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Lacava, Lucie

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Lucie Lacava sits on the parquet-wood floor of her small office poring over a box of treasured old newspapers. "Here are some real antiques," she says, gingerly removing a faded yellow 1952 copy of *The Toronto Daily Star* from a plastic bag. The slightly torn paper carries a front-page story about King George VI's death with the headline: "Pale, weary Queen comes home." Lacava admires the typography, but quickly points to a bright red headline on the otherwise sober black-and-white paper. "I'm not crazy about this," she declares. The self-described "newspaper architect" knows what she is talking about. At 38, Lacava is one of Canada's pre-eminent newspaper designers. Recently, the sparsely decorated office in her suburban Montreal home - she has since moved to a space in Old Montreal - was cluttered with stacks of newspapers, ranging from *The Scotsman* to the *San Diego Union-Tribune*. But it is old papers, with their attention to detail and what she describes as "beautifully crafted" typography that hold a special lure for Lacava. "Sometimes," she says, "I just look for inspiration."

Lacava seems to have no trouble finding it - or work, for that matter. She has redesigned or helped make over two dozen Canadian newspapers, including *The Gazette* and *Le Devoir* in Montreal, *Le Soleil* in Quebec City, *The Ottawa Citizen* and *The Hamilton Spectator*. Her award-winning work draws kudos for its elegance, detail and uncluttered design.

The soft-spoken Lacava spends much of her time with her eyes glued to a large Power Macintosh screen. Typing with two fingers, she clicks the mouse, experimenting with different type for a new section banner for *The Windsor Star's* entertainment pages. "I try to limit the number of fonts I use," says Lacava. That restrained approach has reaped big dividends. In 1993, she redesigned *Le Devoir* using only two fonts for the entire paper. In doing so, Lacava bucked the trend of many newspapers, which "have gone font crazy" since the introduction of the Macintosh computer, says Ron Reason, director of visual journalism at the Florida-based Poynter Institute for Media Studies. "Lucie was one of the first to step back and say, 'We don't need all this.' " Lacava's efforts nabbed *Le Devoir* several awards from the Society of Newspaper Design in 1994, an international organization with 2,400 members, including the prestigious Best of Show prize. Lacava left the paper soon after to work to set up her own business. "I could be the SND poster child," she says, laughing.

For all her jobs, whether she is brought in to help a newspaper's design team or given carte blanche to overhaul a paper's look, Lacava - a graphic design graduate of Concordia University in Montreal - does her homework. She invariably delves into the newspaper's history to learn about its personality, a practice often discouraged by clients. "They're afraid I'm going to come back with a retro-looking paper," says Lacava. She does, in fact, draw some ideas from old newspaper designs, sometimes finding fonts no longer readily available and updating them, to "come up with something quite unique." For the recent *Citizen* and *Gazette* make-overs, Lacava suggested reworking old versions of the newspapers' nameplates, which run across the top of the front page. "She just understands what will work," says Alan Allnutt, editor-in-chief of *The Gazette*, where Lacava landed her first job in 1982 after a freelance assignment illustrating shoe ads. Adds Allnutt: "She has a wonderful designer's eye."

Lacava's input has helped turn *The Gazette* and the *Citizen* into more serious-looking papers: the redesigned papers use less color and have switched to "serif" fonts, which Lacava thinks are easier to read and elegant. She sees it as a welcome change from the colorful, graphic-laden newspapers, inspired by the *USA Today* example of the 1980s, when dailies tried to attract people who didn't normally read newspapers. "I think now we're doing the opposite," says Lacava, a consultant who has a contract with the 55-member Southam Newspaper Group. "We're trying to appeal to readers who love to read newspapers." She is one of them, although Lacava doesn't read like most people - she also scans for design, fine details and mistakes. "I'm critiquing the paper as I read it," she says.

Next, Lacava hopes to expand her client base internationally. Married (to accountant Nick Vannelli) with two young children, she can do most of her work from Montreal and send pages by modem. She is currently helping to create a new look for *The Vancouver Sun*, a redesign that makes its debut this fall. It is not surprising that the multilingual Lacava, who was born in Italy and settled in Canada with her parents and brother when she was 15, believes her work lies between European and North American styles. "I love classic-looking newspapers," she says. That is apparent from a glance at newsstands, where many papers bear Lucie Lacava's touch.

Maclean's September 1, 1997**Author** BRENDA BRANSWELL in Montreal[About TCE](#) | [Who's Who at TCE](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Our Partners](#) | [Copyright Info](#)