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BEHIND THE CAREFUL GROUPINGS, the static poses and the “say ‘cheese’” smiles of the average wedding album, there’s a vast, juicy, swirling novel. For what is a wedding if not a great multigenerational family saga, sparking every emotion from ecstasy to sorrow and back again?

Forty-year-old John Dolan was one of the first wedding photographers to notice the life spilling out from behind a wedding’s careful orchestration. In capturing this great drama on film—first for his older brother’s wedding in 1997, and then for an increasingly rarefied group of editorial and advertising insiders and celebrities—he helped change the aesthetic of wedding photography. It’s even fair to say that he created the style, along with a handful of like-minded wedding photographers.

Having balanced his editorial assignments and wedding photography for years, Dolan has now parlayed his style into an advertising career. One of his frequent clients, Jane Piampiano, manager of art buying for DDB Worldwide Communications, says she became aware of Dolan’s wedding and personal work at “about the time when advertising clients were embracing a more editorial feel for their campaigns. Says Piampiano, “He was a great visual storyteller, and I immediately thought he would be appropriate for some of the clients we work with. He creates such an intimacy between

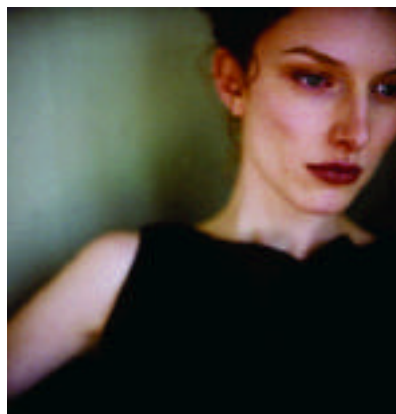
We see the groom in the dressing room in his tails and boxer shorts, the bride in the backseat of the car, the revelers in a gorgeous blur of champagne glasses and disco light. He caught the partygoers in their most unselfconscious and intimate moments always with an eye toward celebrating rather than embarrassing them. “Lots of photographers start out doing that social-commentary edgy stuff,” says Dolan, who is married himself, with three young kids, and based in New York. “In some ways, that’s a little bit easy. It’s easy to do sappy pictures, too. That wasn’t my thing. I knew my thing was trying to find the essence of people and the sensuality of the experience.”

According to Darcy Miller, *Martha Stewart’s* weddings editor, “This whole idea of photojournalist wedding photos has obviously become a bigger trend. But he does it so above and beyond. It’s a combination of his ability to capture the moment, being that he’s physically close to the bride, but you don’t feel he’s in the way. I say to every bride: ‘When you hire your vendors, no matter how talented, you have to like their personality. The day of your wedding, your photographer is in your face all day, and he’s got to know when to step back.’ Brides always say thank you for sending him.” Miller is a recent bride herself who says she would have changed her wedding date to accommodate Dolan’s schedule.

Dolan traces his ease with weddings to an odd



In his ad work as in his wedding photography, Dolan’s specialty is capturing emotional high points in a swirl of events. By Michele Herman



John Dolan

The Stuff of Life

the viewer and the people in the photos.”

There was a time, Dolan recalls, “if you went to a party of photographers and said you were doing weddings, they’d look at you and say they were sorry.” The unwritten rule for the wedding photographer was to stand back a few yards and never catch a guest off guard. Until around 1997, the year *Martha Stewart Wedding* published its debut issue with 20 Dolan photos, wedding photographers tended to create beauty by imposing an artificial order on the day’s proceedings.

Dolan took the opposite stance. He dove in, finding a world of untapped beauty in the swirl of events.

inspiration. As a high-school student in Bethesda, Maryland, he liked to shoot Georgetown basketball games—a setting not as removed from a wedding as one might suppose. “I honed all my skills,” says Dolan, “quick instincts, catching moments, being invisible, knowing when to get out of the way.” When he was 17 he won the Maryland sports photograph of the year. Then he went to college to study liberal arts at Beloit College in Wisconsin and encountered the first of his two major mentors, photography professor Michael Simon. “In a period of six months, he changed me from a *Sports Illustrated* photographer to a more thoughtful art pho-



Opposite page: A sample of Dolan’s wedding photography, which attracted major advertising clients.

This page, top right: Work for IBM with the Wunderman agency. Above, left: Fashion work for the Sundance catalogue.

Right: An outtake from the Lexus campaign done with Team One Advertising.

FOCUS ON ADVERTISING



Clockwise from top left: Women relax on the lawn at a wedding; an outtake from an IBM shoot; more fashion work for Sundance.



tographer,” says Dolan. He credits Simon with teaching him to take responsibility for all aspects of a photograph’s composition. “You don’t take a picture, you make a picture,” was a phrase Simon drilled into Dolan. “It was very high-level training, very subtle, nontechnical and philosophical.” Simon also taught him the value of reading. “Literature affects the way I photograph more than painting,” says Dolan. “My pictures are much more narrative than lyrical, and since the beginning they’ve always had a story within them.”

Dolan’s second mentor, after he came to New York in 1984, had an equally profound influence on him. He met Sylvia Plachy on a rainy afternoon at her *Village Voice* office. By that point he had learned another valuable lesson about himself: he wasn’t a very good assistant, but he was a very good printer. “I didn’t like watching mediocre photographers,” he says, somehow managing, in his low-key way, to sound honest but not arrogant. “It’s really depressing, watching them miss pictures.” But he says he learned good technical skills and discipline from these jobs, “how to make perfect prints for advertising, how to work fast and hard, developing 300 rolls a day.”

Plachy recognized his abilities as a printer and hired him on the spot. “She offered me \$5 an hour plus soup,” says Dolan, “and it was the best business deal I ever made.” Where Simon had given Dolan a philosophical grounding, Plachy taught him about the nexus of a photographer’s life, personality and pictures, bringing him into her home-cum-studio in Queens. “I always had the argument in my head about how much of a picture is owned by the photographer and how much by the subject,” explains Dolan. “She taught me that it’s a bargain between the two, and you meet halfway.”

Like many photographers, Dolan had a natural reticence he needed to come to terms with. “A lot of photographers think you should stay separate and

back. She showed me it’s a gimmick they use to hide behind, and their pictures are cold as a result. She has a magic way of melting people’s exteriors.”

At the end of his three-year apprenticeship, Dolan printed Plachy’s book *Unguided Tour* and the 400 (16 x 20) images for its companion exhibit. This job gave him seed money to strike out on his own. Around this time he took photos at his brother’s wedding and had another epiphany. “I was the best man with a little Minolta in my pocket. I just took a few pictures of him getting dressed.” But during the reception, there was a wild Hungarian circle dance. Without much thought, Dolan jumped inside and started shooting. “What Sylvia said about being part [of the wedding], about not staying outside and being cool became totally clear.” When he developed the photos, he was thrilled. He realized he had trusted his instincts so fully he hadn’t thought about his craft all day.

Shortly after, sitting in his Lower East Side apartment plotting his career, he understood what he had to offer: a gift for working amid chaos. “I realized that I love situations where I don’t have control and don’t have to direct. It’s my advantage that I get calm when people around me are getting crazy.” Dolan joined an unofficial club of fellow wedding specialists, including his officemates Philippe Cheng and Holger Thoss, and Edward Keating of *The New York Times* wedding page, who supported each other’s documentary-style work and shared ideas and camaraderie.

Early in his solo career, Dolan balanced editorial jobs during the week (for *Martha Stewart Living*, *Travel & Leisure*, *In Style* and others) with shooting the weddings of his friends on the weekends. Before long, the two blended seamlessly. He would call magazines and “the 28-year-old editor would say I don’t have a job, but I am getting married in October.” When the editorial work did begin to flow, it had the added blessing and intimacy of the friendships forged at the editors’ weddings.



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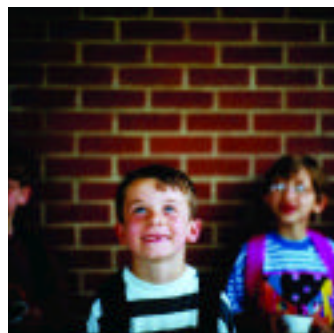
“JOHN HAS AN ABILITY TO CAPTURE THE ESSENCE OF AN EMOTION IN ANY SITUATION,” SAYS CREATIVE DIRECTOR SALLY HOGSHEAD.

Don Morris, a New York-based designer who hired Dolan years ago to shoot his wedding on the strength of his mailer, explains what sets Dolan apart from other photographers with stylistic similarities. “Once we met him, he was disarming, immediately friendly, he’s not about putting up barriers or airs.

“When I think of John,” he continues, “a word comes to

mind, and that is ‘instincts.’ He’d look at a room and see the drama or comedy, or just the interaction going on, and zoom in to it.” Morris was especially impressed when, a month after the wedding, Dolan asked about a blonde woman in the wedding party who had seemed tense all day. Sure enough, says Morris, she had made the wedding cake. “The night before, the hotel fridge broke down, so her husband had to drive the cake around all night in the car with the AC running so the marzipan wouldn’t melt.”

Dolan says that this process of networking through wedding photography “was an accidental marketing plan that was genius. If you rock at their weddings, they love you forever.” At the same



time, Dolan discovered he liked the energy of advertising people. “They’re wonderfully nuts. . .and they get superexcited to have a photographer who will keep up with them,” he says. So before long, the weddings blended into an advertising career. In 1997, Dolan hired Judy Miller as his agent. “Judy took what I do with editorial and personal [work], and she brought it to the ad-

vertising world, introduced me. She brought me in at a time when pictures became homey and authentic; that’s how she pitched me, as making real people look beautiful.” Says Sally Hogshead, who is now creative director of her own agency, Robaire and Hogshead, and who was instrumental in getting Dolan a Lexus campaign two years ago: “John was my wedding photographer, and my wedding party was a rolling bandwagon of top art directors and creative directors. All of them were immediately struck by his effortlessly exquisite style.” That style, she says, made him well suited to “lifestyle” ads that put a premium on naturalism and spontaneity. “Too many advertising photographers

have a self-conscious quality to their composition, but John has an ability to capture the essence of an emotion in any situation.”

Having photographed the weddings of Ben Stiller, Will Smith, George Stephanopoulos and Jennifer Lopez, among many others, Dolan has now shifted most of his energy to advertising work. With Morris he did three years of Sundance catalogues (which inevitably led to a friendship with Robert Redford and his daughter’s wedding shoot). He’s worked for IBM, AT&T and the Gap as well. “I get asked to re-create the sensuality, that core of authentic emotions,” he explains. “A lot of times, people are trying to get back to the simplicity of a snapshot,” where nothing is forced. “My rep and I came up with the term ‘sophisticated snapshot.’”

He’s proud of the Lexus campaign, in which he was asked to shoot the essence of people who own the cars. While he was loading his film, he watched the model’s young son come by with his baby-sitter for a visit. “I saw her interact with him. It was a beautiful little moment, and I snapped a few pictures.” One of them ended up in the campaign. “The less hard I work toward making a picture and forcing it, the better they are,” says Dolan, who jokes that he’d like to call his company “Wing It Photography.” “It’s counterintuitive. It’s incredible when you find art directors who get that.” □

Clockwise from top left: Personal work from Cork Island, Ireland; a wedding; a magic moment captured for Lexus; kids, for IBM.