

Life as a stills photographer

· 9 Jan 2009

Making money at the movies - Alex Bailey has worked in photography for over twenty-five years and here he tells ePHOTOzine how he makes a living from films.

I doubt many twelve-year-old boys have an interest in painters such as Turner and enjoy looking at work by French Impressionists. But in the seventies, when there wasn't DVD players and PlayStations to keep children occupied one boy had a growing appreciation for the arts.



Keira Knightley in *Atonement*. Photo by Alex Bailey.

"I wasn't academic, I always had an interest in visual things and I also enjoyed the countryside too. My dad who had a great interest in fine art encouraged me to look at things visually. So I had an inclination to go in that direction, I think it's something genetic. The appreciation for light and colour can be taught and developed but I believe it has to be built in you from the start, born with it if you like."

Having left school at the age of sixteen, in 1978, it didn't take Alex Bailey long to realise that you work for a long time in this life and having a job that not only pays the bills but is rewarding and enjoyable is a good idea.

At the age of 12 he attended a photography club at school and this combined with his love for fine art that was nurtured in him by his father left him considering a career in photography. He did a part time photography course which he did around his day job and within six months of starting the course found a job as a darkroom technician with The South London Guardian Group. After six months Alex was promoted to junior photographer but wanting to broaden his knowledge of photography he moved on. He worked for the General Electric company, a place where he learnt many techniques to strengthen his knowledge of photography. Again Alex needed to move on and this time he went freelance something which wasn't as simple as he had imagined. He quickly had to do odd jobs to make ends meet but luckily one of his friends was dating a person who worked as an assistant on films and Alex was asked to work on *Robin Hood Prince of Thieves*.



Alex Bailey.

"I was asked to be the second unit photographer and even though I didn't have a clue what one was I thought I should go along and give it a go."

By the end of his first film assignment Alex could see how his skills as a press photographer would help him capture the shots that are all important to the marketing process for films. He could also see how his work in studios would be a valuable asset not to mention the money that could be made from films! And at that point Alex decided the film world would be for him.

"It wasn't easy for me when I started and the industry is still like it, the way in isn't transparent. As my first film was a multi-million pound A-list filled block buster it took me a while to realise smaller budget films need photographers too. Even though I had the experience from a large budget film it still took me another two years to break into the industry fully. There's a lack of information out there, the film industry is somewhat of a grey area. It isn't like going into architectural photography where you can apply to be an assistant and follow a photographer around taking pictures of buildings. Films are put together and filmed in different places, they spend a year on it then it's dissolved, there isn't structure like other forms of photography have."



*Atonement poster.
Images by Alex Bailey.*

This is a problem students and people new to the industry still face. Alex receives many phone calls and emails from students asking for advice, which he's happy to give but instead of repeating the same information over and over again, Alex decided putting it all in a book titled Movie Photos would be best.

"It was hard work, but it was a labour of love and it was very rewarding. It's a very exciting industry to work in and I feel a lot needs to be done in the education side of it. Some students come out with degrees and come to me for work experience and they have never handled a digital camera, they are scared to pick up the phone and this just wont work in the industry. You need to know your equipment and know the business side of the industry to succeed and I thought a book would be a great way to explain all this."

Alex works with many students and the ones who succeed are the ones who are determined and try hard. For the last 20 years he's had regular contact with young photographers and those who do well are those who make the most of the situations they find themselves in.



*Toby Kebbell in RocknRolla. Photo by
Alex Bailey.*

"You have to be committed, be prepared to work for low wages and do long hours," explained Alex.

Alex's book is brimming with great advice for those who want to go into this side of the business. The images used show a varied portfolio of narrative shots, romantic and even lighting and equipment used on sets. It's a great overall look at how to be a set photographer that is well supported by the words written alongside the pictures.

"I wrote the words first, I started off wanting to just help with words alone but decide that would be dull. I wrote for a couple of years and went through my recent images to find a good range for the book. As I took the images there were no issues with licensing which was a relief."

Even though Alex has worked with many famous faces which includes Jude Law and Keira Knightley he says it's just a job and like with any other job you work with a variety of people, in different departments all of which you have to respect.

"I don't mean to burst anyone's bubble but it's just a job. You are part of the film set, the people you work with appreciate your art and they know what you do represents them in the public eye so they want a good working relationship with you. They know if the film isn't marketed correctly then it won't be seen. As long as you are professional, polite and sensitive the actors are open to having their picture taken. Of course when you're working 10-12 hour days, 6 days a week for months on end you do get the chance to get to know these people rather well too."

You need good people skills for this job. You need to be able to conduct yourself correctly and with a range of different people. After all you could be working with up to 2000 people on a set.

"Observe the film set and know when is and isn't a good time to approach someone. Chat to them and take advantage of the day. What girl wouldn't like to be told I'm taking your picture against this beautiful light today?"

Of course most of the time you are working in small rooms where only six or seven people may be but still the quality of the relationship Alex has with the people on set effects what he can produce.

"You work in small areas that don't have much room but if you have a good relationship with people they will move a boom for you and the director will get the actors back on set and set a scene up again so you can get the perfect shot."

When it comes to taking pictures Alex believes there is an anorak in all of us that has a need to have all things technical but this is just a means to the end. The equipment is only as good as the person who uses it and Alex believes having the latest state of the art camera doesn't make you a better photographer.

"I was brought up on Nikon cameras and I have remained faithful ever since. On a film set, I work with two high-end digital SLR cameras and I shoot on RAW mode."

When he works on set, indoor lighting isn't a great worry as the quality is good for the film anyway and when out doors the scenario opens up where daylight can be used.

So does Alex ever get tired of working with the stars on multi-million pound films?

"The chance of getting bored on a film set doesn't arise. As when you get to the point the film is over. All the films are different and so are the people. You can work on one film together and not see each other again for years because of the size of the industry. I photograph a variety of sets, stories and subject matter, I don't get bored of that."



Angelina Jolie in Lara Croft: Tomb Raider. Photo by Alex Bailey.



Pride Prejudice at Stannards. Photo by Alex Bailey.



Cover of Alex Bailey's book.

