production company in the world. I always thought that if we kept on winning awards, the directors and the company would stay relevant and in return have more creative respect.

Developing talent was my other mission. That was our currency. I was always looking out for new talent. It was much easier to develop talent in the ‘90s because ad agencies often needed to make small projects with a tiny budget especially for a new client. If it was a great script and I thought it could win an award or go on a directors showreel, we would do it, no matter what budget they had - twenty grand, ten grand or no grand, whatever. The work was more important than the money.

We also developed ‘film ditties’ for the directors. These were original films which Academy paid for: sixty second or two-minute short films which would appeal to ad agencies and, in turn, would sell the directors that had made them. Other production companies were doing this but by getting test scripts from ad agencies or writing their own test scripts, from which to make fake ads. The problem with a fake ad is that it never felt genuine, and, more importantly, it didn’t give creative freedom to develop a piece for the director. It naturally had the constraints that all ads have.

That’s how Jonathan Glazer got started, with two film ditties. When Academy signed him in 1993, he had some rugby idents from South Africa on his showreel, but we wanted more work to show his talent to the agencies. So, Academy paid for him to make two ditties: a film called *Mad* (1994) and another film called *Pool* (1994). The ad agencies went crazy over his films because they were so original and compelling to watch. Most of our directors made these short little films to kick start their careers too.

Academy was one of the first production companies to start a dedicated music video division which was rather like a training school within which our directors could do almost whatever they wanted. Walter Stern's video for The Verve's 'Bitter Sweet Symphony' [1997] and Jon's videos for Radiohead's 'Street Spirit' [1995] and Jamiroquai's 'Virtual Insanity' [1996] were made by us. The record companies were able to give directors much more creative freedom than ad agencies and that enabled the directors to develop and further their experience. The directors were able to experiment with different film crew, camera equipment, post-production effects and so on. The work could be original and unharnessed, and agency creative directors responded well to seeing the videos.

EC: In 1999, Academy produced Glazer's 'Surfer' ad for Guinness, widely regarded as one of the best commercial ever made. Tell me a bit about that?

LG: Well, talk about a game changer … I remember being at Chiat Day in USA with the film literally hot off the press and with no one having seen it: the creative director to whom I showed it watched it three times in quick succession because he was so blown away by it, and then summoned his entire department to look at what he called "the best commercial ever made." It's hard to think of the commercial in its original form now, because all the parts that Jon added to it like the white horses, the original combination of Leftfield's 'Phat Planet' and Moby Dick on the audio track, and the even longer wait! The sound design for Guinness 'Surfer' was done by Johnny Burn who won an Academy Award earlier this year for Sound Design on Jon's *Zone of Interest* [2023]. It was a year in the making, designing cameras that would work on the surfboard, waiting for the right month to get the biggest waves and the CGI on the horses. With that iconic black and white photography, it's a flawless piece of work that still stands the test of time.

Guinness 'Surfer' television advert, 1999, dir Jonathan Glazer

CGI was breaking new ground around this time. It was hard to get your brain around the capabilities of what could be achieved a whole new rafter of ads were made: imagine getting a boy and a girl to run through a wall like they did in Jon's Levi's ad ['Odyssey', 2002]. We

created CGI that was so stunning, it just opened people's imaginations. Advertising seemed to be leading the world of CGI.

EC: You produced Glazer's second feature film, Birth?

LG: Yes, alongside Nick Morris who was also a producer at Academy. We were the production company on *Birth* (2004) and were able to fund and develop the script with Jon who co-wrote it with Jean Claude Carriere and then we put the budget together. When Nicole Kidman became attached, the phone started to ring with studios wanting to make it, so it was a relatively painless and a quick turnaround for a feature which subsequently I discovered was anything but the norm.

It a different world making a feature film that lasts for 120 minutes than a commercial for 30 seconds: it was like going from a marathon to a sprint. It was an experience that I am so very grateful to have had, but not one that I would want to do again.

EC: Academy signed and developed one of Britain's leading women directors, Kim Gehrig. Why do you think women directors were so badly underrepresented in earlier decades?

LG: Women were underrepresented not just in directing but in every creative area apart from the traditional female jobs in production. We had women crew in make-up, wardrobe, art department and continuity but not in the camera department, which was very much a male domain in which it was extremely rare to see women coming up through the ranks. Women just weren't putting themselves forward to direct. I would often ask female crew and ad agency creatives, "What do you think about directing, would you consider it?" But if the hunger and confidence wasn't forthcoming, it was hard to encourage.

We started talking to Kim Gehrig about being a director when she was still at Mother, the advertising agency. Kim was so obviously talented, and she did have the hunger and confidence. After a short time of straddling both the jobs of a creative and a director, she made the move to full time directing at Academy and the rest is history. Kim is one of the most accomplished directors in the world.

EC: Was it easier for women to become producers than directors?

LG: I've often felt that the role of a producer is unsung in the production of advertising. That's not true in films, where the role of a producer is recognised and valued. In advertising, it's the producer who spots the director's work in the first place, grows and nurtures them, and hopefully helps them on the creative side. It's the producer who makes it work financially and puts the whole shoot together. It's often been said that organisational skills are essential for a producer, but they are by no means the only skills needed to be a successful one. The financial and creative parts of a producer's job are just as important.

Personally, I felt I had much more longevity as a producer than a director. I went into the business when I was 21 and I've had a career spanning over 40 years. I could never have had that length of career if I'd have been a director. Most advertising directors are in demand for a shorter period of time. It's quite an ageist business. Clients and agencies don't think, "Oh, that director has got so much experience, they've been directing commercials for thirty years now, let's hire them."' On the contrary, they are more likely to think, "Let's find someone new." Directors' careers tend to take off, accelerate quite quickly to the top, level out for a while, and then slowly die back again. Directors try to find work from other territories to refresh the showreel, but it's a vicious circle and they can't get work because the showreel is dated. However, a producer can keep going on and on, switching from one production to another with different directors because their age and experience is considered relevant and is valued.

EC: You once said that 13 directors was the optimum roster size. Do you still feel that?

LG: Actually, I don't. The landscape changed. Directors are heavily pigeonholed now, so a production company needs to have a director to put forward for every type of script. A comedy director and a visual director is often a clear division, but there are so many more subcategories within those areas. We were often asked for directors that did cars, or food, or beauty, or sport or tabletop, so we needed to have all those bases covered. In the 1990s, the industry was very much less pigeonholed for directors. I would rather just have the big pigeonhole of very good directors, but that's not how it is in the main.

It's interesting to note that I don't think the profit ratio became any bigger when we doubled or tripled in size. Just the stress levels! Agencies also like to work with different directors, so it was good for us to have a varied roster. Creatives might only get to do a handful of commercials a year so they in turn want to work with different directors. I like to think that I was always available for all the directors to talk with about their projects and any problems that they might be facing on a script. Sometimes, although those problems seemed small, they could have a significant impact on the commercial. It was important for me to find the time to be able to listen and respond to them alongside doing my everyday job of running a company and producing television commercials.

EC: How has the role of production companies changed since you founded Academy?

LG: Today, production companies have to spend so much time and money on the pitch document. Producing a treatment with so much detail and thought about technical solutions and creative visuals can be all-consuming. Especially if a director's ratio is winning one in four pitches, production companies need to be working on multiple treatments at the same time. In the 90s, though, there was no such thing as a treatment: you would have a meeting with the agency Head of TV in the agency, a meeting in which sometimes the creatives

would be present, and sometimes, surprisingly, they weren't! The budgets were way less detailed and the pitch process much less structured.

EC: What Academy commercials are you most proud of, that serve as landmarks?
LG: There are so many but if pushed my personal favourite is Jon's 'Skating Priests' for Stella Artois [Lowe, 120 secs, 2005]. It's a visual masterpiece coupled with brilliant story telling. It makes me smile every time I see it …

Each of our directors had a commercial that pinpointed the uplift in their career: a piece of film that put them on the road to success; it might not be the most awarded piece of work they'd ever done, but it was a game changer. I do have great affection for those spots.

Peter Cattaeno, for instance, who joined Academy fresh from having directed *The Full Monty* [1997], did a spot for Audi called 'Golf Club' [BBH, 60 secs, 1999]. He changed much of the original agency script, adding lines that were improvised in the casting sessions. It was very on point and funny. The lines "El capitano" and "It's all in the buttocks" still make me chuckle.

Frédéric Planchon did a seamless piece of work for Miller Light 'Downhill' [Mother, 60 secs, 2005]. It looked like a loop of film in which you couldn't see the beginning or the end of the film. After this spot we were never short of top scripts coming in for him. 'Time Theft' for Vodaphone [BBH, 100 secs, 2007] followed swiftly.

Si and Ad changed the field of dating commercials alongside their own careers with their charming ad 'Piano' for Match.com [Mother, 60 secs, 2010]. I can look at it now and it's still so moving, like a little indie film within a commercial 60 seconds.

Kim Gehrig's 'Kitchen Parties' spot for IKEA [Mother, 60 secs, 2010], and Seb Edwards Hovis 'Farmers Lad' (JWT, 90 secs, 2012] are also commercials that established their directors' careers. I have great affection for all these.

EC: Awards have been incredibly important in your career. In 2009 you changed the name of the British Television Advertising Awards. Why?

LG: When I became Chairman of the awards in 2009, I thought that it needed a bit of an update, which included renaming them the Arrows to reflect that much of the work was not made for, or indeed shown on, television. Categories included things like the "Ambient Awards", "Instore Awards" and "Cinema." Also, ads were being watched on different platforms, from phones to laptops and in store. So, I suggested we change the name from the British Television Advertising Awards to just simply the Arrows in order to reflect the iconic prize of the arrow mounted on a wooden board.

The Arrows are special because they are British, whereas the D&ADs and Cannes are international. The one thing that's very different in London to the USA is that in London, the production companies were all supportive of each other, and we became friends. The Arrows were part of that. You always knew most of the winners at the Arrows awards event, and you'd be able to congratulate them in person and say how pleased you were for them, and you'd genuinely mean it. It was everyone's most popular award. We were in one big club together.