

TRUDY TAKES

HOLLYWOOD

Trudy Bellinger is a British Female film director living in Hollywood, rapidly making inroads in a predominantly male industry. Having previously made an impact as one of the first female creative executives in the British music industry, Trudy is now determined to do the same in the film and TV industry in America.



WHEN DID YOU REALISE YOU WERE A CREATIVE PERSON? WAS IT IN YOUR GENES OR WAS IT JUST SOMETHING YOU FELT FROM A CHILD?

I remember creating a fashion magazine. When I was about eight years old, and I charged the neighbours ten pence to read it for an evening. I also recall putting on little shows for my parents, friends and family where I'd make impressions (wrongly) and dance or act.

My creativity changed at eleven when my older sister Anita was killed a road accident. I think when something tragic happens to you as a child, it's almost like you have to have some outlet and creativity is no longer a choice but becomes a necessity and a way to channel the pain

TELL US ABOUT YOUR EDUCATION AND HOW YOU STEERED THAT?

I went to an all-girls school from aged 13 and was really into art and drama. I then did a degree called Expressive Arts at Brighton University, where I studied visual and performing Arts. You could choose between Theatre, Music or dance for the Performing Arts element. I chose Theatre and specialised in photography and mixed media on the arts side.

WHO INSPIRED YOU AT COLLEGE?

Multimedia art courses were scarce back then, and so the students were really eclectic, and some were already signed recording artists or in theatre or dance groups so I was very much inspired by my fellow students and by the work of Gilbert and George, Man Ray, Diane Arbus, Theatre de Complicite, Sylvia Plath, Kathy Acker and fashion and subculture.

My primary influence and inspiration was my tutor and mentor, the late Conceptual Artist Helen Chadwick. She was, in fact, the first female artist (in 1987) to be nominated for the Turner Prize. For an incredible installation involving photography and sculpture called *Of Mutability*. After graduating, I worked as her assistant on this show which is probably one of the greatest experiences of my life. She frequently used her own body as the subject of her work which focused on female identity and involved aesthetic beauty created out of an alliance of unconventional, often vile, materials... without a doubt she has been an incredible influence on contemporary artists in particular female artists like Tracey Emin.

WHAT HAPPENED WHEN YOU GRADUATED?

I worked as an art assistant to Helen while trying to pursue my work as an artist, but it was incredibly difficult and expensive as my own art work involved massive installations and billboard size photography.



It was an exciting time as Helen lived on Beck Rd in Hackney where Maureen Paley and Genesis P Orridge lived, so I was surrounded by incredible Art and Intellect. I had a couple of my pieces accepted in The New Contemporaries Show at The ICA and The Young Contemporaries at Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester and had a few pieces commissioned for shows in small London galleries like Camerawork in East London. I needed to make money to fund my work, so I tried to pursue a job as a photographer.

I was very bold and brash back then and with youth came self-confidence. I carted my vast portfolio of experimental and conceptual photography round to agencies and magazines naively believing I was a great photographer and that someone would hire me. But there wasn't much call for autobiographical depictions of female identity or naked self-portraits on crosses at that time !!! So I did various jobs including being a photographer assistant to Rocco Redondo, teaching Photography and randomly Knitwear Design on a Government Youth Training Scheme in Brixton, being a recruitment consultant for Photographers at Photostaff Consultants, and running a small talent agency for hair and makeup artists and stylists.

HOW DID YOU WORKING IN VIDEO START?

I worked for a company called Husdon Productions which mainly produced Stills campaigns. We then moved into film when the demand came from our clients to do training films and in-store videos. Shortly after that, I got a job at The PowerStation, the music channel on BSB Network. This was an incredible experience as I was working with people like Chris Evans, Boy George, Suggs and Jo Whiley. It was an exciting, experimental and creative environment and I learnt a lot working as live TV floor director/stage manager. I met many artists and musicians and became passionate about music videos. They combined all the things I was interested in, fashion, music, dance, theatre, performance and conceptual art, photography, film and subculture and the best ones were like mini art films.

Music videos had become an essential marketing tool for record companies, so many new music video production companies were opening and after the Powerstation closed when Sky and BSB merged, I knew that I wanted to work in Music Videos.

WHEN DID YOU START WORKING AT EMI? HOW DID IT COME ABOUT ?

I had been running a music video production company and executive producing and line producing for US and UK directors such as Sam Bayer (Nirvana Smells like Teen Spirit etc.) Russell Young, Kevin Kerslake, Howard Myers. I had a call from EMI saying that the MD wanted to meet me. I went to the meeting laden with heavy bags of my director's U-Matic showreels (before the days of online reels!), and my intention was to see if I could secure some kind of music video production deal for our company (ExSpence Pictures/Midnight Films) When I got there, I was offered the job of running the music video department responsible for commissioning all the music videos. I hadn't been prepared for that, but the MD wanted me and asked me to name my price which I did and then to really drive a hard bargain I asked for a sports car! To my surprise, he agreed to give me what I wanted, and I found myself unexpectedly in a new job! I was soon promoted to Head of Creative Affairs, which meant that in addition to music videos, I was also responsible for image-making and overall visuals for EMI artists.

WHO WERE YOU HANDLING?

I worked with all the EMI artists so it was everyone from Diana Ross, through to Iron Maiden, Robert Palmer, Cliff Richard, Geri Halliwell, Starsailor, Damage, Terrorvision, Eternal, Louise, Adam Ant etc and then all artists on the dance label Positiva and R & B label Cooltempo.

WAS THERE MANY WOMEN IN THE MUSIC INDUSTRY AT THAT TIME?

There were few Female Heads of Departments when I joined, but EMI then employed the late Rebecca Coates as Head of TV/Radio/media and Jody Dunleavy was Head of Press.

WHEN DID YOU SWITCH FROM ORGANISING THE DIRECTORS AND CONCEPTS TO SHOOTING YOURSELF?

I was at EMI for 10 years and it became increasingly frustrating to commission as the industry was changing and becoming more corporate and my budgets were shrinking. A lot of my artists worked creatively on concepts with me which I then spoon fed to directors. With the shrinking budgets, my access to great directors became limited and, coming from a creative background (Visual and Performing Arts) I became extremely hands on (and dare I say interfering) in every aspect.



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public are women that only
5 % of commercials directors
were female”*

I gained a lot of trust with my artists and they consistently asked me to direct. I was also shooting stills for press and single/album art work so was already going above and beyond what a label executive would normally do. I co-directed several videos and then felt it was time to direct on my own. The first video I directed on my own was a drum and bass track “Shake ur Body” by Shy FX and T Power.

*WHERE DO YOU IDEAS COME FROM? WHAT
INSPIRES YOU? IS IT THE BAND/ARTIST OR THE
SONG?*

It varies dependent on the project. I work in music videos, TV promos, commercials , fashion and original content so it depends. In music videos it is usually the song , the lyrical content or the vibe that inspires me. If I can collaborate or brainstorm with the artist, that's really helpful but it rarely happens. In commercials, unless I am the creative director (agency) as well as the director, I start with the agency idea/ boards and then embellish or bring a new vision /angle to it. I sometimes might see a still image somewhere or a piece of art which inspires an

idea, .sometimes an idea literally just comes to me and I see it running like a film in my head.

*WHAT IS YOUR LIFE STYLE LIKE AROUND
WORK? DO YOU HANG OUT WITH CREATIVES
MOSTLY?*

Now I live in Los Angeles, I am surrounded by industry people I am naturally attracted to and inspired by creatives (artists, musicians and fashion stylists/designers) as we have a shared understanding and interests.

*WHAT IS LIKE TO BE IN CHARGE OF A HUGE
GROUP OF PEOPLE. TELLING THEM ALL WHAT
TO DO ESSENTIALLY? DOES IT FEEL GOOD? DO
YOU NEED NERVES OF STEEL?*

My crew/team are an extremely important part of the whole process so I don't think of it as me being in charge telling them what to do. Everybody is chosen for their skill and its really important to collaborate and work closely wth people to achieve the best results. Of course I have a vision but I am collaborative rather than bossy (I hope).

“Shutting down West Hollywood with Diana Ross (and Ru Paul) for "I will survive" video was an incredible experience as drag queens dressed as Diana came from all over the States. It was like the best Gay Pride Festival and Carnival combined”



Having said that when I am shooting abroad with a crew I don't know, it can be a little scary especially if the crew is mainly male and not used to female directors. I try to be respectful to everyone whatever their role and I hope I encourage people to bring their own ideas to the party. Sometimes the talent might be intimidating or difficult and then its a matter of putting on a strong armor and knowing my crew are my army.

WHO IS YOUR DP? I WOULD IMAGINE THIS IS A VERY IMPORTANT RELATIONSHIP?

Yes - the DP is extremely important and again it depends on the project who I work with. I have my favourites in USA and in UK. When those aren't available, its a very difficult choice as its about the rhythm between the director and DP as well as the aesthetic and shared understanding of terminology/references etc so it can be love or hate.

WHAT IS YOUR BEST MEMORY OF SHOOTING A POP VIDEO?

Shutting down West Hollywood with Diana Ross (and Ru Paul) for "I will survive" video was an incredible experience as drag queens dressed as Diana came from all over the States. It was like the best Gay Pride Festival and Carnival combined - In wild contagious excitement

and surrounded by an infectious frenzy, Miss Ross spontaneously and unexpectedly threw herself off the stage in a spectacular stage dive. For a split second my life rushed before me but fortunately there were hundreds of beautiful and strong Diana lookalikes ready to catch her!

YOU HAVE WORKED WITH GIRLS ALOUD, SUGAR BABES, PIXIE LOTT, LEONA LEWIS, THE SATURDAYS AND MANY COMMERCIALS AS WELL? DO YOU EVER CELEBRATE YOUR ACHIEVEMENTS?

I celebrate when I win a job! Getting the M & S fashion campaigns with Twiggy was a huge deal for me as was winning my first commercial for Rimmel with Kate Moss. I loved working on Next Top Model with Elle McPherson and Julien Macdonald which I did for several years.

As a director, I always want to do more or take things further and so I am never complacent - rather than celebrating achievements I might be commiserating about the shots that didn't make the cut and I'm usually anticipating the next job - I guess the moment I become satisfied with my achievements is the moment I stop progressing. Rather like a relationship, it might take a few years before I look back on a project I directed and finally really appreciate it!

YOU LIVE IN LA NOW WHY THE MOVE?

I moved for several reasons. I have many great friends there and I felt there were more opportunities for moving into Television and Film. I love the weather, the lifestyle and the glamour! And of course the crews and talent are brilliant.

HOW DIFFICULT A TOWN IS TO GAIN TRACTION?

To be honest its been hard as a female director but I think that's changing now, inclusion will take time - we are now invited to the party, just not the really good ones yet!

WHAT ARE THE COMMON ASKS FOR FEMALE DIRECTORS IN THE COMMERCIAL WORLDS?

When I first moved to LA, the main commercial boards I would get sent, were Tampax or Vaginal creams. It was like women directors could only tell female exclusive stories! It was shocking that given the fact half the buying public are women and that only 5% of commercial directors were female.

Our experiences as women are totally different to men, we have the sensitivity and experience to bring the (long overdue) female gaze to life and present women as the subject of the action rather than the object of desire.

“#freethebid was set up for agencies and clients to pledge that one of the three directors considered would be a woman which opens up new opportunities for female talent, brings a more realistic female voice and improves the quality of work. Production companies who pledge to #freethebid agree to sign and mentor female directors “.



By representing a female sensibility authentically and emphatically we can enable the female audience to RELATE - I aspire to make content which will make viewers FEEL rather than merely SEE and like to portray women as strong and in control of their sexuality so they are positive role models for our future generation. Fixing the gender problem in Hollywood is important but its also important for girls and women everywhere -we are influencing culture which is why its dangerous not to have more women directing .

Its a slow process but female directors are gradually working towards leveling out the playing field.

HOW DOES IT WORK IN TERMS OF NAILING JOBS, DO YOU HAVE AN AGENT?

I used to be signed exclusively to production companies who would represent and market me. However the production company model has significantly changed over the last few years and with so much content needed now in all areas, I found it can be counter productive to be exclusive to just one company. I work in many different areas; commercials/music videos/TV promos/TV/ fashion /documentary so I am currently totally freelance and work with multiple companies who contact me if something comes up that seems to suit my style - I am not exclusive to one agent at this point but this is something I am seriously considering as I move into TV and creating original content.

I also work as a creative director so I often get approached client direct to conceptualize and direct commercials and branded content.

DO YOU MOSTLY HAVE TO COME UP WITH YOUR OWN BRIEF OF IDEAS, COULD YOU JUST BE A GUN FOR HIRE AND SHOOT SOMEONE ELSE VISION?

It depends - my work is quite stylised so usually clients want me to bring my own ideas along with my vision and style to a project even if they have the initial concept. In the case of music videos, some TV promos and fashion films I am usually given a lot of freedom to ideate and conceptualize. I think I am much more of a “creative” ideas director than a technical director. Having said that, if its a great project already with a strong visual idea which I like then of course I am happy to shoot and execute someone else vision and believe I have the sensitivity to fully grasp the writer’s (or client’s) intention. Being the Creative Director at a major record label taught me the art and power of collaboration.

HOW HARD IS IT FOR WOMEN DIRECTORS HERE?

Personally I have found it harder in LA than in EUROPE. In UK I (naively ?) didn't think my gender was going against me in my career as a director, but I became aware very quickly of the sexism in Hollywood, even today more than 90% movies are directed by men. I am in a documentary called "Seeing is Believing, Women direct " (directed by Cady McClain) and its frustrating yet enlightening to hear the familiar struggles we have all shared to be heard and seen as directors but fortunately the balance is shifting thanks to organisations like #freethebid, Women in Film and trailblazing women like Shonda Rimes, Ava DuVernay and Alma Har’el. The gender imbalance in Hollywood is as a film critic for NYT put it;

“ immoral, maybe illegal! “

TELL US ABOUT ‘FREE THE BID’?

Free the Bid was set up by commercials director Alma Har’el. When an ad agency puts out a job for tender, they typically present three directors who write treatments and pitch for the job. Free the bid was set up to guarantee women directors an equal opportunity bid on commercial jobs (less than 7% of directors are women) Agencies and clients pledge that one of the three directors considered would be a woman which opens up new opportunities for female talent, brings a more realistic female voice and improves the quality of work. Production companies who pledge to free the bid agree to sign and mentor female directors . Free the bid was initially set up to disrupt the ad industry but has recently evolved into Free the Work inviting all creative industries to recognise, support and champion women.

WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON AT THE MOMENT? YOU ARE SO SUCCESSFUL, WHAT ARE YOUR ASPIRATIONS IN THE BUSINESS FOR THE FUTURE?

I am continuing to direct TV promos, commercials and the occasional music video whilst developing two dramas and a TV non scripted format idea.

One of the dramas (working title "Tease") has been developed with Dita Von Teese. Music and dance, subculture and art come together in glorious technicolor as we weave between glossy exotic fantasy and contemporary gritty reality with elements of old Hollywood. The main protagonists are women so there are multiple strong female and diverse roles of all ages.

The other show (#trending) is more of a contemporary Ab Fab dramedy.

I have a short film doing the festival rounds at the moment. I have just creative directed and shot a campaign for Maison Margiela/John Galliano's Mutiny which has been incredible. I'm a partner and creative director in a GenZ and branded content studio called 3RDSOL (with Amos Pizzey/Mark Simmons/Lisa I'anson) My aspirations are to get my shows off the ground and finally be able to get in the door to direct TV (its impossible to direct without having shadowed or directed TV before so I'm finding its pretty much a closed door at the moment).

I have two fashion related documentaries I would like to make as well. I volunteer as a mentor for several colleges and film programmes and hope to inspire and support more female directors.

As a single mum I also hope to continue to find quality time with my teenage son.



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Photographer Rich Royal

Make up Jane Cohen

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