Her Edit

HER ISSUE | HER VOICE

Issue Twenty-nine

winter 2019

Her Edit

Issue Twenty-nine
Winter 2019

editor@heredit.com www.heredit.com
@her_edit

editorial team
Jayne Phenton
Ann Clark

our contributors
Emma Rees

thank you

Rebecca Fairman
Liz Farahadi
Athena Mandis
Karen McDonald
Anne Morrison
Aradhna Tayal
Sarah Williams
Fionn Wilson

Front cover image
Welcome to the Sixties, 2017,
oil on canvas, 95 x 80 cm, Cathy Lomax
©CathyLomax

Welcome to Her Edit

The start of another year often seems the most prescient time for new beginnings. If you've made your resolutions and are looking for inspiration, then look no further than the women on the following pages.

Anne Morrison, who I'm delighted to be pictured with at BAFTA in the snap above, is one of the warmest and most generous interviewees I've had the pleasure to chat with, and her career sets a paradigm for anyone focussing on professional ambitions in the coming months.

I had an absolute hoot talking with Liz Farahadi, Athena Mandis and Aradhna Tayal. These three incredibly dynamic women are using their talent, not only to create magical cinema, but to raise awareness of social issues and create a seismic shift in the gender make-up of their industry. If you want to change the world this year, then read on.

I'm thrilled to feature the exhibition Dear Christine which opens at one of my favourite galleries, Arthouse1 in Bermondsey, London, on 2 February. I urge you to go. The curator, Fionn Wilson, epitomises the term 'self-starter', having brought together an eclectic group of artists to reclaim the image of Christine Keeler from her tabloid facsimile. Impetus for anyone with a project in mind.

If you have any doubts about trying anything new, be reassured by Emma Fielder's disarming reflections on what she's learned since moving to a different country. Whatever your plans, we hope you flourish in the coming year and wish you a very happy 2020.

Her Issue Twenty-nine

IMAGES
Clockwise from left: Anne Morrison, Fionn Wilson, Liz Farahadi, Athena Mandis, Aradhna Tayal and Emma Fielder

Anne Morrison is one of the most respected women in the world of television. Her illustrious career as an executive producer, coach and keynote speaker, has spanned three decades with the BBC and her recent chairmanship of BAFTA.

She is currently Creative Director, Factual Programmes, Nevision and Chair of Pearson College. Anne is a board member Women in Film and TV (UK), a trustee of both the Charleston Trust, which manages the Sussex home of Bloomsbury artists, Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, and of the Watersprite Film Festival

Jayne Phenton went to BAFTA to meet one of the most powerful - and most charming - women in broadcasting.

ANNE MORRISON
Nurturing talent

It's become a truism that women tend to play down their achievements and abilities, but if there's one thing I learn from meeting Anne Morrison, Executive Producer, Coach and Chair of more organisations than you can shake a stick at, it's that we can all be guilty of it and it's a bad thing.

'It doesn't make you popular in the long run. You get patronised. When I took on the chairmanship of BAFTA, (only the second woman to do so), and I have a fairly friendly manner, a lot of people said, 'My goodness, that's extraordinary.' I remember saying, 'It's really daunting' so as not to seem too big-headed and they said, 'Yes, it must be for someone like yourself. That's a huge thing to take on.' Then I started thinking, 'Excuse me!' I had invited it, by what I'd said, but actually I didn't feel daunted. I felt excited, really keen to get on with it, energised. I always felt capable of doing the job. So I learned that it's important that we as women don't put ourselves down because it just encourages bad behaviour. You shouldn't give off signals that invite people to patronise you.'

Sound advice which you might expect from someone who over a 33 year career at the BBC, rose through the ranks from trainee assistant producer to managing its biggest departments, becoming Controller of Documentaries and Contemporary Factual and the founding Director of the BBC Academy.

Launching and leading the Academy, the organisation's training and development arm, characterises Anne's career which has been built on leadership, developing talent and recognising her own strengths.

'I was never going to be a genius director, but the thing I loved was working in teams and bringing out the best in people, spotting talent that hadn't been recognised. It would give me more pleasure to say to someone who'd been a researcher, 'would you like to direct a film?', and that film be brilliant, than if I'd directed it myself. It gave me a buzz and I saw it as a creative role to generate the circumstances in which people can do their best work. I think you have to be pretty ruthless about what your talents are.'

IMAGE
All images courtesy of Anne Morrison

It was certainly creativity that fuelled Anne's early interests. Both her parents were artistic and, she says, quite radical politically at the time. She was around eight years old when the Troubles began in her home city of Belfast, and although she grew up in a leafy middle-class area, in such a small community, inevitably she was affected. Unusually for Belfast, her parents were atheists. 'You had to be a Catholic atheist or a Protestant atheist – there was no middle ground!' Anne's family were in the latter camp.

Belfast during the Troubles 'felt very parochial', socially repressive and inward looking, with bigotry on both sides. An avid reader, Anne escaped into the work of early 20th century writers, artists and intellectuals known as the Bloomsbury Group.

'There was this wonderful society of people who had so much artistic, literary and sexual freedom and liberation of ideas, and I kept thinking, 'Why am I not in a group like this?' It had been possible in the first half of the 20th century, so I grew up believing there must be a life elsewhere I could join.'

Going to Cambridge led Anne to question her own cultural identity. Having attended a state and therefore almost exclusively Protestant school and being brought up to believe she was British, it was a surprise that she was designated 'the Irish one' and Dublin and Belfast were considered, 'much the same thing'.

'I'd say, 'no it isn't, we're having a war!' and it dawned on me the level of ignorance there was in England about Ireland. I had an identity I didn't recognise imposed on to me which I started by rejecting, but then I realised that being Irish made you fun at parties, a great character and quite popular, so I thought, 'I'll embrace this'. By the end of Cambridge, if someone said, 'you're the Irish one', I'd say, 'yes, I am'.

Given the paucity of international culture in Belfast at the time and not much opportunity to go out, television was a key part of Anne's early life. Not knowing what to do with her English degree, Anne considered what she liked best; fashion and shopping, going to discos and watching television. After 47 job applications - including to Selfridges, Debenhams and the Rank Organisation - and 46 rejections, she won the 'Willie Wonka golden ticket' of the graduate training scheme at the BBC. She was one of six out of 6,000 applicants which Anne concedes involved 'a large dollop of luck'.

Amidst the male and rather intimidating culture prevalent at the BBC at the time, there were senior women who, 'tended to be quite scary and who had had to prove they were tougher than men in order to survive'.

'I learned a lot from them and I feel grateful to them because they were the pioneers. It wasn't as tough for me, because they had forged the way. My generation owe them a debt of gratitude and hopefully we have made it easier for the next.'

However, there were clearly challenges and Anne is honest about the struggles; notably when as Head of Factual Entertainment, she had to pacify staff who were angry at her taking over the documentaries department, believing 'the Barbarians are coming.' Her talent lay in getting people on board and 'turning things around' leading to what is now considered to be a golden age of documentary making at the BBC.

How to balance a high-flying career with a family and home life, is not generally a question put to men, but Anne is unequivocal that she wouldn't have scaled such giddy heights without the support of her husband, Robert. He was a writer and was happy to provide the domestic support given Anne had the earning potential.

'When I'm giving career advice to ambitious young women, one of the key things I say is, 'choose your future partner with care'.'

‘The so-called role-reversal has worked extremely well and I advocate it. I’m a believer that feminism is also good for men. Men are extremely constrained, under pressure to be earners; if they felt they had more choice [they might opt to be] the primary carer and in the home. Robert is quite an evangelist on men taking on this role.

‘When I’m giving career advice to ambitious young women, one of the key things I say is, ‘choose your future partner with care’, because it can be difficult to have two equally high-flying careers if you’re going to have children.’

Anne was appointed Chair of the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) in 2014; she set an agenda of diversity and inclusivity and has advocated for #MeToo and the #Time’sUp movement. Given the chair is a two-year appointment, she was keen to bring her abiding passion for helping people to flourish to the organisation. By inviting people to join who might not have thought it was for them, removing barriers, giving scholarships, providing mentors and contacts, even by the choice of presenters at the awards, ’We literally set about changing the complexion of the organisation.’

Of course for a disco-loving, fashion maven the red-carpet glamour of BAFTA offered opportunity for fun too, dancing till the early hours at the post-awards party to Idris Elba’s DJ set being a highlight, and the same actor running down the aisle of the star-packed theatre to thank her for her awards speech championing diversity.

Ironically, one area where Anne says she used to lack confidence is public speaking, avoiding asking questions in a public forum and passing on public speaking opportunities.

‘I got frustrated and decided to take myself in hand. It was a kind of aversion therapy, I made myself do as much public speaking as I possibly could so it wouldn’t hold any more fear for me. It is a skill like any other such as swimming or riding a bike, but we tend to think confidence is innate and public speaking is something you’re born with. I encourage people to do something about it because otherwise the really boring, entitled people will talk on and on!

‘Diversity is not just about hiring the right people in an organisation, you’ve actually got to hear them and listen to them. We’ve all got to speak up and find our voice or we’re deferring to the over-confident people who are on transmit rather than receive.’

Giving a voice to women is at the heart of the #Time’sUp movement. Sexual harassment and abuse may exist across all industries and sectors, but the Harvey Weinstein case highlighted the

Anne’s top tips on speaking up

Speak early in a meeting

If you leave it until minute 55 in a 60 minute meeting before you open your mouth, it’s like ‘God, she speaks!’, so you better have something amazing to say, but if you speak earlier then you’re already in the conversation and its easy to speak again. Thirty seconds after you’ve spoken most people will have forgotten what you’ve said, so don’t agonise too much over it.

Sit at the front

If, at a panel discussion, you’re nervous about sticking your hand up and asking a question, then, if it’s lecture style, sit right down at the front. You can make eye contact with the people speaking and forget about the rest of the audience because they’re behind you, not looking over their shoulders at you.

Think positively

No mystique to this. It’s thinking positively about yourself on stage. Bruce Springsteen was asked if he ever gets stage fright and he replied that he didn’t. He described instead getting tremendously excited about an upcoming concert to the extent that he doesn’t eat the day before or sleep. He’s describing stage fright, but calling it excitement. If we get in touch with our inner show off it makes life a lot easier.

‘We used to feel that...the trusted brand will be our guides to the truth, but actually...nobody trusts anything.’

imbalance of power in the screen industries. High profile actors may have more opportunity to speak out – and be heard - but they are often referencing experiences early in their careers and can amplify others’ voices. The money that’s been raised by Time’s Up UK’s Justice and Equality Fund goes towards organisations such as rape crisis centres and a sexual harassment advice line and Anne is optimistic that the impact is profound.

‘For me it’s about who has the opportunity to speak out and to be heard. Time’s Up is very conscious of this. At last year’s BAFTA Awards, some actresses took as their guest an activist from a very different area of life, perhaps running a rape crisis centre or a women’s aid hostel, on to the red carpet with them. On their own they wouldn’t get interviewed, but if they had Gemma Arterton with them, Gemma would say, ‘but talk to my friend here’.’

Amongst Anne’s current portfolio career, which includes being a trustee of the Charleston Trust, being on the board of Women in Film and TV and involved with #Time’sUp, Anne is Chair of Pearson College guided by her commitment to education and empowering people to fulfil their potential.

To a greater extent than most higher education institutions, Pearson has a focus on employability and employer engagement, better preparing graduates for the transition between education and work. Employers help devise, teach and assess the courses and they offer a lot of degree apprenticeships. Anne feels quite angry that at some other institutions students pay a lot of money believing their degree is a passport into an industry and then being disappointed to find much of what they’ve learnt isn’t relevant.

‘When I was running the BBC Academy, trainees would arrive and say they’d learned more in their first two weeks than in the three years of their degree. I thought, ‘As employers in the creative industries, we’ve got to engage with higher education to make courses more connected to the world of work.’

Anne is still closely involved with the media industry, recently acting as a senior hearing manager to adjudicate equal pay disputes and bullying and harassment cases at the BBC. High profile equal pay cases like that brought by Carrie Gracie have shone a spotlight on the BBC, but Anne points out that it is systemic across the industry. The gender pay gap at the BBC is smaller than that at Channel 4 or ITN, but they are not subject to the same media scrutiny. Clearly she is a cheerleader for the organisation, but acknowledges there have been profound changes in the way we engage with and digest the media.

‘We used to feel that in the world of social media, the trusted brands will be our guides to the truth, but actually, what seems to happen, is that nobody trusts anything, including the papers and broadcasters of record.’

What strikes me about Anne is that she is warm and approachable and not at all ‘scary’ like the senior women she encountered early in her career at the BBC. Inevitably in a senior position you need to make unpopular decisions, but she counsels against trying to be liked for the sake of it.

‘I now do talks for women along the lines of advice to my former self. Sometimes you have to do brave things that are really unpopular at the time, but then afterwards everyone says, ‘You were great!’. So there’s short term and long term popularity because if you’re running a big organisation, you do have to be tough.’

Certainly Anne shows no sign of slowing down. She has just taken on a new role as Creative Director of Factual Programmes at London-based independent producer Nevision where she was executive producer on the acclaimed film about shoe designer Manolo Blahnik, The Boy Who Made Shoes for Lizards. She is an executive coach and mentor and is a trustee of the Watersprite Film Festival which champions emerging film makers.

On a day off Anne might read a book or go for a walk, but she is clearly energised by the work she does and thrives on interaction and exchanging ideas with others.

‘I’m the extreme version of ‘how do I know what I think, till I hear what I say.’ I work out what I think in conversation with others. I enjoy doing lots of family things, but I get tremendous fun and pleasure out of my work. In fact, people talk about work/life balance, but I no longer know which is work and which is life – it’s all life to me.’

The Cambridge International Student Film Festival runs from 6 - 8 March 2020. The deadline for submissions is 20 January. Visit the website for details.

LOSING GRACE

Liz Farahadi, Athena Mandi and Aradhna Tayal and are a screenwriter and director, producer and actress and writer respectively, each with a wealth of awards and experience in the film industry. Their latest project is Losing Grace, a gripping thriller about the aftermath of domestic abuse.

Jayne Phenton went to talk to them about diversity in the film industry and the challenges for women working in all areas of film-making.

Image left: From left to right, Athena Mandis, Liz Farahadi and Aradhna Tayal, courtesy of Athena, Liz and Aradhna.

‘Women are there, but because they’re not putting themselves forwards, you have to look for them.’

One thing which immediately strikes me about Athena, Aradhna and Liz is that they not only share a close friendship, but a collective passion for giving women a bigger voice in film, both in terms of cinematic narrative, profile and getting jobs in the industry, born out of their own experiences.

Aradhna originally trained as a dancer, studied engineering and then joined the BBC as a radio engineer making independent films in her free time. She worked for BBC doyenne Anne Morrison, who elsewhere in this issue reflects on the ‘maleness’ of the industry. Now running her own production company, Aradhna is committed to ensuring 51 per cent of the crew on her films are women.

‘I can crew this [film] just from my address book, but, even with everything I believe, most of those names will be male and of a certain age because they’re the people I’ve worked with. Women are there, but because they’re not putting themselves forwards, you have to look for them.

‘The industry is slowly, painfully addressing not having enough female voices: writers, directors and protagonists. When Losing Grace was born, we committed to a 100 per cent female crew.’

Award-winning writer and director, Athena, says there are particular barriers for women trying to get into the industry and even efforts to increase diversity, can sometimes backfire. As a mum to two girls, she’s also acutely conscious of the gender bias regarding parenthood.

The head of Directors UK tells a story of going for a job and being told, ‘we’ve already got a couple of women on here. We don’t want you all balancing your periods, it would be a nightmare.’ They’d ticked a box so weren’t going to employ her irrespective of whether of whether she could do the job or not. If a woman has children she’s asked how she’s going to balance childcare - you’d never ask a father that.

‘They are real barriers and they’re part of our cultural makeup, not just our industry. We don’t have to employ women in the same parameters, so if someone has a family and we want to work with that person, we need to think about that.’

The nature of the industry is fast moving, with long days and intensive hours, and a successful career often relies on developing both contacts and confidence, not a sympathetic environment for someone with caring responsibilities. Liz’s own experience with her daughter in the early days of her acting career reflects the difficulties of balancing a heavy work schedule with childcare.

‘She has grown up coming everywhere with me; when I trained, spending time on sets. She’s a teenager now, but it’s still difficult. We had a situation [on Losing Grace] where our production manager in the Isle of Man had a child care issue and we just said ‘bring him’.

‘When you are a parent you do learn to juggle and do things a bit tighter, than when you’ve got the whole day and it’s just yourself. So it makes you more productive because you’ve got less time. We might need to go home a bit earlier, but we can still get the work done.’

Another criterion seemingly singularly applied to women is age. I’m reminded of a story told to me by film producer Clare Wise who wrote for us in our environment issue back in 2014 and sadly passed three years ago. A stellar career as head of international production for Universal Studios – a role that put her in charge of a £130-million annual budget - and films like Priscilla, Queen of the Desert and Inglorious Bastards to her credit - didn’t shield her from agism. While still in her forties, a 60-something male executive told her, ‘You’re too old. Nobody wants you when your eggs have dried up.’

Aradhna, Athena and Liz all agree that it’s an issue for roles across the industry. For men, ‘age’ tends to translate as ‘experience’. Initiatives and schemes designed to encourage young people into film and increase diversity often inadvertently exclude women. Liz says,

‘They talk about supporting emerging talent, but if you’re over thirty, as a woman, your face is no-where. There are even applications which you can’t apply to if you’re over thirty.’

Athena adds,

‘’Emerging’ doesn’t need to mean young; it could apply to career changers and returners to work. Inevitably women will take a massive break which was my own experience. I was working until I was about 33, then I had a baby and it’s very difficult to go out and carry on in the same way. When you’re ready to come back, you’re suddenly too old.’

Aradhna agrees.

‘The biggest thing we have found in championing this [issue] is that big institutions are giving funds to white males. They are working on diversity, but it’s not white women and it’s not older women. The stories on my slate are diverse voices and and they’re stories we’re not hearing. Some are well-know stories, but told from a different angle. It’s about giving voice to people and recognising that everyone has a story.’

This team of three first came together to work on the feature Polly with a shared commitment to ‘telling stories that matter.’ Losing Grace is a thriller with a narrative of domestic abuse, but at its heart is the mother and daughter relationship and how vulnerable women, subject to manipulation and controlling behaviour, can be disempowered by a system which is supposed to support them.

Originally the story was focused on cults, how people are groomed and some are more susceptible than others, but as they developed the story, digging deeper into parent/child relationships, and particularly the complex role of mothers, a different theme started to emerge.

Liz expands on the onus of responsibility being placed on women trying to escape a domestic situation.

‘We uncovered a massive problem where, again, women are not being listened to, not being heard. We have found some examples of women seeking help from social services, telling them they are in an abusive relationship and they have said, ‘you have 24 hours to get out or we are taking your children’. There are social workers doing their best to support women in these situations, but sometimes there is a disfunction between agencies and courts can order children to be returned to the abuser.’

Athena adds,

‘One of the things the film did early on was to create a platform to raise awareness of these issues. It was actually quite shocking how many of these stories were coming back. We realised really early on that the film goes beyond it’s narrative and a piece of cinema; it is a vehicle for expression and raising awareness. How do you measure truth when it’s one person’s word against another? There doesn’t seem to be joined up thinking between the courts and authorities, everything is quite dysfunctional and disjointed. So hopefully the film will at least create a space for dialogue.’

Aradhna points out that Losing Grace is primarily a piece of cinema. It’s being filmed on the Isle of Man and has a clear aesthetic agenda.

‘Right from the beginning it was always going to be beautiful; about the beautiful scenery, the beauty of the relationship and the innocence of the daughter.’ Fed up with doing ‘stuff that didn’t matter’, Liz was frustrated by the scripts she was offered ‘written by white men and featuring a shallow, one-dimensional, token woman there to support the male lead’, but is passionate about film as an artistic medium.

‘We thought if we go for something that’s really gorgeous, people who might not watch something about domestic violence would be drawn in. It’s a poetic thriller. What a powerful tool to make films that actually mean something, that people can watch and from which we can grow collectively as a society. But also, making beautiful films because I love film. I love it.’

Athena’s background is in theatre, as part of the David Glass Ensemble, travelling to developing countries and working with street kids to create shows to give voice to the unrepresented.

‘I’ve always been attracted to the underdog story. My first documentary was about the revolution in Mexico and I remember when we arrived at the cinema for

IMAGE

Actress Tabatha Howard in a still from the film Losing Grace ©LosingGrace

the opening, there was a queue around the block. Afterwards one man came up to me, hugged me and said, ‘You showed me my village on the big screen and for that I’ll be eternally grateful.’ That moment for me was powerful because I realised, I am drawn to stories.’

If, as Picasso claimed, art is an instrument of war, then these three women’s crusade seems to exemplify it, creating beautiful work to give voice to the disenfranchised and potentially changing the landscape of a whole industry. Liz says one outcome of their commitment to a 100 per cent female crew has been having ‘ some amazing conversations with people in the industry’ and Aradhna is quick to point out that positive actions can help to effect change.

‘I’m always going to pick the best person for the job; if that happens to be a man because his voice is important to the story, then let’s make sure that all of the ADs and DPs are women, or if the editor is a man, let’s make sure his assistant is a woman and we give her a job and start changing the eco-system. It’s about changing the way films are made.’ Athena echoes this.

‘It’s recognising women don’t necessarily have the experience because they haven’t had the opportunity and don’t have the list of credits. It’s not about like-for-like, it’s about having those conversations. The positive of not being supported by the big institutions is that we’re really had to engage with the story. It might have been easier to raise the money, but we’re not answerable to anybody. We can make our own rules up for this and that has been really empowering.’

If you would like to be part of this extraordinary project, lend your support at https://greenlit.fund/project/losing-grace

Filming starts in February. Follow the story @LosingGrace Film and the team @lizfarahadi, @AradhnaYayal and @Athena_Mandis.

IMAGE

Actress Liz Farahadi in a scene from the film Losing Grace ©LosingGrace

Artist, curator and writer Fionn Wilson was encouraged to start painting by a friend in 2010.

She founded the SPACE gallery in Southgate and her work is to be found in several international collections including portraits of, amongst others, Dennis Skinner MP and Trade Unionist, Bob Crow.

She is the curator of the exhibition, Dear Christine, which opens at the Arthouse1 gallery in February.

Interview by Jayne Phenton

FIONN WILSON

Reclaiming Christine Keeler

The story of Christine Keeler and her role in the series of events widely credited with the downfall of the Macmillan government, is one which, given the complexity of the personal narratives and socio-political perspectives, has been less explored culturally over the last half decade or so than you might expect.

The film Scandal puts socialite osteopath Stephen Ward, played by John Hurt, at the heart of the story as a victim of the moral decrepitude of the establishment figures he had cultivated. While it goes some way to adding some depth to the tabloid characterisation of Christine Keeler as manipulative, sexually voracious and unscrupulous, she has not been afforded the same redemption as Ward.

Castigated as a 'shameless slut' in the 1960s, the tabloid press continued to exploit her image as recently as 2013 when the Daily Mail published pictures of her aged 71, in ill-health and inevitably changed from her 21-year old self, denigrating her for losing the beauty the People newspaper had cited decades earlier as the instrument she used to 'bewitch and betray'.

The film's release in 1989 captured the imagination of artist and curator Fionn Wilson when she was a teenager. After a peripatetic childhood, Fionn's family finally settled in a depressed area of Newcastle and the cinematic portrayal of beauty and glamour offered an escape from a working class life blighted by Thatcherism and the aftermath of the miner's strike.

'I saw a poster of Marilyn Monroe and was convinced she was an angel. I was raised a Catholic and was fascinated by female images. I saw beauty as virtue in a religious sense.'

Over 20 years later, Fionn revisited the images of Christine Keeler as a painter, conscious that, perhaps unlike Marilyn, this cultural icon hadn't been the subject of artistic exploration. Moreover, the images of Keeler which do exist, are through men's eyes.

'I think women have more to say about Christine's story. I wanted to share her and see her through other people's eyes.'

What began as a series of four portraits snowballed into an exhibition, Dear Christine, including works from 45 artists, writers, poets and musicians (the majority of which are women) which opens at Arthouse1 gallery on

IMAGES

Above: Fionn Wilson with her portrait of Christine Keeler;

Page 24: *Christine Keeler: Anger, Blame, Shame, Ruin, Grief,* 2019, oil on canvas, 122 x 92 cm by Caroline Coon, image ©Howard Woodruff

2 February. Fionn secured Arts Council funding and chose Swansea, where she had lived, and her home town, as the first two locations for the touring show. The Vane gallery in Newcastle is actually opposite the cinema where she first saw Scandal.

The project became a ‘labour of love’ and has attracted widespread support. Screenwriter and novelist Amanda Coe, author of the six-part BBC drama The Trial of Christine Keeler, has written for the exhibition catalogue which includes contributions from journalist Julie Burchill and art historian Kalliopi Minioudaki. Christine’s son Seymour Platt has written a foreword; after her death in 2017, Fionn got in touch with him saying she felt she ‘needed the family’s blessing’.

The critically acclaimed television series tells the story from Christine Keeler’s point of view and similarly the exhibition puts her centre stage. The vilification of Keeler as a ‘slut’ by the popular press and public alike is well documented; at a time when women had little agency, she was seen as guilty of transgressing both social mores and her class. In the vernacular of the time, a woman who was no better than she ought to be.

Through a contemporary lens, we might see Christine as a victim of her appallingly deprived childhood, the men who sexually abused her as a child, her abusive boyfriend, ‘Lucky’ Gordon, whom she feared all her life, and the privileged MP and Secretary of State for War John Profumo, whose denial of their affair to the House of Commons led to his own downfall.

Despite the publication of her own book in 2001, Christine Keeler: The Truth at Last, and her endorsement of Scandal, Christine’s voice has largely been ignored, her attempts to ‘put the record straight’ scorned as attention-seeking or desperate attempts to generate much needed income. In retrospect, her ambition to establish the truth and achieve some public approbation suggests a naivety and ingenuousness.

Dear Christine takes the perspectives of a range of disparate women artists and aims to create a fuller narrative around Christine, acknowledging her vulnerability, her intelligence and, critically, her humanity. By creating images which look beyond the sexual cipher depicted in the tabloids, it may be possible to revise Christine Keeler’s place in British culture and reveal the human being behind the malevolent headlines.

Fionn says,

‘Christine was a woman of her time and basically was thrown to the wolves because she was working class. She was vulnerable and these men were of a higher social class, had power and exploited her.’

From a personal fascination, a four-year project grew and Fionn is now looking towards her next piece of work focused on another often misrepresented British icon, the actress Fenella Fielding. Widely known for her role in Carry On Screaming and slightly comic femme fatale persona, Fielding’s illustrious stage career is largely ignored. Certainly as Fionn talks about Fielding, there are parallels with Dear Christine and the desire to explore these complex women in depth.

Of the exhibition she says,

‘It’s been so joyful to share my enthusiasm and I do feel something is shifting in relation to Christine. The language is changing and I think she is finally being treated with some respect which makes it worthwhile. Art can be quite indulgent if it’s not engaging people. When you present conceptual and intellectualised ideas about a person - someone who was a real human being - it makes it more relatable.’

Dear Christine is at the Arthouse1 Gallery from 2 - 29 February 2020. Read more about Fionn’s work on her website or follow her @fionnwilson11

IMAGES

From left to right:
Remains, 2017, plastic bag, 70 x 30 cm by Julia Maddison, image ©James Blackburn;
I took on the sins of a generation, 2016, oil on canvas, 122 x 76 cm, Sal Jones, image courtesy the artist;
The Game, 2018, pastel, pencil, ink and glitter on rag paper, 84 x 83 cm, Natalie d'Arbeloff, image courtesy the artist.

Originally from Norfolk, Emma Fielder began her career as a reporter on her local paper before going on to head media campaigns for numerous national chairities.

In 2018, she and her husband Dave moved to Paris where he was stationed with the RAF and they have now moved to Bordeaux.

Following up on her article in issue 25, Emma gives us an update on the challenges and life lessons that come with moving to another country.

Words and images courtesy Emma Rees

EMMA FIELDER

Vive la différence

When I last wrote for Her Edit, I was filled with excitement and trepidation about moving to Paris. It has been a challenge and a joy in equal measure. It's difficult to sum up over 12 months experience in one feature, but here are five things I have learned since moving to France.

Learning a language when you're older can be a challenge...

It's one thing to be in French class aged 12. It's quite another to re-learn a language as an adult; and use it for actual conversations about interesting subjects, rather than to express the desire to buy a croissant or to find the way to the train station. Sadly the truth is that the little gems we learn at school, while absolutely useful, don't get you that far at a dinner party.

I've found learning French as an adult to be an incredibly humbling experience, especially at an age when I am generally accustomed to knowing what I am talking about. At least some of the time! Expertise in whatever profession you practice, doesn't help you. Learning a language when you're older levels the playing field and bonds you very quickly with others who are learning too.

It can be hugely frustrating on a bad day, but it is also hilarious (when you are feeling strong and able to see the funny side, of course). I'll never forget the occasion when thanks to my less-than-excellent pronunciation, I told one of my husband Dave's French colleagues that my brother was a diver, as opposed to a baker (*plongeur* does sound fairly similar to *boulanger*). You can imagine the confusion that followed. Learning a language is also genuinely exciting. The moments when you suddenly fully understand something, and see how you could use it in real life, are priceless.

‘...the UK culture in which I believe - inclusivity, diversity, open-mindedness, creativity and the best sense of humour - pulses through my veins.’

Making friends in a new place is hard…

Especially when you are no longer (to steal a phrase from Helen Fielding’s wonderful Bridget Jones’s Diary) a ‘lean teenage greyhound’. I am no longer at a stage in life where I can meet new friends every night in the student union bar, so long as I can scrape together £1.50 for a vodka and orange. Making new friends in more recent years has always been a lovely bonus, as opposed to being the result of a need for company. I’m not at all in the habit of being at social occasions where I have to make any kind of effort. I’m normally there to be with people I love and to relax.

So suddenly being plunged into an expat soirée or (whisper it) networking event at which I know nobody, I find myself being stared down by a startling set of challenges. Who to approach and strike up a conversation with? How to end a conversation if it becomes clear you have nothing in common? How to introduce oneself in an interesting way so a potential new buddy doesn’t glaze over straightaway? And if you do have a good chat with someone, how do you then actually become their friend?

Yes, it’s true that in these situations you can be whoever you want to be, or be stimulated by conversations with folk you wouldn’t normally have a drink with. You can revel in a new love for chess, fencing or embroidery by joining clubs. But the truth is, the whole thing can be exhausting when what you really want to do is curl up on the sofa and watch Netflix. It can be easy to wonder if it is all worth it when I could just FaceTime my besties at home.

But in the last year, I’ve been surprised with who I’ve hit it off with, who I’ve laughed my head off with, and how I’ve felt genuine connections with all sorts of new people, including those almost half my age, which was a bit of a surprise. I still have no idea why one friend in particular, a wonderful 20-year-old with whom I have stayed in touch since moving from Paris to Bordeaux, wants to be my friend. But she does. And that’s a beautiful thing.

We do not need to be defined by our work...

I fully acknowledge that I am lucky to be taking some time out of work and that this is something that most people won’t ever experience. So, I realise that I am learning this particular lesson in a context of immense privilege. But I do believe that it’s an important lesson. For the first time since graduating, I don’t have a job, and this is something I still struggle with. It makes me feel a toxic combination of shame, guilt, panic and confusion, despite being aware that many would advise me to focus on damn well making the most of this precious time instead.

While it’s great if we can enjoy whatever earns us money, I think it is also true that there is far more to us than just what we do for a living. Both mine and Dave’s commitment to work has come between us in the past, leaving us with too little time to spend with each other. Work has also prevented me from seeing friends and family - and having enough time for myself.

While I love the charity sector, which was my work home for 11 years, the downside of working for a great cause is that it’s easy to become consumed by it. I often found myself prioritising work over other everything else in life. My pride in my work, plus the good cause I was part of, and a tendency towards perfectionism led me to feel that my job was the most important thing about me.

But now I am learning that there is far more to success than just achieving at work. I can now speak passable French (apart from when it comes to the subjects of baking and diving), I am fitter than ever before, I read and write far more, and I’ve rediscovered my love for museums and galleries. I’ve also achieved a lifelong personal goal to have a piece of writing published. Perhaps I can see all these things as successes too, and allow myself more time for these important areas of my life when I am working again.

I love the UK...

I really do. Despite all its faults and the unprecedented challenging times we are faced with. Despite wretched Brexit dividing us, despite a feeling that anything can, and indeed does, happen in politics.

It’s the hardest time in my lifetime to be British. Chats here in France will often start with, ‘Where are you from?’ When answering this question, I often feel the need to say sorry. I don’t think any conversational joy can be borne of the statement ‘Um, actually I’m British’, delivered in quiet and apologetic tones.

But regardless, the UK culture in which I believe – inclusivity, diversity, open-mindedness, creativity and the best sense of humour - pulses through my veins. It needs work, but it’s worth fighting for. Wherever I am in the world, I will always feel British. I won’t give up on our odd little country.

IMAGES
Previous page: Emma Fielder
Above: Emma and her friend Hedvig, both courtesy of Emma Fielder.

Her Edit

HER ISSUE | HER VOICE

Issue thirty
out Spring 2020

Join the discussion
@Her_Edit
Read more at
www.heredit.com