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ERIC CAYLA CSC's *HAVEN*

SARORN SIM CSC
CORPORATE CINEMATOGRAPHY

THOM BEST CSC
PLAYED



Kirk Neff: Telling Stories with DSLRs

Sarorn Sim csc

and the future of

C O R P O R A T E CINEMATOGRAPHY

By Fanen Chiahemen

Photos by Dan Denardo*

With its saturated colours, shallow depth of field, soft lens and soothing piano soundtrack, the three-minute video “Sonata” is hardly recognizable as a corporate tool. The slick and evocative piece looks more like a classical music video or short film. And shooting the CSC Award-winning video for Dow Chemical Company was “pretty elaborate,” says cinematographer Sarorn Sim csc. “It was shot with an ARRI ALEXA. There were so many lights and big setups.” The idea behind it was “drawing a parallel between music and chemistry to explain that, like the combination of notes in music, the combination of elements in chemistry is infinite, and both result in the creation of beautiful things,” Sim explains.

Because corporate videos have long been internal communications tools for businesses, their production value has typically been low. “They are usually produced using a three-point lighting setup; you cut it, add a lower third with names and titles, and it’s done. Well, it’s gone beyond that,” Sim says.

Sim, who is represented by AVI-SPL, is the producer and director of photography at Dow. In his role, he has travelled to more than 40 countries shooting corporate videos for the Fortune 500 Company, handling anything intended for external circulation, including marketing videos and commercials.

“A lot of companies don’t have the in-house capability to produce the kinds of pieces that I do,” Sim says. “Most companies have departments that produce the head-and-shoulder shots, the training videos, the safety videos, just basic videos.” But he believes there is an ever more substantial role for cinematographers in corporate settings.

“It’s a very rare skill set to have in a big corporation like this,” Sim offers. “But in terms of numbers, it’s a cost savings to the company. Hiring a DP or an agency costs a lot more. So having me here in-house is a huge benefit for them.”

It was a role he initially expected to be merely transitional.

This page: Sim shooting a mini documentary for Dow in Ghana.

Next page 1: Standing in the midst of one of the world’s most dangerous slums in Cité Soleil, Port au Prince, Haiti. 2: In the desert of Dubai, United Arab Emirates. 3: Sim on an urban shoot. 4: Sim on a shoot in South Africa.





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"I was doing a lot of news-type shoots back then; a lot of projects in foreign places like Afghanistan and Pakistan," Sim says. "I wanted to do something more corporate and agency-style, so I applied for the job, and I got it. I didn't think I would be here very long because I didn't think they would need my skill level here. I was thinking of being here for six months."

addressing some of the world's most pressing problems, including clean water, housing and sanitation.

"The focus isn't on shooting with the cheapest camera anymore," he explains. "I have to decide whether to shoot with the ALEXA or whether to use the F55 or the Canon. I decide



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"The focus isn't on shooting with the cheapest camera anymore. I have to decide whether to shoot with the ALEXA or whether to use the F55 or the Canon. I decide which lenses to use, which lighting package to use. So it's much more like a commercial production," Sim says.

However, the role ended up fulfilling a need for both Sim and Dow. "They embraced it, and I'm still here. They were very open to embracing that concept. Their instruction to me was, 'Ron, we want to raise the bar in terms of what we do in corporate video.' I said, 'If you want to raise the bar you should look at corporate videos in a different light than just training videos and instructional videos,'" Sim recalls. "The corporate video has to step up a notch; it can look like a commercial or a movie. It all depends on how you craft the message."

Sim's latest assignment for Dow took him to Ghana to document Dow employees' engagement with non-profits in developing countries

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There seems to be a correlation between the progression of corporate video production and the streamlining of technology, Sim observes. "It's becoming more affordable for the average cinematographer to achieve that commercial look and feel. You don't need to spend half a million dollars anymore. You can spend \$10,000 or \$50,000, and achieve similar results. If you look at an HMI par, it used to cost \$10,000. But now you can get something equivalent for \$3,000. The technology and resources required for these shoots are more attainable than ever."

A Day in the Life of a Corporate Cinematographer

By Sarorn Sim csc

There are some people who wake up at 3 a.m. and wonder, "Why am I up?" And then there are people like me, who wake up at 3 a.m. and can't wait to jump out of bed. I'm sure five-year-olds feel the same way when they're waking up to go to Disneyland.

Today is shoot day. And after months of prep, we're finally ready to transfer vision into video. Working on a corporate film is like being in court. You spend days and months cross examining every aspect of your argument as you try to win the hearts

and minds of those who hold the key to your inevitable fate. You not only have to think technically, but just as important, think strategically, legally, and sometimes, even covertly. Meetings in fancy boardrooms equipped with advanced teleconferencing gadgets fill up most of my pre-trial/production days. And instead of wearing jeans and a t-shirt like normal cinematographers do, sometimes I'm in a suit!

Finally, when all parties are smiling and charts and graphs and PowerPoint's are aligned, it's show time! Sporting my favourite pair of Levi's and an "I am Canadian" t-shirt that I got for free in a

box of Molson, I'm ready to lock 'n load my cine-camera of choice. There's nothing more exhilarating than jumping out of bed at 3 a.m. to be on the set of a corporate film. This morning, we're capturing the sun rising over the Philadelphia skyline. A Sony F55 with a Canon 30-300 cine lens and a 30-foot jib awaits me.

Oh, and the fun part will be launching 300 helium balloons into the city.

0330: After a frantic shower and a brief check of my pulse, I leave my hotel room.

0400: It's amazing how empty the streets of Philadelphia can be at 4 a.m. Passing by early morning newspaper couriers and half asleep security guards, I arrive at the entrance of our location, Belmont Plateau, a historical park overlooking the City of Brotherly Love. Like a put-put generator, my producer Alan Friedlander has the set already humming with activity. Crews are busy setting up a 30-foot jib, HMI pars, screens and silks. My assistant camera Anthony Sergi is prepping my F55, hooked up to a Flanders Scientific monitor for preview. Scanning my set, I see no one in suits walking around. Perfect!

0500: For this concept, we're using helium balloons with a message tied to their strings to symbolize the reach and impact that Dow has on the everyday citizen. It's almost like the "message in a bottle" concept but with balloons. We're releasing 300 helium balloons in four takes. For this task, we've hired a balloon artist and sculptor to help with the setup. After talking to the balloon staff, I take a big sip of helium and run off to check on grip.

0545: The sun is up! The sun is up!



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Clockwise from top left: 1. Working with AC Scott Morhman on "A New Day," a commercial for Dow's Solar Shingles in Saginaw. 2. On top of a mountain in Honduras. 3. Making friends in hostile territory. 4. Camping out on the lava fields of Samoa. 5. Sim shoots the CSC Award-winning corporate video "Sonata."



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Still he feels there is work to be done in changing the mindset of corporations. Doing so would mean better videos for them, as well as more cinematographers in secure jobs (the statistics are foggy on how many corporations hire in-house cinematographers). "My question for corporations is, with the new technology that's available at reasonable prices, why are they still producing corporate videos using outdated methods and equipment? If cinematographers can step up and prove that the images in these productions can look amazing and that companies don't need to settle for the status quo when shooting corporate stories, there is nothing that should stop us."

Sim points out that cinematographers working in corporate settings may need to adjust their communication because creative people talk differently than business people. "You need to understand how to communicate with people in a corporation because it's not a movie set;

you are working with executives and VPs. They are analytical and are more comfortable when they are working with numbers, spreadsheets and PowerPoint presentations. But I am comfortable with colour palettes, lights and angles," he says. "So it's important to grasp communicating on a corporate level. You can't walk into a corporation and communicate the way you would on set. Initially, the most difficult part was helping executives understand my creative vision. I've learned to use a lot of examples for every shoot. I once used a scene from the movie *Up* to help them relate."

Sim is hopeful about the direction corporate cinematography is going. "I really do hope that it keeps getting better. I challenge everybody in corporate cinematography to help raise the bar," he says. "Tell a story instead of purely communicating a message. As a storyteller, take that message and turn it into something more intriguing." 🍷



0549: You know that Sheryl Crow song "The First Cut is The Deepest"? Well, for me, the First Take is The Deepest! You know you'll roll again, but man, that first take of the day puts butterflies in my stomach and makes my hands tremble like Hiroshima. Thank God for tripods!

0630: After two successful takes, my mind is slowly coming to terms and I start thinking, "Wow, this idea is actually going to work."

0645: Shit! The balloons we launched in the first two takes didn't have any red balloons in the mix. How can we not have any red balloons? Red is Dow's trademark colour. I walk over to the balloon department, take a huge sip of helium and give them my two cents and a lesson on corporate identity branding 101.

0700: Third and fourth balloon launches are a success! Wide establishing shots of the launch are done. Now it's time to set up for close-ups and cutaways. With the sun climbing fast and daylight changing colour, my key grip Eric Murphy and his team click into full gear.

0900: The scene is wrapped. But working for a multi-national corporation the size of Dow means your day isn't done – it's only beginning. With offices in 137 countries spanning every time zone imaginable, I quickly jump on my iPhone to check email, reply to requests from half a world away and prep for upcoming assignments. Today, as we're filming in Philadelphia, I'll be working out of our Philly head office. Going directly from set, I walk in wearing jeans a t-shirt.

People in suits and ties look at me strangely. I smile and flash my "I am Canadian" t-shirt like it's a shield of honour! 🇨🇦

Sarorn Sim csc is a four-time winner of the Canadian Society of Cinematographers Award. His clients have included Discovery Channel, National Geographic, BBC and Fox News. He is a graduate of Sheridan's Media Arts program in Toronto. His mentors include cinematographers Richard Leiterman csc (Stephen King's IT) and Rodney Charters csc, ASC (Charles Angels, 24). He currently resides in the United States.

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