

A GUIDE TO HEAD SHOTS--FOR STAGE ACTORS

Why get one?

-Bluntly, because everybody else has one. A professional quality head shot is one of those things that marks you as being "one of the crowd." It says that you know the routines and conventions of the theater business. This may sound simplistic, if not cynical, but it is important.

-To have a record of yourself to distribute. You cannot be in all places at all times, but your photo can.

-To flesh out the data on the resume which you have attached to the back of your photo.

-To save time and trouble. If your head shot makes it obvious that you just don't look right for a part, you and the director avoid the aggravation of an interview.

-The important point, though, is this unexciting truth:

A good head shot will NOT get you work. It can only keep you from losing work needlessly.

Nevertheless, you still will be best served by the best possible head shot and that is what we're talking about here.

What should it look like?

These days there are two main formats for head shots. "New York Legit" is the more traditional one and probably will work for almost all applications. It consists of an 8x10 print on matte paper with a fairly tight view of your face and shoulders. The picture area covers the whole sheet of paper—no borders.

Type number 2 is the "L.A. Style," once used more in the film industry. (L.A.--Hollywood--movies. Get it?) Now this style is at least as common in all markets as New York Legit. L.A. Style head shots have wide white borders with the actor's name appearing outside the photo area. Ironically, even though the picture area is smaller, the photo usually shows more of the body, making facial features smaller still.

New York Legit still serves as the closest thing to a one-size-fits-all, but I think it's getting a little bit

dowdy. As the L.A. Style has become more common, it has become less distracting in more traditional markets. What's nice about it, too, is that it lets us play with the composition and layout more freely, giving the whole print a nice, unified look.

Your clothes should be comfortable and casual. They should not draw attention away from your face. The "rules" say to avoid solid black and solid white, loud patterns (too distracting) and anything that is overly concealing (i.e. turtlenecks).

As "fashions" in headshot photography change, new trends come up that mess with my ability to confidently tell you what the current standards are. At the moment the flavor of the week is color headshot photography. For the past thousand years or so, a color headshot was the quickest way to mark yourself as a total theater rube. Now it will identify you as cutting edge. Of course, this could all change back by next Thursday.

Regardless of the physical composition of the final photo, you should always maintain eye contact with the lens. I think eye contact is everything. You have to get the viewers' attention, grab it and hold it. You must use your eyes, face and body to PROJECT yourself onto their retinas. Use your acting experience and your intelligence to make your eyes create immediacy. This dynamism is what separates head shots which are merely right from those which are good.

Who should take it?

Me.

If I don't take it, here's who should: A competent photographer who is familiar with the conventions of the head shot biz. Your local family portrait studio is probably not right for the job. Find that competent photographer by checking with friends. A personal recommendation is always best. Just keep in mind that your friend, even if an actor, will have different needs than you. Also check with teachers and mentors for suggestions. If you're really new in town, look for resume photographs that you like, get the actor's name, and call them to find out whom they used. As an absolute, start-from-scratch point, consult the ads in Backstage. (By the way Backstage does a head shot issue every September.) Do not hire someone who: intimidates you, hides costs, appears to have ulterior motives, or appears in general to be a creep. There are a lot of us out there (photographers, not creeps) so don't worry if you don't go with the first one you meet.

Speaking of costs, find out early what your financial commitments are and at what point in the process you can back out of them. That way you can avoid creeps without paying for the privilege.

How should you prepare?

The fact that you are reading this is a start. The rest of the process should be somewhat back-to-front. Think first about what the photos are for and who will see them. Then think about the process that creates the right head shot to show that group. In the very-long term, you need to make some decisions that have to do with much more than just your head shot. It's a real advantage to know what type of acting work you want to do. Different markets have different conventions for their resume pictures. For example, soap opera head shots are a lot more over the top in glamor and production value than photos for stage. TV commercial work may require a "composite" of several photos printed on a card.

One decision you'll want to think about is whether to have your photo made in color or black-and-white. Normally, everything gets shot in color and then converted to black-and-white in the computer, so in that respect you have your options open. The advantage to deciding early lies in makeup and clothing selection. Makeup is different for the two types, and a color photo will certainly make your color choices matter when dressing.

Now, it won't be a crisis if you can't decide on this ahead of time. We can make minor compromises as we go along that will keep your options open. The only real problem would be for you to definitely decide on one and then change your mind after the photography. In short, just remember to tell me: color, black-and-white, or undecided.

On a more philosophical level, different markets and role types will need different mental attitudes when you have your picture taken. It will be easier for you in the studio if you can look in the lens and know that you want to project the image of, say, comic sidekick. If you haven't made these decisions, all is not lost. For the purposes of the head shot, just go with what's a reasonable start. The important thing is that you have something, even if inaccurate, in your mind that you can project into the camera.

Regarding another philosophical matter, get used to your face. You are not Gable or Garbo. Too bad. Now get on with it. If you expend energy obsessing over your imperfect earlobe, you will never create the immediacy and presence that makes a head shot stand out in a crowd.

As the date of your photography gets nearer, give yourself a few days to think about hair and clothing. That way you will be more confident with your choices and still have time for a last-minute brainstorm. By all means consult with photographer and friends on these matters. Schedule your photo session to account for your cycles of sleep, medication or exams, and allow plenty of extra time to spend at the studio. Also, give haircuts a few days to fall into place, and shave your face (men, and women when necessary, please) at a time that leaves you neither too rough nor too red. The morning of your session, get a good breakfast and read the paper. Then go wash your face and apply some moisturizer to replace the skin oil you just scrubbed out. Under no circumstances should you stay up late, party or drink the night before your session, even if you are not scheduled until late in the afternoon. You just can't get away with it.

What should you do during photography?

Breathe! Tension does strange things, none of them useful to your head shot. Fight back by breathing, even if you have to consciously command yourself to inhale.

Think! This cannot be a passive process for you. All those intangibles that will make your photo exceptional can't start to happen if you don't actively create the picture in your mind's eye first. Use your acting training here. To be noticed in a picture takes the same kind of concentration and focus (pardon the pun) that it takes to present a character on stage.

Communicate! You need to talk to the photographer. React to what he or she is doing. Tell him or her if you think the mood or emphasis of the pictures is going in the wrong direction. Lend as much information as you can about what you want the photos to do. You also need to communicate with whomever will be looking at your head shot. Try to say something with every frame. You might need to shoot through several frames to "warm up", and that's fine. The key is to keep thinking about that process of communication.

How do you decide which shot to use?

Let's return to the back-to-front idea for a moment. Ultimately, you are not really the "consumer" of these photos. You just have to pay for them. The real user of your head shot is the person you'll be sending it to. And what does that person want to see in your photo.? Well, I can guarantee you he ain't looking for subtlety. If it takes someone five minutes to appreciate the qualities you reveal in your head shot, then you don't have a good head shot. Put it this way: Have you ever spent more than ten seconds looking at somebody else's photo? Have you ever done it when it was one in a stack of fifty?

So, you need to weed out your photo possibilities not with a fine-tooth comb but with a machete. You should be able on first glance to eliminate at least half of them. Go through the winners and cut out another half or more. Remember, you're not being graded on an average. Your shot will be exactly as good as your best choice. If a possible shot is close but not quite right, eliminate it. Don't look back. First impressions really do count here. If your choice comes down to a few finalists that all make a good first impression, well, then you can nitpick a little. Finally, never, ever, ask your mother's opinion unless she is your agent. Maybe not even then.

What are the mechanics of the process?

First, your face. It should have some makeup, more if you are a woman. The makeup should be done by a person who knows specifically about makeup for head shots. Your personal mastery of stage or

street makeup is of no value for these photos, so don't even try to do your own. Like clothing, jewelry should be simple and not distracting.

Your face is lit and exposed onto a camera negative. Camera negative? Nope, not anymore. It's all digital now, man. Here's how the new system works: When your makeup is ready, I'll shoot a few photos just so we have something to look at on the computer monitor. I use those shots to refine lighting, check the makeup and quietly murmur catty things about your looks to the makeup artist. You can look to decide what changes regarding clothes, hair, etc. you want to make.

When we're ready, we'll start shooting "for real." After a dozen or so shots, I'll load the computer again and we can look at this bunch, see what else we want to change, and go back to shooting. We go through this sequence a few times and, when we're both either sick of shooting or out of ideas, we'll stop. Depending on the day's schedule, I might be able to give you a disk before you leave. The CD will have one or both of these folders on it: First, a folder containing all the "raw" files that we shot. These files will not be usable to you unless you have some pretty good Photoshop access. They are the digital equivalent to camera negatives and, like negatives, not good for anything in themselves but necessary to the final product. You don't really even need these files. I just want you to have them for security.

Folder number two will contain the "contact sheet" of all your pictures. Except it's not really a contact sheet. What it really is is a folder containing a web site of all the day's photos. I have found these sites quick to produce and a really easy way for you to edit you selections. Just click on a thumbnail on the home page of your site and you'll instantly see a nice big version filling your monitor.

Some people get thrown when I tell them I'm giving them a web site on a disk. After all, if it's a web site, how come we don't have to go on-line to look at it? Oh, you naive actor, you. The web site on the disk works with your web browsing software (Netscape, Internet Explorer, Safari, you get the idea). But the difference, and advantage, is that, instead of having to retrieve all those files from the electronic ether of the internet, you have them right there on your computer's hard drive. No waiting.

To open the web site, just look in the web site folder for the file called "index.htm" (it might be "index.html") and double click it. Nine times out of ten, that will automatically open your web browsing program and soon show you a big page of thumbnails. If double clicking doesn't work, don't panic. Open your web browser (remember, you don't have to be on line), click on the FILE heading, then OPEN, then find that index.htm file in whatever way your computer indicates its CD drive. Of course, you can also transfer the web site folder straight to your computer's hard drive if you choose.

What about mass-production?

If you need more than about 35 copies of your photo, it becomes cost effective to have your picture

mass-produced in one of two ways: photographic or lithographic. But that's a story you can ask me about another day.

How much is this going to cost?

For the photographer: In New York and other big cities expect to pay \$250 to \$700 and up. If this is your first resume photography, avoid the extremes. Cheap might equal bad, and expensive could be wasteful considering your own inexperience at being photographed. (Indeed, the most useful long-term value of your first head shot may simply be the experience you gain at getting head shots.) When examining prices, check on: who covers the CD writing, the makeup, prints? Who keeps the files? (If the photographer keeps them, be certain of his charges for additional prints years hence.) How many clothing changes will be allowed? How many photos will actually be taken? Will the makeup person be able to make changes and corrections during the course of the shoot?

Mass-production will cost \$80 to \$200 for the first 100 copies, depending mainly on the method. After the first 100, the unit costs will decrease by quite a bit.

How does the final photo look? If you think it looks great, then it looks great. If you have doubts or suspect your ability to judge, then go back to some of those friends you've been bugging. Often you can have a vague dislike for a photo but not know if the problem originated on your side of the lens or the photographer's. In cases like that, ask me or consult with someone more "photo literate" than yourself.

HOW I DO THESE THINGS

Recently I changed my routine for pricing and scheduling. I'm trying to devote the first Saturday of every month to shooting headshots, and standardizing rates as follows:

<u>No. of Heads</u>	<u>Photography</u>	<u>Makeup</u>	<u>Sales tax</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
1	\$300.-	\$100.-	\$15.-	\$415.-
2 or more	\$250.-	\$75.-	\$12.50	\$337.50

If the sales tax figures look a little odd, it's because I have to charge it, but makeup people don't. Go figure.

Yes, we can schedule for other days, but that will have to rely on our ability to coordinate schedules between the three of us, and my willingness to play phone tag. Also, the price will be higher. How much higher? Depends how crabby I am when you call.

For your money you get the privilege of my time and attention, and the disk containing your raw files with the web site derived from them. Later you'll get two of your choices laid out as explained below. If you want more than two choices finalized, I charge \$25 per additional file.

After you tell me your choices (e-mail is probably the best way to notify me of them) I'll provide you with another disk containing finished files. These files will be retouched, cropped and laid out, have type added, and generally be ready to send to the printer. If I have the time and ambition, I'll also give you sample prints. They won't necessarily work as a final product by themselves, but they'll show you what your finished work should look like.

Scheduling and deadlines vary with how my schedule is running at the time we shoot. If you need something done in a hurry, ask me. I'll do what I can.

People often ask me how many shots I take, especially after they see ads for New York studios that quote an exact number. I don't cite a certain figure because there are too many variables, mainly stemming from your experience and needs. Some people want to try more varied "looks". Some people need extra warming up. Having said all that, it's true that we seem to work in a range of 50 to 125 shots. Don't read anything into the numbers as we're shooting. If I take a lot of photos of you, it doesn't mean that you're a problem. It might just be that I'm indecisive, or I'm trying out different ideas.

Clothes? Bring lots. Again, I don't have a fixed rule on this, but we generally try two or three different tops in a session. Note the "rules" that I mentioned before. Beyond that, bring a variety of colors and, for women especially, different types of neck line. Some neck lines look great on you in real life but just get awkward in a closely cropped photograph.

I am lost when it comes to judging jewelry. Bring whatever you like and we'll rely on better minds than mine.

Getting back to money matters, I do have a fairly stingy refund policy. This whole class of photography is by nature imprecise, and while I certainly do my best to deliver something you will like, I can really only guarantee the technical aspects of your photos. Therefore, if you wind up unhappy with your expression or the general look of the pictures, I'm afraid I can't help you. (See the note above about the whole "...most valuable aspect of this process might be the experience you gain in having head shots done..." thing.) If there is something measurably wrong with the technical quality of the photo, I will by all means make things right by you.

I once brilliantly summarized my feelings about the financial bit like this:

Bad hair day? ...Sorry.

Wish you hadn't worn that tongue stud after all? ...Sorry, again.

Got hit by a train on the way to the studio? ...We'll talk.

ADDENDUM: A Few More Notes About Digital Photography

Making the transition to digital was a traumatic process for poor little me, but now that I've done it I can say that the results are better than what I used to produce on film, and that it gives us new options for your head shots.

First, you and I get to see what's going on with the process as it happens. During the shooting, we can look at your photos on the computer monitor and make changes more confidently as we go along.

Second, I can hand you a CD with all your pictures on it when you leave the studio. Even though you will probably want me to do some work on your final photo file later on, you still have in hand all the makings of your final head shot. This means that our communication about picture selection and the like is clearer, and you can make fewer visits back to the studio.

Third, I can now handle some of the retouching myself in Photoshop, and I can add type for your name in whatever font and position you prefer.

I regret to say that one advantage that has not appeared is cost saving. So far it looks like every dollar I save in film and processing is balanced out by the recurring need to buy some new piece of computer junk.

Of course the files I give you can also be used for your personal web use. They are copyrighted, so you can't sell them to Wal Mart for that ad in Popular Mechanics, but you're free to use them for your own marketing purposes.

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