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## Erik Almas

By Louisa J. Curtis



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Each month PhotoServe Director Barbara Goldman and I exchange ideas and suggestions for the ChatterCorner article and this month, we found the perfect subject. San Francisco-based photographer [Erik Almas](#) recently touched base with Barbara to tell her about a shoot he had done for Ritz-Carlton - with a live lion! The lion is the symbol for the Ritz-Carlton luxury brand and this month is August and therefore the sign of Leo and the lion - so what better to write about? Now, as luck would have it, Erik just happened to come to New York for a few days this week and instead of interviewing via emails and phone calls, I was able to meet with him in person and conduct my interview over a relaxed and sunny Saturday brunch. But before we get to that, here is what Associate Creative Director Ken Hall of Duncan/Shannon in San Francisco had to say when we asked him why they chose to work with Erik on this assignment?

*"For us, Erik was the ideal choice. His images have the style and swagger of a great fashion photographer, while he himself understands the practical realities of advertising like a veteran commercial photographer. Erik's talented enough to be a Prima Donna; he just isn't one. Erik brings a strong, artistic vision to the table. And he works tirelessly with his team to deliver that vision. But he does so without pretense or ego. Plus, he's pretty cool under fire-the fact that he was calmly shooting five feet from an uncaged, hungry lion is testament to that."*

This was not the first time their paths had crossed as Ken and Erik already had a great working relationship together for five years. We asked Ken about the concept and the challenges for this particular assignment. *"The concept was to show how two seemingly disparate things-the proudly old-school Ritz-Carlton brand and the shiny, new, high-tech world of LA Live-fit together beautifully. By bringing our lion, the very symbol of the Ritz, into various LA Live locales, we achieved our goal in an unexpected, yet brand-appropriate way. The significant challenge was making pulsing neon lights, jumbo LCD screens and brightly lit basketball arenas look elegant, upscale and even romantic."* Erik also added, *"In producing and planning for this assignment we tried our hardest to be able to create these images in camera and on one piece of film. The deal breaker was to have the lion on the floor of the Staples Center during play off time against the Celtics. However, they did not want the floor to be damaged by the lion in any way. In the end I think it was for the better that instead we photographed the lion in a controlled environment. The biggest challenge then became to make all the parts and pieces fit seamlessly into one image. We had a toy lion as a stand in and then went into the studio shooting the lion to match. To make sure light and angles fit seamlessly we would comp the lion into the images of the girl taken over the previous 2 days."*

This assignment was obviously quite an accomplishment by all involved, resulting in beautiful imagery for the client. But now, let's find out some more about our photographer... Although Erik lives in San Francisco, he is originally from Norway and still travels home to see his family there every year. I asked him how his Norwegian roots have helped him in the advertising and commercial photography world and he referred to himself as a mellow, quiet sort of person, which helps him in dealing with people. He seeks balance with quieter moments, in particular with landscapes and sometimes by meditating, but confessed that it was easier for him to do that when he is at home in San Francisco and finds it much more challenging to meditate regularly when he is on the road. Seeking balance is inherently natural for Erik. As Ken Hall so perfectly reiterated, Erik is talented enough to be a Prima Donna; he just isn't one. And he's not. He is laid back and charming and obviously enjoys the funnier moments of life.

When I asked him to give me three words that best describe his creative style, he gave me, *"Quiet, Romantic and Classical Composition."* And when you look at his stunning images you will understand why he chose those three words, because his work is just that. I also asked him if he considered himself as a commercial photographer or as a fine artist? He replied, *"I concern myself more with being an amazing craftsman and not so much as an artist. I definitely think more about my work now though, and I am interested in being able to bring intellectual ideas into the vision. Greater art has a longer viewpoint."* He openly admits that his career has pretty much flowed along for him and that he was never really conscious about a grand plan, but he also freely acknowledges that, *"I am the luckiest guy I know! To be able to do what you are attracted to? I have always loved to travel but it is a PLUS to be able to travel for what you do as a living."* He also added, *"I do work very hard. It is like primal hunting, sometimes it is frustrating and other times successful."*

Although much of his imagery is computer-generated, for him it is still all about the light, and he will make the crew get up at 3 or 4 a.m. in order to be ready to shoot early at the magic hour and then rest for a couple of hours before shooting again in the early evening. *"For me there are three components - the land, the sky and the person,"* and when I asked him about the post-production he said, *"I do a lot of it myself. I do the initial post and then I hand it over for the more extensive work."*

And to back up his admirable work ethics, he can pretty much boast 100 percent repeat business, which is very impressive. Also impressive is the fact that he has been with his reps Tidepool, [www.tidepoolreps.com](http://www.tidepoolreps.com), with offices in Los Angeles and San Francisco, for nine years now. He and his agent Brooke Embry literally started out together and have continued to successfully build both of their businesses ever since. They may not always agree on everything, but they always talk about it. Tidepool's vision on their Web site states that it's possible for artists to be artists and still thrive in the commercial world. And with Erik, I believe they have succeeded. Erik says he likes being with a smaller agency and he is certainly a great example that you don't have to be with a big agency in order to be successful.

Throughout our conversation it became apparent that besides hard work, Erik also enjoys some of the finer things in life, in particular good wine and food. Living where he does, it's hardly surprising and he proudly showed me a photo of his well-stocked wine cellar back home. When I asked what his favorite food is, he said, *"Anything that stimulates the senses!"* And when I asked what would he do if he weren't a photographer, he replied yet again, *"Anything that stimulates the senses! I used to be a DJ at one point and I also love food. Basically I need to feel."* I also asked if he could get on a plane tomorrow, where would he fly to and why? *"Argentina and New Zealand,"* was the response. For Argentina, it would be a long talked-about trip with one of his good "food and wine" buddies, and for New Zealand, it would be, not surprisingly, for the landscapes!

And lastly we talked about his influences, and whom he would like to thank if he were accepting his Oscar. In terms of photographers he admires and who inspire him, he gave me Paolo Roversi, Nadav Kander and Annie Leibovitz. And for non-photographers, he gave me Bono and Bill Gates! He expressed his admiration for people who have achieved huge pinnacles of success, but that they also do the right thing by giving back on a super-size scale. In fact, he said he admires all of the people around him really. He talked about having two sets of friends, one set that is more of the intellectuals, the lawyers and so on, and the other set who are more artistic. And his thank you list went something like this, *"My family - they made me finish school, and especially my amazing rock-star Mum! My teachers - in particular Susan Schilling, Jim Wood and Jim Erickson, (with whom Erik assisted for three years). Something Jim Erickson taught me was the importance of learning how to speak eloquently about your own pictures. He was a great mentor, and I also learned from him to be unselfish when it comes to sharing ideas and techniques about image making, photography and marketing. And of course my team - producers, assistants, stylists etc. I find it intriguing that they all help me to bring my vision to fruition."* Great Advice and to see more of Erik Almas's work, visit [www.erikalmas.com](http://www.erikalmas.com).

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