

Photography

Event Photography

May 19, 2018 | Charles T. Low, Photographer

Dynamic, Unpredictable, Uncontrollable, Chaotic: the Usual!

I broke a camera yesterday. That happens from time to time, but I think also signifies how much use I get out of it - well over 10,000 exposures on a lovely piece of hardware which I have had for several years.

Unfortunately, it happened in the middle of a shoot.

Fortunately, it did not happen in the middle of the shoot I did a few days earlier, for a five-hour public event held in Kingston, Ontario, called Health City 2018, resulting in hundreds of photographic exposures of which I am offering over a hundred as useable, for their marketing and information purposes.

Health City, the brain-child of Dr. Joy Hataley, self-describes as "**A Patient Advocacy Forum**", with the slogan "**something amazing is about to happen again**" (and it did!). They use the word "city" because they assemble a micro-community of numerous exhibits in multiple rooms. Health City also included three auditorium presentations on current healthcare topics, involving question-and-answer sessions.

No wonder it all takes over five hours!

Admission was free. The event was held at the Isabel Bader Centre for the Performing Arts, on the waterfront of Kingston, Ontario.

I would like to describe Health City, its purpose, its organization, in much more detail. The themes are critically important, and receive nowhere near the attention and intelligent analysis which they deserve. I think that this is essentially what bothers Dr. Hataley, and why she does this.

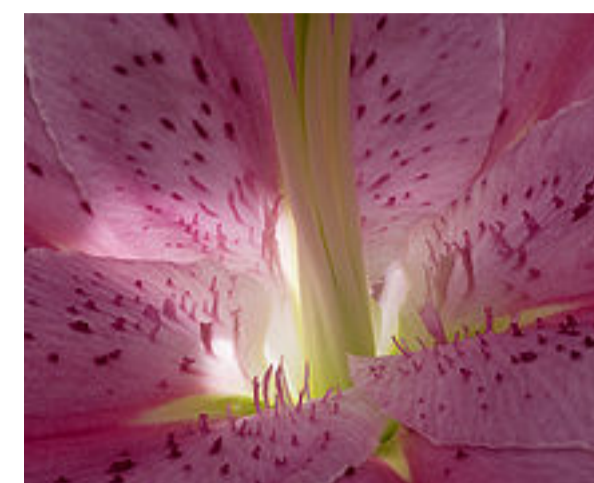
But this is a photography blog, and I will, requiring of myself considerable restraint, mainly confine my thoughts to that arena.



One platoon of an army of volunteers who made Health City possible.

It started several months ago, when Dr. Hataley asked if I would photograph the event, and this falls so well into one of my core interests, which I might call "social healthcare justice", that I immediately

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accepted the assignment on a volunteer basis.

I attended a meeting with the committee, at which I understood that they were hoping for something from me which illustrated the event in action - more than static photographs of booths and exhibits.

All right. That was going to make things harder - but better.

Then, I would have loved to scout out the venue ahead of time, but was away for a while and it just didn't seem to be working out. Advance preparation never hurts, but in retrospect, in this case probably wouldn't have helped as much as one might think. I arrived early, about 3 p.m. for a 4 p.m. start, on Tuesday May 15, 2018, just in time for the introductory tour for volunteers, so the timing worked out really well.

As we toured, I cheerfully noted to myself that *the assignment was completely impossible*.

Fine. "Impossible" is my middle name - just ask my friends - and knowing that there was no way on this great green Earth that I could succeed, I just relaxed, and cheerfully and busily went about making photographs.

That worked out surprisingly well. Not that one could construe any of my output from the event as "studio photography", but I felt pleased with the results.

It reminds me of [Performance Photography](#), in that nothing about the event centres on photography. The photographer occupies an incidental position, trying for the most part to stay out of the way, not to distract from the mission of the event (in this case, tremendously important), and yet, from the periphery, get some memorable images.

I had an entire mobile studio, full of tripods, stands, lights and reflectors ... in the trunk of my car. I needed to remain fleet-of-foot, to roam freely and quickly, and so carried two camera bags with me, and kept everything relatively low-tech. I did not, for example, carry a tripod, handy though it would have been on occasion - but cumbersome most of the time.

So, here goes.

Challenges

Challenge number one: **too much light**.

How, I could forgive you for asking, could a photographer ever complain about too much light? It wasn't so much the *quantity* of light, as the *contrast*. Let me show you.



My first thought was simply to expose for the backlit people, and let the enormous windows flare out, but the contrast was of such a degree that it made people look like ghosts - kinda' cool, but not in this context.

The only thing to do, when close to that plate-glass wall, was to avoid aiming the camera in that direction.

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Near the huge wall of windows - but aiming the camera away from it (as people talked with dieticians).



Dr. Hataley rallying the troops! I sacrificed the background pretty well completely.

Challenge number two: **too little light.**



This interior room - the Studio Theatre - has black walls and a black ceiling. The illumination sufficed for the eye, but challenged the camera!



The Auditorium looked even darker than this to the eye. This photograph required a judicious balancing of camera settings (not to mention years of practice) to get even this.



A shot like this should not be technically possible - telephoto lens at 1/30 seconds exposure. I made a tripod of my elbows, but still, sometimes I just get lucky!



Question from the floor after a presentation ... again in that very dark auditorium.

Challenge number three: **capturing an unscripted, organic process.**

There were people everywhere, interested, engaged, asking questions, offering opinions, and my primary job was to record them in that process. True, I did interact with them from time to time, and often that did result in a better photograph. Just as often, I hung back, shooting from the sidelines, just waiting for a moment ...



An orthopedic surgeon, Dr. Wood, demonstrating a total knee replacement.



Near and dear to my heart, an interactive Anesthesiology exhibit.



The dummy lived.

Challenges met(?)

Here are three approaches I took to this impossible shoot. They represent simply the technical side - there is also the instinct about when to be where, what angle to use, how much to interact, and how ... as with many things in life, this assignment drew upon pretty much everything I had ever learned (although I hope to always have a lot more to learn).

1/ **Ambient light.** Modern cameras can deal with impressively low light. With the two which I used that day, getting up to ISO 6400 (and some cameras can usefully go much higher, although the "native" ISO is a lowly 100 with one of my cameras, 200 with the other), produced grainy (pixelated) photos without much vibrancy, but at least I got pictures. Even in the black room, the Studio Theatre, I *could* make images without using a camera flash. Then, with a larger aperture (e.g. f/2, sacrificing depth of field) for faster shutter speeds, with the camera's image-stabilization working,

and by bracing myself against something for added stability, I felt that I was doing every reasonable, and then some. Some of the photos ended up with too much motion-blur - but many did not!



Dr. Hataley, from a long way away, in a dark auditorium, ISO 6400, at 1/30 second shutter speed, which is very slow for 6-times magnification - quite a modern technical marvel. But the important thing is that it shows her evidently happy with the way the event was going.

2/ **Flash lighting.** One can simply attach a flash to the camera's hot-shoe.



An impassioned and sobering description of the state of Canada's aboriginal population. (Think "social determinants of health".) I made this photo from the back of the auditorium using a simple on-camera flash. There is no point making the light source a little bigger when you're that far away - it will still be relatively small. The only other approach would be to move a remotely-controlled, larger light-source in closer ... not suitable to this setting.

3/ **Poor-man's beauty-dish.** Working hard under these specific circumstances to keep it simple, I have an attachment which makes the flash appear bigger, and moves it a little bit higher, which makes a softer, gentler light.



A light-modifier, what I call the "poor man's beauty-dish"



While not multi-flash studio-lighting, expanding and elevating the light a little is a little visually more flattering than a bare flash, which would create a flatter, less complimentary light.

When a bare, on-camera flash just won't cut it, we often think of *bouncing* the light - bounce it off the ceiling, off a wall, off a purpose-built reflector (the latter often requiring an assistant). But at this venue, the two dark rooms where I might have needed it most - the Studio Theatre and the Auditorium - were simply made of really dark materials: not much to bounce from!

Why do this?

So, a recurring theme of mine centres on why I do this to myself. From the outset, I know that studio-quality portraits will not emerge from such an uncontrolled, wide-ranging, non-photographically-themed event.

But I like the challenge. I have personal loyalty to the organizers and, most importantly, to the cause.

My paraphrasing of "the cause": we have the great good fortune to live in a first-world country. We could and should be doing much better with healthcare systems organization.

I hope that in some way my photographs end up helping with that.

While you're here:

Remember that I make photographs and I sell photographs.

Almost everything which you see here is for sale. Prices at the time of writing, for example, for an 11x14" fine-art print with a generous white border would be about \$50, and you can go up or down from there. Check out my [Rates](#) page. More importantly, check out my [Gallery](#).

Book a portrait-sitting - the right frequency with which to commission formal [portraits](#) is a bit more often.

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Thank you so much for reading.

**Charles T. Low
Photographer**



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