

Judy

Description

Judy Hofflund



Profession: Producer

Nationality: United States

Schooling: Bachelor of Arts from UCLA

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Montpellier/Los Angeles

Interviewed by Sarah Hatchuel

Judy Hofflund is a US film producer with a bachelor's degree in art from [UCLA](#). After 30 years in the business as an agent and manager, she retired. She (co)produced several films including *Murder on the Orient Express* (Kenneth Branagh, 2017), and *Death on the Nile* (Kenneth Branagh, 2022).

Sarah Hatchuel is Professor of Film and Media Studies at the University Paul Valéry Montpellier 3 (France) and former president of the Société Française Shakespeare. She has written extensively on adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. She is general coeditor of the CUP Shakespeare on Screen collection and of the online journal TV/Series

Sarah Hatchuel: Did you want to become a producer from a young age?

Judy Hofflund: I actually did. It's funny. I'll start at the beginning. I grew up in Los Angeles, mostly. I got my bachelor's degree at [UCLA](#). I intended to go to law school. And then I thought, no, I don't want to do that anymore. And what I always loved was movies. I went by myself twice a week, sat in the dark and saw every movie. I read an article about [Sherry Lansing](#), who at the time was president of [20th Century Fox](#). And I thought, whoa, there's a business to this thing that I love. I never saw myself as terribly creative, though I do a little bit more now. It was never encouraged in my life. But if there's a business to it, of this thing that I really love, I thought, okay, I'll be a producer. I'm going to figure out how I get there. The few people I knew in the entertainment business told me to start as an agent because that's how you meet the most people and get a good start. So a little bit of a long story short, I finagled my way into an interview at [CAA](#) (Creative Artists Agency) at a time when they were exploding, when all these big stars were signing with them. I thought, okay, I have to work there. My roommate at the time was dating a CAA client. So she got me an interview. What I didn't know at the time is that CAA had never hired a woman in their training program. I knew I didn't want to come in as a secretary because everybody was called secretaries then. And so I went in to this interview. I thought I aced it. I said, look, I will do anything. I'll wash windows and floors, but I have to come in as a trainee. Obviously, you guys decide what happens to me, but I want you to know my intention is to go the distance and become an agent. It didn't happen right away. And then long story short, I ended up meeting [Mike Ovitz](#) [co-founder of CAA] at a party and I got hired. I was the first woman in the mailroom at CAA. I didn't know until I started. When I started at CAA, I thought this is the job for me. I love it. I'm around actors all the time. I love actors, so my desire to be a producer dimmed. I thought, okay, I'm just going to be an agent. I'm going to be a *great* agent.

Soon I needed to be my own boss. And so I left CAA and I started another agency called Intertalent, which then merged into UTA. I had my second child and I wasn't terribly happy. I started a management company. So the background of my career is: about half of my life, I was an agent and then I became a manager. When I was an agent, I was at big companies – lots of administrative responsibilities and things that I didn't really love. I loved just doing the work of getting clients jobs and reading scripts and strategizing; and I didn't love all these people reporting to me, whom I have to be available to, to help out. So, being a manager took away all that administrative stuff, but gave me all the representation stuff that I really liked.

I always tell people "Buy your agent and manager nice Christmas presents". They work so hard. It's very high-volume work. I am very efficient with my time. I can get a lot done in a day and I struggled daily. I tried to return every phone call every day. That's what I was taught by my boss, [Ron Meyer](#) [co-founder of CAA], but sometimes I didn't succeed. But then it became every phone call and every email every day. I was the girl who did all my homework, but there was always more to do.

Sarah Hatchuel: Did you feel that, as a woman, you had something to prove and you had to do more?

Judy Hofflund: Maybe. I can remember a lot of my male colleagues, especially when I was an agent and a manager saying to me: “Judy, you do too much. You don’t have to read every single script you send a client”. So maybe. It wasn’t very conscious at the time. I definitely felt I had a lot to prove as the first woman in the mailroom because I wanted them to hire more women. I didn’t want to be the one and only. There were jobs that they were nervous about women doing, like delivering film cans to people’s screening rooms at night. And I just did it all, even when they sometimes told me not to, because I was a woman. I just did it because I knew everyone else would resent me if I didn’t. After that though, when I was my own boss, which I was at 29, I didn’t feel it so much because I only reported to myself; it was more me competing with me as opposed to feeling like I had to keep up with the guys.

Sarah Hatchuel: You produced *When Trumpets Fade* in 1998 for HBO. What was it like to produce such an all-male, war film as the first film you produced?

Judy Hofflund: Honestly, it was my partner ([Gavin Polone](#))’s project and he insisted upon putting my name on it. So I can’t take any credit for that movie. My name is on it. Gavin and I are still very close friends, but we decided not to be partners anymore because he really was moving right into producing. I had little kids, so I couldn’t produce. I needed to be able to stay in Los Angeles. And so I had nothing to do with *When Trumpets Fade*. I had a little bit to do with *Drop Dead Gorgeous*, another movie that Gavin and I produced together. I was involved with that a bit, but not how I have been in the recent movies I’ve produced, which is everything every day.

Sarah Hatchuel: The 1999 films like *Drop Dead Gorgeous*, *8MM*, *Stir of Echoes* all seem to denounce different forms of violence against women. And violence is never made glamorous in those films; violence is never eroticized, which I thought was quite wonderful for the time. Do you think that because in a way you were involved, even a little bit as a producer, it might have come across in those films?

Judy Hofflund: Honestly, no, I wish I could take credit for that. I wish I could. Because I would have liked to have, I love how you described that. That’s such a nice way to say it. I really had very little to do creatively with any of those movies. The only one I had something to do with was *Drop Dead Gorgeous*.

Sarah Hatchuel: It’s become a cult film now.

Judy Hofflund: Yes. I got COVID recently, and I watched it again. I hadn’t seen it in a long time. [Lona Williams](#) is such a good writer. You can so tell that it’s written by a woman. I’m proud of that. I think it’s a really funny, smart story.

Sarah Hatchuel: Would you say that producing those films at the end of the 1990s prepared you for the films you’ve produced recently?

Judy Hofflund: I produced when I was still [Ken \[Branagh\]](#)’s manager. I produced *As You Like It*. That taught me quite a bit. I was in England and I learned a lot. I was working really hard and raising two kids, which I took very seriously. We went everywhere together. I never left them, but I was working full

time, with them. But I knew I was done. I budgeted. I figured I could make my life work. And so I quit and closed my business at fifty five. And then Ken, who was one of the clients that I was closest to, called me a couple of years later. Good timing! Just when I was having time to think about what I'm going to do tomorrow, he said "I really miss you, what about producing the [Agatha Christie] movies I direct?" And I said, OK, that sounds great, but I don't really know how to do that job because these are big, huge, high-budget movies. And he said "I think you're a quick study". And I said, all right, I'm in if I can help you, that sounds amazing. So that's a call in a million. But that's the only part of my career I didn't plan. I had no idea that this would happen. And so I said, sure, let's do it; one at a time; and so now we've produced four movies together and I've learned more and more every time.

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As You Like It ([Kenneth Branagh](#), 2006)

I just go by my old work ethic, too. I never pretend to know anything that I don't know. I ask a lot of questions. I work really hard. I start early. I end late. I do my best to absorb. Producing a movie isn't dissimilar to managing. I'm just managing the movie. I'm hopeful I'm especially helping and supporting Ken, but I'm also hopefully helping with the department heads. I love getting to know actors who aren't my clients. That's been a treat. I'm sure there's more to learn.

Sarah Hatchuel: What about *Panic Room* in 2002?

Judy Hofflund: Again I had nothing to do with it.

Sarah Hatchuel: How did things start with *As You Like It*? Was it also a phone call from Ken?

Judy Hofflund: No, it's a long and interesting story. Ken decided he wanted to do *As You Like It* and he had been asked by [Larry Ellison](#), the Silicon Valley big deal guy, to do a Shakespearean play at his residence in Northern California. That turned into a relationship with Larry Ellison, where they decided they were going to do the play at his residence and then develop it further into a movie. It ended up not happening. But kindly, Larry Ellison gave Ken the script back. So Ken said, we'll do it at another time. I said, no, you know, I love the script, let's do something with it now. And he said, OK, but you do it. So we ended up getting [HBO](#) to finance the movie. And that was my first experience of real producing – like being there every day. Ken gave me the job because I did the work of getting it financed.

Sarah Hatchuel: *As You Like It* is probably Shakespeare's work that best interrogates the notion of gender. Were you involved in the discussions of how Rosalind would be represented on screen?

Judy Hofflund: When I work on a film with Ken, it's his baby and I'm supporting it, and I'm very proud to do that. There have been a couple of times on all of these movies where I've said – because I am a [feminist](#) with a capital F – there have been a couple of times where you just have to be a woman to see something, and I've mentioned it to Ken. He's as much of a feminist as I am, you know. Immediately he's like, oh yeah, we've got to do that. He's the type to say, let's make that part that's written as a man, a woman. Let's cast two brothers, one black, one white. He's very forward, always has been very forward-thinking that way. Here's the truth: I don't need to encourage Ken because he's so like this anyway. I'll say things like to [Haris Zambarloukos](#), our [Director of Photography](#), "why aren't there any women [camera operators](#)?" He said, Judy, they just don't exist. Haris is also a big feminist. He would love to have more women around. He said "I can't find them". And I just think that the atmosphere changes proportionate to the number of women who are around. And it's an atmosphere that I want to be a part of, that collaboration, and this gets into how I hope [my next film] *Grace and Lizzie* ends up being. I'm not saying all women are great and all men are bad, but I just think that there is a way of working for me personally that feels a lot easier when there're a lot of women in the room.

Sarah Hatchuel: I see exactly what you mean. So you consider your job as a producer as enabling the vision of a director...

Judy Hofflund: Certainly with Ken. Because he's a producer, director, actor. My job is just to take stuff off his plate. I tend to deal with most of what is happening in Los Angeles –with the [studio executives](#)

and the different departments. These movies have been [Disney's](#), and there're millions of departments at Disney. So I'm talking to the heads of marketing and publicity and product placement. In the [casting](#) process, I'm talking to all the agents, and I know them all. So Ken can really focus purely on making the movie and being creative. That's very second nature to me, it's how I grew up, it's easy. Again, I've learned a lot.

But slowly but surely in this process, I realized (I was never encouraged to) that I do have something creative to contribute. I've spent a lot of time talking to the marketing executives, who are really good at Disney by the way, but like pushing them, "let's go in that direction. Let's make it look different. Let's think about this. Look at these seven movie posters I've found from other movies and what can we incorporate that's interesting", and doing things like that has been a lot of fun for me. I feel my contribution has been welcomed and has sometimes made a difference.

Sarah Hatchuel: In the [featurettes](#) and interviews I've seen of you, I've noticed that you often mention the details of the films, like the costumes, the makeup. Do you see this attention to details as part of being a producer?

Judy Hofflund: Yes, I think it's absolutely a part of any kind of filmmaking. That's one of the things that surprised me about learning really how to be a producer, because the details add up. Because of *Grace and Lizzie*, I'm looking at movies a little bit differently, and I'm realizing that very small things make a movie really good. If you get a handful of little teeny, tiny things wrong, a movie isn't good. Little things can make a huge difference. I've definitely seen that in the movies that I've been involved with.

Sarah Hatchuel: How would you define being a [producer](#)?

Judy Hofflund: It's different for everybody, because there're so many different roles that a producer plays. But for me, it's really being present for all of it, reading all the drafts, looking at the casting lists, seeing movies of people who are contenders for the movie. So it's all of the development. It's being there every day. But once shooting is happening, it's the director's job, especially if you're working with a director like Kenneth Branagh, who certainly knows what he's doing. The only thing I'm doing is helping him, and dealing with anything that might come up from the studio during shooting. Then there's the post-production, which is looking at different cuts and discussing with Ken, and then being involved with all those departments that we talked about at Disney in terms of how the movie is released.

Sarah Hatchuel: Are you happy to be working with one director only?

Judy Hofflund: Yes. I was his manager for 25 years before any of this happened. I've known him for 29 years. So I spoke to him virtually every day, Monday through Friday for all of those years. There was always a lot going on in representing Ken. So this was a continuation of that, definitely. And it was similar in some ways, because I was always supportive and protective of him, but different in other ways, just because my job was different. My job was more helping to support him and representing the movie, as opposed to represent just Ken as an entity.

Sarah Hatchuel: When Ken embodied Shakespeare in *All Is True*, the film placed gender dynamics at the front, and the film suggests that Shakespeare lost his son because he failed to see his daughter, Judith, as a poet. Would you say that the film created a new Shakespeare for the [MeToo](#) generation?

Judy Hofflund: I think it's kind of there in the text. And I think that Ken is always doing something that makes things relevant to the current time period, like casting [Keanu Reeves](#) and [Denzel Washington](#) as brothers.

Sarah Hatchuel: According to you, how has the MeToo movement impacted the industry? And how did you receive that movement as a woman producer?

Judy Hofflund: We were shooting *Murder on the Orient Express* when it all started. I went to the Women's March in London, which was fun. I feel like it was the one that kicked them all off, certainly the US ones. It was a big deal in London. Ken said a really funny thing. I said to him one day "This is all becoming so big. I wish I was more a part of it", which meant being one of the organizers, and he said, "Judy, you're producing a movie here!" And I went "oh yeah, I guess I am". But I definitely think that the MeToo movement has influenced movie watching. I was just thinking myself, look at the success of [Taylor Swift](#) (I happen to be a fan). When I was an agent at CAA, in my twenties, everyone would say "Don't represent actresses, they never make any money and they don't have long careers, only sign actors; they don't make movies for women, men decide what movies women go see".

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Murder on the Orient Express ([Kenneth Branagh](#), 2017)

All of it was just completely false. It just wasn't there because studios were run by men, and movies were directed by men. And they came to it from a male perspective. The Taylor Swift movie is going to make a gazillion dollars and her concert turned her into a billionaire, all of which I applaud because she's a good role model for young girls and she's very empowering to them. All of that stuff that I grew up thinking, it's just so not true. In fact, I never paid attention, because I loved representing actresses as well as actors. With the MeToo movement, people are a lot more conscious. In front of the screen, with actresses, but I think even more so, behind the screen with the producers, the director and the department heads and all of that.

Sarah Hatchuel: Do you see retrospectively *Murder on the Orient Express* as a kind of revenge movie, just like *8mm*, with Ratchet getting what he deserved for harming little Daisy Armstrong?

Judy Hofflund: Oh yes, Ken would often say that the word that best described *Murder on the Orient Express* was revenge.

Sarah Hatchuel: Actually [Patrick Doyle](#)'s score, entitled "Justice", is so beautiful. It's one of my favorite tunes from Doyle.

Judy Hofflund: Oh, that's so nice, he's so talented.

Sarah Hatchuel: I was actually wondering: is it because Ken wanted to promote the work of a woman composer that he chose [Hildur Guðnadóttir](#) for [A Haunting in Venice](#) instead of Pat Doyle?

Judy Hofflund: It wasn't specific to that, but I think it didn't hurt. We were all glad that someone who was so talented and so right for the movie was a woman. Ken adores Pat and we all think he's so talented. The studio brought up the idea of Hildur and we leapt on it just in the desire of doing something different, much more spare, a little electronic and experimental, not that beautiful emotion that Pat is known for. Ken didn't see the movie having a lot of score, and then Hildur added so much to it.

Sarah Hatchuel: The films you've produced often feature a very prominent setting, which can almost be considered as a character in its own right, where the actors and the camera can move freely – big houses in *Artemis Fowl* and *A Haunting in Venice*, a train in *Murder on the Orient Express*, a boat in [Death on the Nile](#).

Judy Hofflund: That's Ken. You're right, though, the train, the boat and the houses are absolute characters in those movies. Ken loves as much as possible to build the whole thing. We had two and a half full-size trains. The boat was a real boat that floated on water that we brought inside and outside the studio stage on the train tracks for *Murder on the Orient Express*. They were things of beauty and it was so sad to see them destroyed at the end of the movies. My point is: he builds the whole thing, so when actors are acting, they feel like they're inside a train, they feel like they're inside a boat, they feel

like they're inside a palazzo in Venice. There are no false walls.

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Death on the Nile ([Kenneth Branagh](#), 2022)

Sarah Hatchuel: You mentioned being a feminist with a capital F. What does feminism mean to you? What is your relationship to feminism as a person and a professional?

Judy Hofflund: Just ensuring that women can do and be anything, for equal pay. In relationships, be equal partners. It's the opposite of anything that resembles subservience. When my girls were little, whenever I called a plumber or an electrician, I would say "Do you have a woman? If you have a woman, send a woman", because I just wanted my girls to see that girls can do anything.

Sarah Hatchuel: Did you encourage them to enter the movie industry? Or are they in the movie industry?

Judy Hofflund: My oldest daughter is not. She is a therapist and very well suited to that job. My youngest daughter, who's in her 20s, has a job in the entertainment business but is figuring out whether she wants to stay there. It's a different business now than it was when I started. It really is.

Sarah Hatchuel: What's your view on the current state of the industry and the evolution for women screenwriters, producers, directors?

Judy Hofflund: I think there's always a lot of way to go, but I think it is headed in the right direction. Maybe I'm just an optimist, but I'd be shocked if it doesn't continue that way. I would because why not? It doesn't make sense for it to be any different. It's the best person for the job. It doesn't matter what their gender is. And there're so many smart, creative women.

Sarah Hatchuel: What about *Grace and Lizzie*, your passion project that you see as a mixture of [Thelma and Louise](#) and [Promising Young Women](#)?

Judy Hofflund: It is an idea that has been in my head for 22 years. I know the number of years because it is tied to a song that came out and I felt there was a movie in that song. Then I watched this documentary, [The Hunting Ground](#). It's an unbelievably powerful documentary about college campus sexual assault. I can't even articulate how seeing that movie made me feel at the injustice that is done to those girls. Because of the reputations at the colleges, everything is swept under the rug or because perhaps the perpetrator is an athlete that makes the school a lot of money. All of it is covered in that documentary. Then I read three different books that dealt with the subject matter. I have two daughters, you know. I love the idea of telling the story of two women, who are best friends and have each other's back. *Grace and Lizzie* deals with the subject matter of believing the victim.

COVID and Ken Branagh got me serious about it because he told me I needed to write it, which I still laugh about. So I did hammer out a really short but full beginning-middle-and-end draft and realized I needed help. I found this fantastic 29-year-old woman who helped me execute it. Now we've got a script. Ken has been very involved in it, editing and adding. And hopefully soon, we are going to go and see if anybody wants to finance it. It's hard to know in this day and age, as the movie business is so crazy. I don't know how it feels in France, but all of my friends' movie-going habits have changed completely. I've produced this big movie that I'm really proud of. It's in the theaters right now. None of my friends went. Everyone was saying "Oh, yeah, great. Streaming. Can't wait." No, you have to go to the theater! But I'm guilty of it, too. I used to go to the movies my whole life, twice a week, and I don't

anymore, I'm interested in that limited series on streaming. We're out of the habit.

I hope I get the chance to tell the story of *Grace and Lizzie*. This is a good story to tell. Let's make it low budget, so we won't lose a lot of money. It should be raw and edgy but with, hopefully, a spirit of fun to it. I hope someone is interested in that. Ken is not directing, he's producing it. It needs a woman director.

Sarah Hatchuel: When you told your parents that you wanted to work in this industry, were they encouraging?

Judy Hofflund: My mom said, are you kidding me? Do you really think you're going to succeed in that business being a woman? I wish my mom would have just said, yeah, go, you're great. It didn't happen. But my father was supportive from the beginning. He grew up dirt poor on a farm and became successful. He was super proud.

Sarah Hatchuel: When did you feel that this was your dream job?

Judy Hofflund: When I started in the mailroom at CAA. Because I was so excited to be a part of this business that I love so much, these movies that I love so much, and it just grew from there. My job was really hard, but I loved it. The last job I got for a client as a representative was for Ken to direct [Cinderella](#). I knew that was going to be a home run. I just knew it. He was the guy. And I love that movie. It's one of my favorite movies of his. It's just beautiful and romantic and appropriate to the 21st century. He did such a good job of it. So that's really fun when you feel that no one else thought of that idea other than me.

Sarah Hatchuel: Is there anything you would like to add on your experience as a woman in the industry?

Judy Hofflund: I love mentoring and working with young women. I love it. The advice I give is probably old-fashioned in this day and age where, rightfully so, my children's generation is talking about work/life balance. But what I say is just "Work hard!" I succeeded in the mailroom at CAA and became an agent quickly because I opened and closed the office every day. Again, that's harder to do in this generation because so many people are working from home. I feel I'm really old when I talk about my philosophies of things, but it's how I did it. If you want to be a good agent or a good manager, you've got to work really hard. If you want to make good movies, you have to pay attention to all the details. You have to not let things slide. You have to be prepared to work hard.

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