



John Hogg



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BEING A FREELANCE ARTS PHOTOGRAPHER

While I am a photographer I have some difficulty in categorising myself. I see myself a photographic wanderer with a range of interests in life and photography. I found a job in the media and by default became a press photographer cum photojournalist and I happened to have specialised in the arts. Although calling myself an arts photographer is akin to the actor who is in reality a waiter.

I cannot make a living in South Africa doing this. I have a theory that the interest that government and society at large has in arts and culture is because it appears on a tick list for a democracy, we have to have one to comply. The interest is not an organic and deep-rooted interest like the French, for example, have. Most of the media support this by being entertainment driven, something the public at large apparently are more than satisfied with.

I do supplement my income and creative need by photographing various dance and music festivals and productions. For this I am grateful and enjoy the interludes that take me away from events, PR functions and corporate work. For which I am equally grateful for sustaining me financially. Understanding the balance is crucial.

What helps as a freelancer in this environment is the indispensable versatility that comes with learning your craft while working on a newspaper.

It is becoming more and more apparent that being a specialist photographer in one field only makes you less viable in the market. *American Photo* magazine back in 1996 dedicated their September/October issue to the question of whether photojournalism is dead or not. Among other reasons it was felt by Carol Squires that the first blow to this noble profession was television and that another threat was the celebrity culture. Television and celebrity culture are possibly even stronger now and added to by online and social media. All sound bites and flashing images. But I, and many others, feel that there is still a place in the sun for photojournalism. Very little in the way of media can burn its way into your memory like a riveting and iconic photograph, and they abound. Think of World War 2, of Vietnam and of Soweto in 1976.

Is there an audience for photojournalism? This was another question posed by Squires then and she felt that, despite some negative editors, there was an eager and enthusiastic one. This, I feel, is still the case.

Another question is one that I posed for myself in the 1980/90s was whether what I photographed in the way of the arts was photojournalism. There were those who loudly proclaimed it was not, comparing it to the photography of the upheaval of those times. I eventually settled on the fact that, in the way I approach it, it is. I photograph live performance as a preference, cover festivals in the same manner as I would a political rally. A portrait of a leading artist is no less important than a leading political figure – who needs the artist to complete his checklist.

Rencontres d'Arles and Visa pour l'Image in Perpignan are the two leading photographic festivals in the world and both in France. Perpignan deals with photojournalism and the conversations revolve around this almost exclusively. At the Arles festival the conversations are as varied as you want them to be. Digital has been embraced along with the more traditional analogue at both and at Arles has "broadened the photographers' palette".

Being an arts photographer often is little more than an ideal but is an ideal that I don't mind striving for. Sometimes the effort outweighs the financial rewards, but then anything you care for should be approached in this way.