

Adrian Dance Photographer Weinbrecht



Peter Eastway

interviews

Australian

professional

photographer

Adrian Weinbrecht

from his home in

England.



Dancer Cathy Marston

Opposite: Martina, one of the dancers for The Cathy Marston Project

You know when you're working with a good dancer by all the little things... the way the foot is pointed or how the position is held, mid-air, until the last possible moment before hitting the ground. These are the things that make a big difference when shooting dance."

Insight

Adrian Weinbrecht is an Australian-born professional photographer living in London. "I've been shooting for 21 years," said Adrian with a smile, "even though I look much younger."

To be successful as an advertising photographer, you need to be positive, resourceful and command a presence. You also have to be a great photographer, but there are many great photographers who simply don't get noticed because they don't have the personality to go with it. That doesn't seem to be a problem for Adrian!

"I considered studying law, but when I looked at older lawyers I decided that this wasn't the life for me. I had always been passionate about pictures, so I walked into a local studio one day and was offered a job on the spot as an apprentice."

Adrian studied photography part-time at Mt Lawley College, Perth, with esteemed Australian educators such as Brian Barrow and Mike Taylor, and expanded his experience by working in a pro lab, a city wedding studio and finally in a commercial studio as an assistant and studio manager. By the age of 23 he had saved enough money either to put a deposit on a house or to travel overseas.

"I believed I could go to Europe and in two or three years of assisting learn what would take me 10 years shooting in Australia. I had no intention of staying away from Australia, of course."

That's not quite how things turned out. After gaining experience in Switzerland, Germany and England, he returned to Perth in 1996 to start his own studio, but it wasn't long before he found himself back in London and married.

"Assisting in Europe and working with a number of different photographers gave me a very solid foundation, not just in photography but in business

philosophy and methodology. I also did a short business course because my observations showed me that those who succeeded weren't necessarily the best photographers, but without exception they were certainly the best business people."

Today Adrian shoots for a diverse range of clients (including Sony, Unilever, HSBC, UBS, Lucozade, Mazda, Land Rover, 3 Mobile and a range of publications), yet it appears his passion is for dance photography.

"A few years ago, a PR friend approached me, showered me with flattery, told me she had no money and asked if I would photograph dancer and choreographer, Cathy Marston. Cathy had been with the Royal Ballet and was starting a new project for which she needed some photos. The job sounded like fun and, having always been interested in form and movement, I said why not."

The Dancer

The association with Cathy Marston provided several opportunities and Adrian developed his approach with each new assignment.

The first photographs were taken in the studio with Cathy in a black dress and striking unbelievable dance moves. To accommodate her movement, Adrian used only one strip light horizontally, placed high above so the dancer could jump up and forward, without feeling restricted by the light heads. With this introduction, Adrian discovered that he loved dance photography.

Cathy also loved the first set of images so much that she returned a year later, this time with a group of dancers. For the second session, Adrian created a more involved lighting set up. Used as promotional photos for The Cathy Marston Project, the shoot



One of Adrian's first dance photographs of dancer Cathy Marston.



Opposite: Lake Thun.
Promotional photograph for
the Berne Ballet.



Studio photograph of dancer.

took place again in Adrian's home studio, a relatively small space, but ample in size for the dancers.

"I often shoot a little wide because this way you can give the dancers space to move, and of course shooting on medium format you can crop afterwards with no problem."

Adrian is an advocate for Phase One medium format digital backs, using P30 and P45+ backs, although by now he may have moved into a P65+. The quality and dynamic range of the files is ideally suited to his dramatic studio lighting, holding both shadow and highlight detail, plus all the nuances and texture of the skin and clothing.

"On this occasion I used several lights positioned behind and to the sides of the dancer, creating an outline around Martina to contrast against a black background. I really wanted to show a lot of shape and I think this was achieved with the modelling



Adrian working on the set.



Location photograph used as background

you can see in her arms and legs."

The outfits were put together by Turkish fashion designer Bora Aksu the weekend before the shoot – he was a friend of Cathy's and, Adrian acknowledged, the outfits were very beautiful.

Adrian's years of studying martial arts helped him to relate to the form and movement of dance, and Cathy obviously liked his work because when she was offered the position of Creative Director for the Berne Ballet, Adrian found himself on a shoot in Switzerland with a twist.

Lake Thun

Wanting to produce something quite different to standard studio work, Adrian thought of taking the dancers outdoors. "I flew to Switzerland and scouted a number of places, but when I returned a couple of weeks later for the shoot, the weather had closed in and I ended up photographing the dancers in the studio."

However, he continued with the location idea, photographing each dancer so he or she could be seamlessly stripped into his outdoor backgrounds. For instance, the dancer at Lake Thun is holding the most incredible pose, high above a blue lake with her head turned back towards a bright, blazing sun.

"The location was photographed mid-morning in August with a summer feeling to the light and the location. When I took the exposure, I bracketed several stops, but kept the aperture constant. I exposed for the sun, for the mid-tones and for the shadow areas. I mean, you already have the most amazing dynamic range with the medium format backs, but when you combine three different exposures, what you have is nothing





E. Lewis, Berne Ballet promotional photograph.

Opposite: For group photographs, the dancers need to work closely.

short of sensational. In the finished file there's detail everywhere."

Back in the studio, Adrian adjusted his lighting to mimic the sunlight under which he photographed the lake. Each shoot might last only five minutes and Adrian marks up a square on the studio floor to give the dancers an area within which to work, rather than a precise position.

"I also needed to take into account the camera height and angle to ensure that the dancer would look like she really was jumping off the pier. The lights were angled to produce a strong highlight down the edge of her legs, just as the sun would have done.

"Before we began, I showed the dancer the background image and explained that we wanted something that didn't look like a typical dance movement. We didn't want a classical pose from the Nutcracker, rather a deconstruction of what the



At the end of a shoot for the Berne Ballet, all the dancers joined in for a group shot!

dancers have learned in order to produce a more contemporary feeling.

"It's pretty simple stuff as long as you think it all through."

Adrian uses Elinchrom lighting and says he owns just about every accessory and light shaper they make. And shooting with studio flash means there is a short pause between exposures while the floor packs re-charge, so after the dancer jumps, there is time to re-balance, ready for the next movement.

It's not a matter of shooting with a DSLR firing at 10 frames per second, rather Adrian watches the dancer and with a little practice can nail the peak moment. He would take no more than twenty or thirty shots in a session.

"Normally I only direct dancers when something's not working. I like to see what they can come up with before I take over – maybe what they do on their own will be even better than what I imagined."

A Matter of Multiples

Shooting single dancers can be challenging enough, but capturing two, three or more at the same time is more interesting still, especially the lighting and timing. The light has to be broad in coverage and suitable for a range of different dance positions. And then there's the small matter of synchronising the dancers.

"It's not as complicated as it sounds. I just count to three and the dancers jump. I suggest they're careful and don't kick or punch each other (it can happen), because the strongest compositions are usually made when the dancers are close together. However, this is what they do for a living and usually it doesn't take too many shots to get it right."

Adrian says he doesn't believe in working tethered for dance photography because he feels it changes the dynamics of the shoot. "I want the focus to be on what's happening in front of the camera, not the computer screen at the back of the studio. I also like downloading the photos from a card because this means I have the data in two places and I never over-write a card on the same day.

"However this isn't to say the dancers don't get to see what I'm shooting. During a break we may show them the images on the back of the camera so they can see what's happening, but I find that you don't have to direct good dancers much at all. I don't mean to make it sound easier than it is, but typically professional dancers move really well and understand what you're trying to achieve."

While Adrian admits some aspects of his images can be happy accidents, like the juxtaposition of dancers or the flow of a costume, by paying attention to the lighting and equipment he uses, he's able to maximize whatever he's given.

"There are no rules for shooting or lighting dance photography. Every situation is different and calls for a different solution." To see more of Adrian's work, visit www.adrianweinbrecht.com. ■

