





A career fashioned in Malta

Heidi Ruggier wanted to study film. Today she's president and founder of Toronto-based public relations company *Matte PR*, advisor with Ryerson University's School of Fashion programme, and mentor with Toronto Fashion Incubator. In her world, that's a perfectly logical outcome. Words by **Cassi Camilleri**.

've always been obsessed with TV and film,' she says, her smiling eyes framed by an iconic pair of black thick-rimmed glasses. A natural storyteller, Heidi Ruggier effortlessly hones in on the early breadcrumbs that led her down the path towards an exciting career in public relations and a life packed with art, fashion, and food appreciation. This is thanks to her openness to mixing and matching, trying and experimenting.

'After graduating highschool, I went on to study history and English. But one of my electives was a film class, and that class changed everything. That was where I watched *Female Trouble*,' she remembers. *Female Trouble* is a controversial dark comedy directed by John Waters and starring actor, singer, and drag queen Divine. Its blend of the surreal and bizarre make it, to this day, a very divisive film. 'It was mind-blowing. I had never seen anything like it. People walked out of that class, and complained to the school. But I just loved it. I thought it was brilliant. That was when I decided to go ahead with film [studies].'

On a family trip to Malta, the opportunity arose for Ruggier to put that plan into action.

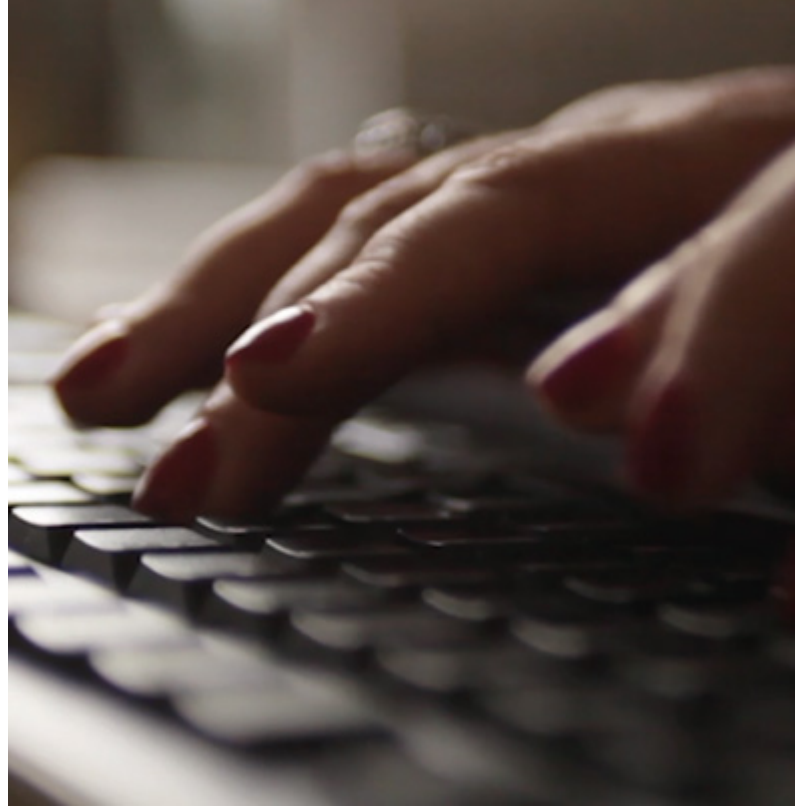
But it required some adjustments. Joining her cousin Dr Amy Tanti on a random errand to the University of Malta (UM), she was struck by the vibe of the place. When Tanti suggested applying to study there, Ruggier jumped on the idea. 'Amy said there wasn't a dedicated film degree, so I should go for Communications. So I did. A few months later, I flew back home, packed my bags, and moved to Malta,' she grins.

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

Ruggier's time at the UM had a lasting impact. 'I had a great experience in Malta. I love how, compared to schools in Canada that have a few hundred students in a single class, there were 30 of us in our sessions. It was so cool. We really got to discuss and engage. And I think we learnt a lot that way.' And it didn't feel like compromising on her love of film at all. 'I adored my classes with [Prof.] Salvu Catania. He was brilliant. But as it happened, studying communications more broadly served me perfectly because that's the degree that got me into PR. If it had been a film degree, I probably wouldn't have been able to >



Heidi Ruggier
Photo and stills by Matte PR



apply for the job I did, and I wouldn't have met the people I did. So it all worked out the way it was meant to.'

Upon graduation, Ruggier had a tough time deciding on a home base. 'I was *this* close to staying in Malta,' she says, squinting to emphasise the point. 'I came back to Canada because ultimately if I wanted to be close to my family while having a meaningful career – it made sense to do that here. My parents were so supportive of me, it was important that I was somewhere close to them. But I always think about eventually going back. Maybe one day down the road I will.' At this point, visits every one or two years keep her in touch with the island and the family she has here.

The move back to Toronto demanded experimentation. Unwilling to wait for the 'perfect gig' to come along, she jumped straight into the fray. 'I got a job in marketing at a chiropractic clinic. It wasn't what I wanted to do, but I was still trying to figure out what that was anyway,' she remembers. 'A few months in, I got the clinic a few stories including the front page of the local paper. I loved the process of creating something, letting the media know, and seeing the initiative in print. And then it clicked. "Hey! I'm doing PR."'

The focus for Ruggier's PR path – art, fashion, food – came from an equally unlikely source. Influenced by the sociology side of her degree, she started volunteering at a homeless drop-in centre. 'People could come in, get a meal, a change of clothes, and other things they needed. I wanted to see if I liked being in that kind of environment and working in that line,' she says. Weeks into the job, Ruggier found herself gravitating towards the messy clothes

donation room. On days when she finished her shift early, she would spend the remainder of the day inside the clothing room sorting through clothes, putting together looks, and merchandising pieces into a curated selection.

'After a couple of weeks, I basically had a little store going,' Ruggier says. 'People would come into the centre and I would get to know them and I would be like "Yes, I have the best sweater for you, come!" Or "I have an amazing pair of shoes or jeans for you." I always loved fashion and putting together looks and outfits. And I knew I liked doing PR. So there it was. That was what I was going to do – fashion PR.'

FROM MENTEE TO MENTOR

With newfound clarity, Ruggier set the ball rolling on making the right career turn. 'I literally sat down and just googled fashion PR,' she laughs. 'That's how I found Nina Budman. She was a mentor at the Toronto Fashion Incubator.' Ruggier called up Budman's office and asked if they were taking on interns. From there, she was off to the races. 'Nina really invested time teaching her team. She also started teaching me the business side of things and how to develop new businesses. During the internship, I ended up finding a client for the company, a client we still support now, and Nina was like "OK kid, you're hired" and that was it.'

Now about five years later, Ruggier sits in the boss's chair. Tragically, Nina passed away in 2016 and Ruggier was there to take up the mantle to keep the company torch aflame, renaming the business Matte PR. 'Nina had a profound impact on me,' she acknowledges. 'Nina connected me with



her extraordinary colleagues, and some of them still look out for me. I'm grateful. The lesson I learnt from them is you can do amazing things through collaboration, and great things happen when projects have multiple generations involved. You benefit from the unbridled exuberance of the young combined with the experience and wisdom of those who have been in the game for a while. It's very important that different generations work together,' Ruggier emphasises.

'Nina also taught me how important it is to work with people who come through your door and help them move towards a career that they want to have,' she adds. Mentorship was a pillar for the company when Budman was at the helm and still is, as evidenced by Ruggier's other roles as advisor with the Ryerson University's School of Fashion Program and mentor for the Toronto Fashion Incubator.

Since taking on the role of CEO, Ruggier has tackled lots more challenges. 'The business model I inherited was not built around digital.

We needed to take that amazing infrastructure built around media relations and extend the offering to include digital services such as social media, e-commerce, and content production.' She also wanted to put her mark on the brand. 'I wanted to share parts of the arts and culture landscape that I think are cool and reflect my personal taste.' This train of thought led to the birth of Glossi Mag, Matte PR's online publication.

'Glossi was really somewhere we could get more creative, more abstract, more avant garde,' Ruggier explains. 'Glossi is the yin to Matte PR's yang. On Matte PR's channels we speak from a business perspective and showcase our clients, in Glossi we write for an audience of creatives, profile artists, and design that inspires us. Glossi is a space where we connect with like-minded individuals.'

This focus on people is something Ruggier refers to and points back to time and time again. 'The people on Matte PR's team are amazing. I'm so lucky,' she gushes. 'It's really important to me that I create

a company culture that is truly collaborative and open. Our team also benefits from being composed of people from diverse backgrounds. Toronto is so multicultural, you walk around and everyone is represented. It's awesome. However, a lot of PR agencies do not reflect that diversity in their staff makeup. Mine does. PR is often the last line before something gets released to the public, so I believe you need a diverse team looking at how you engage the public to make sure you're not making any missteps.'

The fruits of that valuable network can be seen in her latest venture, co-founding a non-profit organisation called House of Neighbours. Created as a response to COVID-19, the grassroots initiative partnered with Centennial College and delivered fresh food baskets to vulnerable families affected by the pandemic.

During her interview she mulled over the advice key to her success. 'Listen to your gut. Listen to your intuition. Listen to the talent around you,' Ruggier says. 'That's all there is, right? Then do what you believe.' **T**