

From Classroom to Catwalk

By Rita Flórez

Commercial, portrait and senior portrait photographer Hernán Rodríguez always thought he would grow up to be an artist. His father was an artist, and eventually, Rodríguez went to college to pursue a career in drawing. But something changed during his time in art school.

"I had to take photography classes along with my art classes [in college]," says the Los Angeles-based photographer. "That's how I became immersed in both. I got into photography full time 10 years ago while I was working as an artist. A friend told me photographers were needed [on a volume shoot] and I was asked to assist in that. We shot 700 seniors in three days."

That first job helped Rodríguez learn the basics of high school portraiture. "I worked for a huge national photography studio, and you had 12 minutes to photograph each senior," he remembers. "That was volume work. You would go in and photograph one senior and then another. It felt like an assembly line at first. But you still had to be able to find a way to relate to the senior." Even though the studio has since gone out of business, Rodríguez learned important lessons to apply to his own studio. "It's good to learn about what makes a business successful. But on the other side you have to learn about what can lead to the demise of a business," he comments.

When he decided to strike out on his own, Rodríguez specialized in custom senior portraits. From his work at the national studio, he knew one of the challenges in senior portraiture was managing the production and workflow. "For my business, the first thing I implemented was a workflow. Before digital, everything was shot on film and the photographer would send everything to the lab. Then the lab was in charge of getting you proofs. Well, now, you're the lab. You take the pictures and have the digital images. You have to categorize them, number them, and make sure the originals are secure.

If you can't do that and produce things in a timely fashion, it hurts your business."

Rodríguez set up a system at Hernan Photography Studio, where he created organized image libraries, produced proof sheets for the seniors' parents and turned the work around in a timely manner. "If the workflow isn't organized, all those images get lost or files get erased. It's scary because you're in charge of everything," he says. "These seniors get all their clothing picked out, their makeup done at the MAC counter and they come in prepared. Word has gotten out that these photo shoots are a cool experience, and they get decked out so if something happens to those images, we're in trouble." How the senior prepares for the shoot will determine which direction and tone the images take. A typical senior shoot with Rodríguez consists of a portfolio with five different setups.

Finding common ground with the teenager is the key to shooting what Rodríguez calls quality images. "Mike Trerotola, my mentor, really taught me how to identify with the personality of the senior in a short period of time," he says. Rodríguez knows that the moment his senior comes into his studio, most of them don't want to be there. "It's summer. They would rather be on vacation or at the beach. They're pushed to take their senior portraits, so they're upset when they get there. You have to get them to smile. You have a short period of time to take images that their parents are going to be happy with. They don't want to smile because they're too cool. It's one of the hardest styles in photography for that reason."



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voice. She had a boa with her; we told her to sing and we took that shot. She didn't want to wear that boa. She said her grandmother did that, and we convinced her to try it. She played into the whole thing, and it ended up being a killer shot."

On other occasions, the teenager's personality does not lend itself to classic shots. In fact, that teenager might want something more edgy. For a recent shoot, a male senior came in and told Rodriguez that he wanted something edgy without specifying exactly what he wanted. Rodriguez suggested a *Twilight*-themed shoot (given the popularity of the movie and its sequel being shot). Rodriguez has found that the guys go for this dark, mysterious look with blue undertones, and the girls really want their boyfriends to have it. The challenge in this particular shoot was creating the mood without having to scout a location in the forest. To move the shoot into the forest, Rodriguez said he and his team would have had to bring in generators and "light it up like a Christmas tree, so we brought the forest to our senior in postproduction. The first challenge was to get the exact image for compositing." (For more information, see the sidebar, "Behind-the-Scenes of My *Twilight* Shoot" on pg. 56.)

To solve the problem, Rodriguez finds himself keeping up-to-date on the latest trends in music, fashion and movies; this year Rodriguez found that the idea of change after President Obama's election resonated with some of his clients. In fact, one client wanted his photograph taken in front of a multicolored wall with a tattoo on his forearm that even bore the word "change."

"Most seniors now are into making statements and wanting to be heard. Being a groundbreaking political year, my client was making a statement," Rodriguez says. "If you see the background, it is red, brown and blue, with his undershirt being white. It's about unity."

In finding something to bring the teen's personality out during the photo shoot, Rodriguez had to walk a fine line between producing an image the teen is going to love and something the parents can be proud of as well.

"If the parents don't like the identity of the child in that photograph, it doesn't matter how well the image is lit or how well the photo is taken," Rodriguez says. "So I put the camera down and we talk about their interests. If I get a football player, we just start talking about sports. That interaction allows me to capture who they are... Every senior is different. It goes back to how you relate them," he says.

Interaction with teens is important and Rodriguez understands how to gently coax his clients in a direction that they might at first be hesitant to try. Rodriguez shot a classic high school senior portrait of a girl who initially resisted his idea. "One girl was the star of *Dreamgirls* at her school. She started singing here, and she had a beautiful



"When seniors want something edgy, we use a RingFlash by Dynalite," he says. "Sometimes the teen just wants this outdoor feel. We don't use lights sometimes. We'll use gold reflectors to create a warm portrait."

For Rodriguez, the camera isn't what's important.





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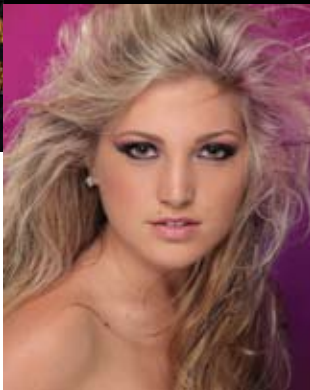
The real gems come from his lens. He uses a Tamron AF90mm f/2.8 Di Macro for close-up work. “Photographers generally use that lens to photograph insects,” he says. “I use that lens for the seniors because it creates sharp images. You can see that moment in time what they were thinking.”

The lighting can also make a huge difference between a so-so photo and one that parents and students will keep with them for the rest of their lives. “We create a lot of that spotlight look—that cinematic look,” he explains. “You put the emphasis, which is the light, where you want it.”

Rodriguez has several simple setups to help get the shoot going: a motorcycle, a tree with a fence behind it, different fabric backdrops and a few painted walls. “A lot of photographers are technical and controlling. They have to have a set list and everything planned out,” he says. “I’m the opposite. I shoot from the seat of my pants. I have planned setups, but I give leeway to let the kids dictate where the photo shoot goes. It’s more organic that way.”

Still, it can be unnerving not knowing where the direction is going to go, but it’s how Rodriguez does his best work. When Rodriguez works in commercial photography shooting CD covers, advertisements and fashion catalogs he tends to live his life on a deadline. “Everything is done with tight turnarounds, and I feed off of it,” he says, “It carries over in my senior photography work. I can just go in, shoot and start creating.”

According to Rodriguez, there are three kinds of senior portrait businesses. “You have the big companies like Life Touch. They have such huge volume that they end up becoming an assembly



line,” Rodriguez explains. “Then you have the other extreme: private sessions. The parents might pay something like \$2000 for a private shoot on the beach. We’re in the middle. We do have contracts with a few schools. But they came to us because we treated their students well in the past.”

Summertime is Rodriguez’s busy season for senior portraits. Several hundred students will walk through his doors the summer before senior year. His studio allocates two days a week, usually one weekday and a Saturday. The weekend is when they get the bulk of the students. “When a student comes in, it can be something as simple as just his portrait or it can turn into a family affair with everyone dressed in white shirts and jeans ready to get in on the action,” he says.

Being flexible has helped Rodriguez grow his business in different ways. “It opens other doors,” he adds. “A senior walked in with her older sister. The older sister owned a leather apparel company. I ended up shooting her entire catalog after we finished the senior portrait. Afterward the senior modeled for her sister’s company.”

But the real boost to Rodriguez’s studio happened before he ever had his own studio, and it’s all rooted in how he’s built relationships with people over the years. When Rodriguez was work-





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ing at a different studio, a girl came in with her mom and said they could only come in on a Saturday, he remembers. "That studio wasn't open on Saturdays," he says. "I lived the farthest from the studio, and I made the trip because somebody had to take care of her. I went down there and photographed her. I did it for free, on my coin." After that session, her younger brother was the next graduating senior and their mother went back to the studio to ask about Rodriguez. They informed her the company went out of business but gave her Rodriguez's contact information. "It's funny what people remember when you do something good for somebody," he says. "That mother worked at a school and gave us the full contract for her school because she remembered what I had done for her daughter. It was really nice."



Since then, word has gotten out about how Rodriguez handles his sessions with his seniors. "The first time we had a school contract, the kids who came in were a little apprehensive," he says. "But they were really excited when they saw their images. There's a good buzz now."

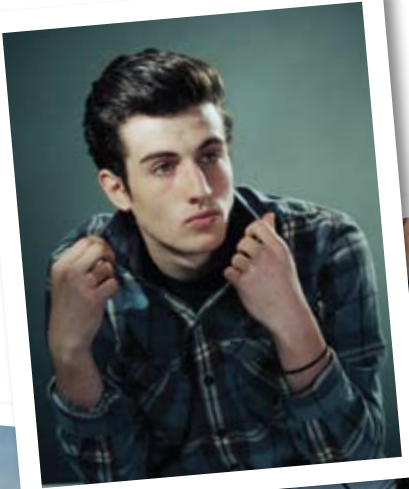
Rodriguez has capitalized on his extraordinary senior shots by entering one of his images, "Dark Velvet," into the fashion category of the 2008 Black-and-White Spider awards. Since Rodriguez also shoots commercial and fashion photography, he treats his seniors the same way as he does fashion models. His work paid off when he won third place at the 2008 Spider awards in the fashion category.

To see more of Hernán Rodriguez's work visit his website at www.hernanphotography.com.



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Behind the Scenes of My *Twilight* Shoot

By Hernán Rodríguez

The *Twilight* craze is huge with the young generation. Teen guys are hip to this style, and girls want a guy who looks like this. We were after a shot with senior Jason that had a dark, mysterious look with blue undertones, which presented an interesting challenge. We couldn't shoot Jason in the middle of a dark mystical forest. We would have had to scout a place and bring in generators to light it up like a Christmas tree, so instead we brought the forest to our senior in postproduction.

Several other professional photographers and I are co-authors of Tamron's new blog, "Angle of View" (tamrontechstips.typepad.com/tamron_blog). We each provide a specialty in which we post technical aspects of imagemaking. Ken Hubbard is an excellent landscape photographer who presents his images in many galleries. I thought that with his expertise in landscape and my knowledge in portraiture, we could collaborate. Once we decided on the specific image, I went to work on some postproduction. The original image was taken in black and white, so I used Alien Skin's Exposure 2 to provide a cross-processing effect with the added blue undertones I was after. I normally don't like to use plug-ins since they tend to give my work too specific a look. Alien Skin's Exposure 2 adds the look of specific films and has excellent black-and-white conversions. Once this was done, the next challenge was to place

a very specific light setup that would emulate the same feel as if he were standing in the forest. The mood was established as a low-key style of lighting with accent and backlighting. The key light was a snoot placed high and to camera right to provide the same effect as of beams of light coming from overhead and from the same direction as the hottest part of the background. This was powered to read f/11. For fill, I wanted to keep minimal spread of light to keep the dramatic look, so I placed a small strip box to the left of the subject to cross-fill and pick up detail in his jacket and pants. This was powered to read two stops less than the key. This light also gave us nice highlights on the left edge of the jacket as if lit by the rays of light from behind. For accent lighting, I used a Westcott Strip-bank with a grid and placed a gobo in front to prevent the lower spread of light. This light was set ½ stop over the key. More accent was added by adding a 20-degree grid with barn doors and a blue gel to complete our look. This light was one stop over the key light.

I also did this same setup in the studio. We tweaked our lights a little to add more or less fill and accent lighting, and also substituted the snoot for a 10-degree grid spot for our key light. Since the outdoor shots were done at night, it gave us a very consistent appearance for both indoor and outdoor.