

Brett Florens by Peter Skinner **South Africa's Finest Wedding Photographer**



Photography careers have their genesis in many forms, but few can compare to the way internationally acclaimed wedding and commercial photographer Brett Florens, of Durban, South Africa, launched his in 1992. It could be stated quite fairly that Brett's career was a direct result of political upheaval, and had it not been for his nation's transforming itself in the early 1990s, he might never have found photography as an avocation or career.

At the time of political unrest, Brett was fulfilling national service obligations. For him, that included four years in the South African Police Service, and in 1992, serving as a member of the riot unit. Fortuitously, a photographic unit was formed to document the nation's political changes, and Brett jumped at the chance to join it. "The unit was set up to monitor police action, as well as the activity of protest marchers," he says, "and I welcomed the opportunity to get a change from what I had been doing, especially something more challenging."

Challenging indeed! For Brett, it certainly felt like being thrown in at the deep end with a sink-or-swim option. With no photographic experience whatsoever, Brett had to learn - quickly - how to photograph and document volatile situations. His unit evolved into a department dealing with politically motivated crimes and township violence, and photography was necessary to record this important slice of South Africa's history. Brett thrived on the opportunity and soon found himself in the thick of newsworthy events, creating images that found a ready market in newspapers and other media. "I quietly began to sell my pictures to the media and soon learned the thrill of having my work published," he says. "In the process, I became a valuable link between the police and the media. My passion for photography had begun. "Prior to that," he adds, "I never had any inclination toward photography, which makes me wonder how many of us have undiscovered talents that might be initiated by sheer chance - or is it destiny?"



Brett's photographic baptism by fire, as it may have been, was wonderful training for the direction his fledgling career was going to take. For one thing, he learned how to work under immense pressure in very stressful situations. While a full-on riot or political rally is more fraught with danger than a wedding, most wedding photographers would concur that their assignments are not stress-free.

Once captivated by photography, Brett was insatiable in his quest for technical and artistic knowledge. Every spare moment was devoted to the task; every spare cent was used to acquire what he euphemistically calls "essentials," or those things that all good photographers well understand.

"I bought books and magazines on photography and scrutinized fashion magazines," he says. "I could not watch a movie or pick up a magazine without analyzing the lighting. Every professional photographer who would give me the time of day was subjected to interrogation about the craft and business of photography. In short, my passion became all-consuming."

Brett channeled his energy and enthusiasm into wedding photography, a market he found relatively easy to access compared to commercial photography. Initially, he photographed friends' weddings, and the demand for his work snowballed from there. It was a bride who gave him the lead to his first commercial assignment, something that has happened quite often once he started shooting more weddings. "Getting your foot in the door is the real challenge in commercial photography," he says, "and I have found that once a commercial client finds a reliable and consistent photographer, they will stick with them." To that end, he advises aspiring commercial photographers who are currently shooting only weddings to make sure their business cards do not pigeonhole them simply as event or wedding photographers.



The variety of work during his police/ photojournalist days has been invaluable in Brett's approach to wedding photography, a genre in which he has earned a fantastic reputation - in South Africa and beyond. "When shooting weddings," he says, "you have numerous subjects to work with - from fashion to still life, from portraiture to photojournalism - and you have to be able to cope with a wide range of locations and lighting challenges. I have embraced the opportunity to hone my skills in all these areas. And of course, there is the immense pressure involved in wedding photography because you have to get it right on the day - there is no repeat performance."

And Brett has found the pressure associated with wedding photography similar to that encountered in contemporary commercial work. He explains, “Commercial photography has become very expensive, with clients spending large amounts of money on top models and perfect locations. The client is seldom in the financial position to re-shoot. So my experience with weddings has stood me in good stead, allowing me not only to cope, but to thrive under pressure while ensuring that the client is comfortable in my capabilities.”

Obviously, many clients have become comfortable in Brett’s capabilities. Scrutinize the images on his website and you quickly appreciate that here is a photographer whose technical and artistic skills are adept in photographing people of all ages and backgrounds, and who is comfortable in fields as diverse as fashion and corporate. Although based in the subtropical coastal city of Durban, his market is truly international in scope. Two months of each year are spent in London, taking advantage of the beautiful summer light in England. He will also travel there at other times if necessary. “The industry is quite seasonal and is much busier in the summer months,” Brett explains. “As the two cities—Durban and London—are in different hemispheres, I can keep busy year round, enjoying two summers a year. Also, the time zones are similar, so I am not dealing with jet lag when traveling between the two places.”



Maintaining a high profile in two international markets takes carefully planned strategic marketing. He advertises in UK bridal magazines and attends bridal expos. To generate corporate and commercial assignments, he markets to agencies supported by general networking.

The formula has been successful, and over the years, Brett has built a huge clientele in the UK. The majority of his work - weddings and commercial—is shot in summer, when the light is clean and the duration of optimal shooting time is long. Having a well designed and informative website has also been invaluable in attracting international assignments. A good example: An Egyptian bride, marrying an English groom in New York City, booked Brett on the merits of his website in South Africa. Talk about wedding photography going global!

While Durban has an excellent climate and ideal photographic conditions year round, its market is not as strong as two other major South African cities, Cape Town and Johannesburg. Conversely, their weather is seasonal, so Brett’s inter-city assignments are based around a combination of timing, demand, seasons, and meeting his commitments in Durban and London. “The markets in Cape Town and Johannesburg are burgeoning, so it’s important to commute to these cities to stay in the game,” he says. Being well known in South Africa means that word of mouth and a large stable of clients, combined with ongoing networking, keep him busy in the domestic market.

Overall, the standard of professional photography in South Africa is high, both from quality and ethical perspectives. But, as is the case wherever people get married and need photographers, the discount suppliers are the bane of established professionals. “With the advent of digital photography and the decrease in camera prices for relatively high-spec cameras, there has been a surge of discount photographers producing inferior work at cheap prices. Because they often offer a CD-only service, they are getting away with very substandard work,” says Brett. “As we all know, shooting digitally for prints is extremely challenging. Over the past few years, those of us who converted to digital photography have had to learn a great deal about things such as screen calibration or using profiles when printing. I do believe that the market will settle as clients become more aware of flybynight photographers.”

However, as successful wedding photographers will agree, the key is to target high-end clientele and infuse each assignment with a distinctive style—and produce a consistently excellent, professional result. “I target the high-end market with a priority on the perfect album as the end product,” Brett says. “I offer only two



packages, with the slightly more expensive one offering more photos, more enlargements and a bigger album. I don't offer cheaper services. My clients have usually chosen me because my style of photography appeals to them. In fact, there have been times when I have advised people who want a very conventional style to find a photographer more suited to their needs."

Brett does concede, however, that while some traditional pictures are essential, this does not prevent him from invoking artistic license. "Weddings are usually quite theatrical," he says, "with elaborate dresses, hairstyles and décor, so I allow myself to be a little adventurous. I play with lighting, with poses, with interesting and contrasting locations, and I use what could be described as a high-fashion style. This is of course mixed with candid photojournalism— because apart from the hour that is given exclusively to me as a photographer, I am there to capture the essence of the day as unobtrusively as possible.

"I would therefore describe my style as an eclectic fusion between photojournalism and fashion that seeks to achieve a balance and structure within the images," Brett says. "I shoot with the finished product in mind and work to a flexible plan. Balance is the most essential element in an album."

While his first exposure to high-end wedding photography was via an Australian wedding magazine—one given to him by a bride and which he still has—his lighting and general approach to photography is inspired by the work of such luminaries as Patrick Demarchelier, Mario Testino, Annie Leibovitz and Peter Lindbergh. Brett still peruses wedding magazines, but his creative vision is stirred more by the photography in magazines such as *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*.

Since weddings can be high-stress situations, among the many roles played by the photographer is team psychologist, someone who encourages people to enjoy the event. "My secret to having subjects relax and be confident in front of the camera is to be emotionally in tune to their anxieties and to then get them to lighten up," he explains. "While I'm a perfectionist, I have a carefree and confident attitude, which I think does rub off on my clients during the day. I joke with them, and I flatter them in a tasteful manner. Reading the client is very important in this regard. You have to know what kind of person you're dealing with, and through experience, you do learn how to handle all sorts of different individuals. By reassuring a client and letting her know that she is doing well and looking great in the poses, her confidence builds and she learns to relax in front of the camera. I am careful not to make a big fuss of the main photo shoot before the day. I always tell my clients that we are going to have a ball— and we usually do."

Although face-to-face meetings are not always possible due to his extensive travel, Brett communicates as much as possible with the principals prior to the wedding. Regardless, he explains his basic strategy for the day's events, ensures he knows who must be included in specific shots, and never loses sight of the fact that this is a major event in his clients' lives.

Maintaining a continuous flow and making the most of the relatively short time allotted to the formal part of the wedding shoot is vital. "I work to a plan," he says. "Each part of the wedding is a chapter in the wedding album, and I shoot accordingly. While I'm shooting, I know what is coming next, so the short time that we have is used to its greatest potential. My role is to document the day as it happens, making sure that the important events of the day are recorded.

“This is obviously what a client expects from a wedding photographer,” he says. “But over and above this, I try to capture the true emotion and romance of the day. From the tears in a mother’s eyes when she sees her daughter fully dressed in her wedding gown for the first time, to the laughter between friends, the nerves and pride of a dad holding his daughter’s arm, and the glow of expectation in a groom’s face when he turns to see his bride walking down the aisle—they are all part of the event, and need to be documented. Macro shots of personal touches—the colors, the flowers, the décor—are also appreciated and add to the album.”



An assistant, in Brett’s view, is an absolute must—and that is nonnegotiable. From lugging heavy gear around, to ensuring that lenses and other equipment are at hand, to manipulating reflectors, the assistant’s role is vital. “An assistant is worth his weight in gold, and the finished product is all the better for having him there,” he says.

As Brett favors ambient light for his primary light source, having an assistant work with a reflector becomes even more important. Backlighting, “which lends a romantic feel,” is harnessed quite often (as in the setting sun with its dramatic lighting). Brett takes no chances, however, and always has portable studio lighting at hand in case of bad weather. Electronic flash is used for covering formalities at the reception. One light source that produces really spectacular backlighting effects is a twomillion- candlepower flashlight, which is operated by an assistant while Brett photographs the wedding couple during their first dance.

Since the launch of the Nikon D100, Brett has shot all digital and at writing is using the Nikon D2X. At a wedding, he downloads to a Flashtrax portable storage device. He uses two Power Mac G5s and Adobe Photoshop CS2 back in the studio. Not surprisingly, he has had to hire a fulltime graphic designer for color management, digital retouching and other aspects of the digital production process.

Since going from police photographer to successful wedding/commercial/fashion shooter, Brett Florens has been a magnet for many people—understandable given that his energy, enthusiasm for life and passion for photography are infectious. And as his wife, Andrea, writes on their website, to meet people with such a passion for their career is rare. “Brett was to me a breath of fresh air,” writes Andrea. He certainly made an impression—they married 18 months after their first meeting.

To see more of Brett’s work and appreciate why he’s making such an impact in South Africa and beyond, visit www.brettflorens.com.

Freelance writer/photographer and author Peter Skinner, who has recently relocated to his native Australia, has more than 22 years experience in the photo industry in public relations, media liaison, corporate communications and workshop production and coordination. His magazine articles and photography have been published internationally and he has co-authored or edited numerous publications and books including the 5th and 6th editions of the authoritative ASMP Professional Business Practices in Photography (Allworth Press). He can be reached at: prsskinner@bigpond.com.