

out of the SHADOWS

there's an old aboriginal Australian proverb that goes, "Keep your eyes on the sun and you will not see the shadows."

But for Aussies Matt and Katie Ebenezer, shadows are meant to be seen. Together they run Shadowplay Photography and Video and its nonwedding cousin, Katie Finn Photography, in Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia.

If this pairing sounds familiar, that may be because Shadowplay reminds you of StillMotion's Patrick and Amina Moreau, and accurately so. Like their Canadian counterparts, Katie's specialty is photography while Matt's is videography.

But there's another, more meritorious reason the name Shadowplay might ring a bell. In March it became the first Australian studio to join the ranks of the EventDV 25 all-star lineup. You may also know Matt as a regular denizen of the DVinfo.net forums or as a fellow WedFACT'er.

Before Matt and Katie hitched their respective companies in 2005, which was around the time they tied the knot themselves, they were successful entrepreneurs in their own right, with rich backstories of their own as well.

YOUNG EINSTEIN

Matt, for one, grew up in a remote, rural part of the country. What stands out about his childhood in his mind is the absence of cinema. Vacations were his one respite from this. "From the age of ten, each school holiday I'd stay with my brother," he remembers. "I'd catch the train from his house into the city and watch three movies a day for two or three days in a row."

As a teen, he spent a comparable amount of time with David Letterman, making highlight reels of *The Late Show*, perhaps foreshadowing his later career. Matt explains, "I spent a lot of time connecting two VCRs together to make highlights tapes from *The Late Show*. It was always on too late for me to watch so I'd tape it every night and then spend hours on the weekend dubbing my favorite segments and band performances."

Matt shot some band performances of his own as well. With a bevy of indie musicians as friends and a

SHADOWPLAY PHOTO & VIDEO



One of his wedding filmmaker peers who helped vote Matt Ebenezer the first Aussie to make the EventDV 25 wrote, "Matt shoots with his eye, not with a camera manual." Another described him unequivocally as "the best videographer in Oz."

www.shadowplay.com.au

Canon XL1 hookup, he was firmly on the wedding videographer trajectory. That was 5 years ago, and it was Matt's first taste of using anything more powerful than a consumer handycam.

MAN AT WORK

Matt's day job at the time was as an IT network administrator at a private girls' school, which was something of an equipment gold mine for a video enthusiast. Thanks to a special program at the school, each student had her own laptop, which also gave Matt the opportunity to introduce video editing into the curriculum and teach video editing basics using Windows Movie Maker.

Matt himself had access to two school computers with Broadway capture cards installed and a couple of Hi8 cameras, which made him the go-to guy among his musician friends for making basic promo videos or filming concerts. "We'd come into the school on weekends to edit or take the computers home," he recalls fondly. "Lots of backyard cricket was played while we waited for the videos to render."

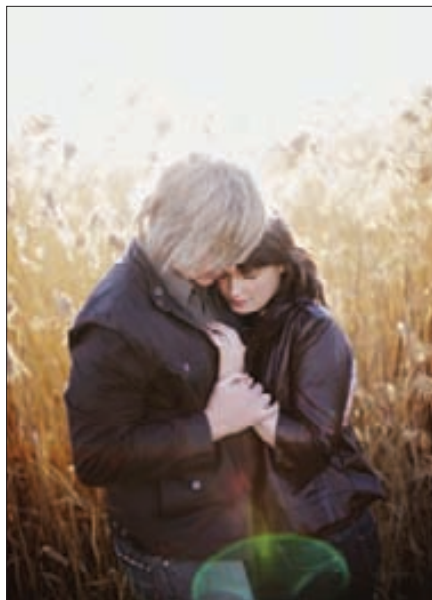
In the summer of 2005, Matt was wrapping up a 9-year run at the school and was itching to try something new. Fortunately, it was about that time that some of his videography jobs became paying gigs. Taking a leap of faith, Matt dropped back to part time at the school and took out a loan to purchase his own gear with the idea of pursuing wedding videography. Unsure of how much or how fast his new production company would grow, he says, "I figured that if all it turned out to be was an expensive hobby, then that was fine with me."

MY BRILLIANT CAREER

In 5 short months, Matt was pleased to discover he had surpassed his 6-month business goal: to earn as much from video production as he was earning from his IT job.



For Matt, an artistic eye trumps a technical tool just when it matters most—your wedding day.



"Apart from marrying each other," Matt says, going into business together "was the best decision we ever made. I can't think of a better way to spend my life than doing what I love with the woman I love."

With this goal fulfilled, he would quit and dive into wedding video production full time. Matt reached a personal milestone at that time as well. He and Katie became partners in business and in life. Of their decision to join forces, Matt says, "Apart from marrying each other, this was the best decision we ever made. I can't think of a better way to spend my life than doing what I love with the woman I love." Their business motto became "Together, wedding photography and video complement each other and tell the complete story of a wedding day."

Katie maintained her children's photography business with her unmarried surname Finn. "It's way cuter and a nicer-sounding name," Matt says. "Originally, we made her business Ebenezer Photography but nobody could spell it. And Ebenezer Scrooge was the mean old guy who wouldn't let kids celebrate Christmas. Not the best name for a kids' photography business."

Katie has been a hugely positive influence on Matt, both personally and professionally. An excellent natural light photographer, she's taught Matt much about seeing light. "When shooting, everything for me comes down to light. Without light, we've got nothing. No amount of color correction or trickery can save us from poor light. And I'm not talking heaps of lighting gear or on-camera lights, just good old natural light. I look for it everywhere. In just over three years of marriage I've never seen Katie once use a flash. Her approach definitely helps improve the quality of my footage."

Matt, who prides himself on having keen artist's instincts rather than a purely technical focus, says, "Katie is often amused by my lack of technical knowledge." Laughing, he continues, "I remember one day she was teaching me a bit about photography and I was amazed to discover the exposure meter in the viewfinder of her D200. She asked me, 'Doesn't your video camera have an exposure meter?' I was adamant that it didn't have one. Turns out I'd been using my

Canon XL2 for almost two years without ever referencing the exposure meter." He concludes, "I just turn the dial till it looks right." That breezy, instinctual statement might send you running from an overly confident anesthesiologist or a brash young co-pilot, but coming from Matt, it's proof that sometimes an artistic eye trumps a technical tool, just when it matters most—your wedding day.

WALKABOUT

Their business model was working beautifully, but there was one snag: Matt soon realized that better money could be made making corporate videos and TV commercials. The decision was a no-brainer: "I could make about \$2,000 in a day producing a 30-second TV commercial or spend a week working on a wedding video and struggle to make the same money." So he started adding corporate work to his services.

To get clients, Matt came up with a strategy that involved making a "hit-list" of the larger businesses in town and crafting ways to engage them. He would make an appointment with a potential client and, in the time between the initial phone call and the meeting, go out and shoot a mockup. "If I talked to a potential client about making a 30-second TV commercial, as soon as I hung up the phone I'd film and edit a mockup. Most of the mockups never ended up being used but it was the demonstration of initiative that wowed the client."

A year later, in June 2008, with the goal of shielding his corporate clients from his other identity as wedding videographer, Matt and Katie launched Shadowplay. He says, "It was important to me that my corporate clients didn't associate me with wedding videography in any way. Sad, I know, but true."

The plan was for it to be just a side project, "a way for Katie and me to truly team up as husband and wife." There wasn't any pressure for it to succeed, because Matt had his corporate clients as a safety net.



The need to keep their studio growing in a difficult market, Matt says, has spawned a business plan that "will most likely see me becoming a photographer who does the occasional wedding film."



"Ultimately," Matt says, "life is too short to spend it doing things that you don't enjoy."

BACK TO WHERE I WAS

While Matt's corporate clients were wowed by his work, Matt was just spinning his wheels. "After doing corporate work for almost three years, I got to the point where it had become quite soul-destroying." While it could be very financially rewarding—indeed, he was bringing in six figures—he found that he had strayed too far from the reasons he got into video production in the first place. "Initially corporate clients chose to work with me because of what I could uniquely offer, but over time I'd become just another widget-cranker and there was nothing unique about the work I was producing."

Matt credits a few cinematographers in particular as inspiring him to return to weddings: the crew at StillMotion, Jason Magbanua, and Chris P. Jones. "Drowning in a sea of corporate video mediocrity and hating where my video career had taken me, seeing their work felt like I'd been thrown a lifeline. I knew I wanted to get back into shooting weddings."

He's no longer accepting commissions for corporate video productions and TV commercials, which allows him to focus exclusively on Shadowplay and Katie Finn Photography. The decision to stop doing corporate work certainly brought with it a fair share of worry and stress, but, "Ultimately," he says, "life is too short to spend it doing things that you don't enjoy."

Today, Matt balances his time between the two companies, dedicating only about 20% of his time to Shadowplay's videography services. The profit potential of photography in Australia's wedding industry far outweighs videography, so that's the focus for now. For example, one of the first weddings they booked was an upfront \$9,000 package, just for photography. "That was unheard of in our area, with most photographers' top packages peaking at around \$3,000," Matt says.

SHADOWLANDS

Unfortunately—"and I hope I don't offend anyone," Matt prefaces—"the wedding videography industry in Australia isn't in the best shape it could be. It seems that Australia is only now starting to break free of the old-school-cheese-filled-white-vignette-loving-'80s rubbish that is unfortunately still being produced today."

Consequently, wedding video is down there on a bride's budget priority list under a guest book and pen—while she'd no sooner cut the photographer from the wedding than the groom. "We're a fair way behind our

counterparts in Canada and the U.S.," Matt says. "And the guys from the Philippines are putting us to shame big time! At least we can beat them all at cricket."

As a consequence, the market can't sustain what it's worth to produce a quality wedding film. Videographers charging rock-bottom prices have set the bar almost irreparably low, he says. "I love what I do and I'm proud of the work I produce, but I don't love it enough to compromise on price. Ultimately, I must be a smart businessman rather than a starving artist," he says, citing advice from blogger/entrepreneur Seth Godin. "Don't waste your time trying to change people's minds; spend your time finding the people who already agree with you. That's my approach to finding my ideal clients."

All that said, the industry in Australia is starting to turn around. Matt is encouraged by a new generation of wedding filmmakers "that is keen to learn and are currently putting in the hard yards to see our industry turn around." In fact, five Aussies made the trip to Austin, Texas, for Re:Frame in April. "That's a massive financial commitment and one that demonstrates the passion that these guys have for our industry."

It's a passion he shares and plans to nurture through the years, starting with polishing his photography skills. The reason for this is twofold: One, he'd like to establish a style and possibly a brand outside of Shadowplay that enables him to shoot the type of wedding films that he wants to shoot and charge appropriately for them. And two, with photography being their business' bread-and-butter (or bread-and-vegemite?), Matt and Katie need a plan in place for when they'd like to have kids. "That plan will most likely see me becoming a photographer who does the occasional wedding film."

They've also just moved into new studio space with fantastic street frontage, huge windows, and a location on the corner of one of the busiest intersections in their town. "Some people think that we're crazy taking on such a commitment in these uncertain financial times," Matt says. "My opinion is that we need to be more visible than ever," and the worst mistake they could make would be to shrink into the shadows and play it safe.

He offers another Godin adage in conclusion: "Playing it safe is often the riskiest thing you can do."

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