

Go-to filters

We talked to drama DoP **Nick Dance** to see what filters he regularly uses.

It's true that quite a lot of what we might have used filters for can now be done in post. For instance, I tend not to use colour grads now because this is quite easy to do in post and it gives more control of position and colour. Producers tend not to want too much burnt in, keeping options for the grade. Obviously, as cinematographers, we want to put our stamp on the look on the day but we also have to choose our battles, and often schedules dictate what can be done on set.

NDs and ND grads

I still tend to use ND grads – mostly for bright skies but sometimes interior as well. If you've got a bright wall you want to take down and it's difficult to get flags in or no time, you can use them vertically. This could be done in post quite quickly, but I find the more you can do on the day is best, just in case you can't get to the grade. Working with the top-end cameras like the Alexa and RED, especially if shooting raw, there is tremendous latitude and the detail in a bright sky will probably be there to be brought back in the grade. But ND grads are still really important when shooting with lower-end cameras, which don't have the same dynamic range or when you're not shooting raw. For straight ND and infrared ND (IRND) filters, I tend to use Platinum Schneiders because of their consistency. ND filters can fade with age and different manufacturers and batches may have a slight colour bias (even though in theory they are the same ND rating), but the Platinums are very true, with no colour-shift throughout the range. This is very useful, not only because you get a true reproduction of the scene, but it also saves time adjusting the colour balance of the camera to remove any bias, especially when shooting with several cameras. The advantage with cameras like the Alexa Mini and Sony Venice is they have a limited range of ND filters built in, which can be switched in quickly, but you may still need some lower range NDs to fill in or add to the built-in ones. As well as the Platinums there is now the RHodium Full Spectrum ND range.

Diffusion

I frequently use diffusion filters and almost always in drama. The early HD cameras could give quite a harsh image and I tended to use Schneider Classic Soft filters to take the edge off, especially with the Sony 900 or similar. They tend to help blend in the highlights, giving a softer, more filmic look. So I've used them since the advent of HD in the early 2000s. The Classic Softs are quite comparable to Tiffen Promists and give a softer image with varying degrees of diffusion to the highlights depending on the strength of the filter. They give a very pleasant look, not only softening and diffusing, but also smoothing out any skin blemishes in close-ups. For the pilot of *The Royals*, our lead actress was Elizabeth Hurley, which was quite daunting as, of course, she had to look perfect on screen – and, if not, I would be the first to go! In the screen tests, I tested a wide range of diffusion filters but in the end decided on Schneider Hollywood Black Magics. These worked very well as they keep the image punchy and



On *Deep State* – with gaffer John McKay and 1st AC James Blyth, custodian of the filters! We are shooting raw on an Alexa XT (with ARRI LMB 25 lightweight matte box)

sharp, but handle skin tones well and remove slight facial imperfections. They also give a pleasant flare to highlights. Depending on the lens used, I would decide on the strength of the filter, usually going heavier for closeups of our female stars. Actually Elizabeth had great skin in any case, so the pressure was slightly off!

These filters are available as plug-ins at the post house, but it can add to the cost due to time and also I don't think the effect works as well as when physical filters are used on set. Also, if I'm not able to get to the grade, it means I know the filters have given the desired look I was aiming for (especially important if I want to work with a particular actress in the future!).

Diffusion choices generally depend on the subject matter and script. The last shoot I did was the second series of a political thriller called *Deep State* and the producers wanted to keep the gritty look of the first series, for which little or no diffusion/softening filters had been used. So I tended just to use them for closeups of the female leads.

It often comes down to budget what equipment you can take on a shoot. These days I always hire in all the kit as it means I can choose exactly the right camera and filter package for each project as there is so much choice these days. We always tend to do lens and filter tests beforehand and decide on the right ones depending on the genre, lighting style and actors involved in the project.

Polariser and optical flat

The other filter that is always in the kit is a polariser. This helps to take down the highlights, especially bright sunlight reflections, and particularly for cars it cuts window reflections, allowing you to see through the windscreen to the faces within. Polarisers also intensify colour, so are great for enhancing blue skies. We also always have an optical flat, just a clear filter which doesn't affect the image but protects the lens from damage, especially, say, if filming an explosion or other stunt, or just any situation where the front element might get damaged. Far cheaper to replace the optical flat than the front element of a lens!

Fact File

Nick Dance BSC started his career in documentaries shooting (on film) in over 60 countries, from the deserts of the Sahara and Atacama to the pyramids and Great Wall of China, including flying with the Red Arrows and ocean diving on nuclear submarines.

Nick's drama work includes many BAFTA and RTS award-winning productions including: *Bodies*, *Pompeii – The Last Day*, Terry Pratchett's *Johnny and the Bomb*, *Shameless*, *Nuremberg: Goering's Last Stand*, *Call The Midwife* and *Skins*, for which he was personally nominated for BAFTA and RTS awards for Photography and Lighting, and awarded a GTC Award for Excellence. Most recently he has worked on *Poldark*, Series 4 (BBC), *Gentleman Jack* (HBO/BBC) and *Deep State*, Series 2 (Fox).