

Fundamental Editing Case Study #10

AT THE SHOW, MAKING THE BEST OF AN UNCONTROLLED ENVIRONMENT

By Kent DuFault

When you're taking pictures in an uncontrolled environment, there is only so much that you can do with the camera to create the best image possible.

In the old days of film, that could be a genuine problem.

When I had my commercial photo study, it was not unheard of to spend half a day or even an entire day creating one picture. I photographed a lot of factories. We would go into a factory, and we were required to manually create an environment that would generate an acceptable photograph.

Digital photography has really helped us out in that respect, especially with the development of the camera RAW file format.

What you can do with a camera RAW file is nothing short of amazing.

Image 001 is a photograph from a Kung Fu show that I saw in Beijing, China. I was ushered in and seated with no chance to move about.

My distance to the stage wasn't too bad. However, photographing with theatrical lighting is always difficult.

This image has problems. Let's fix them!

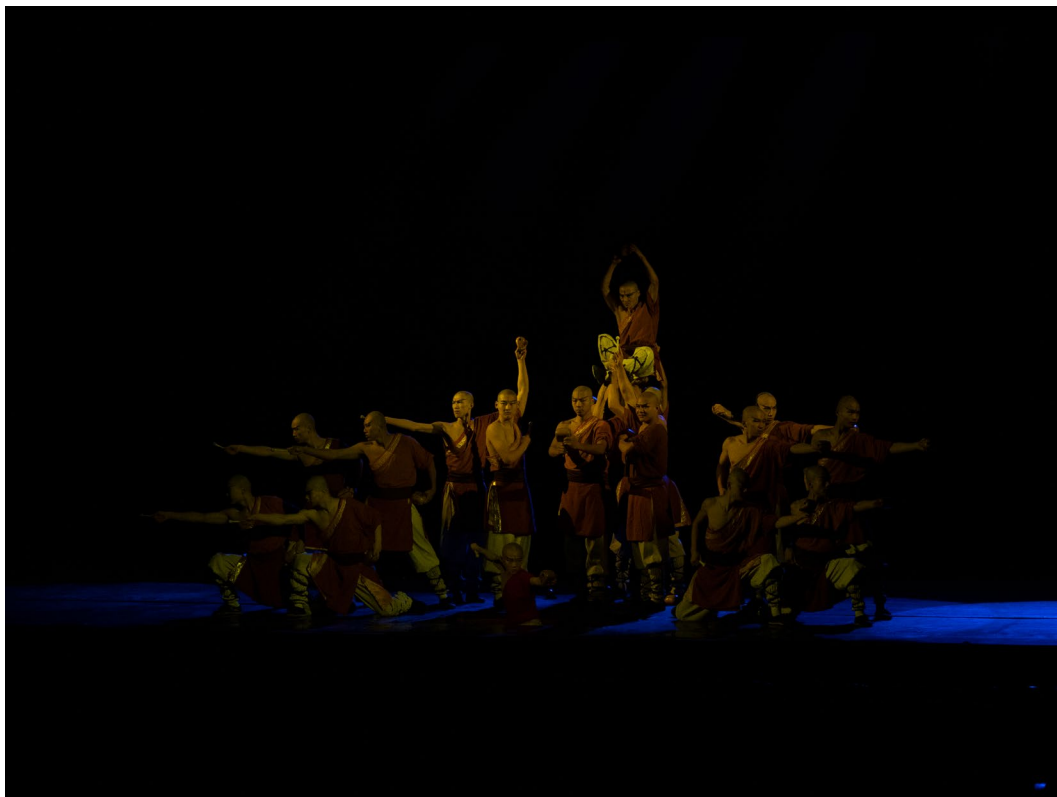


Image 001 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

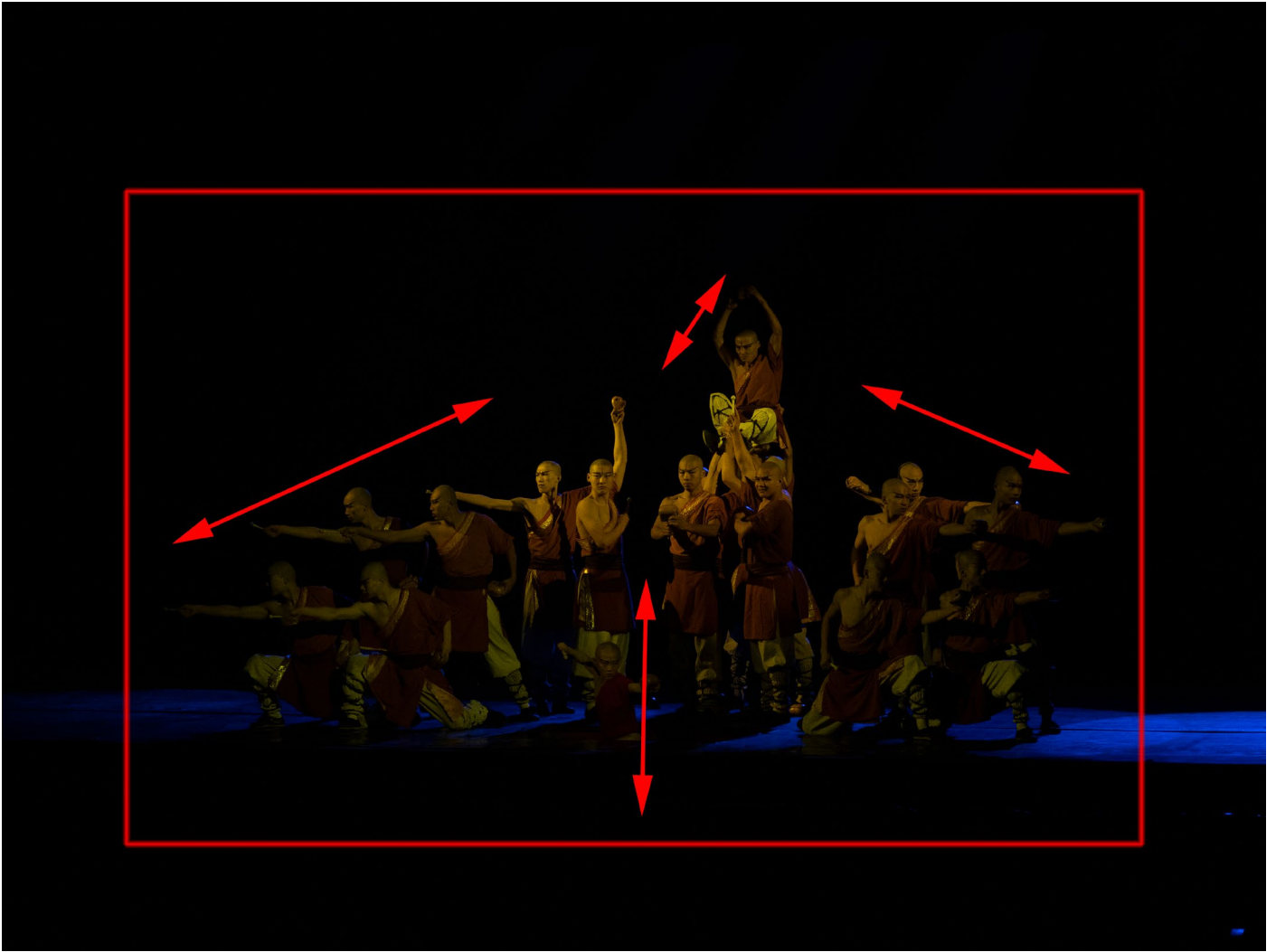


Image 002 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

My intent for this photo is pretty simple. I want to get in tight to the group of men. I also want to even out the exposure so that they are all reasonably visible.

I chose this picture out of the group that I shot for several reasons.

The action stopped for a moment, so the entire group was reasonably focused, sharp, and detailed.

Secondly, their positioning created a triangular composition, which I often use in my photographic work. I love the triangle composition technique!

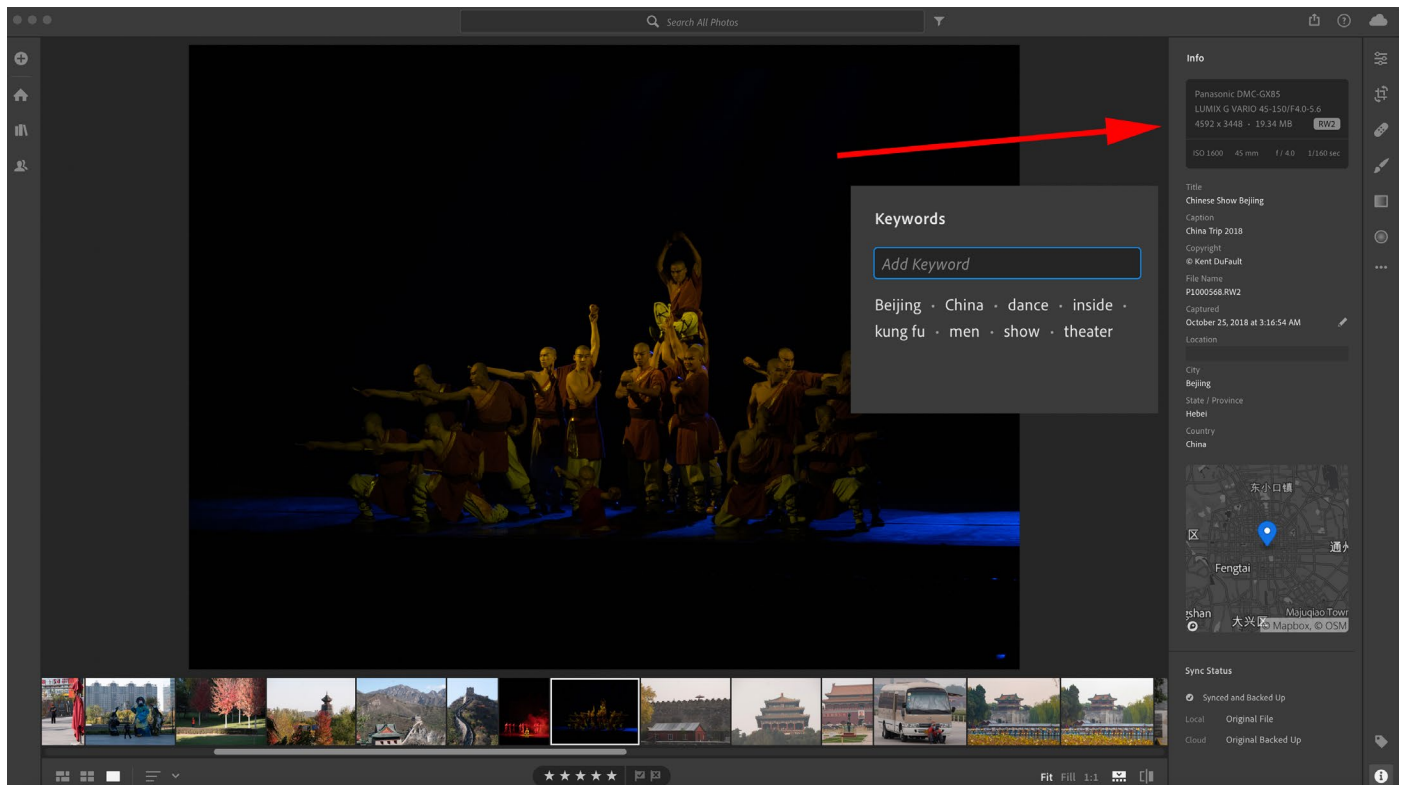


Image 003 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I entered my metadata and keywords.

You may be wondering why I'm repeating this step in every case study, and the answer is simple.

It's important!

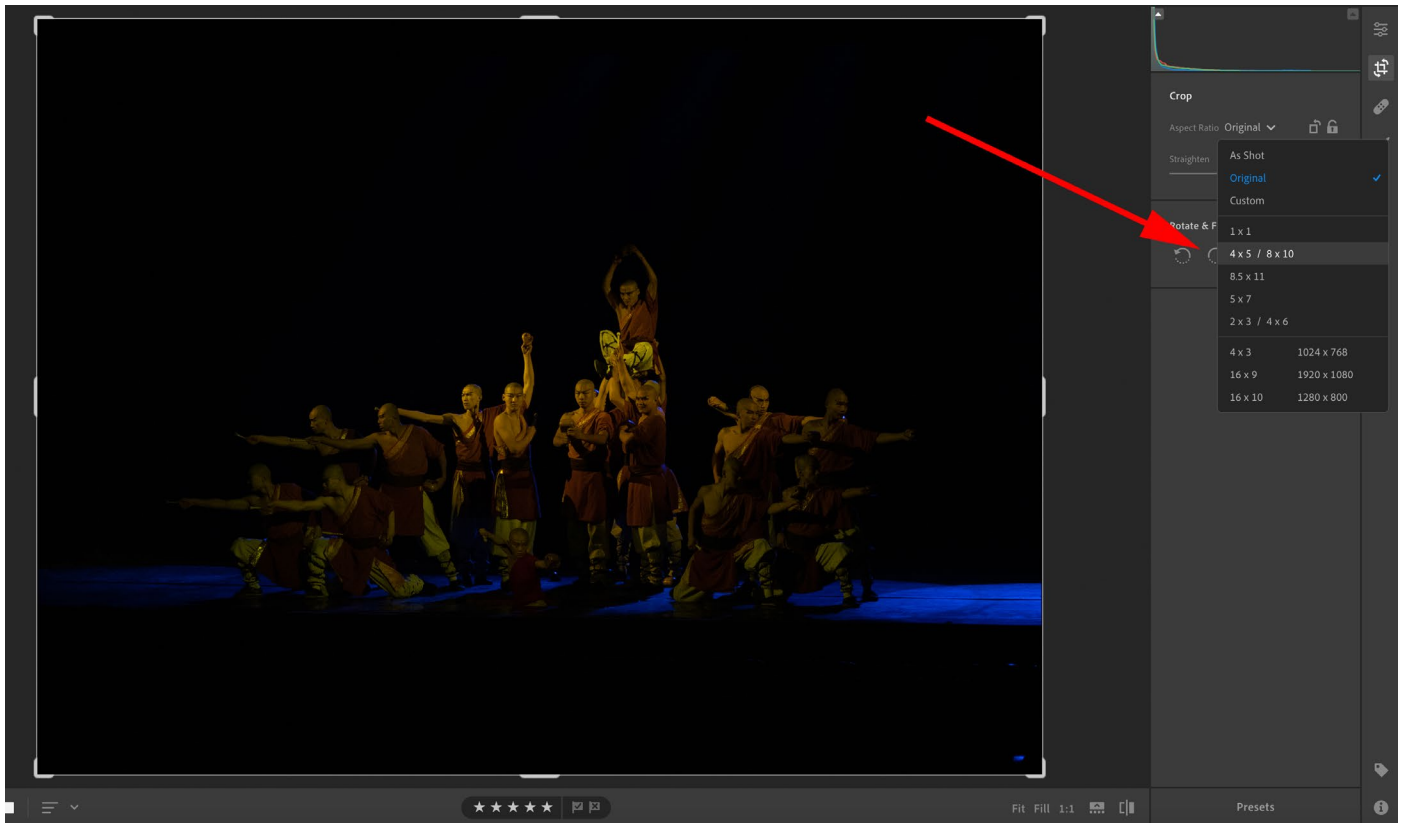


Image 004 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I already know that I want to print this picture and hang it somewhere in our home.

I begin the cropping process by looking at the preset aspect ratios. The 4x5/8x10 aspect ratio left too much dark negative space.

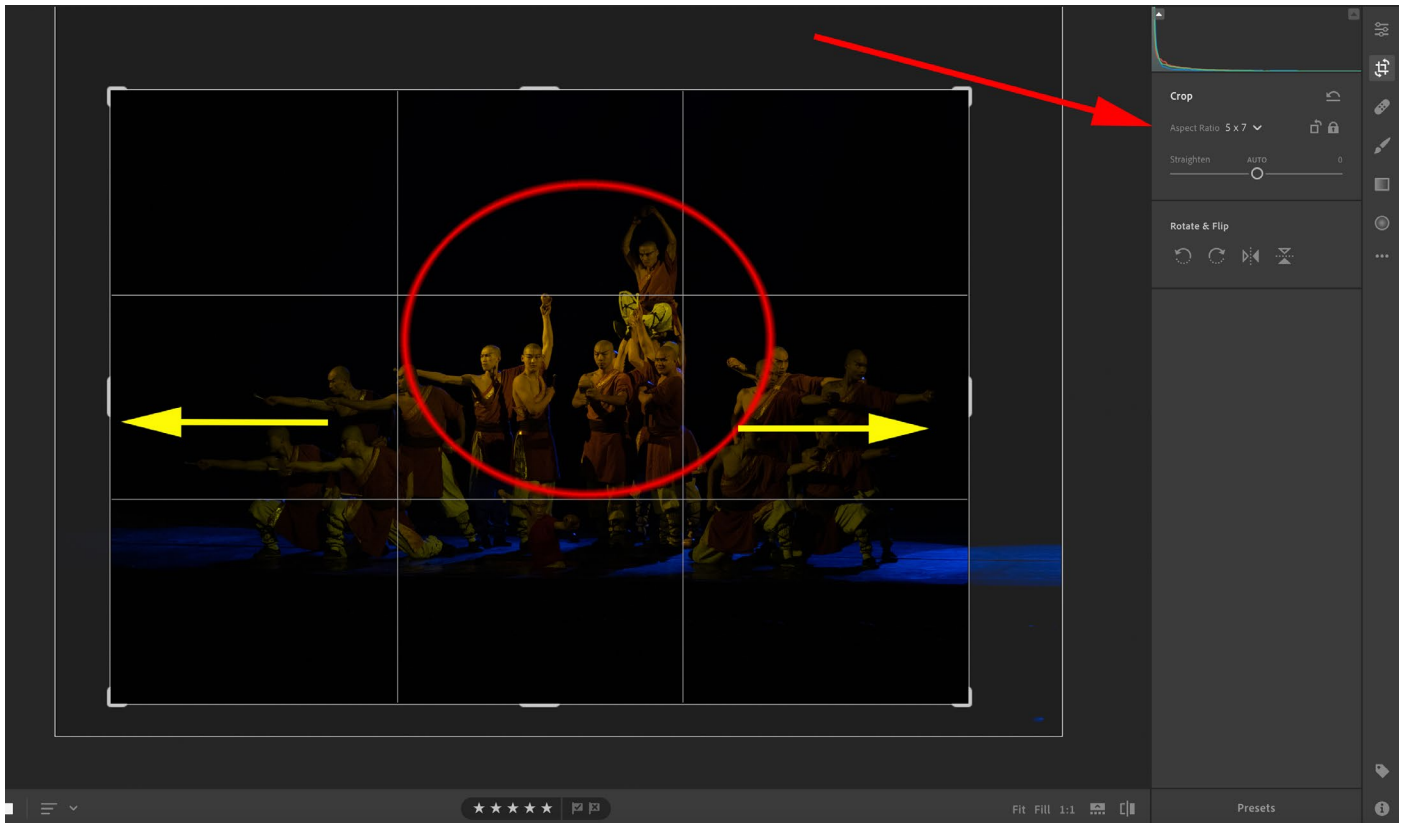


Image 005 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

The 5x7 aspect ratio is a bit narrower and thus provided a better use of the space for my composition.

Using the Rule of Thirds, I placed the elevated man at the crosshairs. I will be using him as my hero stopping point.

Note: I mentioned this in one of the landscapes case studies, but it's worth repeating here. When evaluating a photo for Fundamental Editing, it's crucial to identify the subject of the photograph, so that you can edit accordingly.

At times, the entire frame is the subject. This is often true with landscapes, and it's also true with this picture. The entire Kung Fu dance troupe is the subject. But when the whole frame is occupied by the subject, you still need to provide a path for a viewer to travel through the picture. You also need a place for their eyes to stop. Professional photographers call this place the 'hero.' That 'spot' within the frame will hold slightly more visual weight than the rest of the frame. That can get tricky. This photo will be tricky to post-process to this end. It is a good one to show you as an example.

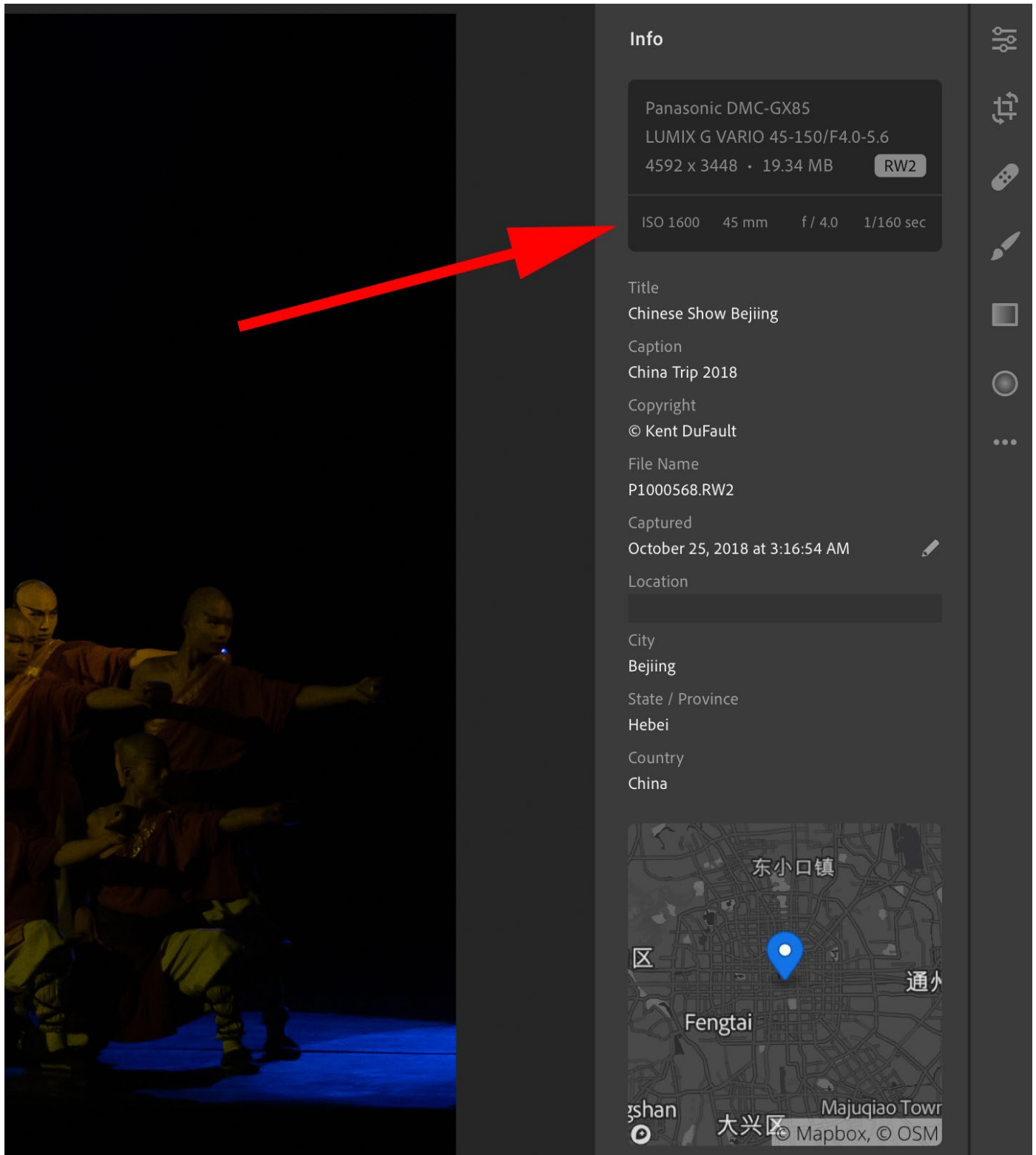


Image 006 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

This photograph was taken at ISO 1600, which is the very upper limit of acceptability for this camera. I knew the digital noise would be substantial, and it will become worse as I open up the shadows.

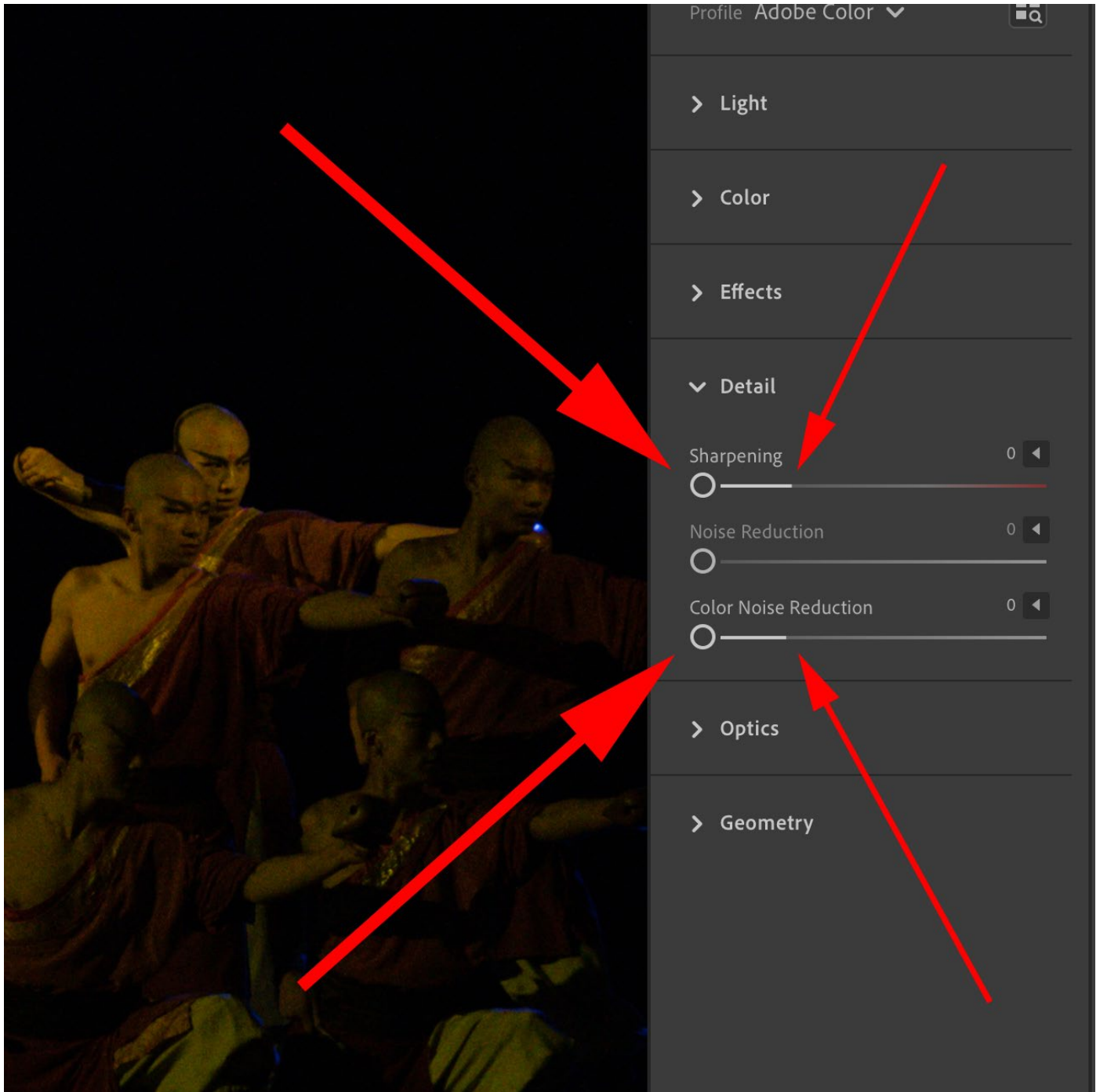


Image 007 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

Noise Reduction in Lightroom CC is found under the Detail Tab. I want to eliminate the noise as much as possible yet keep the picture sharp.

I have the advantage of knowing already that the photo won't be printed as a large print. This gives me some wiggle room.

Note: The larger a picture will be displayed, the more detail you want to retain.

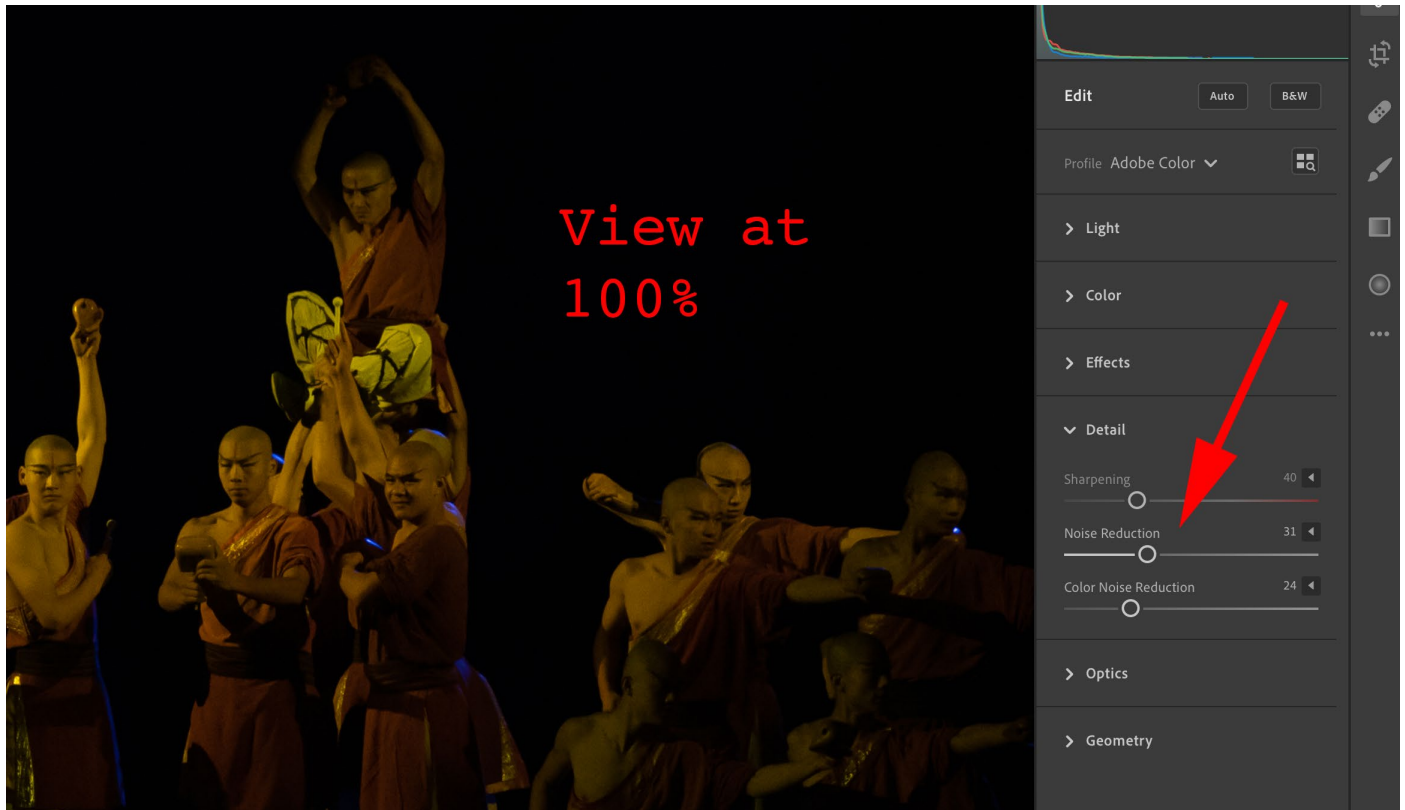


Image 008 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I'm going to break the Fundamental Editing (FE) list protocol and not only make some Noise Reduction but also apply some global Sharpening as well as Color Noise Reduction.

I'm sure some of you are now thinking, "Wait a minute! You said global Sharpening is always last!"

I did say that, and 99.9% of the time I would hold to that rule.

In this case, I'm already aware that digital noise is a problem, and as I try to fix the lighting and Exposure problems, the noise will get worse.

So, imagine something like this.

Say you've cut yourself and you're bleeding pretty badly. I slap a large Band-Aid on your cut, wrap it in a towel, put you in the car, and take you to the emergency room for proper care.

In my FE process, **the step above for this particular situation** is me slapping the Band-Aid on. More help will be needed later on in my Fundamental Editing.

My settings are Sharpening 40, Noise Reduction 31, and Color Noise Reduction 24.



Image 009 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

The next step on the FE list is the global Exposure adjustment.

However, I'm going to throw a real curveball: we will jump to the end of the FE list.

Using the Adjustment Brush, I am going to raise the Exposure on various parts of the Kung Fu Troupe to balance them out for a better global Exposure adjustment.

Note: Look at the histogram. It tells us that there are almost no tones other than black in this picture!

You can see the mask that I created. For this mask, I raised the Exposure to +1.04.



Image 010 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

In Image 010, you can see that I am now in my third mask with the Adjustment Brush.

In each mask, I have varied the Exposure slider in an attempt to put the entire troupe into a closer, more balanced exposure level.

You'll notice that I'm not trying to make them all exactly the same. That would look unnatural. The men that were in the shadows are still in the shadows. The shadows just aren't so dark!



Image 011 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

The White Balance of the men in the shadows was significantly different than the men in the spotlights. I used a local WB adjustment with the Adjustment Brush to bring them all closer together in color.

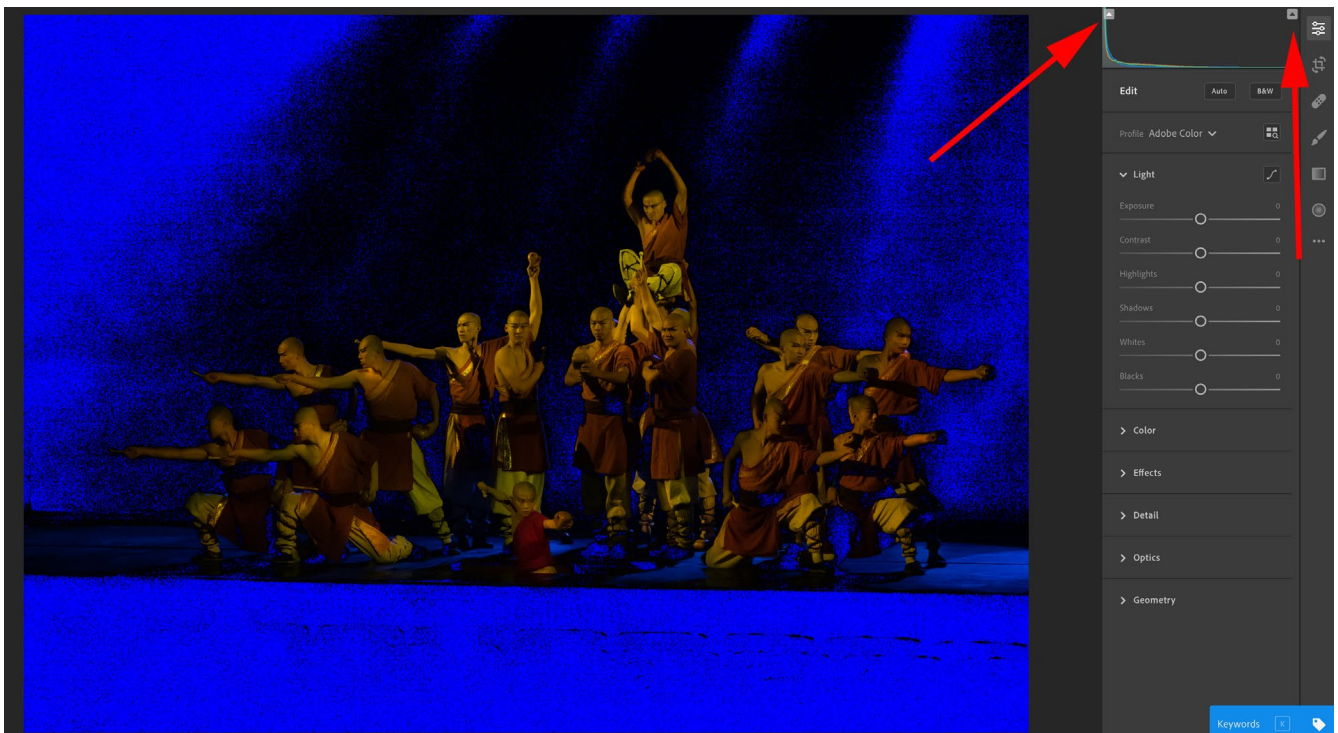


Image 012 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I turned on the Clipping Indicators. Not surprisingly, there was no Highlight Clipping. However, the Shadows Clipping was off the chart. This must be fixed, or my printed photo will look awful!



Image 013 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I raised the global Exposure slider to +0.60. This brightened up the Kung Fu Troupe nicely and also eliminated the Shadows Clipping, as indicated in Lightroom CC.



Image 014 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

During the discussion of my intent for this picture, I talked about how the entire troupe is the subject. Still, the elevated man will be my hero.

I began the process of creating that composition when I was using the Adjustment Brush to increase the Exposure in various points of the picture.

Study Image 014. Where you see the red 3, is the darkest area of the subject. Where you see the red 2, it is a little bit lighter in tone. Finally, where you see the red 1, it is the brightest part of the subject. My hero spot!

I'm going to brighten the hero even a bit more by increasing the Highlights slider to +6.

Remember, the Highlights slider only affects the far-right side of the histogram. That would be only the brightest tones, which happen to fall upon the hero because he is in the most glaring spotlight.



Image 015 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I'm about to do something rare – I'm not even sure that I've ever done this before.

I'm going to raise the Shadows slider to +100 and the Blacks slider to +100.

Whoa! It brought up the Kung Fu Troupe nicely from the shadows as well as the lights on the floor. The background is still wholly black, as viewed in Lightroom CC.

I like the look of this, but I need to check something.

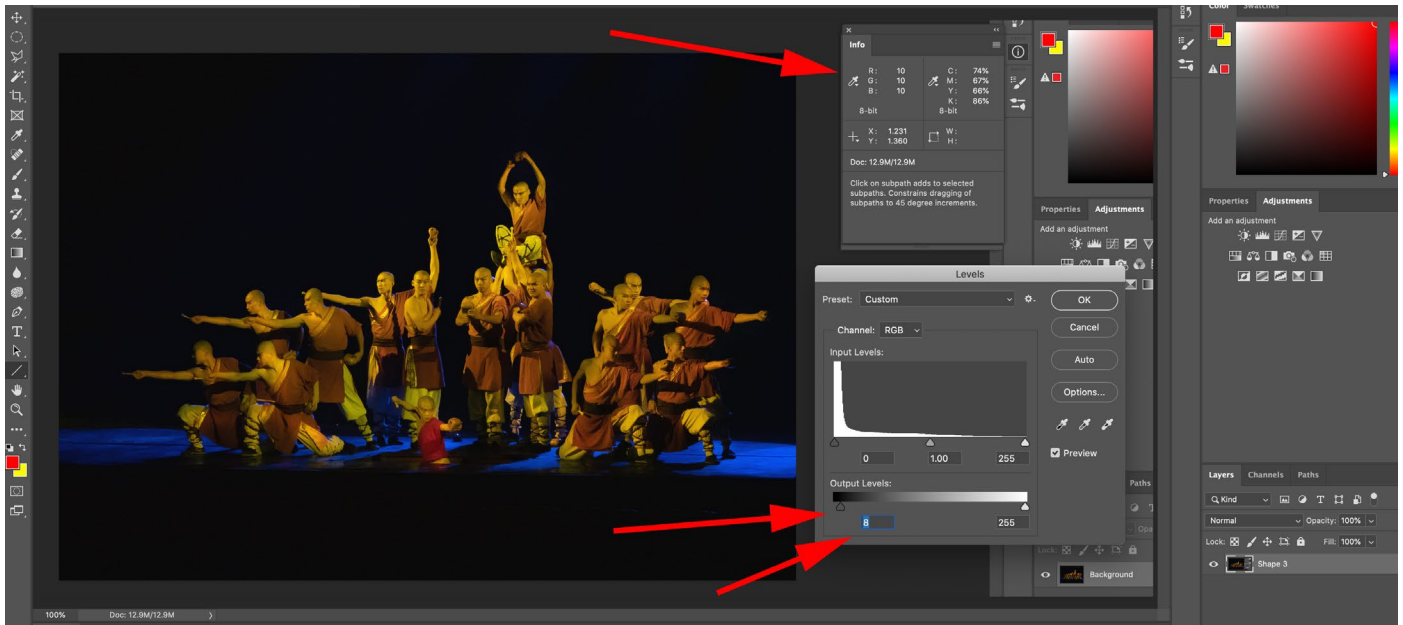


Image 016 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

Since my ultimate goal is to print this photo, I wanted to make sure that the Black Point is appropriately set. With a tricky picture like this that contains a lot of black area, I felt that I needed to accomplish this in Photoshop. It might have been fine using only Lightroom CC, but this way I'll know for sure.

I opened the picture in Photoshop and ran my mouse over all of the black background areas. They were all reading 0,0,0.

That is a poorly set Black Point. For a color photographic print, you want the Black Point (especially when you have large areas of black

or deeply shadowed tones) to be somewhere between 8,8,8 and 12,12,12.

In Photoshop, you can accomplish this by opening the Levels adjustment tool and then set the output Level on the shadow side to the number you wish to use.

I'm setting it to 8. This means my Black Point is 8,8,8.

Now, if I repeat the process of running my mouse all over the black background areas, I will get a reading of 8,8,8 or higher.



Image 017 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I experimented with some global color correction, but it really destroyed the theatrical mood. I decided not to do a global White Balance correction.

Black Level = 0

Black Level = 8-12



Image 018 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I want to return to the Black Point for a minute. The top half of Image 018 was when the Black Point measured 0,0,0. The bottom half of Image 018 is when the Black Point was set to 8,8,8.

Visually, you can see a difference. However, it's difficult to detect with an untrained eye. Yet,

printed photos have a notable difference in the black density. If the Black Point is too low, the shadows take on an inky unnatural appearance. This photograph was a prime candidate for that mistake!



Image 019 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I'm still struggling with the issues of noise and sharpness.

I went back to the global settings and reduced Sharpening to 25. I increased Noise Reduction to 45, and I increased Color Noise Reduction to 60.



Image 020 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

Since I reduced the global Sharpening by almost half, I decided to use the Adjustment Brush and locally Sharpen some critical elements within the composition.



Image 021 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I noticed a few hot spots that were created by the spotlights. They were eye snags, in my opinion, so I removed them with the Healing Brush.

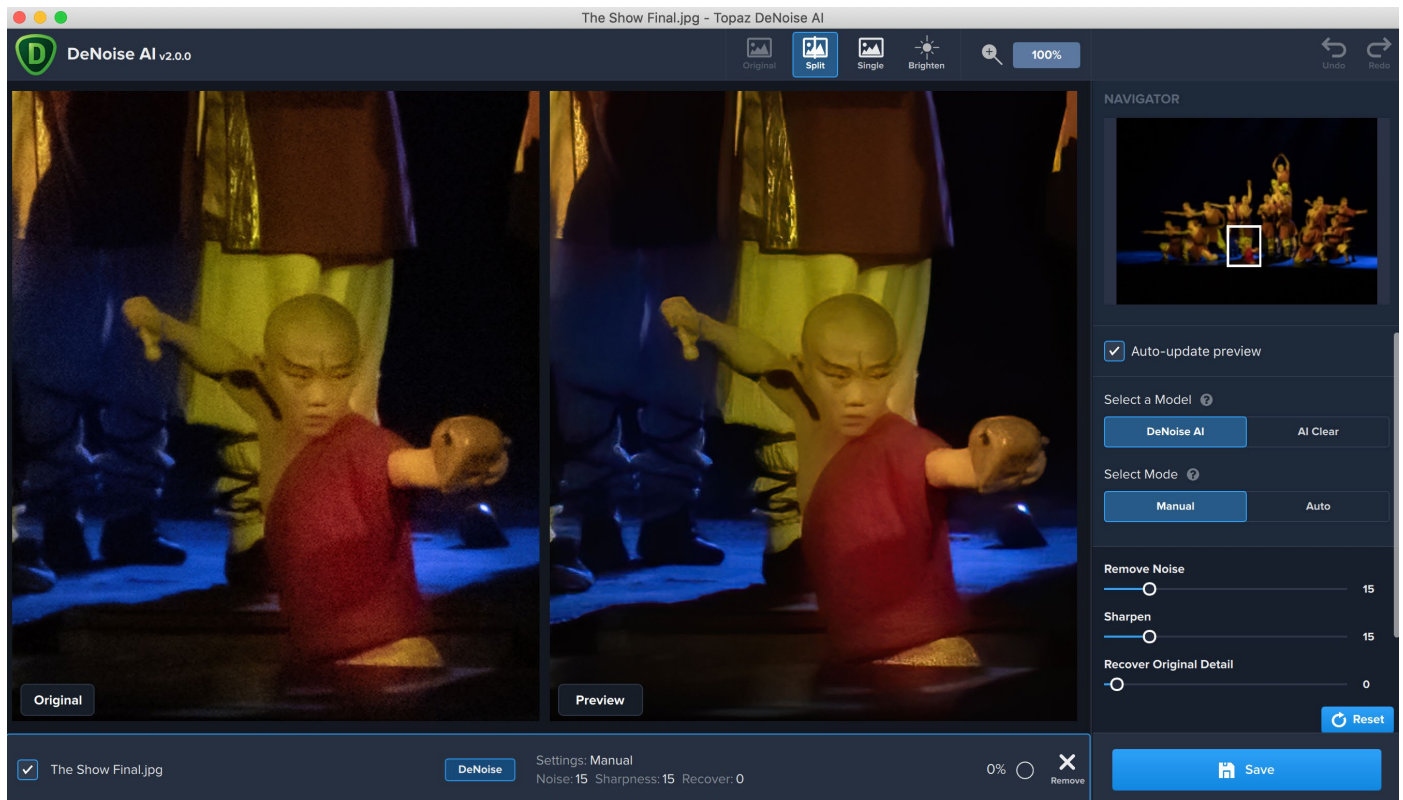


Image 022 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I was still not satisfied with the level of digital noise.

In these case studies, I have mentioned several times the DeNoise AI software program by Topaz Labs.

I ran this shot through DeNoise AI, and the result was spectacular. It was a considerable improvement over the Lightroom Noise Reduction tool.

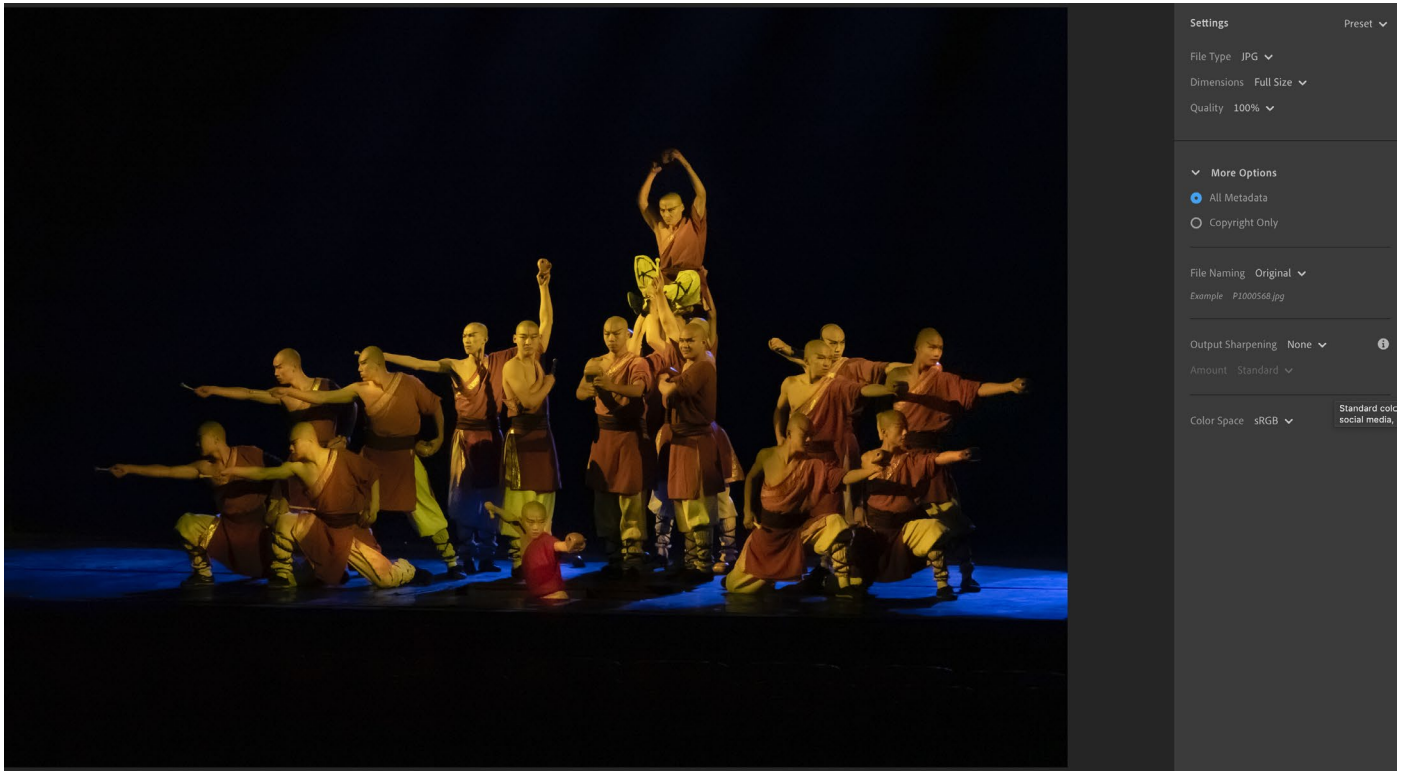


Image 023 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I imported the DeNoise AI version back into Lightroom and properly labeled it so that I could select the right file in the future.

I then exported the image to make a print!



Image 024 – Photograph and Fundamental Editing by Kent DuFault

The top half of Image 024 is the original camera file. The bottom half is my Fundamental Editing final photo.

As you can easily see, Fundamental Editing made a vast difference in this picture!



Image 025 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

Here is my final picture.