

Brandon Bunyan – Black Coffee



Brandon John Bunyan is the owner of Black Coffee, a rental company making waves in KwaZulu Natal. Sitting casually in conversation around a table on the patio, consuming mince pies with blobs of cream and cups of coffee, it comes to light that Brandon has an additional passion besides his loved ones and successful business. Brandon is a collector, or as his dad (a green fingered, crazy, antique dealing hippy, pommie, rave ballie now living in Germany) calls it, an Urban Retro Archaeologist.

Known to wake up at the break of dawn, a cardinal sin when considering the late hours often worked, Brandon will attend car-boot sales, auctions and flea markets with the hope of unearthing a valuable or underpriced antique. For this seasoned professional, a real find can be anything from a spritzer bottle, reminisce of days gone by when egg cream drinks were the craze, cameras, valve radios, pinball machines and even old leather bound gentlemen's razor kits. Brandon's interest came about when as a young lad, he picked up a brass mechanical log, a device used for maritime speed measurement, while exploring the ship breaking yard in Durban harbour. Since then he gathered a Smurf and antique toy collection, naturally sabotaged by younger members of the household and has an enormous train compilation providing good entertainment on evenings or rainy days. If the sun is out, however, come sleep or no sleep from the previous nights Gig, the family will pile into their Vito and set off for an adventure, travelling inland to find that dragon in the mountains, perhaps having a ride on an old ferry boat at Durban harbour or taking the dogs out for a run on the beach.



Brandon with his “gang”, Jenny and boys
Christian, Jude and Flynn

The minute you walk into the home of Brandon and Jenny Bunyan, you know you’re in a special place where family is everything. Inside are the three excited boys, red haired Flynn, with his missing front teeth young Jude and still in nappies, Christian.

For these fellows it’s all in a days work...jumping on the trampoline, doing the WWE on dad, swimming with inflatable dolphins and crocodiles, or sailing away in their own pirate ship, built in the back garden by Brandon. The walls are adorned with family photos, Thomas the Train murals painted by mom in the boys’ bedroom, and a piano sits in the living room where sometimes a bit of tinkering and singing can be heard. Boisterous dogs are affectionately teased that if they fail to behave they shall be shipped off to the nearest SPCA.

Nicknamed “Bunyan” during his school years (and “Make a Plan Bunyan” today), Brandon always wanted to be a classical musician. He played the bassoon (why is another complicated story) and was in the Natal Youth Orchestra and a Cadet Musician with the then NPO. “It looked like orchestras were going to fold in South Africa and I didn’t like practising for eight hours a day,” says Brandon. “I went to the next thing I knew which was theatre. After all, not much girl action comes from playing the bassoon (in Afrikaans dis n’ Faggotte). I studied theatre crafts at tech, switch instruments to saxophone (a much more successful babe puller) and then worked as a over enthusiastic, slaving, box humping lighting and sound technician around Durban and N&KZ (as it was known back then).



A younger Brandon

“Fond memories of sitting with 16 par-cans, a followspot, 4 moonflowers (pre-moving light effects) and a no-name brand smoke machine at the first two Splashy Fens, sleeping under DJ booths at those harbour raves or checking on the strategically placed analogue dimmers in the models dressing rooms during Durban Designer Collection fashion shows, are from a special time gone by in this industry. Today it is all serious business.

“I got my foot in the door at CAPAB in 1993 as the tea boy in the Sound Department and consequently worked at the then Nico Theatre for a wonderful two years. The theatre was different then. There was a lot of money to blow on lavish operas, ballets and musicals... not for us, however. After tax, I was taking home R800.00 a month....it was a good grounding to suffer for your art. There were 600 staff working there back then of which more than half of them were in it for the theatre and not the money. It taught me the real passion and dedication to do what I love.”

The money or lack of it, eventually led Brandon home to The Sneddon Theatre at The Natal University in 1995 where he was appointed as Head Technician and he stayed for five years to work on some fantastic productions. “University employment became way too comfy and was stuck in its own protected and secluded world so I left my well paying secure job and its many benefits, joined the unemployment fund line and started Black Coffee in March 2000.”

Initially Black Coffee was established by Brandon and a friend from tech days, who had just come back from New Zealand – Michael Broderick ex Production Projects and known to the media and Durban theatre audiences as (even after many modest objections) The Lighting Wizard. “The dream was to have a technical company to cater for and beef up the standards of bigger theatre productions. We chose the name because Michael was addicted to black coffee and the harder we worked the more coffee we drank!” said Brandon.



Jenny and Brandon.... interesting outfits!

Black Coffee started with staging and theatre lighting and after a year bought their first sound system. "Theatre suddenly took a down turn in Durban and there were no major shows being produced or in the pipeline," says Brandon. "We were also doing more corporate gigs in young and fast growing industry in Durban. Michael decided to continue his dedicated focus on theatre lighting design and script writing and opted to leave the partnership. From then on, every cent I made went back into the business and we slowly grew out of our powerless rented garage in Morningside and into proper premises in Mayville where we now have 2 large units.

Today Black Coffee does everything from lighting to sound, AV, staging and design work. "The only things we don't do are décor, fairy lights or porta-loo illumination," smiles Brandon. The latest venture is a video production company called Motion Detectives which he convinced his sister, Kristi, to start with him. "In two years, we have employed three full time editors at Motion Detectives, have three editing suites and are in the process of building a proper video editing studio.

"Durban is an exciting place and a fast growing town just ripe for a company like Black Coffee," he says. "I enjoy the variety of things we do. Drawing from his theatrical experience Black Coffee is known as a highly creative business rather than a technical menagerie of unlimited equipment. "...which doesn't mean we don't love and appreciate loads of good gear on our gigs. We just like to make every bit of equipment count and be worth while for our clients."

The team consist of enthusiastic individuals who share his passion ; "Its not the equipment that makes an event, it is the people on the team, who sometimes thanklessly take themselves almost to the point of death to get that gear in the perfect position in limited time and still move on to the next task, who make an event."

Brandon is married to Jenny who also has a theatre background. After completing a diploma in Theatre Crafts at the Natal Technikon, a fourth year in national Higher Diploma in Stage Craft and Lighting and working for a stretch as a professional make up artist, Jenny was employed by the Technikon as a Theatre Manager and technician. Nine years later, she left the Technikon when offered a position to run the Supper Theatre at The Royal Hotel. She worked there for one year and when Brandon needed someone he could trust to run the Black Coffee operation, she joined him in 2001 while consulting for another year at The Royal.



The couple had met at Technikon, he in first year, Jenny in fourth. “I remember Brandon hanging around the theatre quite often. He said the acoustics in the back corridors were good to practice his saxophone in,” smiles Jenny. “He had long hair, unshaven and heaven forbid – an earring!! Not my type at all. He worked on a lot of the shows at the theatre and was always willing to help. When he went to work at CAPAB for his practical training we chatted a few times but just as friends. When I heard of a position at The Sneddon Theatre, I gave him a call and got him back to Durban – still no spark or romance. After a number of years, he working at The Sneddon and me at The Courtyard Theatre, many phone calls later and pure friendship, he asked me to go to Cape Town with him just as a travel buddy. I nervously accepted and nine years after first meeting we sparked.”

Jenny assumed the position of Operations Manager at Black Coffee, and as she puts it was the “whip cracker and problem solver”, keeping the guys looking tidy and doing the accounts, quoting, clamping down on Bunyan’s over spending on gear, swinging the baseball bat at ‘those’ clients and all the regulation stuff. In 2008, however, with Brandon’s sad and nervous blessings, Jenny set off in a completely new direction and opened a toy shop, called SMASH BANG BOOM in Durban specialising in wooden and timeless classic toys (for kids). Brandon often hijacks the opportunity to do the hunting and buying of merchandise.



For the Bunyans, Christmas holidays are always a highlight and because they all seem to suffer from a bit of cabin fever, they love being outdoors. “If I don’t keep busy and in turn keep the kids busy, they can turn on you like a pack of hyenas,” laughs Jenny. Not everyone manages to balance a great business and a tremendous family. The old adage dictates, “You can’t have your cake and eat it” but this undoubtedly does not ring true for the Bunyans.

Brandon’s regrets in life:

1. Not leaving school five years earlier and running away with the circus.
2. Not putting a copyright on his phrase “Just Do It!”



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