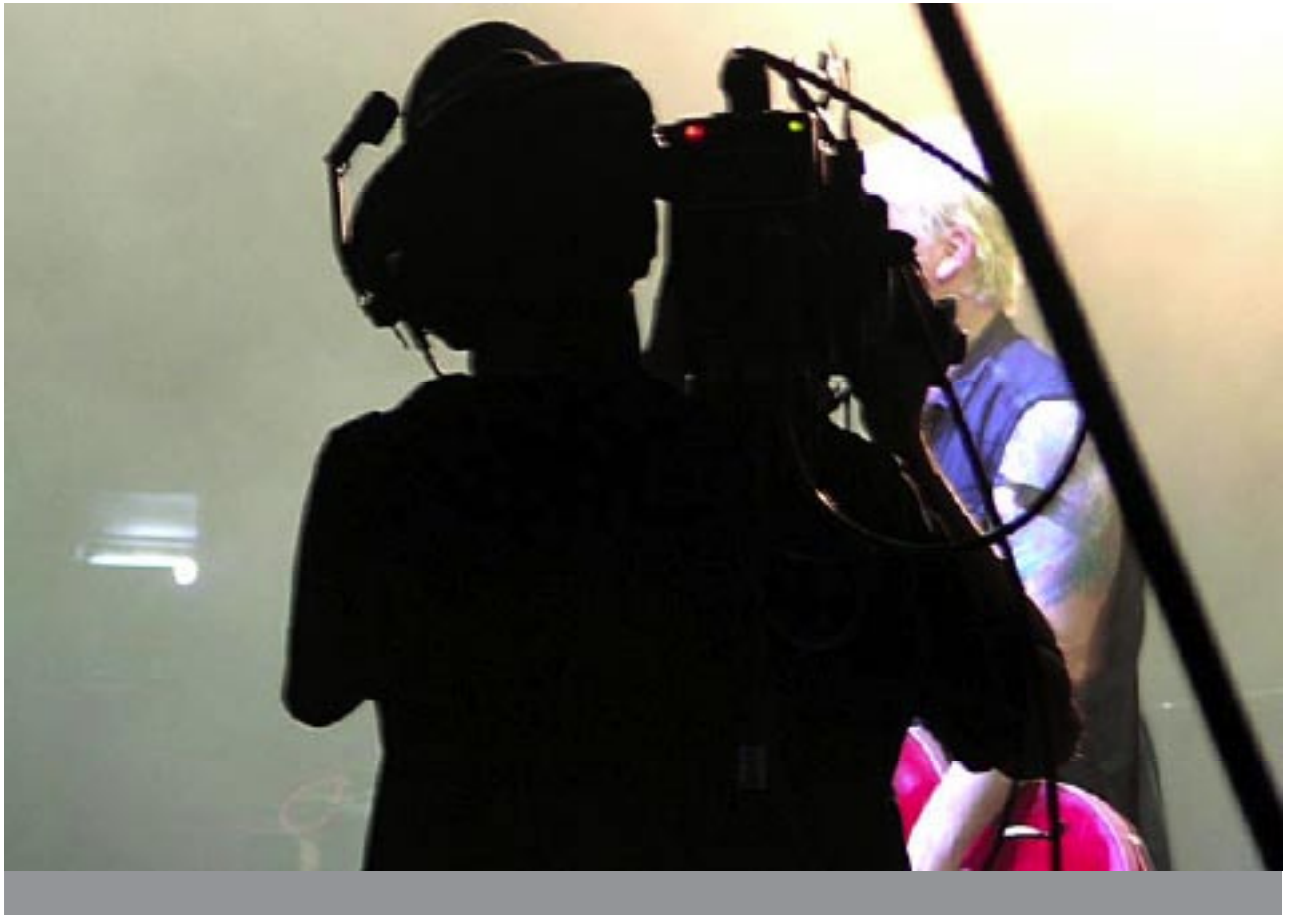


Starting out in TV production

Nione Meakin talks to Gemma Davis about the realities and difficulties of a career in television



Being a television producer sounds glamorous and exciting. But, as 22-year-old Gemma Davis is finding out, getting there can be a decidedly unglamorous journey.

Gemma graduated from Royal Holloway University with a degree in English Literature and Drama and a passion for television. A regular studio audience member on TV shows, she imagined she would get into the business easily by sweet-talking researchers and being taken on as a runner.

She moved to Islington, North London, straight after finishing university and began touting her CV to as many TV companies as she could find. But television is fiercely competitive and with no real experience in the field, Gemma found herself unable to get any work.

“Myself and my friend went to the depths of despair, because we’d moved to London almost immediately after leaving university and neither of us was able to find jobs there. At one point I was commuting to Enfield Chase every day to do a job there, just because I was so broke. “

While becoming a lowly runner - the most common way of gaining entry into television - is hard work and badly paid, positions advertised on Grapevinejobs (a film and television jobs website) receive about 200 applications per day. They also demand some television experience and with none, Gemma had to think more broadly. She eventually found work as a receptionist for a Soho-based post-production company responsible for getting finished film digitised and edited.

The position received around 120 applications from other TV hopefuls and was offered to Gemma only when the woman originally chosen declined it. It wasn't the job she had dreamed of, but she thought it would be a great way in to the business.

"I didn't really want to work in post-production, but I did want to work in TV. I made it obvious that I didn't want to be a receptionist forever but was interested in seeing what went on and would work hard while I was there. You can't be snobby about it - you have to be willing to start at the bottom. "

Shortly afterwards, she was promoted to working in the company's bookings department, but found it unstimulating. She was then made post-production coordinator, a position that involved arranging editors for projects, booking studios and managing budgets.

"That's when runners start buying you lunch!" she said. "It was exciting, but scary because of the responsibility and because I didn't really know what I was doing. I picked everything up as I went along.

"It took two or three months before I didn't get butterflies when I woke up every morning. I'd lie there thinking, what are they going to ask me to do today? You really have to bluff it and blag it. I'd be researching things on the internet, rather than ask people to explain them."

Gemma decided she did not want to stay in post-production and had no interest in editing or the more technical positions. She wanted to use her creativity more and decided to try to move into production by getting advice from clients who were already in the kind of jobs she hoped to get into. Her plan paid off and she got another lucky break.

"One of our clients who I'd got talking to really liked me and asked me if I'd like to come and work for them. It was amazing as I didn't even have to apply for the job."

She then started her current position as a production coordinator for the corporate video team at a leading financial institution. They make videos for businesses, teaching everything from company etiquette to safety at work.

Gemma's job involves booking crews for shoots, arranging for finished tapes to be delivered to post-production companies and shadowing producers and directors.

"It's not exactly exciting but I get to go on shoots sometimes and it's all good experience. I've got to do this obligatory year to move up and I think the more I can prove myself, the more I will be able to get out of the office and take on more responsibility. But once you get on and start enjoying things, it drives you on."

Having initially known nothing about television, she said it was still very much a learning curve. "I just want an injection of knowledge because at the moment I don't know all the stuff I need to know," she said.

"I beat myself up about it but I suppose I'm learning all the time. At the start, I'd come out in hives because I was so stressed about it all, but then as soon as it clicks and you're au fait with everything, you totally forget that you were this stuttering mess."

Gemma hopes to use the job as a springboard into a similar position in broadcast television. "I'd have to take a step-down money-wise but I'm willing to do that because I'd much rather work somewhere where I can use my creativity more. It might also be a case of stepping down roles, to a production assistant rather than a coordinator."

She advises others thinking of going into television against being too pushy. "There's always been this thing that you must be pushy, but you should just

be yourself," she said, "I think people are much more impressed by that than by someone trying to be something they're not."

Being thick-skinned is another must. The media is renowned for being cliquey.

"Runners are treated like servants and if someone asked one to clean their shoes, they would. At one place I knew of, the runners were asked to pick all the blue M&Ms out of a bag and bring them to the directors and they actually did it because you do whatever you're asked. You just have to be thick skinned and know that that's the way it works."

Most important, she said, was to get as much experience as possible, in whatever way. Try and do something that is either career-related or degree-related, as then you've got something to fall back on.

"Take your CV in to places and follow it up with a call. If you get an interview be really honest and don't make up things that you can't actually do. They will pull you up on it and you'll get caught out.

"If you don't want to do technical work like cameras, don't pretend you do, because it won't help you in any way. But equally, don't rule things out if they're not exactly what you wanted to do. You can often turn things to your advantage or you will meet someone who can help you get where you do want to go."