





# *coat hangers, inc*

Interview by Mary Leighton

Modeling agent Liz Bell — from rising star to raising stars

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**V**ancouver-based agent Liz Bell has a pragmatic view toward the models she represents. “You’re a glorified coat hanger,” she says. However, when Bell speaks this way about the modeling world — a world in which she has succeeded as both a model and an agent — she is not putting it down. For Bell, modeling gave her the opportunity of a lifetime, and for that she is grateful. She’s simply honest about the business — a right granted to her by her 25-plus years of experience.

By the time South African-born Bell was a 21-year-old waitress working in Vancouver, modeling scouts had already approached her. She responded by throwing away their business cards. However, one particularly persistent scout convinced her to come into an agency for headshots; but even when the photographs led to phone calls, Bell figured it was a fluke. When she was selected to go to New York to enter a runway contest, she thought it was a mistake. She went, and she won.

It was all part of a trajectory that took Bell across the Atlantic to walk runways in Paris and Milan; to wear Valentino, Dior and Krizia and to work with fashion legend Karl Lagerfeld (or simply Karl, as she refers to him). In her photos from this time, Bell practically marches off the page, although today she laughs at the 1980s-era fashion: power suits, high belts, chunky earrings, massive bangles and bushy eyebrows.

“Back in the day, there were no cell phones, no faxes, no Blackberries. You woke up, went down the road to a payphone and called your agency to get your appointments for the day,” she says. “It taught me how to bring out the best in myself — how to walk into a room and be confident.”

The Province newspaper ran a profile on Bell in 1985, when her career was in full swing — the first of her careers, anyway. She came across as enthusiastic and down-to-earth in the interview, talking about the importance of having her own style and being comfortable.

Today, Bell sounds equally enthusiastic and down-to-earth, but instead of thinking about her own career, she’s thinking about the careers of the 40-or-so models and actors whose headshots line the walls in her Gastown office. Now in its 16th year, Lizbell Agency is one of the top boutique modeling agencies in Canada.

“It’s much easier to promote someone else than yourself,” Bell says. She speaks from a valuable vantage point when pontificating on the modeling business.

“There are so many people, so it’s like genetic roulette. You’re a glorified coat hanger. You have to wrap your head around that and find a way to preserve yourself. You have to be confident. You [need] staying power. You [need] a sense of who you are to put up with all that rejection,” she says. “I realized very young that this is a business opportunity... I saved all my money and I was really focused. That’s what I tell the girls: ‘Use this opportunity. Don’t let it use you.’”

Bell relates a story of a model who signed on with her agency. Just as the young woman started getting some attention she told Bell she wasn’t interested in pursuing modeling. She wanted to

go university to start a writing program.

“What are you going to write about?” Bell exclaims, reflecting on the decision. She insists that if you happen to win this game of “genetic roulette,” you need to run with it. “People are afraid of success and they self-sabotage.”

While Bell pursued success as a model because she recognized it as a business opportunity, now that she’s in



PHOTO BY PETER HOLMES MAKEUP BY STEPHANIE LAVIGNE

the business of managing models she has cultivated something of an art — the art of drawing out a model’s maximum potential. “It’s about seeing the girls evolve and succeed,” she says.

“Vancouver isn’t the fashion capital of anywhere,” Bell readily admits, but she says that she loves the city for the people who produce, “Amazing photos and amazing editorial magazines.” The quality of the shots in local magazines often surprises agents outside of Vancouver — who often use these tear sheets as the main criteria for their hires.

It occurs to me that despite her success as a model, Bell may not have received the advice she now dishes out. How would her life have been different if she had access then to all that she knows about the business now?

“If I had known then what I know now, I would have been an even bigger star,” she says. Bell may be blunt, but she’s not bitter. Running an agency is a challenging career — demanding a wide range of skills from social to managerial to creative — but it is a rewarding one as well. “I do it because I love it, and because I get to use my artistic flair... It’s ever-changing. It’s always exciting. And it’s the most amazing study of human nature.” **b**

