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MONTIZAMBERT

Lighting for Digital Part 21



Lighting for digital

Dave Montizambert – Breaking the Rules

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Not only does this photographic exposé entitled 'Stairway to Sin' (see Image 001) of well-heeled model Renée Robyn and not so well-heeled Tyler Baker tread on some toes with its suggestive nature, it also steps on the photographic toes of traditional lighting and its 'rules.' In fact it steps so far away from traditional lighting that there isn't even a fill light – it is selectively lit with a five lights, each light emphasizing to a lesser or greater degree, an area of the scene. What, no fill? Will I burn in hell as a result? Will I be excommunicated by the photographic community and hung, drawn, and quartered at the next Convention for breaking the rules? In principle I am opposed to rules, especially in photographic lighting. In my mind, rules are the tools of people trying to manipulate others, not always for the bad, but usually at the expense of thinking and free will. At any rate, photographers are always talking in hushed tones about 'breaking the rules' as if these photographic rules are somehow sacred. I suppose using the term 'rule' is harmless enough, but I believe that the words we use reflect and shape our base philosophies, it seems to me that a rule suggests something that must be followed, breaking it is at your own peril. I'm not suggesting chaos here, this rant of mine is really about semantics, I think we need guidelines to live by and to create lighting by, so it would please me to no end if we turned our lighting rules into guidelines and consider them as starting points rather than fixed 'Don't mess with me' entities. Enough philosophising, now on with my 'rule busting' shoot.

The setup:

Our Madame of the staircase, Renée, clad in a dazzling 'it's-so-red-it-hurts' cocktail gown, is seen pausing on the stairs in what seems to be a discreet transaction with drunken sailor, Tyler (see Image 001). The scene takes place long ago, in a bordello at night and so the look is dark and dramatic. To help create this dramatic feel, a full frame sensor DSLR paired with 17 mm lens was positioned low on a three-foot tripod some six feet away from Renée. This low angle and the distortion created by shooting so close to the subjects, offers much dramatic affect. In this image, like all my images, I use light to separate the subjects from their surroundings. An overall set light was placed to camera-left side of the photo-set some nine feet away from Renée and standing seven feet above the floor. This 1,200 watt-second studio strobe was fitted with a 24" Octabox, which had a 30" soft egg-crate affixed to its front. The soft egg-crate grid narrows the beam of light emphasizing the subjects and not the background. The power of this light, measured with an incident meter placed against Renée and with its dome pointed back at the Octabox, was adjusted to underexpose the area by one stop. To see the effect of this light and to see the effect on the image with and without the soft egg-crate, compare A and B of Image 002, also see the positioning of this light labelled A&B in the lighting diagram portion of Image 002.

Suffice to say, Renée is the main attraction in this image, and so is further drawn out from her surroundings by the placement of a second 1,200 watt-second strobe, this light acts as a main-light to her and was placed some six feet from Renée on the camera-right side of the photo-set and was raised to sit eight feet above the floor. It was fitted with another 24" Octabox and sports a 40" soft egg-crate. The power of this light, measured with an incident meter placed against Renée's face and with its dome pointed at the Octabox, was adjusted to correctly expose her flesh. While this soft egg-crate focuses most of the light on Renée it does allow some to spill past onto Tyler partially illuminating his face. Compare B and C of

Image 002, also see the positioning of this light labelled C in the lighting diagram portion of Image 002.

The fact that Tyler's face appears underexposed in version C of Image 2 helped to make him secondary to Renée, but he appeared just a little too dark for my liking and so I decided to brighten him up using a 700 watt-second strobe fitted with a medium honeycomb grid placed some nine feet from him on the camera-right side of the photo-set and raised up to sit seven feet above the floor. The power of this light, measured with an incident meter placed against Tyler's face and with its dome pointed at the strobe, was adjusted to set the accumulation of both this light and the previous light for a one-stop underexposure at his face. Compare C and D of Image 002, also see the positioning of this light labelled D in the lighting diagram portion of Image 002.

Just like Tyler's face, the lower portion of the scene also needs more light and so a third 1,200 watt-second strobe fitted with a coarse honeycomb grid was placed some nine feet from Renée on the camera-left side of the photo-set and was supported with a floor stand some eight inches above the floor. The power of this light, measured with an incident meter placed against the bottom of Renée's gown and with its dome pointed at the light, was adjusted to underexpose the area by approximately one stop. Compare D and E of Image 002, also see the positioning of this light labelled E in the lighting diagram portion of Image 002.

Finally, to bring up the background exposure a little in the upper portion of the image frame, a fourth 1,200 watt-second strobe fitted with a coarse honeycomb grid is placed just out of frame at the top of the staircase on the camera-left side of the set. This light was approximately 12 feet from background area that it was lighting. The power of this light, measured with an incident meter placed against the background wall and with its dome pointed at this fifth light, was adjusted to underexpose the area by approximately three stops. Compare E and F of Image 002, also see the positioning of this light labelled F in the lighting diagram portion of Image 002.

As you can see by the preceding description of this image, the lighting doesn't follow standard portrait methods and I should point out that it was not created in this way for the sake of 'breaking the rules', instead it was created with a particular dramatic look in mind that standard portrait lighting wouldn't achieve. I would also like to point out that photographic rules are not unbreakable laws, in photography the only laws you cannot break are the laws of physics, unless of course you own Photoshop ;) .To wrap-up my rules-rant I would like to finish with this: I think we should keep photography democratic rather than autocratic, creative rather than restrictive.

Dave Montizambert lectures internationally on lighting, digital photography, and Adobe Photoshop. He is also a published author having written two books on lighting and digital photography (www.montizambert.com) plus numerous magazine articles on these topics in North America, Europe, Russia and Asia. Dave also creates Photoshop tutorial DVDs for www.software-cinema.com. Dave is available for lectures and workshops in your area and can be reached through www.montizambert.com.

- A. Overall set light - 1200WS strobe with 24" Octabox.
- B. Add 30" soft egg-crate grid to 24" Octabox.
- C. Subject light to Renée - 1200WS strobe with 24" Octabox fitted with 40" egg-crate.
- D. Subject light for Tyler - 700WS strobe with medium honeycomb spot grid.
- E. Low angle accent light - 1200WS strobe coarse honeycomb spot grid.
- F. High angle background accent light - 1200WS strobe honeycomb spot grid.

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