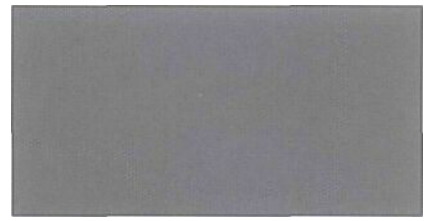
HIGH-KEY LIGHTING



Many people think that high-key lighting means overexposure, but that's not the case (image 177). Overexposure is an entirely different tool. "High key" simply means that the vast majority of tones in the image are above middle gray (image 178), including any shadows. Excluding specular highlights, such as catchlights, there usually is detail in even the brightest areas.

Working with high-key light demands a great deal of control over light placement as well as knowledge of your film's exposure latitude, the number of f-stops above and below your key meter reading that will still show detail. Color transparency films, for example, have less latitude than color negative films and are not as forgiving—especially if push processed. I leave it to you, gentle reader, to determine how well your favorite film handles a high-key scenario.



< Image 177

A Image 178

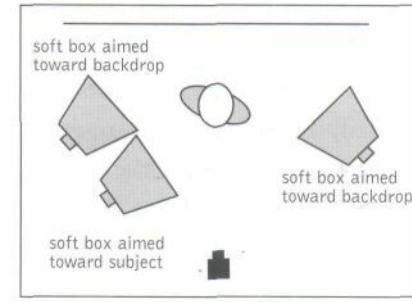
One secret to high-key lighting is that every side visible to the camera is lit—there are no deep shadows. For image 179, two large soft boxes and one medium soft box were used. The furthermost camera-left box was aimed mostly at the white paper background but still grazed the left side of the subject's face. The second box was positioned to throw the light from its left side onto her face, with the strobe head aimed at her camera-right shoulder. This meant that the light from the right side of the box would wrap around her. The medium-sized soft box was placed to camera right and aimed to throw most of its light at the background (image 179B). All the lights metered the same at the point where they hit the subject and on the background immediately behind her, so the ratio seen here is 1:1:1.

Although I was pleased with the look, I was less than happy with the small shadow cast by her hair from the camera-right soft box. I also felt it might be visually interesting to light a corner of the background a little hotter and show a gradation of white behind her.



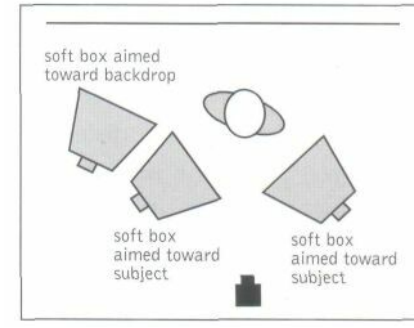


A Image 180

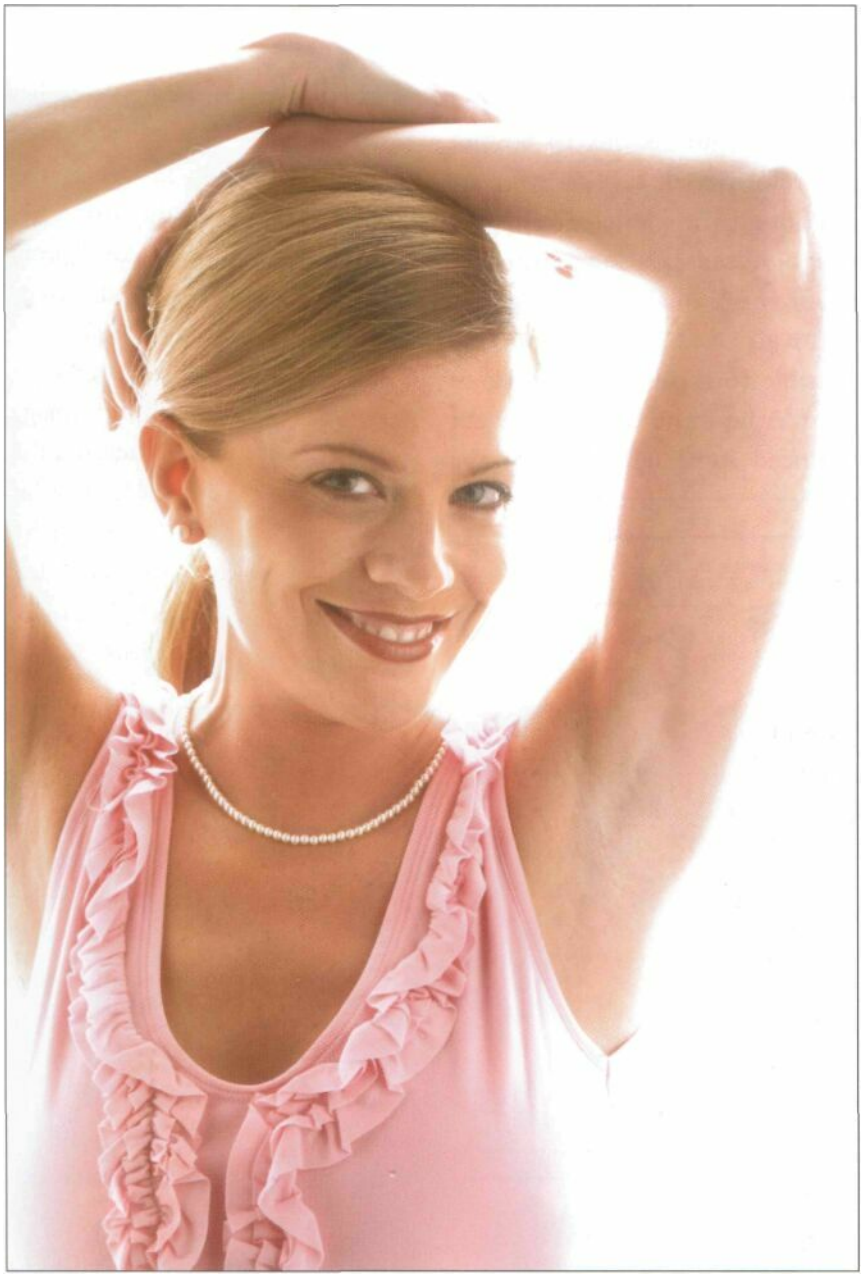


< Image 179

A Image 179B

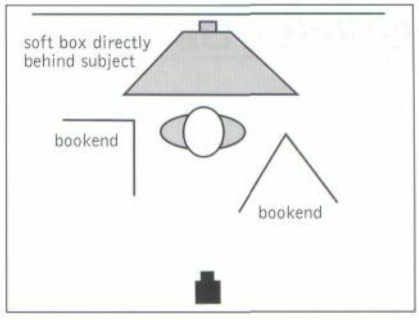


A Image 180B



The first correction was to pull the camera-right soft box toward camera, along the arc of equal distance (see the sidebar on page 14), just far enough to minimize the shadow throw. The furthermost camera-left box, which had been set roughly parallel to her, was rotated to place a corner closer to the paper. This new placement would not change the light on her, but would make the light brighter for a small portion of the background behind her (images 180 and 180B).

In image 181, you see an example of blown-out highlights that work very well. My subject stood up against a large soft box, the only light source. A bookend was placed at camera left, perpendicular to the box, to bounce light evenly along her side. A second bookend was set at a 45-degree



< Image 181

A Image 181B

angle on camera right, to bounce light straight into her face (image 181B).

When I faced the soft box with the light meter, the reading was f 22, but when I turned to face the camera and fired the strobe again, the bounce reading was a perfect f8. I knew the 3-stop difference would mean a clean, bright background with burned-out highlights wherever the light wrapped around her.

A RETURN TO HIGH KEY

Current trends indicate a renewed interest in high-key images, perhaps because of their classic, timeless qualities. A photographer I know who specializes in graduate portraiture says he's doing more now than he has for years, and that this style is being requested by parents as well as their offspring. You may discover you particularly like the high-key effect on people with light-colored hair, since darker hair takes away some of the feeling of brightness. For dark-haired subjects, try moving in tight to minimize the amount of dark hair in the image.

LOW-KEY LIGHTING

The obvious opposite of high-key, low-key lighting does not imply underexposure or rampant darkness. It simply requires that the majority of tones be below middle gray-

While photographers frequently use black velvet or paper to minimize background detail, it is not always necessary. The one-light scenario shown in image 182 relies on light's ability to bounce and reform itself as it goes.

Around the model, I arranged four bookends, placing a strip light inside the V of the one at camera left, which was closed as much as possible to throw only a shaft of light. A bookend on camera right bounced some light back at the subject, which softly illuminated her back.

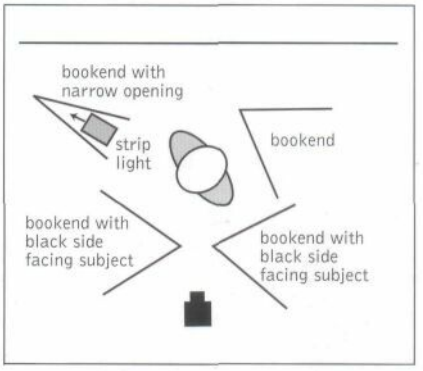
The other bookends were placed in front of her, with black sides facing her, to absorb most of the spill. The camera was set between them (image 182B).

Unlike the other example, a total of four lights were used to create image 183, which derives its low-key look from the clothing and the dark paper background. The key was a strip light, set squarely in front of my subject. The highlight across his profile came from a 6-inch dish with a 10-degree grid spot, powered to *1/2* stop over the key light and tightly controlled so as to not light too much. It was actually aimed dead center at the hidden side of his face.

The hair light was another strip light, set closer to the camera than usual and at an angle to match the slope of the client's back, neck, and head. It was powered at 1/2 stop over the key light but still looks very muted, because the fabric of his suit and hat absorbs so much light.

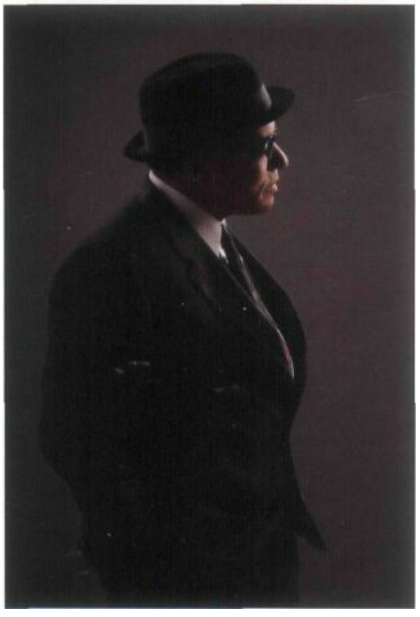
To avoid any tonal merger, a medium soft box was set at camera left and aimed at the background. It was powered to £22 to match the key and illuminated the paper to its correct density (image 183B).

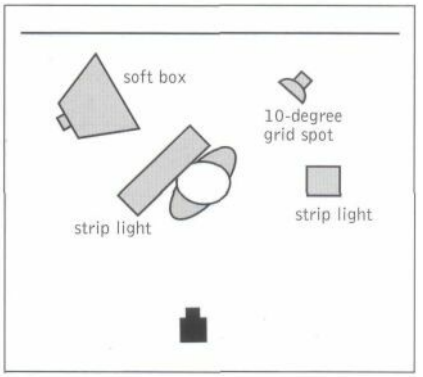




< Image 182

A Image 182B





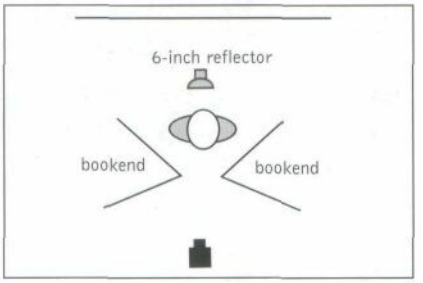
< Image 183

A Image 183B



For a glamorous change of pace, source your one-light portrait from behind your subject.

Unmodified light spreads out rapidly. For image 184, a single strobe with a 6-inch reflector was placed far enough behind the model to light her hair evenly and so her shadow would completely cover the camera (any light directly falling on the lens will flare). A small fan added life to the hair.



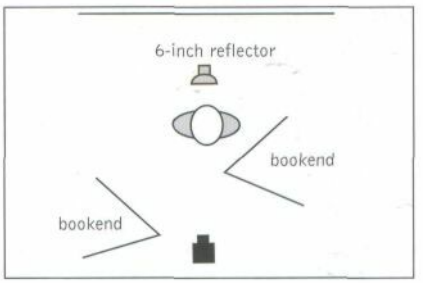
> Image 184

A Image 184B



Bookend flats were set in a V shape between subject and camera, and moved in or out until the lighting ratio was 4:1 (image 184B). There are minor drawbacks to using the two reflectors, set at equal angles to camera, however. Note how the double shadows define the inside of each nasolabial fold. While there's nothing wrong with this, it can make the face look heavier. Also, from this position, the shadow that falls across her neck completely encircles it. This could have been avoided by turning her body to face either of the two reflectors. If you look closely at her eyes, you'll see that the tall reflectors give her irises a "cat's eye" appearance.

To increase the contouring, remove one of the bookends to produce deep shadows or back it off to produce less fill. For this example (image 185), I moved the camera-left reflector until the ratio was 1:4 (image 185B).



> Image 185

A Image 185B

PORTRAITS WITH FLARE



A Image 186

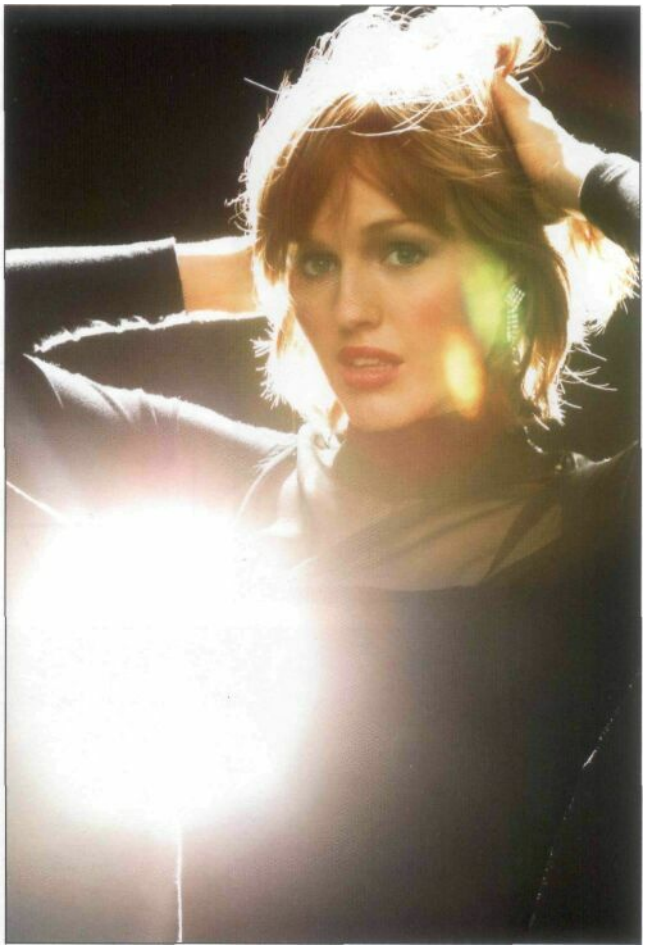
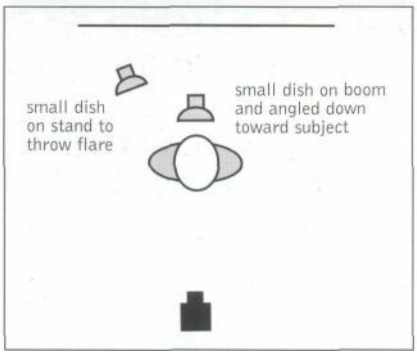


Image 187



< Image 186B

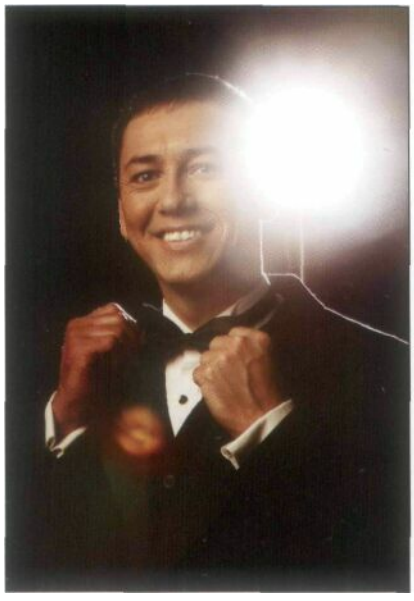
If you've ever aimed your camera into the sun you've seen what lens flare will do. Depending on the lens, you will see the light reflected (as it bounces off the glass elements) in a straight line from the source across the center of the image to an equidistant opposite point.

When lens flare is exploited, like a controlled explosion, the results can be quite stunning. This is an extremely variable effect, so I suggest you use these basic ideas and experiment until you find combinations you and your clients like. Out-of-the-ordinary techniques like this are easily tacked on to the end of a more traditional shoot just by saying, "I wonder what would happen if ..."

Two lights were used to create the flared backlight look seen in image 186. Both utilized a small dish and were balanced to the same power output, approximately 4 stops over the key light (image 186B).

When a small amount of the back light shows to the camera, the flare is dramatic and contrasty. Like most flare situations, the subject's own shadow determines the intensity of the light that falls to camera. Allowing more of the flare light to shine to the camera increases flare and lowers the overall contrast (image 187).

When the output of the back light is more closely matched to the output of the key, the flaring



A Image 188

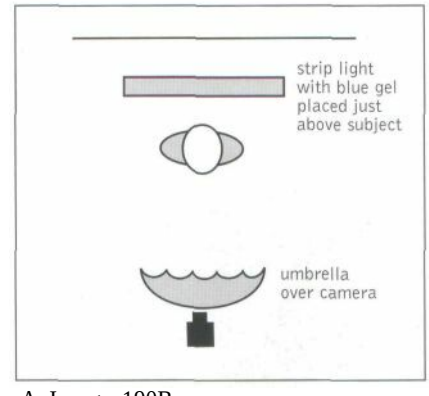


A Image 189

light is still bright enough to over-expose itself but not too much of the surrounding area (image 188).

Using a large soft box instead of a point light source reduces the lens element reflections while providing a softer flare (image 189). Note that the strobe head was centered just below the subject's chin and tilted up slightly toward the camera.

For image 190, a strip light with a blue filter was positioned as a hair light behind the subject but was set low enough to shine directly into the camera's lens, effectively lowering contrast without showing extra reflections (image 190B).



A Image 190B

Image 190

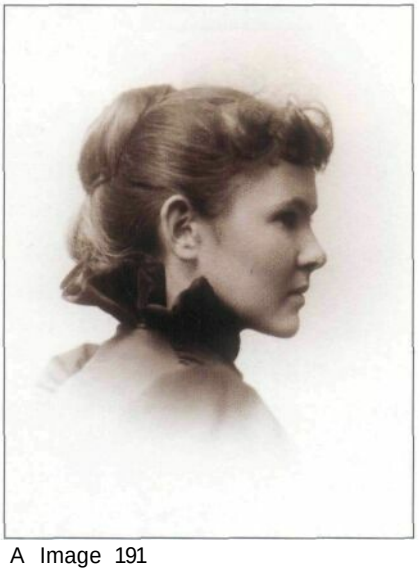


WORKING WITH THE PROFILE

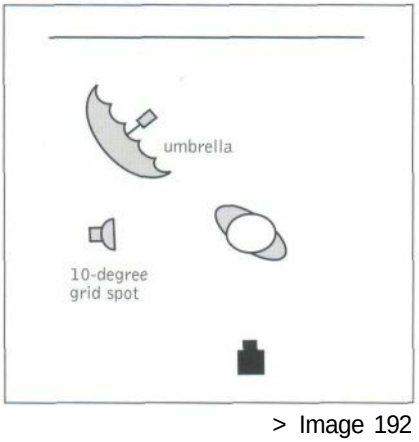
A finely crafted profile photograph is interesting and strong. Viewers are drawn to them, in part, because they see someone represented in an unusual manner, in a way they had not, perhaps, considered before. Successful profile images separate the subject cleanly from the background by using light, shadow, or color, and show the complete middle line of the face. The nose should not be turned, nor should the viewer see any of the "hidden" cheek (image 191).

One word of advice: Sometimes, if your subject is looking straight ahead, the whites of the eyes will be too distinct. The solution is to have the model look slightly more toward the camera. This is a minor cheat that can be a big help.

A small 6-inch reflector fitted with a 10-degree grid spot was the key source for image 192. Another light with a small umbrella, on a boom arm above the model, was aimed at the background at a 45-degree angle

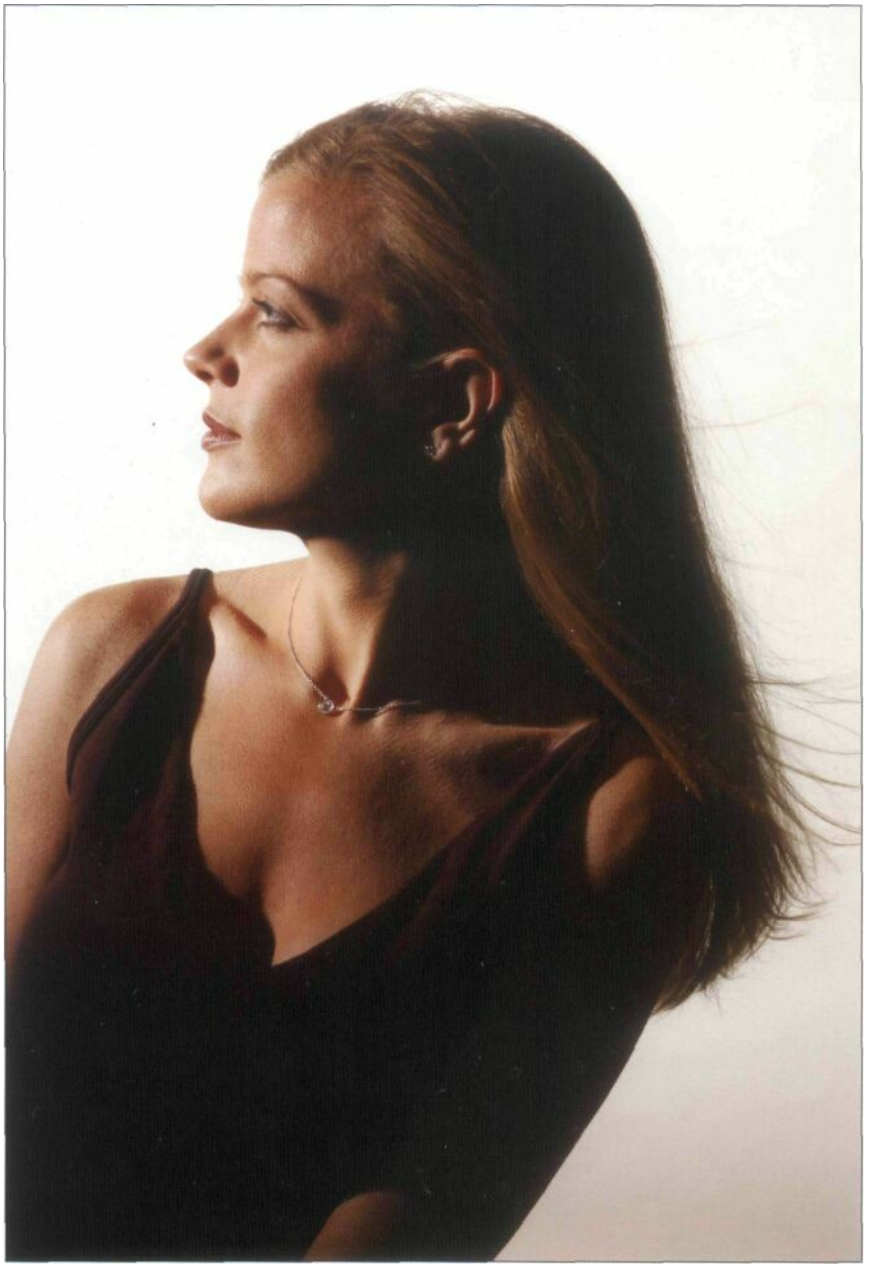


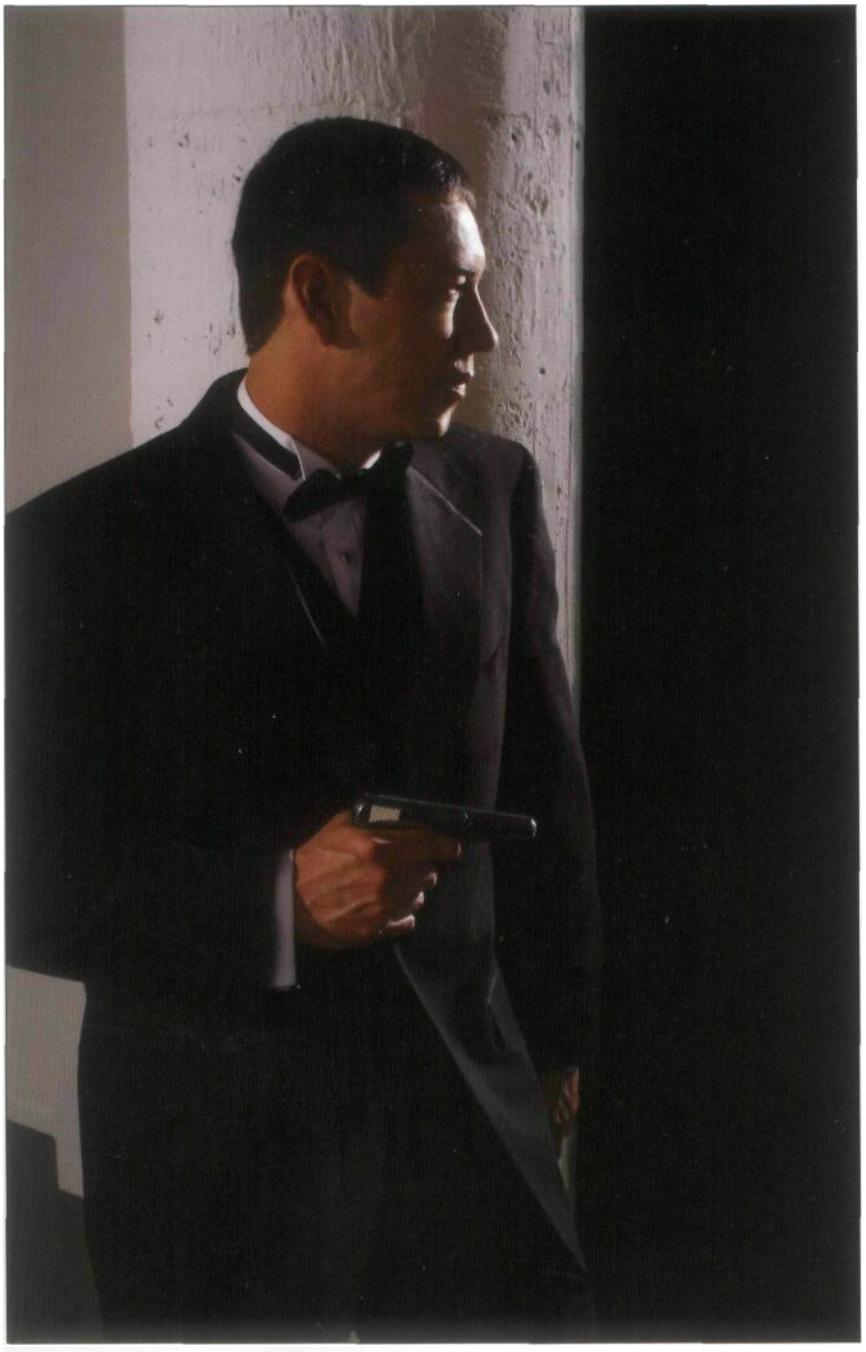
A Image 191

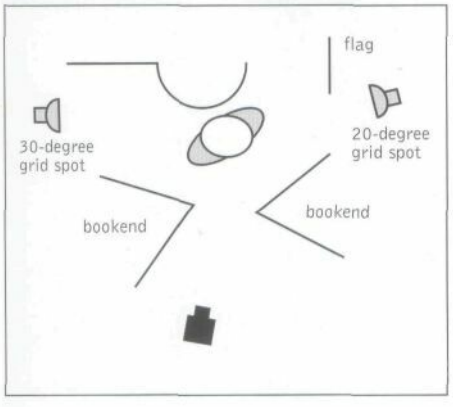


> Image 192

A Image 192B







A Image 193
> Image 193B

(image 192B). The key light was metered at f l l, and the background light, top to bottom, read from f 22 to f 8.

Image 193 is a classic secret-agent shot and required two lights, both 6-inch dishes. The key light was fitted with a 20-degree grid, while the kicker was fitted with a 30-degree grid. To get the bright highlight on his face, the key was placed so the angle of reflectance would be straight into the camera. Bookends were placed on each side of the camera to pick up stray light and open the shadows. Additionally, a small vertical flag was used to tone down (by about 75 percent) the key light striking the column (image 193B). The key-to-kicker ratio was 1:3.