

Sharon Lewis finds activism experience a plus for new CounterSpin host role

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TORONTO (CP) - Her biography describes Sharon Lewis as a writer, actor and . . . activist. Activist? The word does tend to stick out. Has there ever been an activist as the host of a TV current affairs show? Especially on CBC Newsworld?

But as Avi Lewis's replacement on CounterSpin - described as Newsworld's flagship debate show - Sharon Lewis has no problem with the concept since she does not equate activism with bias. "It's a journalist's job to activate change through information," Lewis, 36, says over coffee. "Who isn't passionate and is in the journalist field, otherwise I don't know what would drive you?"

The Toronto native says that like her predecessor, she owns up to any bias she may have going into a show, but that she doesn't claim to have the answers, only opinions.

Please see below for more on Lewis

"Because if I had the answer then I wouldn't be interested in the debate and I don't think anybody else would be."

Otherwise, she said, she would have to have a TV show called Sharon's Answer.

"I realize that there's a perception that activism may mean that there is a specific interest that I'm tied to," she adds. "I need to be absolutely fair, absolutely, completely fair in facilitating the debate, to make sure that whatever my biases are, (they) aren't leading to misinformation."

Although she had prior experience in theatre and film (including the lead role in Clement Virgo's *Rude*) Lewis was thrown to the lions, so to speak, when invited to pinch-hit for Avi Lewis on a CounterSpin episode earlier this year.

Her performance in that baptism of fire was, apparently, solid enough that she got the permanent gig when he decided to move on.

Although not scheduled to begin full-time until Sept. 17, she was again required to hit the ground running on a special edition of CounterSpin the Thursday after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Since then the show has focused on the story. It even turned the debate on last Monday's episode over to voices of dissent, to guest panelists opposed to U.S. foreign policy who have found their views unwelcome in the U.S. media these days.

The very title of the show, she stresses, suggests a desire to counter the usual spin doctors who try to manage the information carried in the media.

Lewis says despite her lack of previous TV moderating experience she believes her work in political theatre was a major plus.

"There's a real school of thought that says the best kind of learning is the Socratic method, by question and answer as opposed to instruction. And I think CounterSpin sets up that format. For me it's a continuation of what I was already doing. It's what I do in theatre."

Did she get any advice from Avi Lewis when he handed over the baton?

"What he did give me, which was really great, was a lot of huge support. That's a great way to walk into a new job. He was just like a big cheerleader.

"He said 'What took me a while to learn I saw you already do.' So that was exciting to hear."

If she's adept at tackling the tough exchanges, she can also handle the frivolous. Asked when she first realized she was so telegenic, she claims not to know what that means. When told she looks good on camera, she laughs heartily. "I'll only realize that if you keep telling me that! I dunno. It's never been a burning sort of passion in my life."

Right now CounterSpin is her burning passion and she has dropped any interest in having a hyphenated career. She doubts she will return to writing, drama or activism in the foreseeable future.

"This is THE focus, yeah. This is a dream job, this, for me is a culmination of all those skills. So leaving it would be going backwards."

Ah, but what if Virgo tempted her with a meaty film role?

"I'd say, 'Come on CounterSpin. Let's debate it' "

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A look at Sharon Lewis's bio:

Born: Toronto. Age 36.

Education: BA with honours in political science, University of Toronto.

Community work: Co-ordinator of the Women's Centre at U of T; the Big Sister Program of the Children's Aid Society, Amnesty International; AFRIC, dedicated to education about the war in the Sudan; Second Look Community Arts.

Training and theatre/activism experience: Brazilian political theatre technique under Augusto Boal in England; co-founder of Sugar'n'Spice Productions to promote work by and for women of colour; worked with Maxine Bailey on the play Sistahs.

Writing: Articles for Fuse and Metro World magazines; co-edited the anthology Plural Desires; received a screenplay scholarship from the National Film Board and from the Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto. Has a novel in progress called Poverty and Love.

Film: Lead role in Rude (Clement Virgo); also made two short films, Maple and Impasse at Holy Faith.

Quote: "I don't have the answer. Because if I had the answer, then I wouldn't be interested in the debate. And I don't think anybody else would be either. Then I would need to have my own TV show and just call it Sharon's Answer."

- on whether she can be a neutral moderator and call herself an activist, too.

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