

The Role of a Lifetime

CBS ENTERTAINMENT PRESIDENT NINA TASSLER BEGAN AS AN ACTOR, BUT WON SUCCESS AS A TOP EXECUTIVE WHO CALLS THE SHOTS BEHIND THE CAMERA

A SA FORMER ACTRESS accustomed to creating just the right character look for an audition, Nina Tassler remembers exactly the suit she wore to the most important interview of her career.

Back in the late 1980s, as she prepared to meet with Leslie Moonves, now CBS' CEO but then running the production company Lorimar, "what I was wearing was I think probably not very professional, but instead more artsy, which was more my style," recalls Tassler, now president of CBS Entertainment. "And I also remember thinking, 'This is a great place to work. I really want to be here. Don't stop talking until you feel you have the job.' And so I just talked and talked and talked."

And with that, the petite brunette became a Hollywood executive "suit"—which is ironic for a woman who says she has never felt comfortable in such stuffy business attire. "Even though CBS has sort of an anticorporate structure, I still find it strange that I would be working for a corporation," says Tassler, who had studied acting at Boston University, then moved to New York to work off-Broadway at the Roundabout Theatre Company.

But even during that time back East, the young performer was showing an ability to tackle a bigger role. "I was auditioning, but I also really enjoyed putting together readings and showcases for friends," Tassler explains. "I don't know if I had the level of self-awareness to realize what it meant in terms of a future career, but in doing anything I could to keep my head above water—I was waiting tables, working in the box office, fundraising, running spotlights, building and tearing down sets—I found myself being able to handle a lot at one time."

AN INADVERTENT CAREER

When her husband, Jerry Levine—a fellow actor whom she had met as a freshman at BU, started dating as a sophomore, and married shortly after graduation—got his big-screen break as Stiles, the comic sidekick in 1985's *Teen Wolf*, the couple relocated out West. But after a few jobless months in a rented house in Los Angeles, Tassler says, "I was

SAGE ADVICE

GET A JOB, ANY JOB.

Find a way to do anything related to this business, even if it's tangential, peripheral. It gives you a better opportunity than waiting tables.

TAKE THE HIGHER GROUND.

My boss at Triad Artists, John Kimble, used to have a sign on his desk with a saying, which I've tweaked a little bit for gender. "There's no limit to what a man or woman can do if he or she doesn't mind who gets the credit."

TREAT EVERYONE WITH RESPECT.

John said it didn't matter if someone came to repair his plumbing or was a head of state, he would treat them the same way. I was an assistant for years, and I still remember who would not give me the time of day, and who treated me like another human being.

at the end of my rope." And watching her college roommate Geena Davis, who had begun to get some career traction but still suffered setbacks, would make Tassler wonder about her own future.

Davis referred her friend to her own agent, to help her get at least work in an office. Eventually, through a chain of leads, the struggling young L.A. transplant interviewed with two very different firms on the same day. One was the Irv Schechter Agency, where the agent David Windsor was looking for an assistant/receptionist. The other was the Thrifty Corp., seeking an executive assistant in its import division. "I'm not a great typist, and Thrifty had me take a typing test, using carbon papers. And they were so strict, warning me not to use the correcting key, 'because we can tell—we've got the carbons!'" Tassler remembers. "And I thought, 'OK, this is what my life has come to—a typing test at the Thrifty Corp.'"

Ironically, Tassler must have nailed the test, because within a few days, amid her despair over unemployment, she got calls that she had landed both jobs. Luckily, the call from Windsor came first, on a Friday night, and Tassler started what would become her Hollywood career the following Monday. Luckily, when Thrifty phoned, "I thought, thank God I had already taken the other job," Tassler remembers. "But talk about two roads diverging."

WOMEN IN PROMINENT ROLES

After only seven months at Irv Schechter, Tassler jumped to Triad Artists, where she worked for five years, now as a full-fledged agent. Tassler recalls with a laugh how unrelenting the work can be; in 1988, she remembers, while on the phone with the producer of the film *Silence of the Lambs*, negotiating job terms for a casting agent client, she went into labor with her son, and talked deal points between contractions while the producer coached her breathing. Eventually, Tassler says, she realized, "I didn't want to be an agent my whole life," and went to work with Moonves at Lorimar.

There, and later at Lorimar's successor Warner Bros., Tassler started by working in producing



“long form,” i.e., TV films and miniseries. Those early 1990s days of the Valerie Bertinelli or Meredith Baxter movies of the week were, she says, a heyday for women, with so many female writers, performers and, to a more limited extent, producers able to play prominent roles. From her female boss, Warner Bros. producer Lindy DeKoven, Tassler says, “I learned an enormous amount. She was a very strong presence, and did not suffer fools. She taught me so much about being thorough, and paying attention to detail. It was trial by fire, because she really had to see if I had the goods.”

Now at CBS, the network she joined in 1997 and has headed since 2004, Tassler is paying it forward. “I’ve always felt that women have reached out a hand to help me,” explains the Latina network president, of Puerto Rican heritage on her mother’s side. “And I feel that for the health of our business, and the future of our company, it’s important to identify strong female and multicultural candidates.”

Tassler has staffed her development teams in every daypart and genre with many female executives. It makes sense; after all, women watch more TV and drive the Nielsen ratings. And yet, despite the decidedly feminine touch, she notes, the network is anything but ... well, “girly.” For example, her entire comedy team is female, and yet the shows they come out with, like *Two and a Half Men*, often have a decidedly masculine edge and appeal.

In fact, “judging by the kind of programming we have on the air, and the genres—a lot of procedurals, crime dramas, mystery and detective shows—you would think that a commando was programming this network,” Tassler jokes. “But what we know from learning about our audiences and really listening to them is that what appeals to women isn’t necessarily what you would stereotypically think. Women love mystery shows. Women love detective shows. Women love cop shows. And so I think that having women [with the power] to make decisions has been very beneficial to CBS. And I feel incredibly blessed and fortunate to be in this position.” — *Jim Colucci*