Lynda Lager

Her powder-puff revolution has frayed some egos in Washington's close-knit modeling industry

By Pam Carroll

UNLIKE SOME OTHER WORLD CAPITALS—Paris, London, and lately even Moscow—Washington just doesn't cut it as a fashion town. It's been scorned as a city in which politicians' wives issue the prevailing fashion statements (indeed, this season all eyes are on Barbara Bush), a city whose department-store buyers are bullied by a coterie of conservative consumers, a city of fashion conformists who wouldn't know style if it sat on their laps at Robin Weir's.

Fashion town or not, though, Washington has its share of aspiring models—maybe more than its share, given the limited amount of work available for them here. The jobs are hard to come by; the city's fashion editors and catalog designers tend to spend their money in New York, and Calvin Klein is never going to choose the Willard over the Waldorf for his spring preview. So Washington's models settle for what's left: two-bit exposure in movies, locally produced television and print ads, fashion shows in shopping malls, Vanna White-type convention work. The truly desperate can be found in department stores assaulting shoppers with designer perfumes.

Lynda Lager thinks the models are getting a raw deal, and she wants to put an end to it. Like a cross between Eileen Ford and Samuel Gompers, she's trying to incite the city's models to revolt against the system. In a city where models have always operated as free agents, hustling jobs from any agency that will hire them, she hopes to get the best models in town to sign an exclusive contract with one agency: her agency, T.H.E. Artists Agency.

Lager's powder-puff revolution hasn't yet brought the industry to its knees, but she figures that the dialectic of history is working in her favor.

"In virtually every fashion market in the world, exclusivity is how this business works," says Lager, whose agency had $500,000 in bookings last year. "A model signs an exclusive contract, that gives one agent the right to book her assignments and collect commissions on her earnings. In return, the agent helps the model develop a style, finds her the right jobs, negotiates rates and conditions with clients on her behalf, and pays her on a regular schedule."

Exclusivity may be inevitable, but in the here and now Lager faces a formidable obstacle: Central Casting, the city's oldest and largest modeling agency and T.H.E.'s main competitor, hasn't signed an exclusive contract in 18 years. Dagmar Wittmer and her partner, Carol Ness, contend that Lager is perpetrating a cruel farce by promoting New York-style exclusivity.

"Washington is *not* New York. It's a government town, not a fashion town," argues Wittmer, whose agency racked up $3.3 million in bookings last year. "To be a model here and survive, you have to be with every agent and do it all: print, television, editorial, commercial. Exclusivity has been tried here, but it just doesn't work."

Lager doesn't deny that exclusivity's track record has thus far been dismal: three attempts, three failures. The first agency to try it, Novelle, declared bankruptcy in 1977. The next to try it was Adair, which was founded by Adair Keating, a former employee of Novelle's; not long afterward Keating split to New York. And in 1981 Jan Stephens, one of the models who'd been burned by Adair, opened Panache; by 1986 it too was out of business.

Panache wasn't a complete failure, however. Local photographers and fashion editors still wax nostalgic for "the Panache girls," several of whom now work in New York—a move that, ironically, contributed to the agency's demise.

Lager believes that Stephens had the product but lacked the skills to manage it. Details—such as negotiating a percentage of the first-year earnings of the models she referred to New York agents—eluded Stephens. In addition, she relied on Hecht Company for 35 percent of Panache's bookings; when Hecht's abruptly took its business to New York, her agency was doomed.

When Panache bit the dust T.H.E. was an agency for professional stylists. Lager had persuaded local photographers that stylists could make the models they used for magazine covers and fashion spreads look better—and make them look like better photographers. In effect, Lager created a market. She cornered the supply of stylists, and T.H.E. turned a profit within 18 months. When Stephens realized that Panache was going nowhere fast, she offered Lager a group of her best models, hoping that she could do for them what she'd done for the city's stylists.

"I didn't want to leave the models hanging," Stephens says. "Although fashion models really aren't Lynda's forte, I gave my models

PHOTOGRAPH: TIM REDEL

to her because she's young and she's hungry, and she's a better business manager than I am."

T.H.E. currently has more than 150 faces on file, 15 of whom have exclusive contracts; the rest play the field. Central Casting's best-known look is referred to around town as the Bomstein blond (you've seen her in Bomstein Agency's real estate ads); by contrast, Lager wants to market Ivory girls. She says that only 5 percent of the world's population are born models—5'9" frames, perfect size-8 figures, flawless skin, and magical bone structure—and even they need to be refined by an agent. The process costs money, and no agent with brains would be willing to make the investment without an exclusive right to cash in on the model's success. "God makes models," Lager says, "but only agents can turn God's models into Paulina Porzikovas and Carol Alts."

New York agents can't believe that Washington's free-for-all system has survived for this long. "The basic beginning in this business is commitment on both sides—a model and an agent working together to advance a model's career, not competing with other agencies to do the same thing," says Sue Charney, the president of Faces. "Exclusivity is the way it's done, period."

Off the record, Washington's nonexclusive models gripe about low pay, late pay, and humiliating assignments. At Central Casting, they say, client service means that if the auto show needs a blond with terrific headlights, it'll get one.

"You take a big risk by turning down bookings or getting a controversial haircut. Dagmar Wittmer will make sure you don't work for a few months," says a model who's considering signing with T.H.E. "It would bring wonderful peace of mind and be very prestigious to have an exclusive contract with T.H.E., but peace of mind and prestige don't pay the bills. Only a young model with some other source of income can afford to sign an exclusive contract."

Eileen Ford, who now runs the biggest modeling agency in the United States, brought exclusivity to New York's woefully disorganized fashion community in 1948. The key difference between Ford's crusade and Lager's, Lager points out, is that Ford's agency was supported by an editorial powerhouse, *Vogue*; T.H.E. has had no such commitment from the *Washington Post Magazine* and the other local publications that regularly hire out-of-town models. "I'm spending $10,000 to $12,000 a week," says Nancy McKeon, an editor of the *Magazine*. "When you have access to world-class models for little more than what Washington agents charge, it makes sense to take as many chances

PHOTOGRAPH: CHRIS HARTLOVE

THE MARYLAND MERCURY

By Keith F. Girard

This Bud's for You. J. Willard "Bill" Marriott, Jr., is a devout Mormon who neither smokes nor drinks, but he apparently believes there's a big market in Maryland for steak and beer.

In California Marriott Corporation is test-marketing a midpriced eatery called Allie's that serves beer and wine with dinner. If the formula works, the company plans to convert its Big Boy restaurants in the Washington area. But to do that, it needs to be able to sell liquor. And state Delegate Robert Kittleman, a Republican who represents Howard and upper Montgomery counties, has filed a bill that would allow Marriott to sell beer and wine at its restaurants in Montgomery County. (Companies are currently limited to one liquor license per county, except under special circumstances.) Kittleman's bill, however, is hotly opposed by the Montgomery County Hotel, Motel Licensed Beverage Association, which represents about 75 independent restaurateurs. The sale of liquor has always been a politically charged issue in Montgomery County, and the association has always been influential in local politics.

It's still too early to predict a winner, but the upcoming battle doesn't leave much Miller time for the combatants.

Decline of a Dynasty. The Gores of Montgomery County, one of Maryland's oldest families, are selling most of the land around their pre-Revolutionary War estate on the Potomac River to a local developer, Bob Keeler, for a reported $50 million. Keeler couldn't be reached for comment, but he's said to be considering plans to build up to 50 luxury houses and a golf course on the 146-acre property, which is located in the heart of Potomac hunt country. Only one house per two acres is allowed under current zoning, but the houses may be clustered to preserve open space. In 1985, according to county records, H. Grady Gore filed a subdivision plan for part of the property but never followed through on development.

From the day he pulled the Bullets out of Baltimore 15 years ago, Abe Pollin has never had many fans in Crab Town. He seems to be trying to make amends, but without luck.

Last summer Pollin's Centre Management, which operates the Capital Centre, offered to run the Baltimore Arena. The Arena has never turned a profit, and Pollin agreed not to collect any management fees until he cut the deficit. Baltimore's mayor, Kurt Schmoke, apparently thought it was a good deal for the city; he gave Pollin a no-bid contract.

Others, however, believe Pollin is laughing all the way to the bank. His company now has a monopoly on major halls in the Baltimore-Washington area: the Cap Centre, the Arena, and the Patriot Center at George Mason University. "Who's benefiting whom here?" asks Tony Ambridge, a member of Baltimore's city council. "I think they're making out on the deal."

Pollin promised to bring family entertainment to the Arena, but he won't get the ultimate family attraction. Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey Circus, the Arena's top draw, pulled out as soon as it heard that Pollin was taking over. The Feld family, which owns the circus, has been feuding with Pollin for years and refuses to do business with him.

The contract has embarrassed Schmoke in other ways. It turns out that Gary Handleman, a vice president of Centre Management, is a longtime friend of Schmoke's. The relationship led to charges that the no-bid contract was nothing more than a sweetheart deal, although Schmoke's people say there are enough safeguards in the contract to prevent a conflict of interest.

Pollin, who didn't return several telephone calls, has promised to find another high-quality circus for Baltimore. Still, he hasn't been able to charm Charm City.

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The battle Lager has waged over exclusivity has frayed egos in the city's tight-knit modeling industry, and the combatants are fairly ripping apart at the seams.

"If Lynda Lager could have changed Washington's modeling business, she would have done it by now," bristles Ness of Central Casting. "As for her being a good businesswoman, I don't think Lynda Lager knows where the business *is*."

"We make our money off the volume we do, not off the models' 10 percent," adds Wittmer. "I couldn't sleep at night if we had a naive model who couldn't audition for a great spot because we had her sealed off under exclusive contract. We've stayed on top 18 years without putting a stranglehold on the models."

Stephens and Lager, however, insist that Central Casting does have a stranglehold, without the squeeze of legal contracts. "Central Casting has everyone by the balls," Stephens contends. "It has all the clients: photographers, ad agencies, Hollywood moguls. At Central Casting, the client is supreme. And he should be, but not at the expense of the people you represent."

Lager's campaign may have finally struck a chord. In November, 30 Washington-area models formed a guild, a professional organization that will act as a liaison between models and clients and agents to promote the interests of the models. Practically overnight the guild signed 70 members. It aims to enforce standard rates and pay periods and to set guidelines for the models' conduct.

"We're still discussing strategy," says Sharon Cline, the guild's chairman, "but it looks as if the models will need to sign limited contracts that would make them exclusive to an agent on a client-by-client basis: if a client hires you through an agent, you're subsequently exclusive to that agent for jobs with that client."

Neither clients nor models are going to buy the idea of exclusivity on principle. In the end the only thing that will bring Washington clients back home is a collection of great faces—and so far there's been no stampede to T.H.E. "In the fashion area, Lager, to me, doesn't know the first thing about developing a face," contends a dour observer. "Neither does Central Casting. They wouldn't know a model if it bit them on the nose."

Lager has given herself another year to prove the naysayers wrong. If she can dazzle the city's editors and catalog makers with a little of the old Panache, she may be able to make Washington a respected breeding ground for New York-bound talent—a real fashion town, so to speak. R

PHOTOGRAPH: CHRIS HARTLOVE

SMOKE AND MIRRORS

By Richard Blow

The 100th Congress churned out important legislation on matters of trade, civil rights, the environment, the federal budget, taxes, and drugs. As usual, a slew of competing lobbies worked behind the scenes to get their special interests written into those laws. Now that the dust has settled, it's worth taking a closer look at some of the maneuverings that went on; they illustrate the different strategies that lobbies used to get things done on Capitol Hill last year.

The oldest trick in the book. Business—in particular, the Grocery Manufacturers of America, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and the National Restaurant Association—won a major fight against Ted Kennedy's bill to raise the minimum wage by going directly to their membership. "We got letters from every damn restaurant and grocery store in America," says a Senate staffer. An avalanche of mail that came right before the November elections helped to keep the issue from coming to a vote on the Senate floor.

Guns . . . The National Rifle Association renewed its don't-mess-with-us reputation by helping to beat a bill that would've established a waiting period for handgun purchases. Many Hill staffers believe that the gun lobby has overstated its role in this victory, however. "A lot of congressmen would have voted the way they did with or without the NRA," says one.

But as the group proved yet again during its unsuccessful attempt to defeat Maryland's gun ban, its lobbying is never subtle—a strategy that gives people the impression that it can simply steamroll its opposition. And the perception that the NRA has unrivaled power is almost as good as actually having unrivaled power.

. . . and roses. The environmental lobbies proved last year that good arguments and solidarity can sometimes beat the better-financed industrial lobbies. The Public Interest Research Group and the Sierra Club, for example, helped to push through a moratorium on offshore oil drilling in Massachusetts, California, and Florida. They succeeded not by pushing some arcane "snail darter" theory, but by arguing the need for an overall energy policy rather than piecemeal drilling.

The creative drive. Even groups that don't have a lot of money can accomplish things if their goals don't gore anyone else's ox. Artists for Creative Equity and the Writers Guild, for example, successfully fought a provision in the 1986 tax bill that would have prohibited writers and other artists from deducting expenses on their work until the year their work started to produce revenue. The arts lobby mounted a celebrity campaign, bringing famous writers such as Kurt Vonnegut to town to schmooze with congressmen to win votes for repeal.

The message from these successes? When it comes to lobbying Congress, well-organized pressure campaigns are probably more effective than the Mike Deaver-style string-pulling that's generally used to lobby the White House.

William Lightfoot's election to the city council is bad news for the District's medical community, whose attempt to reform malpractice laws has stalled in the council.

Lightfoot, a trial lawyer, is taking the place of Carol Schwartz, who might have sided with the doctors. There's little chance that Lightfoot will. Campaign finance records show that he received at least $31,500 (and probably far more) from the area's lawyers. About $2,000 of his money came from Jack Olender, the malpractice lawyer who's the bane of DC doctors, and his firm. So what's Lightfoot's official position on tort reform? "I've got a natural inclination to be on the side of the injured person," he says. "But just because I'm a lawyer doesn't mean that I can't think objectively about the issue."

Incidentally, Lightfoot was in court the day after he was elected representing a client who was suing a dentist for malpractice. He won a $55,000 judgment.

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