

Tired of routine reception photography? Explore some new ideas or get a fresh take on the tried-and-true standards. Those party pictures can be compelling documentaries of significant relationships.

WEDDINGS

By Stephanie Boozer

©Becka & Nate of Studio222 Photography



There are certain reception shots you simply cannot fail to shoot—the couple's introduction, the cutting of the cake, the father-daughter dance, everything that tradition and expense mandate. After all, a lot of money goes into throwing a party of record, and its glory is fleeting. But you don't have to be stuck in a boring routine. Try rethinking your approach.

TAKE THE PULSE. "Every reception has its own cadence," says Tasha Owen, of Tasha Owen Photography in Tacoma, Wash., who spends a few precious minutes getting an early read on the party vibe. "Sometimes the crowd is very hands-on and wants to interact with you, and at other receptions, that's just not your part. I try to find the calm in the storm and start anticipating what's going to occur."

Owen also keeps a sharp eye on who the guests are photographing. If there's a group of sorority sisters or family members gathering for a candid shot, she'll cross the room to get her own perspective on the scene. "They're doing the work for you—they know who's supposed to be in that shot," she says. "Pay attention to the guests and they'll guide you to the heart of the reception."

TAKE A SEAT. "Something we've started doing helps immensely, sitting with the guests," says Becka Knight of Studio 222 Photography in Orlando, Fla., who realizes that sounds a little unorthodox. But when the relationship is right, Knight finds couples make the suggestion themselves. "We never have to worry about missing anything that might come up when we'd

Life of the party

12 Tips to break you out of the reception rut

otherwise be seated far away, refueling.”

Knight sees a psychological transformation in guests’ demeanor that makes them feel more comfortable around her. “They perceive us as friends instead of vendors,” she says. “That kind of trust is invaluable both at the reception and after, because they become our biggest cheerleaders along with the bride and groom. If we become friends, in addition to taking amazing photographs, we become not only memorable, but remarkable.”

BE LORD OF THE RINGS. “As portrait and wedding photographers who photograph people all day long, it’s a refreshing change of pace to grab the rings, find interesting locations or textures and let yourself be creative in a way you don’t often have the opportunity to be,” says Chris Scott, of Chris and Adrienne Scott Photographers in Nashville, Tenn. “We love the chance and the challenge of creating interesting ring shots in a different location at every wedding, and our couples love the results.”

TRIUMPH WITH THE TRIPOD. “It’s essential for any reception that we shoot,” says Christian Oth, of Christian Oth Studio in New York. “Most of our receptions end up being indoors after sunset, and the tripod can do a lot of things, like timed exposures.” One of Oth’s signature shots starts with mounting the camera on a tripod and setting the exposure at f/8 for for 1 second. “The long exposure blows the people out, and you get beautiful details on the table,” he says. “You also get the suggestion of the human element because the people are blurred just enough.”

MOVE THE FLASH. “Take the flash off of the camera for the first dance and father-daughter, mother-son dances,” says Scott. “We typically use two lights, one stationary and one carried by an assistant. With some simple hand signals to our assistant, and just moving around the dance floor, we can

get a ton of variations in the lighting and mood of the first dance. And once you’ve nailed your ‘safe’ shots, start playing around with lens flares and backlighting.”

This is a great opportunity to experiment, Scott adds. “It’s officially time to break the monotony,” he says. “We’ll do some shutter dragging by bringing a light in close (or on-

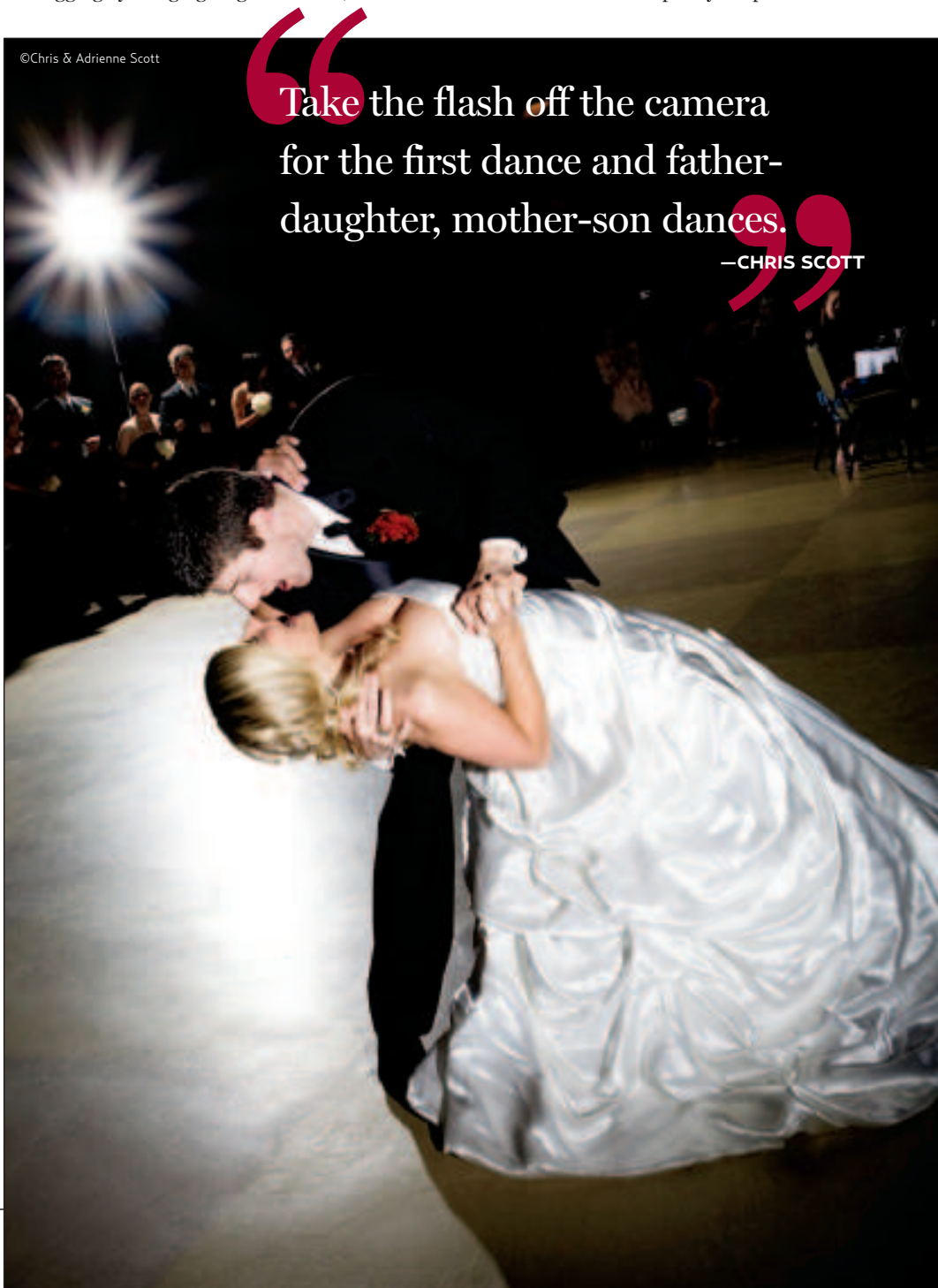
camera) and turning the camera during a long exposure. You’ll stop the motion of your main subject while the ambient light in the room will blur. We use this very sparingly though, as it can get old pretty quickly.”

TAKE IT DOWN A NOTCH. “The ability to shape and mold your flash under all circumstances will help set you apart

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from the competition,” says Canadian Dave Cheung, of DQ Studios in Calgary, Alberta. “Think of well placed off-camera flashes as in-camera dodging and burning. Use your flash to dodge and guide your viewer. Another great effect, slightly underexposing ambient and accenting with flash, can help minimize distracting backgrounds, people and clutter.”

Dialing down the flash makes it almost imperceptible to guests, yet renders dramatic lighting with a hint of spot to guide your eye into the focus of the image. “We hide the flash so that it’s totally unobtrusive,” says Quin Cheung. “Our flashes are going off at very low power, so they don’t interfere with whatever is going on,

which enables us to capture true emotion.”

“Being able to surprise your clients with imagery they literally couldn’t see with their own eyes is one of the most gratifying parts of the job,” adds Dave.

COLOR IT BEAUTIFUL. “I want my party shots to look especially lively, and colored lights really help create a sense of action and excitement,” says Brian Dorsey, of Brian Dorsey Studios in New York, who was cited as one of the top 10 wedding photographers in the world by *American Photo* magazine. “Not everyone’s budget can support a large-scale lighting design company. When I want to kick up the energy on the dance shots a notch, I’ll place a gelled flash head—deep blue is my favorite—up high near the band and trigger it from my camera. I can use it as a cool rim light or kicker and it really makes the images pop. It’s not the same as spending \$20,000 on Bentley Meeker’s Lighting & Staging, but it works pretty well in a pinch.”

GET ENLIGHTENED. “Sometimes we find opportunities to photograph details of the reception before it’s dark,” says Oth. “We do get light coverage on that, but we also make sure to go back and get shots after dark as well. For example, the cake: you can get amazing pictures of the cake when it’s sunset, but when you go to put the album together, you don’t want to have a mismatch of a daylight cake detail next to the couple cutting it at night.”

IF YOU’VE GOT TIME, SELL IT. “If you’ve got some downtime in the reception, or an assistant who does, and a laptop, why not run a slideshow of main images from the day?” says Scott, who finds it can lead to new bookings. “Most people are floored you’re showing images from the day, and will crowd around to see them, dragging over other people to take a look. We are hyper-sensitive to getting things right in-camera during the day, knowing that people



©Brian Dorsey Studios

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are going to see untouched images that night at the reception.”

Eric Sartoris, of Anthology Photography in Austin, Texas, also has good luck with same-day slideshows. “We run a slideshow on a projector screen or large monitor, even incorporate the day’s captures with a pre-made slideshow that includes childhood and other pre-wedding photographs of the couple,” he says. “We’ve gotten incredible responses from this.”

CREATE A DIVERSION. Another trick that both Scott and Sartoris say amps things up at the reception is setting up a photo booth. “One light and a backdrop, or a blank wall, and you’re in business,” says Scott. “We encourage our couples to bring props for the booth and we end up with hilarious photos to show for it at the end of the night. We’ll typically have a slideshow of images up on our blog within a day or two of the wedding. It’s an easy sell on the front end and a great way to make some extra money in print, album and DVD slideshow



©Tasha Owen

sales afterward.” Sartoris’ Live Photo Booth has been a huge success and “a source of added excitement at many of our receptions.”

THE GROOM HAS FAMILY, TOO.

So much attention is focused on the bride

and her family, it’s important not to neglect the groom’s family. “I run a studio with eight photographers,” says Oth, “and I have to specifically train them to do that.”

Oth also reminds his photographers, as grim as it might sound, “There may be a grandparent there who will soon pass away, and this could be the last occasion they’re photographed with the couple. These are often the most cherished pictures.”

When Oth and his team are grabbing table shots, he backs off with an 85mm lens. “It’s a little removed, and I can shoot into people talking to each other,” he says. “It gives beautiful coverage of human interaction, which is so important later on.”

LAST WORDS—DON’T MISS ANYTHING! “Think of it as *What did the bride pay for?*” says Oth. “It’s very important to get all of the details, the flowers, the tables and so forth. But don’t make it look like you’re shooting down a checklist. Be aware of the details and cover them beautifully, especially if you want to get published in a magazine or blog.” ■

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