

Interview with Shana Alexander

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Interviewer: Joe Abrell

Date: November 27, 1976

Length: 9:16

Joe Abrell (00:00:01-00:00:16) You see her every week on 60 Minutes. And tonight I'm going to represent you and ask her some questions. Of course, I'm talking about Shane Alexander, who has written this book called Talking Woman. It's a series of firsts, how she was the first woman. You can almost fill in the blank. Welcome to Montage.

Shana Alexander: Thank you. Now listen, Jack.

Joe Abrell :No, no, no, I'm Joe.

Shana Alexander : Oh, you're Joe.

Joe Abrell: I'm Joe, yeah. Do you. Are you guys live? You guys.

Shana Alexander: Yeah, we're reasonably live, but we're not in the same room.

Joe Abrell: Really?

Shana Alexander (00:00:29-00:00:35): No, no. Jack's in Washington normally and I'm in New York normally. Occasionally we are in the same room.

Joe Abrell: But I always wondered, do you sit there and listen to. Is that the first time you've heard what he said?

Shana Alexander: No, no. We do this by the magic of telephone. We have to agree to disagree. We have to pick a subject. We are not actors. I don't want to speak for Jack, but I believe what I say and I write it out. So we call up, I expect Jack to call any minute and say, what are we going to fight about this week?

And we pick something on which we can find opposing attitudes. And then whoever's point which is first, he or she writes it out and then if it's me, I call up Jack and say, this is what I'm going to say, Jack, so that he can prepare a rebuttal. And then next week we go backwards.

Joe Abrell (00:01:13-00:01:16): Do you have a hard time finding things you disagree on or are there a lot of times.

Shana Alexander: Some weeks it's tough and sometimes it just falls right in there.

Joe Abrell: Let's talk about the feminist movement for a moment. What are your feelings about that?

Shana Alexander: My feelings are that it had to happen and I'm glad I was a part of it as briefly as I was. I've always been a female. I'm not a very good organization, anything including organization, woman. And so I rejoined the human race quite, if I ever left it quite a long time ago. My problem, the thing I like to say, is that there is an enemy, but it isn't men.

Joe Abrell: Who is it?

Shana Alexander (00:01:49-00:01:58): Poet society. And it's the way things work and it is the male dominated or male run order of things. But so many feminists got mad at the wrong people. They got mad at the men and they got so mad that they turned off both men and women.

Joe Abrell: Well, now you've been competing with men all your professional life. Have you felt discriminated against? Did you pay on jobs?

Shana Alexander: No, but I was discriminated against. I made about Half as much in the early days, but I was sort of happy shuffling go lucky and didn't mind making half as much. But when I speak to young women today in colleges, I tell them, be sure not to do what I did.

Joe Abrell : Which was what?

Shana Alexander (00:02:35-00:02:48): Which is to undervalue yourself and to think, well, whatever they pay me is okay. I'm glad to get the job. I'm going to get married. I'm not going to stay here very long. I just worked for a few months. I did get married speaking of Life magazine, but I stayed 18 years.

Joe Abrell: Well, things are so different, I guess, today than they were right after World War II. Maybe women don't face exactly the same thing you did. Hopefully not.

Shana Alexander: I think they are not so different inside their heads. There's legislation now to see that they get equal pay.

Joe Abrell: I was interested in reading you were talking about. Your first interview you did was with Gypsy Rose Lee. I'm presuming now all this is true.

Shana Alexander: Well, that's true.

Joe Abrell: Yeah. And you wore white gloves to the luncheon. Tell us a little bit about that first interview you ever did.

Shana Alexander (00:03:22-00:03:58): Well, I wore gloves so I could hide the questions in my glove because I was only 16 and I didn't. I'd never met a stripper. I'd never seen a pregnant woman. I was terrified. I'd been hired as a joke. You know, the paper thought it would be funny to send this kid to see the big stripper. And she was very big then because she was a tall woman. So I said in reading out of my glove. Ms. Lee, after the birth of your child, do you intend to resume your career? And she said, honey, I can't have everything going out, nothing coming in. See, the point of this is that she gave me a wonderful quote and she understood what I need and she saved a frightened kid, which I was right.

Joe Abrell: Why did you want to be a journalist?

Shana Alexander: I didn't want to be a journalist. I wanted to be an anthropologist. But at the time that I was studying anthropology, the places that I wanted to go because my gods were Margaret Mead and Ruth Bennet. I wanted to go to the South Pacific, which at that time was overrun by either Marines or what we used to call Japs. And the only place I could go to do the field work would be among the Navajo or the Hopi or the American Indians, who were not interesting then the way they are now. They're sort of chic now.

Joe Abrell: Mr. Okay, why did you turn to journalism rather than field?

Shana Alexander (00:04:35-00:04:57): Well, I got this job on the paper in the summertime and I could write, and it was certainly more fun than going to Vassar. So I didn't go back to Vassar for a while.

Finally I did. I finished up, and then by that time I had had a little experience as a journalist. Journalism is a terrific life, and anthropology is a good preparation for it.

Joe Abrell: Speaking of journalism, I wonder as a journalist myself, sometimes people say, what does it really train you to do? And I'm not sure it trains you to do anything.

Shana Alexander: Oh, it trains you to survive. I mean, you wouldn't know that I was 83, would you?

Joe Abrell: Well, no. If that's what it does to you, I'm glad I'm a journalist. But, you know, you're not really trained to be a business person. You're not really trained to be an accountant, anything like that.

Shana Alexander: I felt that very strongly when I finally, rather late in life, I think I was 39 years old, I had to start writing a column and have an opinion every week and write the Feminine. I. And now I have an opinion on Point, Counterpoint. And I felt a terrible lack of education. And I had gone to Vassar College and had had a classy education by the usual standards, but I didn't know anything. And I missed everything between ancient Egypt and the New Deal by moving around from different schools.

Joe Abrell: Before you were in television, though, did you have kind of a. Did you look down your nose at TV journalism when you were a writer for Life and Newsweek?

Shana Alexander (00:06:00-00:06:33): No, when I look down at mine, you see, when I was at Life and Newsweek, there Wasn't anything like 60 Minutes or like what we're doing now, or there was very little of it except maybe in little local places or little ghettos on Sunday afternoon where 60 Minutes used to be. But what's happened now is that public affairs has become show business. So a show like 60 Minutes, it's the seventh most popular show on all of CBS. They're starting up another show that will start in January.

Joe Abrell : Why do you think that is?

Shana Alexander: I think it's because the public grew up and there's only so much Mary Hartman and Starsky and Hutch and so on that people can take. And for people like us, it's wonderful. Because it shows that people care and that the audience is the audience. The American public is a hell of a lot smarter. Oops.

Joe Abrell: Well, that's true. Which is a great thing.

Shana Alexander: Better educated than many broadcasters think.

Joe Abrell: I presume you have total freedom in what you say.

Shana Alexander (00:07:04-00:07:20): I've been very, very fortunate. Yes, we do. We have to. People often say, do you believe that stuff? That you say. And I say, well, I'm not an actor. I believe it very much. Sometimes I accuse Jack of not believing his because I can't believe that he does.

Joe Abrell: Well, I asked you earlier about disagreeing. Do you sometimes find you agree more often than not on things that surprise you that you do?

Shana Alexander: Yeah, but then we try to avoid that subject.

Joe Abrell: Well, I don't know. Do you think it's a good technique to have Point/Counterpoint?

Shana Alexander: When I joined the show, I was already a longtime fan of 60 Minutes, and I said, sure. They asked me if I would be interested. They said, we have a novel new idea. We're going to change the program and have a man argue with a woman. Oh, well, I said, what an interesting new novel idea. So I did audition, and I eventually won this audition. And I said, I love being on this show.

I don't mind auditioning or anything I have to do to get on it. Because it reminds me of Life magazine, when Life was in its big good days and always had the story you wanted to read about that week. And Don Hewitt, the producer, told me that the show was consciously modeled on

Life magazine. And I said, well, what about me and Jack? What's the silly point count? Oh, he said, you're the editorial page. Oh, once he gave us our label.

Joe Abrell (00:08:30-00:08:35): You felt better with another label given to you. Well, did you ever feel that you were the token woman?

Shana Alexander: Yeah, sure.

Joe Abrell: And how do you feel about that?

Shana Alexander: I've been a token woman in so many places and situations that I'm quite used to it. I'm not ashamed of it. And somebody has to go first. And as long as you don't stay there too long and become the kind of petrified token woman, well, I think it's all right.

Joe Abrell: Well, thanks very much for being with us. We appreciate your candor.

Shana Alexander: Thank you very much, Joe. I like doing this.

Joe Abrell: Thank you.

Shana Alexander: I'll come back.

Joe Abrell: Good. I hope you will. And we'll watch for you.

Shana Alexander: Thank you.

Joe Abrell: We know where to find you every week.

Shana Alexander: Sunday at any rate, unless the NFL is up to its old slow tricks.

Joe Abrell: Okay, thanks very much. We'll be right back.

(00:09:16)