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Staging makes home stand out, TV pro says

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VANCOUVER – As a professional home stager on HGTV's *The Stagers*, Matthew Finlason says he often gets requests from people to help with their decor changes.

The 33-year-old, who was born in Jamaica and raised in Toronto, moved to Vancouver in 2005 to further his career in design.



Matthew Finlason, a professional home stager on HGTV's 'The Stagers,' says now is the time to make your property stand out from the rest of the market.

The process of staging is a mystery to some. Finlason explains the ins and outs:

Q: What do stagers do exactly?

A. Stagers breathe life into dull spaces. I like to think I paint a room with a sofa and vase to have people fall in love with your home so that they will buy it.

Q. How did you get into staging?

A. I answered an ad on Craigslist that sought a particular skills set. It was an ad placed by (home staging company) Dekora for a home stager. I met with Ron Sowden, the owner who used to set-decorate for Disney and Miramax. I quickly recounted my set decoration experience in film and TV and the many years I had schlepped in art departments for commercials and indie films. I think he was amused by the cocky kid who walked in off the street with no experience pretending to know it all. Fake it till you make it.

Q. How did your upbringing take you to where you are today?

A. I learned a lot about building and real estate from my dad (who was a property developer). At a very young age I learned about hard work and chores. You don't question why something had to be done in a Jamaican home. You learn to carry your own weight and work hard without giving any lip. I can thank my

family and my culture for giving me a strong work ethic and a thick skin. It prepared me well to withstand the intense pressures of staging and schedules of television production.

Q. Have you always wanted to work in TV?

A. Yes and then no. I had walked away from wanting to be on TV after many years of chasing an acting career in Toronto. I quit acting and moved to Vancouver where I disappeared behind the camera to work in art departments hauling boxes and learning from the ground up how productions are designed. I thrived in this creative environment, which I found to have meaning and freedom to be experimental.

Q. How did the show come about?

A. I was staging with Dekora for about a year and a half before Paperny Films showed up looking for designers to lead a new show about home staging, which was still a hot new concept. I approached my interview like it was an audition. When they discovered I had experience as a set decorator and production designer with past on-camera experience, it was a glass slipper that fit.

Q. How has being on TV affected your life?

A. It's amazing how many people want someone on TV to come into homes and pick their tiles. And when I show up it's like they know me from the show. I can just be myself and don't have to be caught up with acting professional. My humour no longer scares clients away.

Q. How has staging been affected by the global economic crisis?

A. With property values declining and markets crashing, there is less money to go around. People are making half of what they expected to on the profit of their real estate and are tightening their belts. Yet staging has never been more relevant. The moment you put your home on the market it becomes a product. In this market, standing out from the rest has never been more essential. Staged homes attract more buyers.

Q. What's the biggest challenge about staging?

A. Trying to have clients understand that a stager is not hired to entertain a homeowner's tastes. How a client feels about a particular cushion or sofa arrangement matters little to the process, and that can become difficult when I am working in their home. Now that I stage on television, however, I have less clients challenging what I do.

Q. Where do you see yourself in the future?

A. I would love to transform dorms to be more suitable for student living – design dual-purpose furniture like beds that transform to entertain seminar study groups. I feel students have it bad enough having to combine storage, study, sleep, eat and party into one tiny space. "Pimp My Dorm" – I would like to do that show.

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