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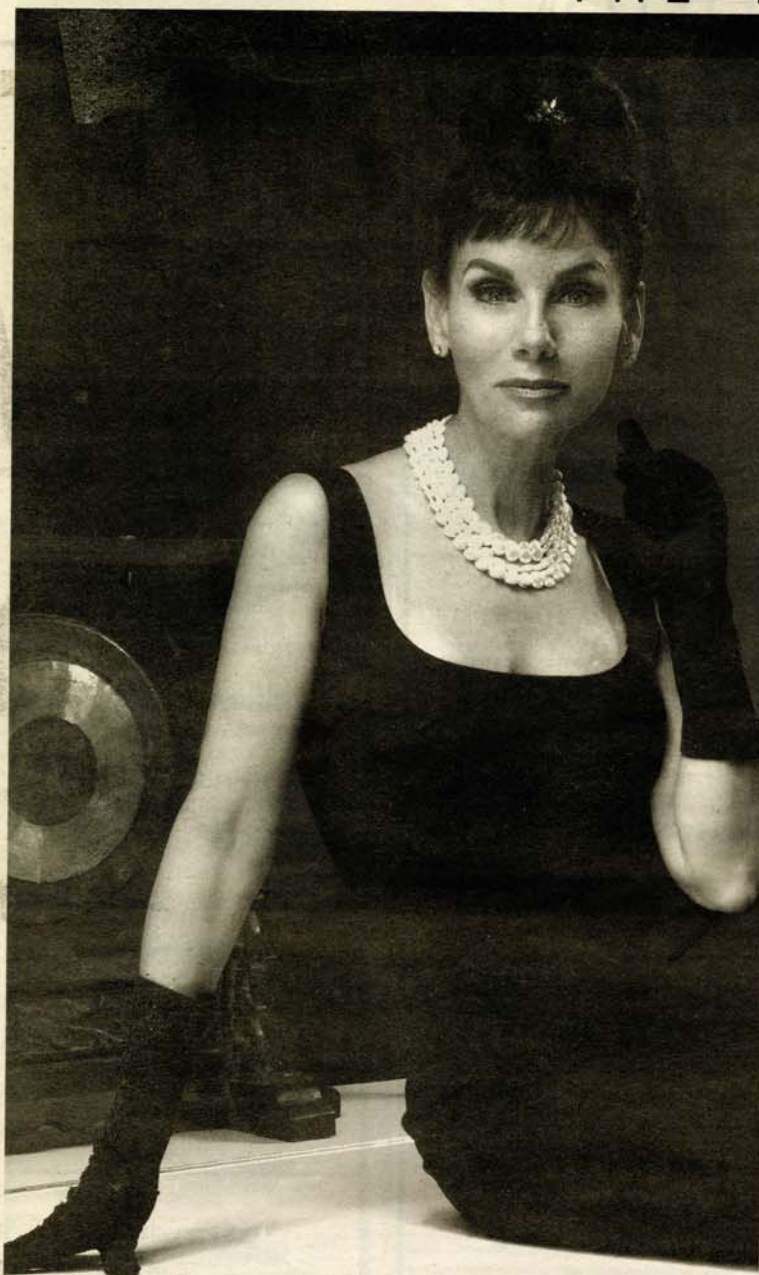
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THE PLAYER



Lynda Erkiletian By Gabriel Scindian

The Player, a multimedia column, is aired on WTOP beginning at 5:10pm every other Wednesday in Bob Madigan's *Man About Town*.



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The Civilized Steakhouse

Lynda Erkiletian

By Veena Trehan

It was 1983. Pregnant for the second time in a year, D.C. stylist Lynda Erkiletian was again madly searching for reputable replacements. The crisis would have led many new mothers to give up their job but, for the former model, it was the genesis of a successful business.

"I decided maybe I should sit down and interview myself and decide what I would want in an agent," she says.

The answers, borne of a decade of industry experience, led to her professionally-run T.H.E. Artist Agency. The firm signed stylists, then a year later top local models to exclusive contracts. Now Erkiletian has over 400 models walking the tony runways of Tysons shows and gazing out from D.C.'s new glossies.

How does she show the money - \$150 an hour for local print jobs - to the pretty people? First, their photos have to earn them a half-hour slot. Then the real work starts. "Generally the first two months is about changing their image," says Erkiletian. Her agents prescribe a regimen of food, skin, hair care and exercise that's been honed over two decades. The end result is ad campaigns of models that look like the agency president herself - glowing hair, perfect skin, and a figure without an ounce of fat - although they are more likely to wear black Prada suits with matching Manolos only on jobs.

The agency is flexible in who they hire (13 to 80-plus) and how they look (based on whether they're working editorial, commercial, runway, or lifestyle jobs). However one rule is ironclad. From their fix-up period through their client bookings, they must be reliable and nice. "Life's too short to represent divas," she says.

More of her models are changing to a gender less known for their drama.

She's aggressively hired men, and expects it to pay off as trendsetter Ralph Lauren just held his first mens' show in 35 years. The one third of her agency are more likely now to be fashion targets rather than fashion props. But she's noticing a problem. The men who grace the European magazines are too skinny (often over 6 feet, 140 pounds). She fears local clients will push for "little boys with makeup," leading to a new gender and generation of anorexics.

Erkiletian doesn't tolerate drug or eating problems but she admits there can be pressure when designers suggest models get skinnier. "People have to feel healthy in their mind and their body and their soul."

The Tifton Georgia native was fortunately attracted to more creative pursuits. Fashion was an early love. The six year old traded in Skipper and Ken dolls for more Barbie clothes, soon learning to hand-sew more doll outfits from her grandmother.

She gravitated to the arts and theater, partly because of a late-diagnosed dyslexia that made school a daily struggle. Modeling became a route to extra money for one of six children in a military family.

When she moved to D.C. at 19 she discovered there were no jobs in petite runway. Erkiletian worked as a singer (opening for gospel artist Candi Staton for Teddy Pendergrass), then as a stylist and agency owner. Along the way she had four kids and got divorced.

In 2003, her best friend, recently widowed Paula Murad (married to actor James Coburn), was diagnosed with stage IV cancer. It took just eight months for the 48-year-old Murad to succumb.

Erkiletian took over as executive director of the James and Paula Coburn Foundation, finding new energy in furthering their legacy of holistic medicine, the arts and the outdoors. Recently the foundation pledged \$1 million for a wellness garden for the Motion Picture Television Fund, a project that celebrates Murad's passion.

Erkiletian spends about one week in Los Angeles each month and three weeks here although she's given up the suburbanite life. A few years ago, the main men in her life had become handy-men and contractors - she says it felt like a full-time job just keeping up the house. "It's like the movie where Diane Keaton moves to Vermont and everything that breaks is \$3000."

Erkiletian bought a Georgetown Ritz-Carlton condominium in 2005. Now it is home to Lynda, owner of the Asian-inspired Muleh - Christopher Reiter, and three kids from 14 to 23. A Siamese cat and pug, alike but for their eyes, curl up together every night.

Her happy home life is complemented by a rewarding, if unexpected, work life. "If you had asked me when I was 22... if I would ever be someone who would sit behind a desk I'd have told you I would die first," she says.

But her insider perspective has brought skill, success and satisfaction.

"We provide a service to our client ... but we represent our talent."