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ENTERTAINMENT OPINION

## T.O.'s party pillar Jennifer Bassett on embracing balance — and the grunt work



By **Shinan Govani** Contributing Columnist  
Fri., June 28, 2019 | 5 min. read



History was giving a whiplash this week at the party held to mark the 90th anniversary of the Fairmont Royal York Hotel.

Coinciding with a major nip-'n'-tuck done courtesy of The Rockwell Group — the most significant being a refreshing of lobby that now includes a glamorous bar area right out of a Henry James novel, centred around a looming clock tower — Monday's party drew from many currents: society, business, media, and fashion.

No one present, certainly, was around when the grande dame opened in 1929, then the tallest structure in the sleepy city. A dwindling lot might remember when Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth first stayed at the hotel (one of a long line of royals who have bunked there!), or that time when Robert F. Kennedy came to stay. Or when the splendid Ella Fitzgerald arrived to take centre stage inside the hotel's then-famous Imperial Room (joining others like Marlene Dietrich and Eartha Kitt).

Making her way through the throng, in this giant shindig cast across a triad of spaces in the hotel? That would be the never-let-them-see-you-sweat, perennially smiling Jennifer Bassett. A party planner *par excellence*, she hails from a family that, in this town, you might regard as being as prestigious as the hotel. Mixing business, pleasure, and

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as being as vintage as the novel. Mixing business, pleasure, and privilege: all part of her wheelhouse.

"It is the first place I saw bare boobs," the tastemaker recalled, laughing, the next day when I went to her well-appointed house in Rosedale for a debrief! As her two ginormous South African mastiffs, Aya and Oak, spread out near us, Bassett was talking about her own experience going to dinner with her parents as a kid at the Imperial Room, a proper clubhouse that was also sometimes the site of somewhat risqué pageantry.

A real-life Eloise! No surprise, given the family pedigree: granddad was the late John Bassett, owner of the Toronto Telegram, founder of CTV, one of the maestros behind the Maple Leafs ... the man for whom a whole theatre is named inside the Metro Toronto Convention Centre! Her dad Douglas is no slouch, either: The media exec and society perennial was made an officer of the Order of Canada in 1991, in recognition of his business leadership. One of several third-generation Bassetts, 45-year-old Jennifer has been making her own splash, with even Departures magazine including her Toronto-based company, Bassett Events, on its list of world's best event architects a few years back.

"A healthy 2,000," is what she confirmed about the guest list the night before at the Royal York, confirming that it was the largest event she has worked on. It had followed a fairly busy spurt for the mother of two: a few nights prior, she did the annual after-bash for the Joe Carter Classic (held at Rebel). Last month was an elegant affair at the ROM commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Weston Family Foundation (the Weston clan having been intertwined with her own for decades).

Slouched today on a sofa — in a white T-shirt that read "Sunkissed," with her wrist boasting an oversized watch and her blond locks pulled back neatly — Bassett was giving me a little bit of the easy elegance of old-school muses like C.Z. Guest. Like many members of a certain well-bred (and vanishing) caste, she also had an ease with talking that columnists like me do not see as often as I should: here was someone was clearly raised knowing that the trick to manners is making other people feel comfortable.

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"You can't buy taste," she told me, repeating what she tells young people who ask for advice on getting into her biz. She also tells them to go do the grunt work, because there is no replacement for it: "Go and stuff 500 gift bags."

That, and also this: "Put down the phone and have a conversation."

Asked where she accrued her own taste, she says, "100 per cent from my mother. Everything she did was classic, and beautiful. Never ostentatious." Growing up around the fabulous parties that Doug and Susan Bassett would throw, she remembers having to properly greet their guests — before scampering off to bed.

But the ease with people is indubitably a family trait, if an amusing story that went around about her granddad, as reported in Maclean's, is to be believed. When John Bassett was appointed, at age 74, as chairman of the Security Intelligence Review Committee, overseeing the nation's top spy agency, a fashion photographer-round-town quipped: "Well, he'll certainly be good at keeping secrets. He told me about the appointment at a cocktail party two weeks ago ..."

"We plan parties — we don't solve cancer!" Jennifer Bassett segued to saying, flaunting a well-balanced philosophy. The fact is she has had several personal challenges which have contributed to that healthy world view, and she is eager to share about them. Early into her first marriage, she had a molar pregnancy, a rare condition that happens in about one in 1,000 pregnancies and is usually fatal to the fetus.



in about one in 1,000 pregnancies — one which led to her doing chemotherapy. That followed another unimaginable loss: getting pregnant again, she gave birth to a daughter, Olivia, only to lose her at 30 weeks when she developed a diaphragmatic hernia. (She and her then-husband later helped to establish Sunnybrook's Perinatal Loss Clinic to help others.)

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Later, Bassett went on to have two children — son Will and daughter Mackenzie — but the marriage faltered. It was another difficult time. Alas, love came along again when she ran into an old acquaintance, Sam Bennett, at a party. Unlike her first wedding, though, which had been a proper society do at the Windsor Arms, she stage-managed the second one: it was a haute countryside affair held at Langdon Hall (which Bennett's family happens to own!).

One added bonus: because her new husband is a classically trained chef, he does the cooking. "Every night," she said, beaming.

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The party planner gets to kick up her heels sometimes.

*Correction — June 29, 2019: A previous version of this article incorrectly named one of Jennifer Bassett's children.*



**Shinan Govani** is a Toronto-based freelance contributing columnist covering culture and society. Follow him on Twitter: [@shinangovani](#)

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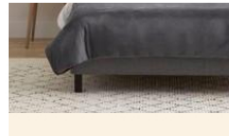
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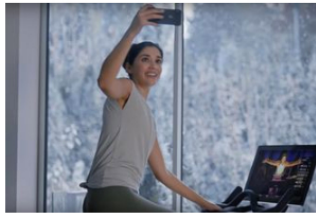


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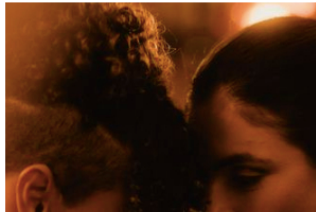
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