

# Elaine Bedell

## The Southbank Centre CEO on success – and failure – in TV, and how gender inequality persists in the media

### On... making the arts accessible

I don't have a privileged background. I was born in East London, and every few years we moved house further down the central line until we ended up in Essex. My family always valued art and culture – but we accessed it for free. We went to the library every Friday and my mum would read to us each night. My father, who left school at 14, was an electronics engineer and a gifted piano player: our biggest piece of furniture was a baby grand. I had free piano lessons at my state school and my father would take us to recitals at Royal Festival Hall. I'm absolutely committed to making sure Southbank Centre, which used to be referred to as 'the People's Palace', is open and inclusive. Up to 40 per cent of our events here are free.

### On... her big break

While studying English at Leeds University, the BBC Education Department ran a competition to find the best student-produced radio documentary. My friend and I won. The prize: a three-week crash-course in production. That's how I got my foot in the door.

### On... starting her own business

In my mid-thirties, I set up a production company called Watchmaker, working on shows such as BBC One's New Year's Eve shows with Clive James and

covering Bill Clinton's first election. As executive producer, I'd be in the studio gallery with my sleeves rolled up. As managing director, I'd be thinking about the bottom line and wondering if I could afford to provide free biscuits. Even though TV is adrenaline-fuelled and everything has to be done by yesterday, I tried to create a fun culture and a sense of camaraderie. Most of the staff who joined Watchmaker in the early days were still there eight years later when it was bought by the Chrysalis Group.

### On... failure

My most catastrophic failure was an ITV game show with Simon Cowell called *Red or Black?* Hosted by Ant and Dec, contestants could win £1m on the spin of a wheel. It was one of the most expensive game shows in British TV history – and it tanked. We only made two series. Audiences wanted to feel contestants had earned the money, not won it out of luck. Our egos took a battering. You have to dust yourself off, learn and move on.

### On... her debut novel

In between leaving ITV and joining Southbank Centre, I had six months of gardening leave, so I decided to write a semi-detective novel [*About That Night*]. I'd come from a very noisy industry full of extroverts and suddenly I was trapped in my own head. I'd get up

early and write for hours. A coach once said to me that the best thing you can do in life is find things that occupy you so much that you don't notice time passing.

### On... leadership

I try to be visible and accessible. We have all-staff meetings every quarter and I run a weekly employee surgery. My biggest worry is money: only 37 per cent of our funding comes from Arts Council England, the rest is from ticket sales, donations, commercial partnerships and sponsorships. My aim is to preserve this precious institution and make sure it's in robust health when I pass it on.

### On... gender equality

It's ridiculous that I'm the first female CEO at Southbank Centre. I joke that they must have run out of men to ask. ITV didn't have a female boss until 2018 – and the BBC has never had a female director-general. There's no question men have been hiring in their own image. But it's not just bias that's holding women back at work: it's babies. Childbirth takes months or years out of careers. Meanwhile, men in equivalent positions power ahead. I took my second child, Florence, into work with me when she was two weeks' old and she slept in a Moses basket under my desk. I could do that because it was my company – most women don't have that option.

Interview: Kate Bassett. Portrait: Richard Cannon

### Leading lady

Elaine Bedell powered through the ranks at the BBC and ITV, commissioning and producing popular hit shows including *Strictly Come Dancing*, *The X Factor* and *Top Gear*. Having run her own production company and set up the commercial arm of the Royal Shakespeare Company, she's now CEO of Southbank Centre, Europe's largest arts centre. She's the first female boss in its 66-year history.

