

# PETER HURLEY

# THE HEADSHOT

THE SECRETS TO CREATING AMAZING HEADSHOT PORTRAITS



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here and there, but all we really want them to do is a bit of a squinch and a tiny little smile the entire time. Once you've captured that left, right, and center, you are able to say, "There it is. You got it." C&A down, now I can go home.

### *Goin' Sneaky on 'Em!*

It's my belief that once I've nailed C&A, I can close down the session and be on my merry way. However, why the heck would I do that when I have a perfectly good human being standing in front of my camera? It's time to push the envelope and get something that goes beyond the ordinary, producing an image that finds a sweet spot for itself in the middle of my portfolio.

That's it, PEOPLE! You can't just let opportunities slip by you. Sure, you got the job done and nailed your C&A, but for my aesthetic, I've got to take it up a few notches. So, where do we go from here you may ask? Let me tell you, this isn't for the faint of heart. You've got to dig, and if you aren't the type to be a little irreverent, then this might not be for you, but this is precisely where my juices start flowing. I'm going for my self-proclaimed signature look: I'm going sneaky on 'em!

That's right! Years ago, I was minding my own business in my studio and I looked over at my assistant and said, "I wish everyone that walked through that door, got in front of my camera and just looked sneaky as hell." That's it. That's all I really needed in my life. My favorite pictures are always the ones that look sneaky. I decided then and there it was my mission, because getting someone to look sneaky causes the onlooker to think, increasing the lookability of the shot tenfold.

If you can actually pull off having someone look like they are up to something, then in my book, you are a champ and the furthest thing from a chump. Do that day in and day out and you'll be runnin' at the top of Headshotland. All of my favorite shots that I've taken have a sneakiness to them or look like the person has something up their sleeve. I can't help it. It's my jam.

So, I may capture my C&A right off the bat, but you'd better believe right afterward I'm going in for the sneaky kill. It's the one look that makes my heart sing and produces a resounding SHA-BANG for me every time!



Diego Ajuz



Douglas Taurel



*Catherine Chadwick*

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## CHAPTER 5

# Lights, Camera, Action...or Not

So, people get in front of your camera and they tend to look completely blank. That's just what they do. They don't have a clue as to what their face looks like. Think about your face right now. Do you know what your face looks like as you read this book? No, you have no idea. Let me tell you that your brain has got it under control and you look fine. So sit back and relax, you're just fine.

However, those people in front of your camera aren't just fine. They are freaking out internally and externally, and that shows up as looking like they got caught with their pants down. They rely on you to tell them whether they're fine because they're looking in your camera and they're thinking, "Am I okay? Does this look good?" It's your job as the photographer to chill them out and let them know that they really are okay. This is where you start to build the trust you'll need to succeed with them as the shoot progresses.

You've got your technical down, right? I need you to nail the technical on the head, so that it's not in your way when you are working one on one with an individual. You can have the most incredible technique down, but if you can't coach that person toward an interesting expression, then in my opinion, you don't have a shot. Once you're technically set, then I want you to take that technician hat off and embrace your subject by teaming up with them as their director in order to SHA-BANG the absolute crap out of the shoot together. You have to take the bull by the horns, tell them what you need them to do, and make them understand that you've got their back.

## *What's the Action?*

Simply put, you've got the light, you've got it exactly where you want it, you've got your camera, and the technical aspect of your work is in your back pocket. You are ready to go. What's the action? We're not making a film here, PEOPLE! We're doing still photography, but there has to be an action.

What happens, most of the time, is that a photographer takes a picture with no action and they get a blank stare into the camera with no life behind it and no vibe. So, what we want to do is help foster that vibe in our subject. You need to create an action for the person in front of you. My belief is that most still photographers don't think there needs to be action, because it's a still photograph. Well, the truth is, you need action for a commercially viable headshot.

Other forms of photography can capture moments or a feeling without the need to do anything

on our part. At times, we actually want to do as little as possible to disrupt what a subject might give us. That's when we are being an observer. However, when someone comes into your studio looking for an image that they need to promote their personal brand, you are no longer an observer—you need to become a catalyst to bring out the best in them. Nine times out of ten, they won't do it on their own and will need your help. So, how do you do it? That's the big question, isn't it? Well, let's delve a bit deeper into that one.

I think the key to success in headshot photography is creating that rapport between you and your subject, so your subject has the ability to play. You're capturing still moments that are immersed in playfulness, so that the shoot comes to life. You're creating the atmosphere. You're dealing with a human being and you've got to create a synergistic relationship with that person. For me, it's all based

on teamwork. You're teaming up with this person to pull the best out of them, so that they give you something in front of the camera that they're not going to give anybody else.

You do it by creating a shtick for yourself. You need to have your own authentic way of doing it, which will be different from anybody else's way, but you need to own whatever your schtick may be. The key is to be authentic with it, so it doesn't come off as an act that you are putting on, but a symphony that you are playing to get that person to fall into the palm of your hand. You need to be able to recreate it over and over and over again. I've used the same shtick for years and am constantly refining it, growing as a director with each person I photograph. I've realized that it's about creating teamwork, rapport, or camaraderie, a synergy in order to allow that person to open up and play in the environment you've created for them.



Aubrey Grant



Kate Nowlin

If you put a camera in front of somebody and you don't say anything, chances are there isn't going to be much there. What else would you expect to happen? My whole point on all of this is to always think, "What's the action?" Is there any action going on in your photographs and, if so, did you create it?

### *Camera Invisibility*

Much of my work is based on what I like to call camera invisibility. I want that person to look in the camera as if the camera isn't there. If I can't tell that a camera was in front of them when looking at the image, then I feel I did my job that day; I feel like I accomplished something. The fact that I pulled a true human expression out of that person in a brief instant means the world to me. I firmly believe that these types of expressions will stop an onlooker in their tracks and give that image something special, something that I like to call "lookability."

**look•a•bil•i•ty** \ˈlūk-ə-ˈbi-lə-tē\ n. slang

1. A measurement of an image's ability to secure attention from an onlooker.
2. In my book, a shabangin' shot that makes you want to stare at that sucker!

See, when somebody stares down the barrel of a lens, they change. I don't care who they are—I modeled for eight years and every time someone sticks a camera in my face, I change. Your job becomes changing them back to who they were before you caught them in your viewfinder.



How do you do that? That's really the million-dollar question and it has been my quest since I picked up a camera in 2000. We never master direction, but get better at it as we photograph more people, so my quest will never end. Wherever you are on yours, I want you to know that tomorrow you will be a better director than you are today and today you are a better director than you were yesterday.

You may not know how to get from where you are to where you want to be with direction, but

if you have someone in front of your camera each day, you can continue to grow into finding your own authentic way of directing people. It's what I strive for every time I place someone in front of my lens. It's what I think about day in and day out, and it's what I'll continue to think about for years to come. It has taken me 15 years to get where I am with it and feel like I'm damn good at it. I think it's going to be scary how good I'll be in another 15 years' time. I hope that the same holds true for you.