

POST



ALUMNI PROFILE

Succeeding by Design

by Daniel McCabe

Lucie Lacava examining different fonts in her Old Montreal offices. Mignon Khargle, art director for on-line magazine *Salon*, says, "Lucie is capable of creating work which is timeless in style, cleverly standing on its own amid the marketplace clamour of hip and happening trends."

main photo
Christian Fleury

Are you the sort of person who likes to kill time by thumbing through newspapers at magazine stores or newsstands? If so, you're familiar with Lucie Lacava's work even if the name doesn't ring a bell. Indeed, if you read Canadian newspapers at all, Lacava's craftsmanship is almost impossible to avoid.

Le Devoir. *The Ottawa Citizen*. *The Montreal Gazette*. *Le Soleil*. *The Hamilton Spectator*. Lacava, BFA 82, is the designer who engineered new looks for all these papers, earning herself an armful of prizes in the process. She's nabbed a pair of National Newspaper Awards for layout and design and has also been honoured for her work by the Advertising and Design Club of Canada. Her redesign of *Le Devoir* earned several prizes from the Society of Newspaper Design in 1994, including the Best of Show top prize. Two years later, Lacava wowed the judges for this international organization once again, winning a Special Jury Prize for her work on *Le Soleil*.

Lacava's redesigns don't just work on an aesthetic level. They make good business sense too. "The newspapers that I've redesigned have never suffered a drop in circulation," she says. "It's usually just the opposite — the readership goes up."

Lacava manages her own design firm in a tenth floor office in Old Montreal, a few doors away from the building of her former employer, the *Gazette*. Her space is filled with antique wood desks and cabinets and with newspapers from around the world. Originally from Italy (she accompanied her parents and brother to Canada when she was 15), Lacava uses her familiarity with European approaches to design to her advantage. *The Ottawa Citizen* uses a font that she first spied in British newspapers. Her papers tend to have a European flavour to them — dignified and reserved with playful flourishes around the edges. A frequent traveller (when interviewed in Montreal, she was just back from designing a newspaper in Toronto and on the verge of a trip to Geneva for a conference), she often buys \$30 worth of papers from around the world to read on flights. Asked to list her own favourite papers, she mentions publications from across the globe — *The New York Times*, Italy's *Reforma*, the Sunday edition of Britain's *Daily Telegraph*, the front page of the *Scotsman*.

"I have a passion for newsprint," Lacava admits.

By her own estimation, about 90 percent of her clients are newspapers. Her biggest single customer is the Southam Newspaper Group, which publishes the *Gazette*, the *Citizen*, *The Vancouver Sun* and several other papers that Lacava has worked on. She also does non-newspaper work — a catalogue for the Musée du Québec's blockbuster exhibition on French sculptor Auguste Rodin, for instance. Her talents are earning her business from the U.S. as well. She has done design work for the *Detroit News* and the *Kansas City Star*.

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Lacava's latest project may have been her most challenging yet. She was the chief designer for Southam's Toronto-based *National Post*, which debuted October 27. Lacava says, "It was like nothing else I had done before — it was a little more complex. It's also one of my first designs where no one has said it looks like this paper or that."

Lacava originally had her sights set on a different sort of career when she enrolled in graphic design at Concordia back in 1979, after a brief try at translation at Université de Montréal. "I went into Concordia's program thinking that illustration was my strong point," the soft-spoken Lacava says. "I soon realized I wasn't quite as good as I needed to be to make a career for myself." The realization didn't distress Lacava too much, though, because she quickly discovered that she had a real flair in another area. For a year-end project, she was assigned to put together a prototype for an imaginary magazine about Concordia. "People really liked it, they all seemed impressed," she says. "I thought to myself, 'Okay, I'll never be a great illustrator, but this isn't so bad.'"

Shortly after graduating, Lacava landed a job in the *Gazette's* advertising and art department, creating distinctive looks for the newspaper's ads. When a designer position opened up on the newspaper's editorial side, she jumped at it. Her colleagues in advertising thought she was nuts.

At the time, during the early 1980s, newspapers were stiff and staid creatures. Still, Lacava liked the idea of working with editors on the heart and soul of a newspaper — its stories. Her timing was good. Shortly after she switched departments, *USA Today* made its debut and changed the world of newspapers forever. An instant best-seller, *USA Today's* bold and vivid graphics shook the industry. Editors realized that the appearance of their papers could no longer be an afterthought. Suddenly, Lacava's job became much more significant.

In 1987, Lacava received her first major assignment, to design the *Gazette's* new Sunday edition. Lacava opted for a breezy, bright and user-friendly newspaper that would go down well with a croissant and café au lait. Some *Gazette* journalists grumbled that the Sunday edition was so light, news wise, that it floated. But readers were instantly won over. "In focus groups, readers started asking us, 'Why can't the paper look like this every other day of the week, too?'" recalls Lacava.

She went on to revamp the look of the entire *Gazette*, then left to take over the design of *Le Devoir*, one of Quebec's most prestigious newspapers. Lacava gave the paper an overhaul, fashioning an elegant-looking publication. "I think after *USA Today*, newspapers went a little too far," says Lacava. "Everybody wanted that colourful look with graphs and charts all over the place. I tend to

be very classic in my approach to typography and design."

Lacava's *Le Devoir* drew widespread praise and catapulted her to the ranks of North America's top newspaper designers. Mignon Khargie, the art director for *Salon*, a highly regarded on-line magazine, cites Lacava as one of the best publications designers around. "I still remember the year in which *Le Devoir* stunned the judges at the annual competition of the Society of Newspaper Design," Khargie says, "and I remember the excitement that there was something new, different and wonderful to look at and experience."

"Lucie is a real master of the basic building blocks of newspaper design," says editor John Cruickshank of *The Vancouver Sun*, a paper Lacava recently redesigned. "She's one of the better students of newspapers around. She's aware of all the latest trends — in Europe, Latin America, the U.S., Britain — and she's very authoritative on all the issues surrounding newspaper design."

After *Le Devoir*, Lacava headed off on her own. "There are only so many ways you can design a section for election coverage or illustrate recipes for St. Valentine's Day," she says.

According to Lacava, the process of redesigning a newspaper involves equal measures of marketing, science, detective work and intuition. When hired to take on a job, she meets with the publisher and the editor to get a sense of what direction they want to take the paper. Focus groups of readers suggest the sorts of design elements they would like to see (bigger photos? crisper fonts? more local news?). She watches the current paper being put together, to get a sense of its character, as well as its limitations. In redesigning the *Gazette*, for instance, Lacava had to factor in the paper's old printing presses which often resulted in mediocre colour and barely legible type. "We restricted the use of colour, used more bold typography and added more white space. The result was a much cleaner looking publication."

She also likes to delve into a newspaper's past for inspiration. "I like to see how the front page has evolved and the types of fonts that have been used over the years," says Lacava. "Every publication has its own special history and strengths. My job is to try to bring that character out and help create a connection with the readers." Nobody does it better. ●

Daniel McCabe is a Montreal editor and freelance writer.

