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## Preparing for Headshots By Suzanne McLaren

*(appears in the Canadian Actors' Equity Association Newsletter – March 2005)*

### First things first...

Before you go shopping for a photographer and maybe a new outfit for your shots (and auditions), the first thing you need to do is plan your 'looks'. How are you going to present yourself? Do you need a serious, dramatic shot or a light comedic or commercial one, or both? Can you play younger or older, the girl next door or the goddess. It is advisable to speak with your agent. If you don't have one, then ask a director or coach who knows what you're capable of. It is critical going into a shoot that you are clear about what the shots need to say.

After all, headshots represent you to casting agents and the public. Think about what you are going to be using them for! Plan it out!

### Choosing a photographer...

When shopping for a headshot photographer it is important to choose someone you feel comfortable with and can open up to. I would advise meeting with a few people before booking. A good headshot photographer can be helpful in making wardrobe decisions and planning a shoot.

### What's the cost? ...

Some people are natural bargain hunters while others believe they have to spend top dollar to get the best quality. Headshot prices in Toronto range from approximately \$175 to \$450. The variables are the number of rolls and 'looks' you get, whether you get proofs or contact sheets and how much time the photographer spends with you. It is a significant investment in terms of dollars and cents and what it means for your career, so shopping around a bit could be well worth the time. Don't forget to ask if the photographer is involved in the printing of the 8x10s. Many sub-contract to a lab who may not be as concerned about the quality of your prints. Others take extra time to retouch distracting stray hairs or logos on clothing which can significantly impact the quality of the final image.

## Quality control...

Here are some keys to evaluating the quality of work in a portfolio.

- Do you feel the subjects in the shots are really looking at you and or are they looking past you and appear 'vacant'? Do the eyes speak to the viewer?
- Do the personalities come through in the shots or are they a carbon copy of the next person?
- Is the lighting flat or does it give the subject depth or dimension?
- Is there a mood or an enigmatic moment?
- Can you see the person in the shot or is it posed or stiff?

## The formula for success...

My experience with headshots is that if the subject is really 'present', either enjoying the shoot and having fun (where a smiling shot is captured naturally) or just hanging out being in the moment with their thoughts (a reflective or pensive moment), it is obvious to the viewer. It is almost a catch 22 to come into a shoot being nervous and worry about everything. I would suggest that you do your homework to prepare for the shoot but once you arrive look at it like a job, be professional have your clothes ready, your hair styled (or ready to be styled if you have hired a makeup and hair person) and just relax and try to enjoy the experience.

There's definitely a lot riding on new headshots, not just the cost and what it means to your career. Try to think of it as a positive pressure. The photographer may feel pressure to get good shots too. After all their career depends on it.

I find that shoots where the subject is friendly and relaxed and communicates openly to me—giving me useful information about themselves—go the best. They are comfortable in their body and not stiff and awkward and this shows on film!

One thing that you can do to help put you in the right frame of mind at the shoot, is to bring music that puts you in the mood—either relaxes you or gets your adrenaline pumping. If you forget to bring your own CD's, ask if the photographer has the type of music you'd like to hear. Having your favourite radio station on in the background or the volume cranked up on your new CD may help you feel more comfortable.

If you're inexperienced in front of the camera, why not practice in front of a mirror to see what your face is doing. Remember you're not performing on stage—the camera will pick up every nuance of your expression (especially in a close up). You can also learn a lot by looking at snapshots of yourself to see what hairstyle, clothing or camera angles look best. It's helpful when people bring in previous headshots or snapshots of themselves to a shoot or consultation. Seeing how they photograph and hearing what they like and don't like about the shots is valuable information.

## Planning ahead...

What time of year is best to get your shots done? The weather definitely does play a small role. It is critical for some people how the humidity or dryness affects their hair. A person

with a pasty white complexion in the dead of winter may benefit from catching a little bit of sun before doing a shoot.

If you can afford it a good makeup artist can be the key to getting fabulous headshots. Especially when doing colour shots where the details are more visible. Well applied makeup that matches the skin tone and is well blended with the texture of the skin makes a huge difference. A good makeup artist will work with you, by first finding out how you normally wear your hair and makeup. It is important to plan the order of the shots you'll be doing. If you're combining black and white and colour shots in the session, you may want to do the colour ones first as the makeup is usually lighter. Makeup can be considerably heavier for black and white shots and therefore they are generally done after any colour ones.

### Choosing B&W versus Colour...

Black and white photography translates colour, shape, and texture to a range of tones on film. Because it is only dealing with a scale of grey, specific colour information, good or bad is absent. Slight 'imperfections' such as pimples, scars and wrinkles are hardly noticeable. Less than white teeth, red eyes or a questionable hair colour are not apparent.

On the other hand, features you may wish to highlight such as clear porcelain skin, beautiful white teeth or a healthy glow are not as noticeable on black and white film. Colour film can really highlight unusual features such as green eyes, strawberry blonde hair or freckles.

Ultimately, most people find black and white more flattering.

Choosing clothing to contrast with your skin tone will help draw the viewers eye to the face. Generally very dark clothes (black, navy or dark brown) or light ones (white, cream or pastel) work to give a B&W shot a graphic and eye catching look.

### Clothing Suggestions

- clothing should be casual, fit well and be comfortable with minimal detail
- textured clothing is great—leather, denim, corduroy, knits/sweaters
- avoid logos and bold or busy patterns (they distract from the face)
- choose styles that are flattering & highlight your best features
  - ✓ fitted clothing will feature a toned body
  - ✓ 3/4 length or long sleeves generally work best for women
  - ✓ layers (t-shirt, button shirt, sports jacket) look interesting & camouflage a slim frame
  - ✓ bulky clothing is not flattering—avoid thick cotton knits & polar fleece
  - ✓ V-neck lengthens/opens up a round face or short neck
- no jewelry unless it adds to the message (i.e. necklaces, bracelets or watches)
- bring a good selection of tops, sweaters, shirts, jackets and just a few matching pants/skirts
- choose similar tones of clothing for tops & bottoms
- bring appropriate accessories if they're going to show (i.e. belts, ties)
- women should bring appropriate undergarments to work with each outfit

### For B&W Shots

- light tones (white, cream or pale pastels) look clean and bright for a commercial look
- dark tones (black, navy blue or dark brown) appear to be more dramatic
- when a layered look is used, combining very dark and light tones works well

### For Colour Shots

- choose colours that compliment your hair, eye and skin colouring
- jewel tones such as rich reds, blues, purples and greens work for a film/television shot
- bright, intense colours such as orange, turquoise and fuschia are vibrant and youthful and suit a commercial shot
- neutrals can work if they compliment your colouring (i.e. olive green to bring out the eyes, caramel that matches the highlights in your hair)
- avoid pastels which will 'wash out' and very dark tones such as navy which will appear too drab

Come prepared—plan a few days in advance to get enough sleep so you'll look and feel rested. Drink plenty of water and moisturize your skin, especially in the dry winter weather. It's key to looking younger and healthier. Most people need a week or two for their hair to settle down after it's cut. Factor this time in when scheduling your appointments. Come to the shoot with your hair styled as you would normally wear it. Eat a meal before you arrive or bring a power bar to keep your energy up through the shoot. Most shoots go on for 2 to 3 hours (or more) so be prepared to use up lots of energy!

*Suzanne McLaren is a Toronto based headshot photographer. Her work can be viewed on her web-site at [www.suzannemclaren.com](http://www.suzannemclaren.com) or by contacting her at 416-879-6053.*

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