

Visual Arts » Film

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The Director's Cut

By Jami Stall

Matt Mays knows the adrenalin rush of hanging off the back of a truck while filming elephants in Kenya and the sensation of lemurs bouncing onto his shoulders during a rainforest trek in Madagascar. Owner of the full-service production company Mays Entertainment, this Hoosier native also knows that eating plain spaghetti, croissants and Pringles for a week at a remote tropical island prevents Montezuma's revenge. And he knows that driving hazards abroad can be anything from dangerous to downright ridiculous.

"I've zoomed through towns, almost driving off the edge of the road and down a cliff," says Mays. "But I've also driven for 12 hours to get to a shoot only 200 miles away, because the roads were bad and we had to stop for a cattle crossing – a *two-hour* cattle crossing. It's just being in another culture and country. It's normal for them, and it becomes normal for you after a while."

From Mexico to Madagascar and from Costa Rica to Kenya, travel adventures are all in a day's work for the local film director. His current globetrotting goals are to document disappearing ecosystems, wildlife on the brink of extinction and, perhaps most of all, unsung heroes striving to stop these biological devastations.



Courtesy Matt Mays

Matt Mays works alongside his crew while filming lemurs in the rainforest of Madagascar. Thanks to the Indianapolis Zoo, some of the animals and their habitats might be spared. The Indianapolis Prize is a biennial award that brings into sharp relief the cause of animal conservation and the courageous and talented men and women dedicated to the cause.

The winner of the 2014 Prize, which will be announced in May, will receive \$250,000 cash reward and the Lilly Medal, an original work of art that signifies the winner's contributions to saving some of the world's most threatened species. And the five remaining finalists will each receive \$10,000.

Meanwhile, Mays and his film crew have been racking up frequent-flyer miles for months to meet up with the conservationists and the creatures they're

About The Author



Jami Stall

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Bio: Jami Stall, editor of award-winning *Sky Blue Window*, loves discovering all the arts and cultural activities around Central Indiana. When she isn't writing or shooting pics, she's out and about meeting the people and enjoying the events featured on

SBW.

More by Jami Stall

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Comedian and panelist on NPR's *Wait Wait...Don't Tell Me!*, Paula Poundstone comes to Indy this Saturday. Here she shares with *SBW* the not-so-glamorous life she lives and loves.

by Jami Stall

The Über Tuber

A photograph of a solo silhouetted potato brings in more than a million bucks abroad. So what's so special about this spud?

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by Jami Stall

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working to protect. He is charged with creating videos of the finalists to be shown at the 2014 Indianapolis Prize Gala to be held at the end of September.

"The work that the zoo is doing with this award is amazing," says Mays. "It has a worldwide impact and is recognized as the biggest prize of its kind. Being a part of that, helping to bring it to life, is a huge honor for me. It's the most important thing I have ever worked on."



Courtesy Matt Mays

While working on a project for Discovery Channel, Matt Mays met Jane Goodall, the famous British primatologist and anthropologist, who turns 80 on April 3rd.

That's saying a lot, considering Mays' resume reads like a Hulu program guide. He's worked on networks such as ESPN, Travel Channel, VH1, and MTV (documenting the lifestyle of Curtis Jackson, aka 50 Cent) to following around the Amish Mafia for Discovery Channel. From award-winning television and film work to video projects, Mays' background is diverse to say the least.

He bills himself as a producer, director and a writer, but also handles travel arrangements and research on all subjects produced. "It would be nice to be handed a stack of papers and just jump on the plane," he says. "But the story of my life is becoming an instant expert on a million different things, because we've covered so many different topics over the years."

He's produced pieces on sports, health care, wildlife, music, dump trucks, rappers, Amish people, knees and cells -- he recalls off the top of his head. "Part of being in this market is you just go where the work is," Mays says. Though he admits if he were on the West Coast, he might do as others in his field and narrow his work to a niche.

But, as a husband and father of two young children (aged 3 ½ and 2 years), there's something about helping the planet that resonates with the 37-year-old. Something that brings him back to the Prize year after year. He's worked on all but one of them since the Prize's inception in 2006.



Perry Reichenadter

When not on location, Matt Mays enjoys his work space at the King Cole Building, where his 8th-floor office affords a great perspective on downtown Indy.

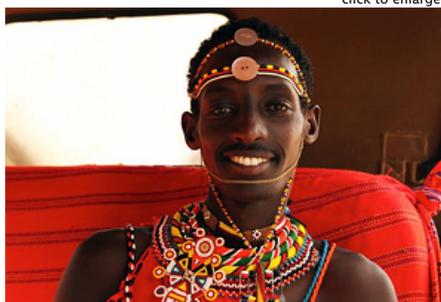
"I love the adventure," he says. "And meeting these people and understanding where they've gone and what they've done and what's made them keep going ... it's just amazing to me."

His role, to sum it up far more succinctly than it is, is to produce videos of the six finalists. The clips are then used to tell about the conservationists, their work, and the species they are trying to rescue from endangerment. Ultimately, the videos will be played during the gala, at which the winner is honored. Mays also produces all the ancillary video images and production numbers shown on the big screens that evening.

What boils down to a five-minute video clip of each of the finalists (one of which is named the winner) actually takes Mays and his crew the better half of a year to produce. Once they learn who among the original 39 applicants are chosen as finalists, he and his crew go into pre-production work. They travel in a three- to four-month window, visiting each location around the world for three or four days. The writing then takes a few days, and add to that a week of editing for each one. Then they're left with about 10 to 20 hours of footage to be edited down to the most captivating five minutes possible. This last step (in addition to producing a few other films for the gala) requires six to seven weeks of editing.

Mays just returned from the rainforests of Madagascar last month and still gets excited talking about the lemurs spring-boarding off his shoulders from the trees and his encounters with the indigenous people.

"I love getting to go to Madagascar to produce stuff," he says. "It's one of the greatest things I've ever worked on ... to meet all these people [the conservationists abroad] and to go to all these crazy places around the world. But the biggest honor comes in knowing that I'm doing what I can do – you know? I'm not going to go out and [personally] save the lemurs or the elephants. But I can do this. I can help



click to enlarge

Courtesy Matt Mays

Mays captured on film the joyful spirit of this Samburu, Kenyan man while on location filming elephant expert Dr. Lain Douglas-Hamilton for the 2010 Indianapolis Prize.

save wildlife by communicating the message."

And though his work captures the animals on film, he's quick to point out he's no wildlife photographer. He has a set amount of time at each location. His job isn't to document the lifestyles of the animals; it's to capture something in them that will engage viewers.

"We're making these films for the gala, so they have to have a certain emotional impact," he says. "I have to make you care about that little bat or lemur or seahorse. My job is to create context around something -- to make it interesting, make it unique and useful."

Because the finalists hail from all around the world and from some areas that are not possible to film for a variety of reasons, sometimes Mays and his crew must tap dance around reality. If he can't travel to the Arctic, he and his crew might film in snowy Montana for a day or two and then do some clever editing later. Also, he says sometimes the endangered animals aren't cute or captivating, so he has to put that out there. "You find ways, in a combination of humor and context ... whatever we can. If the animal is ugly and dumb, we say that; we're not going to gloss over it," he says.



Courtesy Matt Mays

The lemurs of Madagascar loved the camera and it did them, but not all wildlife Mays films is as photogenic or cooperative.

But filming the nonhuman models has its challenges. "Wild animals are wild animals. That's the bitch of it," says Mays. "You go out on an expedition to find something, and they just may not be there that day, or maybe the only angle you can get is of their backside and you're screwed for five hours."

He says it happens and he just has to figure it out, work around it with stock images or some other means. But Mays says the benefits far outweigh any challenges. Some of his greatest rewards have been discovering the grace and humanity in the world.

"Without trying to sound like too much of a downer, the perspective I've gained is that as thankful as I am for all the stuff I have, I have a pretty keen perspective on how quickly all that could crumble," Matt explains. "I've been to places where the people are not necessarily traditionally educated or they don't have myriad opportunities. But they're just amazing, talented, hardworking

individuals who you would love. You think: I wish you could come home with me and let's work together. You're awesome."

Even after 20 years in the business, Mays never takes for granted the gifts of his travel experiences. "Every time I go to Africa I think I can't believe I'm here again -- and someone's paying me to do this," he says wistfully. "It's insane. And every time I leave there, I wonder if that will be the last trip."

Tags: Film, Matt Mays, May Entertainment, Indianapolis Prize, Indianapolis Zoo, ESPN, Travel Channel, VH1, MTV, Discovery Channel, Amish Mafia, Conservation, Animals, Directing, Film Makers, Film Production, Awards

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Hen House Tours

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by Trish Barton / Butler

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