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Today's event

- + 6:00pm ~ 10:00pm Fine Arts & Crafts Auction - Fundraising Event
 - + 8:00pm ~ 11:00pm New Ideas Festival
 - + The Second Mile Club
 - + Pet-therapy Volunteering
- [17 events more »](#)

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Letter to the Editor



Urban Pleasures

Married to a focus on Canadian culture

Bathurst Quay couple premier interactive Kane DVD

By **Janice Kaye**
[Print this story](#)

She's from Burlington, he's from Edmonton. She's the optimist, he's the realist. She's detail-oriented, he's big-picture. Together they form the core of CineFocus, a thriving film company in Liberty Village.

Twenty-four-hour togetherness certainly would not work for most, but then John Bessai and Joan Prowse are not like most married couples.

Prowse, who graduated from Ryerson in journalism, and Bessai, with a Masters in political science from York and experience as a researcher for CTV News and CBC, met while making a 1988 anti-free trade video, Canada for Canadians.

"In the spirit of the time," said Prowse, "We wanted to keep our national programs, protect what makes us great as Canadians. That's how John and I think. We always work as a team. One of us will have a project we'll direct and other will always play a supportive role and we switch back and forth. I did the film Buffy Sainte-Marie: A Multimedia Life and John's doing Museum Maestros. We seem to go that way."

They married in the summer of 1989, shortly after finishing that first project. CineFocus was born in 1991.

The team has produced documentaries for Bravo!, Discovery, Knowledge Network, Vision TV, TVO, SCN and the CBC, including the recent film on Buffy Sainte-Marie, the first-ever screen biography of the well-known Canadian activist, singer-songwriter and digital artist, and C.W. Jefferys: Picturing Canada, a documentary on the Canadian artist and historian.

The company's latest is the Bessai-directed From Field to Studio: The Art of Paul Kane, an interactive DVD based on his previous award-winning television documentary on the Canadian painter who documented early First Nations life across the country. The groundbreaking project fuses the documentary form with interactive technology, enabling the user to gain greater insight into the mind, work and times of the influential and controversial artist. It was one of just six projects chosen in 2003 for development through the Interactive Project Lab at Norman Jewison's Canadian Film Centre.

"When we got into the Canadian Film Centre," said Bessai, "We were mentored there to create interactivity. There are features allowing the user to explore the locations Kane visited. It shows and compares the journals he wrote in the field to his later published work. It really moves into this multi-platform world everyone talks about now. But in 2003 it was very green and a new idea."

The film has resulted in a permanent public interactive museum exhibit based on the film and opening at the Royal Ontario Museum in spring.

This enterprising couple is carving a niche in the Canadian film universe. Prowse said, "We like to say we tell Canadian stories internationally, issues that transcend Canada but make people mindful and aware of what makes us a great country. Buffy and Paul Kane are from Canada. So are Gail and Barry Lord, but they work in Abu Dhabi, China, all around the world. They're strong nationalists and use that focus."

Bessai agreed, "We are unabashedly and unreservedly focused on Canadian stories. We think they can and should be celebrated. There's huge educational value in these things. Schools are crying out for Canadian content."

Poll question

A Penny for Toronto? How About TWO Pennies?

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- Neither GST nor PST

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The filmmakers talk with teachers and educators about their needs so the final film will be relevant to the curriculum. "We will try to get feedback so we can improve what we're doing," explained Bessai. "We do 'user-testing,' inviting people to try our different design models, and studying what they said incorporating some aspects into our design. We're interested in the audience or user in what we create. We have our own ideas but we think good ideas, good design, good TV come from interaction with the user."

They are keen on interactivity because of the ways technology "is changing the way people watch documentaries," said Prowse. "We put so much work into the research and filming that is not on the screen because of time constraints. The interactivity lets people learn more."

Added Bessai, "A minute-and-a-half explanation of an artefact by a curator would never work in a documentary because it's too long. But on the website, there's more information without breaking up the spirit of the main narrative."

The couple live an integrated life, with their work, art and marriage intertwined with community. They live in the artists' co-op on Queens Quay called Arcadia, built in 1986 to provide affordable live/work spaces for people working in the arts and maintained and staffed mostly by volunteers on a non-profit basis. There is a small art gallery, a performance, rehearsal and social space; a rehearsal room for musicians, a workshop with a kiln room, work tables and equipment for sculptors and potters, a dedicated space for visual artists working on large canvasses, and a darkroom.

In the beginning, while living there, Bessai and Prowse worked out of Arcadia, creating and editing the TV series *Lucky Breaks* and the Paul Kane film for three years.

"Arcadia is really the flagship of the Bathurst King neighbourhood," said Bessai. "It's a fascinating building. Like all co-ops, it has a democratic structure where people feel they can contribute and participate, co-operate and take responsibility. It sounds great but is sometimes challenging, like a libertarian freedom of the individual, a kind of ownership, but it has these obligations as well. And the need to participate is what makes the co-op work. That dynamic has spilled over into the community as a whole. Arcadia has always been in the forefront of the community improvement battle, helping create the Harbourfront Community Centre where youth and seniors and children and teens can hang out. Arcadia in microcosm is a place that creates a good community dynamic with engaged citizens and has stood up for things they have problems with. Arcadians and Bathurst Quay were in the forefront of stopping that bridge to the Island airport in 2003."

Bessai was in the Bathurst Quay Neighbourhood Association and a founding member of the organization opposing the Island airport expansion.

Not every couple could live, work and accomplish so much together. How do they manage it?

"Very well," said Prowse. "It's just what we do with our lives and so it's a pleasure. Our values are the same, but we have opposite perspectives or different ways of looking at things."

Bessais attitude can be summed up in the phrase, "We have to get another job." Prowse would say, "We'll get a phone call tomorrow." Prowse called her husband is "a bit more realistic," while she's "a bit more optimistic. You call on me if you need to be looking at the minutiae. John's the big thinker."

Because they came together as a couple on their first film, working together is key to the success of their relationship. "We're a team," said Prowse. "It's a lucky situation. We can always rely on each other. That works both with our business life and also with what's going on in the community. We enjoy each other's company and how much fun there is in what we create together."

Opposites may attract in the beginning but it's looking outwards together as a team that keeps this twosome in sharp focus.

www.cinefocus.com

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