

TIM PALMER

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

FUJIFILM behind the camera



THE ROAR OF THE CROWD

AN INTERVIEW WITH TIM PALMER

There's nothing quite like a bit of reality television to concentrate the mind. Match night at Old Trafford, a seething blend of celebrities and the general public, probably combines the unpredictability of the jungle with the combustibility of a Big Brother house.

Trying to keep his cool while a crowd of over 70,000 at the Manchester United versus Watford Premiership match in January was shamelessly losing its was cinematographer Tim Palmer as he recorded key scenes for a new BBC drama, *True Dare Kiss*.

Episode two of the six-part by Debbie (*Cutting It*) Horsfield required, said Palmer, "probably 12 to 15 scenes at a match. We were shooting a mixture of live football and stuff with the actors in the stadium on match night. It had to be done with military precision because they are very strict about people going in and filming, especially with a live match going on."

Palmer, no stranger to all kinds of small screen lighting challenges in a career, which includes hit television shows like *Life On Mars*, *Cold Feet*, *Robin Hood* and *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet*, explained the deal.

"While recce-ing it, I knew that when we were going to film the actors in the stands on match night there was no way I could bring any lighting in; I'd just have to shoot with available stadium light. I did the colour temperature reading and the stadium

lighting read at about 6,500 Kelvin, which is a very high daylight content. It was also not a very bright reading at T1.4 at 500ASA.

"Because the daylight balance was so high, if I'd used tungsten stock, it would have come up very blue and would have needed a lot of colour correction in telecine. It would have pushed all sorts of colours in all kinds

and it came up absolutely fine. So that's what we ended up shooting on the night. It was no more grainy than you'd expect of fast film, the colour was fantastic and the important thing was it enabled us to get real footage of a real match night."

It didn't quite finish there. "We also then went in on a non-match night, set up close-ups, proper dialogue with sound, shot with the same stock and matched in the lighting. Obviously I was able to put in a little more fill just to bring the exposure back up a bit. I didn't want to make it look too good, not to correct it back too much because I knew we'd still be intercutting it with what we had shot for real."

Said Palmer: "What I've seen on the assembly so far has been great. There were lots of goals [Man U won 4-0, for the record], lots of cheering crowd and actors jumping up and down. I had to do shots where I was panning all the around the stadium from the relatively underexposed areas where the actors were sitting to where it then gets massively overexposed with the stadium lights."

"I wasn't able to do any stop pull on the night so I just had to let it go and hope to bring it back afterwards. The way the Realia 500D handled the contrast was really very impressive," noted Palmer.

Considering how packed Palmer's CV has been over the past decade or so, combining episodic TV with several major dramas, his actual beginnings in cinematography were decidedly halting.

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of directions, especially when you've got the green of the football pitch and colours of the players' shirts.

"I thought," said Palmer, "that this would be a perfect opportunity to use the Realia 500D because it's fast and daylight balanced. I couldn't bring in more than one lens so it had to be the zoom. Where we were filming, the available light was about a stop and a half underexposed from the maximum stop on the zoom so I knew going in we'd be underexposing the film and then having to pull it back in telecine."

"In the 'prep' week, I did some tests underexposing the Fuji stock, shooting it on the zoom at the exact stop and the exact lighting level that the stadium lights would give me –

Photo main: DP Tim Palmer and above centre, behind the camera, at Old Trafford shooting the new BBC drama, *True Dare Kiss*

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Boasting dual citizenship – his parents live in San Francisco – he studied history at the University of California, Berkeley before beginning fully to indulge a growing passion for still photography. "I was a photographer's assistant for two years and then I branched out to do my own editorial work for about five years.

"During that time, although I really loved film photography I didn't really understand what it was; lighting for film appealed to me in a kind of parallel universe. I certainly had no idea how to get into it and it was only through various coincidences – a friend of a friend said they knew someone at art school who needed someone to do the lighting for their student film – that I got into it. I had a go, and it seemed to work out all right.

"After that, I thought that as I'd seen how a film crew worked, I have to start at the bottom so I beavered away doing freebies for more student films and did some basic crewing."

Eventually, recalled Palmer, he met a clapper loader who took him on as her trainee on *Institute Benjamenta* or *This Dream People Call Human Life*, the intriguingly-titled, award-winning feature debut in 1995 by the Brothers Quay. There he met "my first and foremost mentor", DP Nic Knowland BSC, who then took him on to another film.

"Nic's a magnificent cameraman; I learned so much from him – and he almost persuaded me to stay on as his clapper loader and not to go to film school." Tempting as that was, Palmer decided to take the offer of a three-year course at the NFTS, which, he admitted, "proved to be extremely valuable. As well as all the contacts I made [he was a contemporary of other aspiring DPs like Adam Suschitsky and Alessandra Scherillo], I also got a chance to work on between 20 to 25 short films while I was there."

Looking at his subsequent career, he has also capitalised on other initial NFTS contacts like directors Jeremy Webb (who has directed half the

episodes of *True Dare Kiss*) and, especially, John McKay, with whom, after collaborating on a pair of shorts at film school, he has worked on two of the BBC's updated *Canterbury Tales*, *Life On Mars*, *Waste Of Shame* and *Robin Hood*.

His "big break" – apart from the invaluable earlier mentoring of Knowland – came on Annie Griffin's BAFTA Scotland-winning comedy-drama serial, *Coming Soon*, about an experimental acting troupe. "I think she hired me on the strength of a short film I'd made called *Glottis*, on 35mm and in black-and-white; it was a rather surreal piece which seemed to catch her eye."

That in turn led to the first series of Griffin's acclaimed C4 comedy series, *The Book Group* – and Palmer doesn't seem to have looked back since. "For the past couple of years at least, the jobs seemed to have dovetailed quite nicely," he suggested, modestly.

More recently, he shot the last couple of episodes in series two of *Life On Mars* (having also done a block in the first series). "The whole premise of it is giving it a great look. You're expected to go in there and really do things you may not usually do in TV in terms of working the angles and the lighting.

"It's a real challenge, never boring and you're always being stretched to the limits of your imagination. If you can succeed with that – and people respond to it – then you really know that you're a valid practitioner of your craft."

Palmer has also shot a new C4 drama, *Saddam's Tribe*, which seems to be pretty much what it says on the pack – "a very dark and evil piece", said Palmer, about Hussein family rivalries as the notorious Iraqi ruling clan began to fragment violently in the 90s.

It's directed by Christopher Menaul, with whom Palmer worked briefly on this year's BAFTA-nominated *See No Evil – The Moors Murders*,

when he filled in for DP Lukas Strelbel. That gritty recreation of the 60s *cause celebre* was also the first time Palmer had used Fujifilm. "I liked what Lukas had done with it, and I was very pleased with the results after working with it, too."

True Dare Kiss – starring, among others, Paul Hilton, Paul McGann, Dervla Kirwan, Dawn Steele, Ciarán McMenamin, Esther Hall and Pooky Quesnel – is a sprawling drama about the fall-out in a large, extended family following the death of its estranged North Country patriarch (David Bradley).

"In early discussions with the directors [Jeremy Webb, Declan O'Dwyer], they were," said Palmer, "referring to *Six Feet Under* as being an interesting comparison in style.

Producer Marcus Wilson said of Palmer: "What impresses me is the way he doesn't impose any personal style on the show – all his work is driven by the requirements of that particular show. He has a great sensitivity to the needs of the director and the artists he's working with and is very good at balancing the look of a particular scene with the overall arc of the story."

Meanwhile, noted Palmer: "As well as for the football episode, I also had another very specific reason for wanting to use Fujifilm on this piece. Throughout the story, the various characters have flashbacks to their childhood – their growing up, adolescence and so on – so I used Fujifilm, the Eterna 500T, for those because I just felt it gave a more appropriate look.

"Most of the flashbacks are from the 80s and the stock has a softer, pastely feel that reacted just right to the blues that I was putting in. There also that earthiness that Fujifilm gives." ■ **QUENTIN FALK**

True Dare Kiss, to air on BBC One later this year, was partially originated on 16mm Fujicolor Eterna 500T 8673 and Reala 500D 8692



Photo main: a scene from *Waste Of Shame*; above l-r: scenes from *Life On Mars*, *Saddam's Tribe* and on the set of *Robin Hood*