Fourth Year Art Award
Proposal to Fund Travel and Equipment for Research
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Theatre Through the Looking Glass

Project Abstract

My name is Steven Johnson and I am a rising-fourth-year Drama major with a concentration in Lighting Design. I am requesting funding for photography equipment that will allow me to improve upon my portfolio, and study how the camera's focal length and framing chosen for a shot shapes the narrative of the image.

Background

Last Spring I was fortunate to receive funding for my project "Theatre Through the Camera" which focused on how a DSLR could improve my portfolio, and the challenges that come with shooting stage lighting. Some of the results of that project can be viewed in my portfolio website stevenjohnsondesigns.com. I am exceedingly happy with the results of my research, with both the work I was able to produce for my portfolio and the newfound passion I have discovered for photography as an art form outside of theatre. I have since taken ARCH 5710 Photography and Digital Methods with Kirk Martini where I further developed my photographic identity, and some of that work can also be found on my website. With the large amount of new photographic content I was producing, I also decided I needed to learn about photo processing with Lightroom & Photoshop. As I worked on my shots from the theatre I began to notice a pattern emerging, I was making massive crops to nearly every photo.

Processed & Uncropped Image

Processed & Cropped Image

Processed & Uncropped Image **Processed & Cropped Image**

I have realized there are two main reasons why I continue needing to make crops to my production photos. The amount of my field of view that is taken up by a subject (e.g. a performer or set-piece) when I'm in the room capturing the image is much larger than when that image is displayed back on a screen or in the standard print portfolio size. As a result people and objects in the photos feel smaller and farther away than how they felt in the space. The other reason is that I am not trying to objectively replicate the exact image seen from the seat that I take the photo from. Instead my goal is to create images that capture the mood and intentions of the moment on stage, and to frame that photo in a pleasing composition that doesn't distract from moment being presented. I try to preserve as much of the details of the stage design so that the photos can be used as tools of communication with other designers or in interviews when discussing my skills, processes, or philosophies of design.

All this excessive cropping however comes at a cost of detail and resolution. So much of the data that the camera's sensor captures is wasted when I crop, essentially tossing the data in the garbage. Now most photographers will tell you that this has a very simple solution, get closer to the subject you're shooting so you only frame what you want in the photo. Unfortunately with stage productions this is almost never an option for me. Many productions when hiring a professional photographer to shoot the show will have set aside photo calls where moments will be posed and the photographer can take their time to work with the shot. However many of the productions that I work on either don't hire a professional photographer, or as with dance productions, don't have photo calls and just have the photographer shoot during a full dress rehearsal without stopping the run to try for a different angle. Meanwhile I am often unable to move in for a closer shot because I am stuck working behind the lighting console.

Another problem I encountered was that of the high contrast low-light environment of stage lighting. Even opening my aperture all the way and using as slow a shutter speed as possible, I needed to have my camera set to a high ISO, the sensitivity of the camera's sensor, of 3200 or 6400. This gave me the exposure I needed, but introduced a lot of noise into the photographs, as there is not enough light hitting the sensor to record the full amount of data for the image. Digital processing of the images is able to reduce this noise as seen below, but the amount needed blends the image too much giving it an unnatural look as details are lost.

Unprocessed Noisy Image **Processed with Noise Reduction Image**

Project Proposal

The problems encountered in my first research project are twofold, first cropping to create a desired framing reduces resolution and detail, and compensating for a lack of light with high ISO introduces noise into the image and loses detail. Therefore I am requesting funding for photography equipment that will allow me to improve upon my portfolio, and study how the camera's focal length and framing chosen for a shot shapes the narrative of the image. The equipment for this research is a Canon EF 24-70mm f/2.8L II USM Lens, a Canon EF 135mm f/2L USM Lens, and a Lowepro – StreetLine Camera Carrying Bag. The deeper zoom of the Canon 24-70mm Lens compared to my current 18-55mm will give me more power to shape the narrative that my photos tell through their framing. While a variable zoom lens is ideal for shooting theater, in the circumstances where I am stuck so far away behind the light board the swapping to the 135mm Lens will close that distance for me, removing the need to crop later and preserving that data captured by the camera. I have chosen these two lenses instead of a single lens that can zoom the entire range of 24-135mm because of the sharpness quality of these lenses, and also because of their apertures. The aperture of a camera controls how large the hole in the lens can open up, and the wider the aperture, the more light is allowed in. My current 18-55mm lens has an aperture of f/3.5-5.6, whereas the f/2.8 of the 24-70mm and f/2 of the 135mm has an effective increase in the amount of light let in by 100-200%. This increase in light will allow me to use a lower ISO, and keep noise in my images to a minimum while preserving details.

I will use these lenses to continue to create archival photography of my work in lighting design for productions including but not limited to the first UVA Fall 2017 main-stage show (TBA), the UVA Fall Dance Concert 2017, Live Arts Gala 2017, Lighting of the Lawn 2017, the UVA Spring Dance Concert 2018, and the UVA Capstone Play Festival 2018. This list is not completely comprehensive as I am in the middle of applying to summer productions, and the 2017-2018 production seasons of UVA Drama, Virginia Players, and Live Arts are TBA. Photos of my designs from these productions would be processed in a rolling fashion and then be added to my website portfolio as

soon as possible. In addition I would hope to further explore my photographic identity in works outside of theater using these lenses, and also add some of that work to my website portfolio.

Timeline

Summer 2017

- TBD

Fall 2017

- UVA Mainstage Show (TBA)
- UVA Fall Dance Concert 2017
- Live Arts Gala 2017
- Lighting of the Lawn 2017

Spring 2018

- UVA Spring Dance Concert 2018
- UVA Capstone Play Festival 2018

April 2018

- Completion of rolling processing of photographs
- Prepare and submit an outcome report
- Present award outcome presentation alongside other Arts Scholars at Open Grounds

Proposed Budget

Item	**Price (with estimated tax and shipping)**
Canon EF 24-70mm f/2.8L II USM Lens	$1,842.74
Canon EF 135mm f/2L USM Lens	$1,052.99
Manfrotto Camera Case	$105.29
	Total = $3,001.02

Thank you for your time and consideration