

HOLLYWOOD BEGINNING

this is the story of a successful Hollywood assistant director turned breakout wedding filmmaker turned ... well, you can just read it for yourself and find out. You'll see what you've probably already suspected: that an A-list film production background isn't the worst kind of training you can have if you want to make great wedding videos—and, perhaps less predictably, that happy endings often aren't endings at all.

THE HILLS ARE ALIVE

When the backdrop of your high school years are the Bavarian Alps, how can you not be inspired to make music and movies with your friends? "I absolutely loved it," says Whitestone Wedding Films principal Joth Riggs of the 3 years he spent as a teen in Munich, playing drums in a band and shooting detective shorts with his buddies.

Post high school, after a false start back home at Hollywood's Percussion Institute of Technology, Riggs pursued an education in filmmaking, earning a B.S. in film and television production from Fitchburg State College. During his senior year, while most students were interning for local cable companies or video duplicating services, Riggs smartly parlayed his connections in the film industry. Namely, his connection to cousin Russell Carpenter, A.S.C., who DP-ed *True Lies*, *Titanic*, *Charlie's Angels*, and *21*—and who happened to be DP-ing *Pet Semetary II* just when Riggs needed an internship.

It would be his first Hollywood experience. As the film crew's video assist intern, Riggs set up and maintained the monitor feeds for the director. He says, "This was the best possible exposure I could have gotten, because it enabled me to be right next to the director for every scene on the entire shoot. I was able to see all the inner workings of a film crew and learn what everyone does. It was then that I discovered what an assistant director [AD] was and knew instantly that that was what I wanted to do."

AMBLIN MAN

After graduation, he returned to the West Coast, where he worked for a season as production assistant on the sitcom *Coach* before moving over to another production company on the Universal backlot, Amblin Entertainment.

WHITESTONE WEDDING FILMS



Joth Riggs, Hollywood AD-turned-wedding filmmaker
www.whitestoneweddingfilms.com

"The only thing better than working for Steven Spielberg," he says, "was working on the set. So in 1995 I applied and was accepted into the Director's Guild training program," a prestigious program that accepts fewer than 20 people out of more than 2,000 applicants each year. The program consists of 400 days of on-the-job training as well as hours and hours of seminars and training sessions toward becoming a Director's Guild of America (DGA) assistant director.

As a DGA trainee, Riggs learned an important lesson: how to see the big picture. "Having an understanding of what everyone else was doing on the set and understanding how all the pieces fit together to create the movie was really significant and important for me. It helped me gain a broader perspective, not only on the set but also in life."

Everything Riggs learned there, he says, helped shape his perspective on filmmaking. One of the responsibilities of an assistant director is to direct background actors in the scene, allowing the director to focus on the principal actors and their performances. "Setting background action is about movement, timing, composition, balance, and juxtaposition. Some of the shows I worked on were very background-heavy, whether it was filling a scene with hundreds of extras in full battle gear for *Starship Troopers*, staging an entire Western town with real horses, wagons, and a steam locomotive for *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, or filling a sunny California beach for *Baywatch*. Painting moving pictures with real people on a living canvas helped me develop my overall sense of composition and a clear vision of the big picture."

SAY GOODBYE TO HOLLYWOOD

Once he was in the DGA, he and his wife started their family, and within a few years, they were blessed with two little girls. But the work began to take its toll. As an AD Riggs routinely worked 16-plus-hour days on the set, often for several months straight. With predawn call times, it was too much to arrive home past 10:00 or 11:00 p.m. "One Saturday morning, after a typical week, I woke up, and my youngest, who was 2 years old at the



Joth Riggs (right) with Jane Seymour on the set of Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman



A page from the Not Today storyboard posted on the film's website

time, ran and hid behind Mom because I was a total stranger to her," he remembers. "This moment broke my heart, and I knew something had to change. I started noticing all the broken families on the set. I became more aware of the environment I was working in and how my own personal values had started to erode. My career and my ego had become more important to me than my family, and as a husband and a father I felt an obligation to make a drastic change in my life."

But it wasn't as though he was just going to give up AD-ing for a career, in, say, wedding videography. That struck him as a major step down. "As a filmmaker, I was often asked to shoot weddings for friends but was completely uninterested. I just wasn't inspired." But as creative professionals know, inspiration is a bonus, not a given. You've got to produce even when it's not there if you're going to make a living. So when a family member asked him to shoot a wedding in 2004, he decided he would do it after all—"as long as they let me make something people would want to watch."

FIRST STONE CAST

When this first pro bono project was finished, a lot of people suggested that he should charge for it. After weighing the benefits of having creative and personal freedom and of owning his own business, he decided to go for it. Whitestone Wedding Films was born. Whitestone is a Biblical reference, pertaining to a jury system in which trial jurors were given a white stone and a black stone to decide someone's fate—the former represented innocence. "I saw the white stone as representing a fresh start for my career and for my family life."

Riggs' first paying client came from the WEVA Bride's Guide. A bride posted about her upcoming wedding in his area; he responded and got the gig. "Although it may have been one of my first weddings, it wasn't my first production, so that really helped seal it for them."

Whitestone's signature CinemaStyle wedding movies are a reflection of his Hollywood-informed vision. Rather than simply document the day, he says, "I strive to make each wedding film a uniquely moving piece that tells a great story from beginning to end. I often use familiar cinematic devices such as composition, subtle camera movement, lighting, quality sound, compelling music, and well-paced editing to help capture the emotions of the day and enhance the couple's overall experience."

His Hollywood experience has also helped him realize how key having a clear vision and plan is in order to succeed, on multiple levels. "On the set, you must have a plan in order to get a movie made; it's no different on a wedding film. I can't just show up at a wedding and expect things to fall into place. I often tell my clients that if I can't make a high-quality film of their wedding day, then I'm really not interested. I need to be inspired by the project in order to have that clear vision."

While having a clear vision and a detailed shot list, along with a great second shooter, helps get him through the day, Riggs feels the real magic is made in the edit bay, even though it's not always him making the magic. "I'm way too particular to run an efficient business, so I rely on several freelance editors to get a project to about 80%, then I take it the rest of the way." Like any good principal, "I need to make sure it matches my vision before I put my logo on it and send it out."

NEVER SAY NEVER AGAIN

Recently, Riggs was invited to work on an upcoming independent feature film as first AD. *Not Today*, a story about (take a breath) a young American traveling in India who discovers the horrors of human trafficking and its effects on a young Indian father in his quest to help him find his daughter, began filming in India in late winter. (You can follow the progress of this film, due in theaters this fall, at www.nottodaythemovie.com.)

"When I got the call for this movie I was reluctant to go back to the set, but after hearing more about it, I really felt strongly about the material and about the opportunity I had to make a difference with this project." Plus, he points out, it's the slow season. Come spring, it will be back to business as usual.

But it's a welcome break and a chance to do something he loves. With Whitestone Wedding Films, he'll continue to produce high-quality wedding movies, while sister company Whitestone Productions will pursue independent films. "Now that I have my own business, I can afford to pick and choose which projects I take," he says.

Is this a Hollywood ending? In the Joth Riggs story, it feels more like the middle.

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