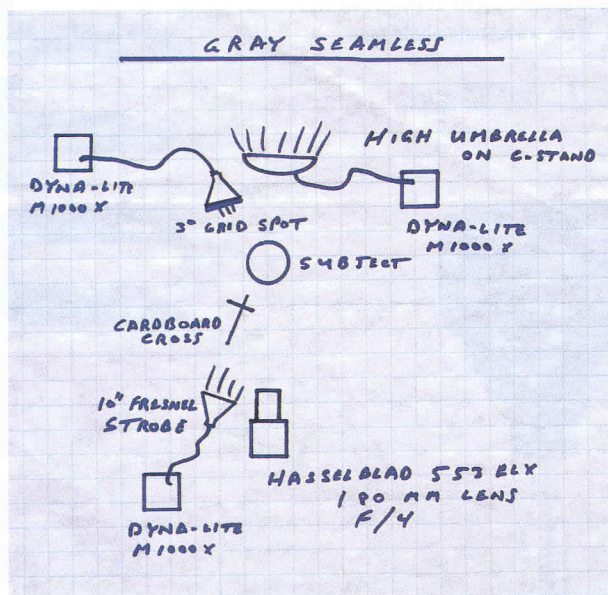


Grecco shot this portrait of actor Robert Duvall, star of 1997's *The Apostle*, with a Hasselblad 553ELX and a 180mm f/4 Zeiss lens, arranging his lights as shown in the diagram below.



Michael Grecco had just an hour to photograph Robert Duvall for a *Time* magazine story on the virtuoso actor's 1997 Oscar-nominated film, *The Apostle*. "I wanted to come up with a concept that would say what the movie was about without being too obvious," says Los Angeles-based Grecco, who has shot celebrities ranging from quirky Quentin Tarantino to svelte *Star Trek* star Jeri Ryan for magazines such as *Premiere*, *Esquire*, and *Rolling Stone*. The photographer's solution was to cast the shadow of a cross on Duvall's sculptured face.

To create the shadow, Grecco knew he needed a fairly hard, directional illumination. So for his main light, he used a custom-built Fresnel strobe. "I bought an old 2,000-watt tungsten studio spot with a 10-inch-diameter fresnel focusing lens, and had it adapted for my Dyna-Lite strobes," says Grecco. "The whole thing is covered with a frosted dome, so it gives me a light that's both controllable and has some soft qualities to it."

The cross that casts the shadow is actually a cardboard cutout, about a foot tall. "To make the shadow sharp I had to place the cross fairly close to Duvall," says Grecco. "It was just outside the frame to the left." But when Grecco put Duvall into the waiting set and started shooting Polaroid tests, the cross's horizontal bar was out of proportion. "Duvall thought the shadow looked like a telephone pole, not a cross," says Grecco. "So I just twisted the cross in perspective to shorten it up."

Grecco's Fresnel strobe head was powered by a 1,000-watt/second Dyna-Lite M1000X power pack. Another M1000X pack powered a boom-mounted, umbrella-softened head high above the subject, aimed at the gray seamless background. And a third pack powered a head fitted with a three-degree spot grid, aimed at Duvall's left side from behind. This created the glancing highlight on the actor's hair. "The strobe head was in a much lower position than a typical hair light," says Grecco. "And the highlight is actually on the hot side of his face. The usual approach would be to put it on the shadow side. But I like to break lighting rules, because if you do things by the book I think your pictures look too slick. The highlight gives the photo the feeling of a movie poster without being too much of a formula."

Though Grecco's shooting is highly improvised—a necessity given the fickleness of the famous, who sometimes reject ideas for entirely personal reasons—the photographer keeps careful records of the lighting arrangements he ends up using for each shot. But they aren't closely guarded secrets. Some of his best portraits, along with detailed diagrams of the setups used to create them, can be seen in *The Art of Portrait Photography*, published by Amherst Media. "From the book, you might think I'm a very technical photographer," says Grecco, who has just been nominated for an Alfred Eisenstadt Award for Magazine Photography. "But I do it all from intuition." ■

SEEING THE LIGHT

Celebrity photographer Michael Grecco illuminates the spiritual side of Robert Duvall.

BY RUSSELL HART

