

Light & Lens

by Eric Gershon



At the end of a red clay road in rural Laos, freelance cameraman Eddie Marritz

stood among the milling chickens, goats, and cows, contemplating angles and perspectives. A tributary of the Mekong River flowed behind a cluster of elevated bamboo and straw huts. Beneath each hut several provincial Laotian women sat at looms weaving textiles that, thanks to the Internet, would later sell in Seattle for \$500 each. Marritz was there to get the scene on film for a CNBC documentary about money.

The job in Laos was, so to speak, just another day at the office for Marritz. In his type of project-based work, travel is a given. Filmmakers document life in pictures, and because life happens everywhere, Marritz goes everywhere. By the time he arrived in Laos, the CNBC project (“A Thousand Years of Money”) had already taken him to England and Spain; in between he’d gone to Central America on an unrelated assignment. In every place he goes Marritz meets people and hears their stories. One of the best parts of the job, he says, is “observing what other people’s lives are about.”

The thrill of a varied and itinerant career, however, weighs against the tremendous responsibility that comes with the freelance life. The chief — the only — executive of his career, Marritz must, for example, regularly calculate whether an assignment is worth the effort or not. And money isn’t always a reliable measure of worth.



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF EDDIE MARRITZ

Berlin Story

Last summer, PBS producer Helen Whitney left a short message for Marritz on the answering machine in his Manhattan apartment. Could he shoot for the PBS program *Frontline* on September 19 and 21? Whitney left no other information — no subject, no location, no details whatsoever other than the date of the shoot. Nothing.

At first Marritz thought he'd probably pass up the job. He'd recently worked well with Whitney on a *Frontline* project, but the dates she was proposing coincided with his son Ilya's departure for Berlin. Ilya would be away for a year, and Marritz wanted to send him off properly.

"My family has had to be very flexible in the past because I've felt I had to take jobs," he says. Marritz missed Ilya's high school graduation because he was shooting a video for the Harvard Business School in the Midwest. ("He was about to go to college and we thought, 'How are we going to pay for this?' so I took the job.") Another time, while his brother was getting married in Seattle, Marritz was darting around Los Angeles in a bulletproof vest filming a documentary about police raids.



And Then There Was Light

"I light and lens scenes," explains Marritz. "In conjunction with a director or producer, I make a plan to shoot anything from an interview to a real scene. Will it be done in one shot or in cuts? Will the camera be moving or stationary? What colors work? Then I communicate with a gaffer, grip, art director, propperson, and soundperson. In reality, if you're working on a film rather than a corporate video, much of this has been planned in pre-production. Still, on many documentaries, a certain amount of improvisation is required — you're working with a smaller crew than on feature films."

Marritz especially hates to turn down assignments from people he likes working with — but experience had taught him where and when to draw the line. Ilya would be away in Europe for at least a year. "I called Helen back a day later and left a message on her voicemail saying that I didn't think I could do the job," says Marritz. "I wanted to be around for Ilya's departure for Berlin."

Whitney persisted.

As it turned out, she was making final edits to a *Frontline* documentary about Pope John Paul II, for which Marritz had done much of the original photography. An important interview with German scholar and papal critic Hans Kung needed to be shot again. Kung had given his interview in English, but the European distributors of the film wanted their audience to hear it in German. Time was tight. Marritz was the man for the job — if he would take it. Whitney had good reason to think he would: Kung lived in Berlin.

"Before it came to my attention that the shoot was in Berlin, a place where I could rendezvous with Ilya, I was prepared to turn it down," says Marritz. But, of course, it didn't come to that, and in the end Marritz went to Berlin, Ilya saw his dad, and Whitney got her footage.

Marritz spent four merrily frantic days in Berlin. "We booked a handsome, quiet reception room in the Hotel Adlon," he says. "I worked with my locally hired sound recordist, Simone, to make a handsome lighting setup with a look consistent with the other interviews I'd shot for the show."

Arrangements had been made with the hotel to have a VCR and monitor ready for Marritz and Kung. Marritz wanted to give Kung a chance to refresh his memory of the initial English-language interview before they met to reshoot the interview in German. The planning and preparation paid off. "The shoot itself took about six hours from pick-up of gear, set-up at the

hotel, then light, prep, shoot, and wrap.” This freed up Marritz’s schedule so that he could poke around the Potsdammer Plaza and the Tiergarten with his son.

Scrapper

In the beginning, Marritz wouldn’t have dared to turn down work. It was too hard to come by. After graduating from New York’s Hunter College in the early 1970s, Marritz drove a cab and bused tables at restaurants part-time while trying to break into the film business. He knew that he wouldn’t find a full-time film job, that he would have to build his career one project at a time. “To this day,” Marritz says, “very few staff jobs exist in the field. It’s basically set up for teams to come together, execute jobs, then disband.”

He got an important break in 1974: “I was in Riverside Park throwing a Frisbee for our dog, Thor, and I met a film editor.” The editor, Anitra Pivnik, was there with her dog, too, and she and Marritz got to talking. Pivnik said she was in film; Marritz said he wanted to be in film. Pivnik encouraged the neophyte.

She told Marritz to get in touch with two men she knew — Don Lenzer and Dick Pearce — who had filmed the documentary “Woodstock” in 1969, and to use her name. Perhaps they’d have work for an up-and-comer. Naturally, Marritz took the cue. “I got sporadic work from both of them,” he says. “I was green and relatively unschooled. I’d assist them on record company commercials, early versions of music videos, low-budget commercials, and the occasional PBS documentary.” In this fashion, Marritz earned his stripes, \$85 a day, and a valuable lesson about career building.

“Not all career advancement is attained through rational

pursuit,” he says. “Sometimes schmoozing is enough to open doors that one is not necessarily looking to open.”

Learning Curve

Like all freelancers, especially those in the arts, Marritz had to build his own career. There was no traditional, clearly defined career path for him to follow, as there was for doctors and lawyers and teachers. He had studied film production in col-

lege, but knew that he would get the most valuable training on the job. So he took one small job after another, learning as much as he could from each project. Sometimes he was a gaffer, sometimes a grip, eventually a production assistant, and finally a camera assistant. He held microphones, set up lights, loaded film magazines into cameras, focused lenses. Getting more responsibility required “initiative, taking risks, and an unbelievable capacity to persevere,” Marritz says. “I’ve had to be many things.”

Part of the payoff has been a career of adventure spent with colorful people. In 1975 Marritz spent a week in New Mexico



Q: What was the worst project you ever worked on, and why?

A: I’m not sure right now, but I’ll say this: Any project that is being led by people who don’t believe in preparation and communication or is driven by “blame” is one that I’d prefer not to be a part of. Not being heard, trusted, or allowed to be oneself (within professional boundaries) is intolerable for me.

Q: What was the best project you ever worked on, and why?

A: There have been quite a few. Basically, any job that energizes or teaches, and not just photographically,

is a very good job. I very much enjoyed shooting an HBO documentary called “The Living Museum.” We spent a number of days filming artists who were institutionalized at the Creedmore Psychiatric Hospital in New York. The characters were amazing—funny, scary, and articulate. The location itself emanated an energy and power that fed us all.

Q: What do you say when people ask about “your job”?

A: I suppose I want people to know that while my job is primarily cinematography/videography (i.e., lighting and lensing), it

also demands powerful political, social, and psychological skills.

Q: What is your guiding philosophy?

A: I try to listen to my director and producer, and to respond as an individual with my own sensibility. Listen and be heard.

Q: If you could be doing anything other than what you are now, what would it be?

A: I’d be curious to try landscape architecture, sculpture, and poetry.

Question & Answer

working as the camera assistant on a documentary about painter Georgia O'Keefe; shortly thereafter, he broke into the photographers' ranks as the assistant camera operator on a feature film called *Rockers*, shot in seven weeks in Kingston, Jamaica. He has shot music videos for both Bananarama ("Cruel Summer") and fellow New Jersey native Bruce Springsteen ("Atlantic City"). He traveled to Illinois to film "Skokie," a feature film for television about neo-Nazi marches in that town, and to Bali, Australia, and Japan with dancer/choreographer Lori Anderson to film *Alive from Off Center*. In the last year alone, projects have taken him to Mexico, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Spain.



Working his way up from the bottom has given Marritz the confidence that he needs to do the good work that gets him jobs. "It took me a while to believe that I had innate skills of my own. Early on, I did as I was told and watched carefully,

many days not fully understanding what was going on. Later, when I became a camera assistant on feature films, I stood closer to the chain of command, and I got a better idea of how decisions were made. I began to develop a voice — an eye — of my own."

As Marritz developed technical expertise and an artistic sensibility, he also had to make decisions about the general direction of his career, decisions that would profoundly affect his lifestyle. If he wanted to pursue work in feature films, he would probably have to move to Los Angeles; if he wanted to establish a reputation among documentarists, he could stay in New York. He had worked on both feature films and documentaries, and could perhaps have gone either way. But he didn't want to move to California, and competition for jobs in feature films was extremely fierce everywhere. "I needed to make a decision," Marritz recalls, "and I said to myself, 'It doesn't look like it's going to happen for me in features, so why don't I become the best documentary filmmaker I can?'"

No Such Thing As a Sure Thing

In this spirit, Marritz plunged into a career that, for twenty-five years, has rewarded him with opportunities for travel, variety, and self-determination — and has sometimes perplexed him in its unpredictability.

"Often, when I've just completed a substantial project and I feel really poised to go on — nothing happens," he laments. But then he brightens up and reports that another project is in the works. It seems that for all the globe-trotting glamor of his work, Marritz is ultimately just like most other freelancers — often worried about getting enough work, but still loving his freedom. **1099**

IP STATS

Field:

Cinematography/
Videography

Specialty:

Documentary

Hours per week:

About 50

Typical working hours:

7 AM–7 PM

Main current clients:

PBS (*American Experience*,
NOVA, *Frontline*), *National Geographic*, Nabisco

Rates:

Services: \$700 per day plus
any money I can net on
gear rentals

Earnings in a good year:

\$100,000

Favorite business

readings:

American Cinematographer

Favorite non-business

readings:

Novels by Ian McEwan, V.S. Naipaul, and Graham Greene; poems by William Stafford, Philip Levine, and Donald Hall; *The New York Review of Books*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Economist*

Best way you get clients:

Referrals from producers or other camerapeople

Worst wage-slave job(s) you ever had:

Taxi driver, bus boy