

The value of actions and plug-ins to professional photographers is indisputable, but finding the right ones can be daunting.

BY WENDELL BENEDETTI

Get *tweaked*

A ROUNDUP OF PLUG-INS AND ACTIONS

Plug-ins and actions dramatically expand the capabilities of Photoshop. Some provide new and time-saving ways to apply the application's tools, while others provide distinct capabilities. Both streamline the workflow from image capture to final output. No professional photographer should be without them.

But there are literally thousands of these tools available. Instead of Googling through

pages of worthless links to find ones for your particular workflow, check out the examples from the Web sites below. All of them offer downloadable plug-ins and actions, and many include instructional DVDs, reviews, tutorials and lively forums.

Jim Lewis runs **ACTION CENTRAL** (www.atncentral.com), the **Photoshop Actions Exchange** Web site, as a service to

the image editing community. The site features almost 100 free downloadable actions, each with an example posted so you can see what it does. Among the actions is **Erick Nguyen's** stunning Watercolor effect. The 26-step plug-in automatically sets up layers as needed, while the user makes the desired adjustments. **Stephen Almas' Urban Acid** action set simulates several darkroom-based cross-processing techniques for edgy urban and glamour images, also letting users make creative adjustments.

ADOBE STUDIO EXCHANGE

(share.studio.adobe.com/default.asp) includes thousands of free/shareware and full commercial applications. Registration is required, but there's no charge. The free **Philip Graves Pencil Sketch Version 2** action automatically turns color images into pencil sketches without user input. The nifty free **Waterscape** actions, by **Lisa Tam**, turn any scenic photograph into an image reflected in water, sans user input. The



Heavy application of the LucisArt plug-in Exposure option turns a portrait into a revealing character study.



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AGD Color Temperature & Exposure Correction plug-in automatically corrects color imbalance. This shareware includes sophisticated curve mixers and ICC profile conformance.

ALIEN SKIN SOFTWARE

(www.alienskin.com) plug-ins optimize, restore, mimic film and render unusual effects. **Exposure** makes digital images look as if they were captured with any of the most popular film types; also offers darkroom and studio effects; \$199. (Full review in the Bonus Content at www.ppmag.com.) **Image Doctor** removes distracting artifacts that ruin otherwise good images. It has a very effective JPEG artifact removal tool, and also selectively eliminates spots and scratches; \$129.

Xenofex 2, especially useful for Web designers, renders 14 graphic effects, ranging from burnt edges to lightning, cracks and crumple; \$129.

ALTOSTORM SOFTWARE

(www.altostorm.com) **Rectilinear Panorama** plug-in has a wizard-like interface for correcting mild to extreme geometric image distortion. It can virtually change the lens or move the position where the shot was taken; \$69 home edition, \$179 pro version. Windows only.

AUTO FX SOFTWARE (www.autofx.com) plug-ins create artistic edges and photo-realistic lighting and shadows. Some brush on color correction and sharpness, others rebuild lost detail or turn images into works of art. **Photo/Graphic Edges 6.0** is one of the most comprehensive Photoshop-compatible plug-ins available, with 14 photographic effects to create thousands of edge and border effects; \$179.

Mystical Lighting lets you apply photo-realistic lighting and shadow effects that weren't in the original image. It ships with 16 visual effects and over 400 preset configurations; \$179.

Auto FX AutoEye 2.0 optimizes images automatically by rebuilding details that

don't readily appear in the original image. It removes colorcasts and noise and applies motion blur and grain, when needed; \$129.

GREG GORMAN'S (www.gorman-

photography.com/gorman.html) Web site features samples of his extraordinary celebrity photographs. It also includes free PDF text files that walk users through the process of

ONLINE RESOURCES FOR PHOTOSHOP ACTIONS & PLUG-INS

Numerous online sites contain links to Photoshop compatible plug-ins and actions, but little more. Some sites go the extra mile with informative tutorials, instructional DVDs and unbiased reviews.

The **Photoshop Actions Exchange** (www.atncentral.com) is one of the best online resources for actions, tutorials and books. Its online store features insightful books, a tutorial section filled with Photoshop instruction, and downloadable versions of Jim Lewis and Kent Christiansen's best Photoshop tips. Also available are links to additional helpful Web sites and downloadable online actions, as well as a frequently asked questions section that briefly explains where actions fit into the Photoshop directory structure.

Adobe Studio Exchange (share.studio.adobe.com/Default.asp) is a treasure trove of Photoshop action and plug-in information. Not only does it list thousands of downloadable commercial, shareware and freeware plug-ins and actions, it features candid feedback from users. This extensive site has hundreds of downloadable tutorials, with accompanying feedback, and similar support for eight other Adobe imaging applications. The required registration to download files is free.

PluginsWorld (pluginsworld.com) covers all the popular Adobe and Apple imaging applications. Although not dedicated to Photoshop, PluginsWorld offers more than 500 downloadable commercial, shareware and freeware plug-ins, with descriptions and user ratings.

The Plugin Site (thepluginsite.com) combines the offerings of a plug-in manufacturer

with a wide range of additional resources. It provides numerous links to free plug-ins, reviews, tutorials and a gallery of images that have been modified by the company's plug-ins.

Free Photoshop (www.freephotoshop.com) provides complete descriptions and reviews of hundreds of freeware and commercially available plug-ins. It's a great place to begin looking when you need a quick, unbiased overview of what a plug-in does and how well it does it.

Ron Nichols Digital Learning (www.ronnichols.com) Web site supplements its actions products with instructional DVD sets that walk users through the fundamentals of various studio techniques. Topics include watercolor painting, oil painting techniques, and a guide to effective portraiture posing. Nichols has a special discount section for PPA members.

The Russell Brown Show (www.russellbrown.com) is filled with interesting downloadable Quicktime videos that cover all aspects of the Photoshop workflow. Simply click on the video of your choice and sit back and watch informative lectures, with illustrations, on topics ranging from sharpening to moiré removal to advanced masking. All lectures are free.

The Adobe Evangelists (www.adobeevangelists.com) Web site offers free downloadable PDF tutorials covering all the important features and uses of Photoshop. It also has a few interesting downloadable actions as well as information about Julieanne Kost's Photoshop CS Fundamentals and Photoshop Advanced Techniques DVDs.

—Wendell Benedetti

THE GOODS: SOFTWARE RESOURCES

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The Pop Art tool in nik's Color Efex Pro 2 selectively transforms ordinary images into psychedelic visions.

creating actions that expedite RAW workflow and black-and-white conversion.

KODAK'S AUSTIN DEVELOPMENT CENTER (www.asf.com), formerly Applied Science Fiction, is well known for its optimization plug-ins to restore aging or badly exposed images, reduce noise and smooth skin tones. The professional versions support 16-bit files and feature advanced controls. Good for correcting poorly exposed backlit shots, **Digital SHO** reveals image details that were lost in muddy shadows or nearly blown highlights; \$99.95 pro version, \$49.95 regular version.

Digital ROC restores color slides and prints

by automatically removing unwanted colorcasts. Also optimizes color balance, contrast and brightness; \$99.95 pro version, \$49.95 regular.

Digital GEM selectively reduces unwanted noise and grain without introducing blurring; \$99.95 pro version, \$49.95 regular.

Digital GEM Airbrush smoothes surfaces while preserving detail. You can selectively apply it to light and dark areas; \$99.95.

KUBOTA WORKSHOPS (www.kubota-workshops.com/products.php) offers a variety of actions to automate production, streamline the RAW workflow, build photo albums and add dramatic artistic effects. **Artistic Tools**

Volume 2 Action Pak features over 60 diverse actions. Some apply toning, others boost color, add glows, enhance landscape and convert from color to black-and-white. The popular Lord of the Rings set gives any landscape or portrait an ethereal, arty look; \$69.

Production Tools Action Pak automates time-consuming digital studio tasks. Its 50 actions batch resize and correct color, bring out shadow details, rotate, and sharpen; \$69.

AutoAlbum Volume 2 actions automate the creation of professional wedding albums. With very little user input, these actions quickly build glitzy magazine-style layouts from TIF, JPEG or PSD files. Over 426 pre-configured page layouts included; \$249.

LUCISART (www.lucisart.com) uses the patented Differential Hysteresis Processing (DHP) algorithm to bring out lost details in near-blown highlights and muddy shadows. It also simulates several artistic effects, Klimpt's surrealistic techniques, a sculptured look and several plaid textures; \$169.

NIK SOFTWARE (www.niksoftware.com) plug-ins approach imaging from the perspective of a photographer. They selectively sharpen, apply realistic filter effects, convert color images to black-and-white, and reduce noise. **Nik Sharpener Pro 2.0** has sliders and brushes to sharpen only the desired sections of an image. It supports 16-bit files and RAW images; \$169.95 Inkjet version, \$329.95 Complete version.

Nik Color Efex Pro 2.0 simulates such lab effects as cross-processing, glass filters, black-and-white conversion and toning; \$299.95 Complete version with 75 effects, \$159.95 Select version with 45 effects, \$99.95 standard version with 19 effects.

Nik Color Efex Pro 2.0, Rick Sammon Edition, includes 12 filters used by the noted photojournalist. Some apply sophisticated tones, others introduce simulated sunlight or apply interesting vignettes; \$79.95.

Dfine 1.0 reduces unwanted image noise. It minimizes JPEG artifacts and noise, without throwing off the color balance, contrast or brightness; \$99.95.

ONONE SOFTWARE (www.ononesoftware.com) image enhancement plug-ins were originally developed by Lizard Tech and Extensis. Some provide image correction and enhancement, some create masks, some enlarge images for high-resolution output, some make borders. **pxl SmartScale** gives you the option to up-scale medium-resolution images by as much as 1,600 percent, without noticeable loss in output quality. Sharpness, edge contrast and edge detail tools included; \$199.95.

Mask Pro 3 creates sophisticated Photoshop masks using advanced color matching and decontamination technology to map out difficult objects, such as glass, smoke and hair; \$199.95.

PhotoFrame creates thousands of professional-quality border and edge effects. It supports glows, shadows, textures and bevels as well as configurable edge effects; \$199.95.

PIXEL GENIUS (www.pixelgenius.com) approaches image enhancement from a photographer's perspective rather than a computer programmer's. Its plug-ins all draw heavily from darkroom and studio techniques.

PhotoKit simulates over 140 analog photographic effects. Among the more interesting features are toning, burning and dodging sets,

and color to black-and-white conversion; \$49.

PhotoKit Sharpener's workflow approach sharpens during image capture, creative editing and output. For added speed, its non-destructive sharpening can be batch applied; \$99.95.

PhotoKit Color provides numerous darkroom-based color and tone enhancements, cross-processing tools, color correction filters, and color overlay effects; \$99.95.

PhotoKit-EL is designed for darkroom technicians. It simulates the color balance, tone and grayscale conversion that at one time took place only in the lab; \$39.95.

THE PLUGIN SITE (www.thepluginsite.com) software manages plug-ins, creates edges, textures and frames, corrects for color imbalance and applies artistic effects. The recently introduced MacOS X Version of **FocalBlade** features sharpening and blurring tools suitable for first time users to seasoned experts. It works with 8- and 16-bit images to enhance without adding distracting elements; \$49.95.

The MacOS X Version of the **ColorWasher** plug-in corrects for exposure, saturation, contrast and color imbalances in 8- and 16-bit images. It features novice and expert controls; \$49.95.

Harry's Filters 3.0 plug-ins include some 70 effects and options. This freeware applies gradients and patterns; warps and artistically transforms, and can be used to reduce noise.

GARY FONG INNOVATIONS

(www.garyfong.com) features products that expedite the work of wedding photographers, like an actions-based album designer. Digital Album (and collage) Designer uses drag-and-drop technology to automate the creation of striking wedding albums and collages, adding borders, film spools, artistic edges, photo corners and drop shadows; \$99 sale price.

RON NICHOLS (www.ronnichols.com) offers wedding photographers actions-based tools that speed up retouching and proofing. The **Proofing Actions CD** speeds making six- and four-up proof pages, with customizable background and borders. Includes cropping scripting to apply 8x10 or square crops to a directory of images. Watermarks are supported; \$139.

Production Retouching Palette actions automate wedding and portrait retouching. They select the appropriate brushes, controls brush characteristics, while managing blending and opacity. Great for first-time retouchers; \$169 downloadable version, \$179 on CD. ■

Visit www.ppmag.com Bonus Content for direct links to the plug-ins and actions mentioned in this article, plus additional example photos.

Altostorm uses a wizard-like interface for correcting mild to extreme geometric image distortion.

