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# WHAT MAKES CREATIVE COLLABORATIONS SUCCESSFUL







LEFT: Michael Schmelling and Kay Madsen worked on a music video for The Funs. "There's a trust" between the two, says Madsen.

## DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY: KAY MADSEN

For directors of photography (DPs), the process of working with a photographer/director on a shoot is different in many ways from working with a traditional director. Photographers may not be used to directing talent for longer takes, or they—or their crew—may not be adept at translating their lighting style from strobes to continuous lights. Another big difference is that photographers are often unaccustomed to having someone who is essentially another photographer on set. "I do see that it's tough at times for the photographer to lay down the camera," says Kay Madsen, a DP who has worked with several photographers on a range of motion projects, from side-by-side still/video shoots to more traditional video-only projects.

"You define yourself as the photographer, as the person who is working with that piece of technology in your hands, and that's a big step to let go of it and focus on the directing," Madsen says. That may not be for everybody, and some photographers might be better off just hiring "a fantastic focus puller," camera assistant and crew "that can help you translate your lighting ideas into continuous light," Madsen counsels. For those who do want to work with a DP, he advises finding one "who you can develop a shorthand with who hopefully loves the style that you shoot and will do anything to emulate it. That's what most DPs are trained to do."

Madsen has collaborated with photographer/director Michael Schmelling regularly for the past few years, often on advertising shoots that produce both stills and video for clients. The pair met

while working on a conceptual video for a mutual artist friend, and Schmelling felt "a real kinship" with Madsen's work on that project. He brought Madsen in to work on a Levi's campaign in 2012, and they've continued to work together, recently on a number of projects for YouTube.

On integrated still and video projects, Madsen is often shooting video while Schmelling is making still photographs, and Schmelling says that being able to trust "that whatever he is shooting is consistent with the way I'm seeing" has been important to the success of their collaboration. "Not that he has to mimic my shots, shot-for-shot," Schmelling adds, "but from the first time I worked with him, I knew I was in good hands with him shooting, and I knew he was going to go above and beyond shooting what I wanted him to shoot, but then also exploring his own angles and things like that."

Madsen says the collaboration works because he's given "a bit of a longer leash" to experiment with different angles as he shoots from the side and tries not to interrupt the still shoot. "There's a trust," Madsen says. If he tells Schmelling he got what he needs from a setup, they can move on. "I sometimes come in and say I got good stuff but I feel like we have to do a little extra piece or repeat it just for

video," he adds, "and then we'll go in and Michael will direct the talent to translate what they are doing into a moment that feels like it would work in motion."

Their creative discussions are another aspect of the collaboration that both Schmelling and Madsen appreciate. Schmelling notes their "long conversations about a photographic versus a cinematic sensibility." As he's grown as a director and his video projects have gotten bigger, Schmelling has realized that it's important to him that the video "be reflective of my photo work so that all this stuff can live together." Each frame in the films of Schmelling's favorite directors feels like a photo, he says, whereas shots in other films are "purely for cinema" and don't necessarily reflect the way people see the world. Sometimes Madsen will find a camera angle that "will win me over," Schmelling says, while other times Schmelling will "fight for a more photographic perspective to video." That feedback helps Madsen "continue to deliver video that [Schmelling] feels represents the kind of photographic style that he's established," he explains.

Says Madsen: "The better the communication, the better the end product is going to get."

—CONOR RISCH