

# Size really does matter

Want to give your portraiture a fashion look? Lighting is key, but you don't necessarily need anything complex. [Michael Roscoe](#) tries out four set-ups using Broncolor's mammoth Para umbrella as a single light source

Creating a credible fashion look is notoriously difficult. As soon as any style comes to the fore, it's over. The best shooters in this market have an instinctive talent for lighting, and they're constantly experimenting. Simplicity is often the key, and there's no better place to start than with a single light source.

Before selecting which one to use for my four set-ups, I had to consider a few issues. My weapon of choice wasn't any ordinary piece of kit, but one of the single biggest lighting products available. Broncolor's Para FB range of reflectors actually come in three size choices, with

opening diameters ranging from 170 to 330cm.

It might have been tempting to go for the biggest option, but there's no point if it won't fit in the studio or location it's going to be used in. This means I had to consider the height of the Para, but also add on enough ground clearance once it was mounted on the stand, and extra ceiling space above so it could be raised and angled when I wanted.

The size of this product needs proper support, so you can't scrimp by getting a stand that

isn't up to the job. The Para also won't fit onto a standard-sized spigot, needing a 28mm socket fitting found on such products as the Avenger Super Wind Up 29. This Avenger light stand also enables the larger Paras to be wheeled around as they're too hefty to safely drag about on their own, and it can also raise your light source to a maximum height of around 3m and lower it without the risk of it slipping down out of control.

The final consideration, and perhaps the most important factor, was that the Para doesn't come with an integrated flash unit. However, it does feature a standard sized 5/8-inch mount spigot so that

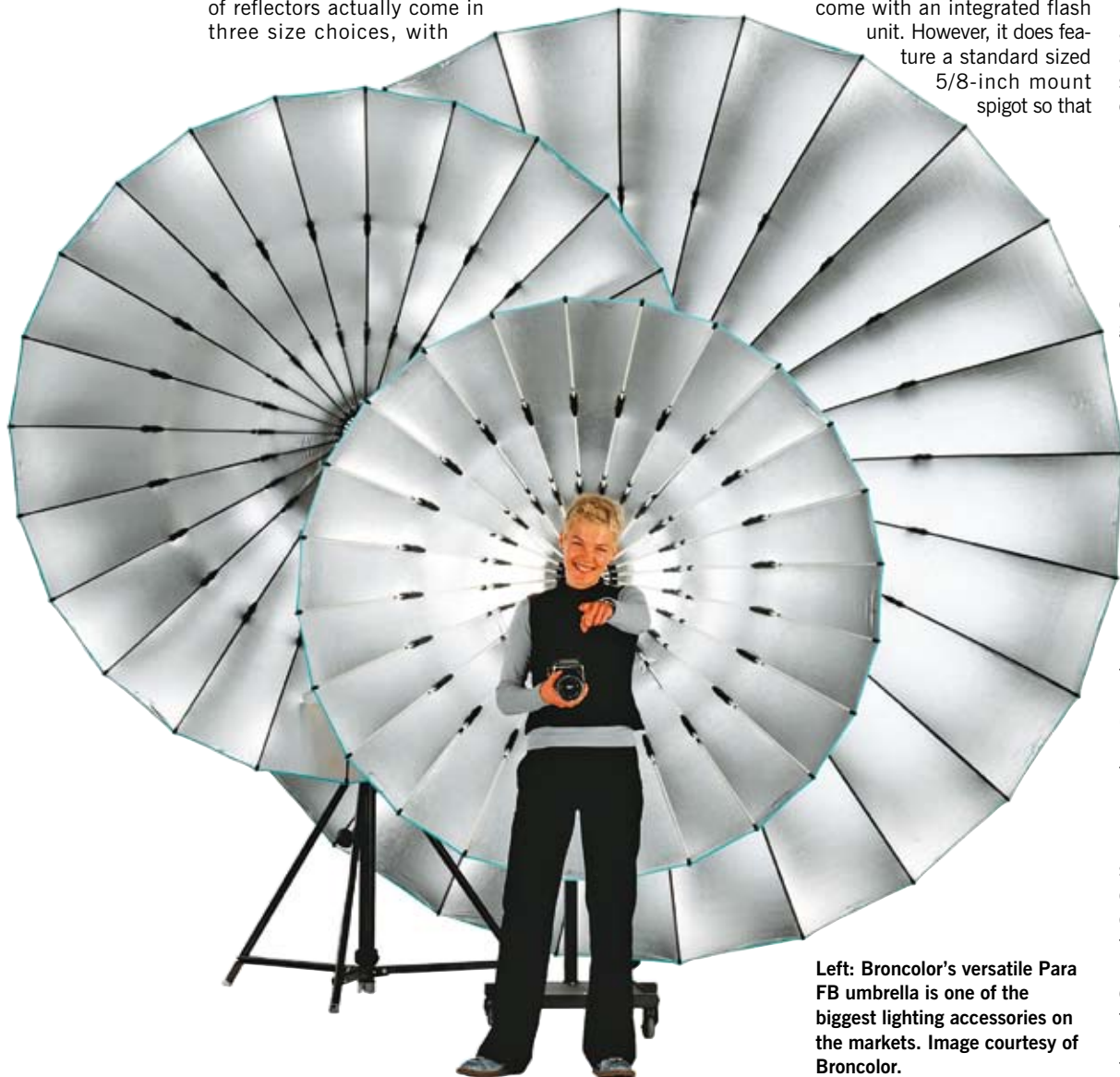
most flash heads can be attached to the end of its arm inside the reflector.

## Set up

I used the mid-sized Umbrella Para 220 FB, which as the name suggests, has an aperture of 220cm. It comes in a surprisingly compact 35x32x31cm box, or it can be carried single-handedly in a slightly smaller soft bag as it weighs only 9.1kg, so it will easily fit into the boot or onto the back seat of a car. The element that is bulkier than the Para is the stand needed to support it as it weighs a stout 35kg, although lighter ones are available. However, it also folds down small enough to fit into the back of an estate.

The Para 220 FB is surprisingly quick to set up. Once it is mounted on the stand the umbrella shape is unfurled by winding a handle on its rear. It is ready to use in a few minutes, but it's worth checking that none of the silver fabric material has got caught in its hinges as it might snag and potentially damage the lining. The angle of the Para can be altered across a maximum range of about 180°, although its movement is restricted to approximately 130° on the Avenger stand as the umbrella will collide with the stand when it is pointed down. However, it is still possible to swing it up at around up at around 90° if necessary.

Broncolor is keen to point out that this isn't a mere umbrella. It is, in fact, a parabolic umbrella (hence the Para name) with 24 braces and a reflective silver interior that make up a series of hard light sources. There are a number of factors that make the Para a truly controllable light source, including three different density diffusers available. However, a fundamental feature is that the position of the lamp head can be adjusted and focused towards and away from the silver lined interior by adjusting a knob. This, in turn, enables the spread and consistency of the



**Left: Broncolor's versatile Para FB umbrella is one of the biggest lighting accessories on the markets. Image courtesy of Broncolor.**



'This isn't a mere umbrella. It has 24 braces and a reflective silver interior that make up a series of hard light sources.'

**Left:** The Para's ability to control the spill of light is simply achieved by adjusting the position of a flash head along the arm and by adding a dish attachment. However, in this image I positioned the flash head half way down the arm and pointed the Para down to direct the light onto the subject to enable the background to fade out. This image also used a hair light positioned above the model using a Pulso G head and beauty dish. The final image was captured using a Nikon D3x and 50mm lens.  
Model: Heidi Burns, model agency: Rah Productions Ltd [www.rahproductions.co.uk](http://www.rahproductions.co.uk).  
All illustrative potographs © Michael Roscoe.



**Above:** This image was captured using a 220 Para FB with a flash head and dish attachment positioned to get a crisp light on the model and shadow on the background. I positioned a black polyboard on the right-hand side of the set, and the spill of light was adjusted so there is some fall-off in the top-left-hand corner to help the model stand out. I was lying on the floor to get this perspective with a Nikon D3x set on ISO100, f/13 with a focal length of 55mm.  
**Model:** Chloë Tee, stylist/make-up artist: Heidi Walkington.

**Above centre:** The obvious benefit of using a Para 220 FB umbrella is that it produces a large and even spill of light that is ideal for illuminating a full-body model shot. However, that doesn't mean it can't be used as a backlight, a backdrop or even just a prop. Light-shapers like the Para are often used as interest in TV promotions such as the Myleene Klass Pantene advert and in music videos like Lady Gaga's Poker Face.

**Models:** Shaun Charles-Smith & Warren Philo, stylists/make-up artists: Anna Pichowski and Melissa Chartan.



illumination to be altered. It is also possible to adjust the angle of the flash head to point it at different sections of the interior to obtain a variety of soft and hard effects.

These elements, combined with the possibility that almost any flash head can be used a light-shaper such as a dish or grid, mean it is possible to get an almost infinite number of different lighting effects. I used the Para 220 FB with a Broncolor Scoro pack and a Pulso G flash head, but Broncolor users can

also employ a Unilite, Pulso Twin, Pulso 8, or Broncolor HMI (up to 575W), and it is possible to achieve an even spread of light using a Broncolor Ringflash P.

My only words of warning are to be careful that the flash doesn't go off as you're adjusting its position using the front focusing knob on the end of the arm. Needless to say, standing in close proximity to the light once it has bounced off the silver lining could do more damage than make your eyes water, but the position of this knob also means



This image was captured using the D3x and 24-70mm lens, and lit with the Para positioned several meters away but directly in front of the model. The large spill of soft light from the Para enabled me to shoot and move around in front of it without having to worry about casting a shadow or blocking the light on the model. Any shadows cast behind the model were filled with two background flash heads.  
 Model: Jessie Purdue, stylists/ make-up artists: Hayley Gittins, Jodie Hoggard and Zoe Holland.

it difficult to adjust the flash head's position if you are using a front diffuser.

### Fringe benefits

I discovered an unexpected benefit of using the Para, but one that can't be underestimated. Put simply – they impress clients. In fact, they impress models, stylists and almost any one who hasn't come across their scale and appearance before. Like it or not, it is sometimes beneficial to have a bit of theatre on a fashion shoot.

This may be no big deal in the hallowed circles of the world's top models, photographers and fashionistas, but for the rest of us it's a very simple way of creating a high-end impression.

Let's face it, it is understandable that clients are not aware of the intricacies of the lighting used, and in fairness it's not their job to know about it. But one thing almost anyone can understand is scale, shape and form, and these are a sure-fire way to wow them.

It is most unlikely that many

photographers will invest in a Para for this reason alone, but if you have a really important client and you want to pull out all the stops, then it may at least be worth hiring one.

### Conclusions

Overall, this is a very simple piece of kit to use and photographers that want to create a classic Para effect can easily achieve it by putting the flash head in the flood position and making sure their model is standing at least three or four meters away.

However, to get the most out of it does take some practice and experimentation.

The Para may seem like an extravagant accessory but its use is as appropriate for shooting fashion as lighting up room sets. Is it well made, easy to transport and stow away, and simple to operate. It is certainly not cheap, but like most things in life, you get what you pay for and there few light accessories that I've come across that are as durable and offer as many creative lighting opportunities as this model. **BJP**