

The Golden Rules

Gold and silver are dominant colors in epic feature, *The Curse of the Golden Flower*. Colorist Warren Lynch talks about achieving the right color mix beneath all that flash and glitter.

By Danny Chan

Director Zhang Yimou's penchant for colors is almost legendary. From using the classic three-strip Technicolor process for bringing out the bright red hues in his earlier movies like *Ju Dou* and *Raise The Red Lantern*, to his primary-colored themed montages in *Hero*, few directors are known to be as exacting when it comes to film coloration. In his latest epic offering, *The Curse of the Golden Flower* (COGF), Zhang seemed to have pulled out all the stops in continuing his famous indulgence with colors. Luckily, he gets to rely on the expertise of colorist Warren Lynch to get the job done properly.

The Sydney-based veteran film grader is no stranger to big-budget films either, having served as one of the digital cinema colorists on *Lord of the Rings 2 – The Two Towers*. As a colorist, Warren has a string of major projects to his credit including the feature films *Gabriel*, *Yuk Do San*, *Black*, *Eklavya*, *Blackwater*, *Right here Right now* and *The Bet*.

"Working with Zhang Yimou will probably be one of the highlights in my career," Lynch shares modestly, "At all times, we had a great working synergy which is important for the creativity to feed off; in order to achieve the artistic goals we set out



The Curse reflects Warren Lynch's close collaboration with the director and DOP throughout the entire project

to accomplish."

Even the casual filmgoer could tell from the visual splendor of the colossally majestic sets that the artistic goals were set pretty high. At the beginning of COGF, where viewers are led through ornate doors to reveal the resplendently regal inner and outer courts of the palace, the ostentatious display would set the tone for the rest of the movie. However, the director and DOP seemed to be pushing the envelope of aesthetic boundaries with each subsequent

scene. In one climactic sequence, two battalions of army soldiers can be seen converging on a rising fortress from a helicopter view. The result is a pulse-racing scene in which a sea of silver (the rebel forces) and gold (the imperial guards) clad soldiers clashed in a grand display of valor, patriotism and of course, colors.

From the onset, Lynch worked closely with the director and DOP to ensure that enough visual information would be retained at the post stages. The

clockwork process required for such a demanding project was developed and refined over the course of Lynch's career as a colorist, editor and post facility proprietor. Besides attributing the glitch-free workflow to a tried and tested system that has been working for years, Lynch also praises his co-collaborators: "I realized that the work that everyone had put into the project was incredible. I was also motivated from the positive comments made by my colleagues in New Zealand and Hollywood. I would have liked to have more time to refine every scene but deadlines often do not allow this luxury. So in looking back, the film's final result was a good one."

Lynch is currently working on a slated for International release feature film *Gabriel* for Sony Pictures. Meanwhile, Intercolour has commenced the pre grading for VFX shots on Stephen Chow's next film called *A Hope* which is planned for final post around March.

The following is an excerpt of Asia Image's interview with Warren Lynch.

Q: How did you become involved with the film *Curse of the Golden Flower*?



01-02/03-04: Two sets of before (left) and after (right) grading screen shots

WL: We heard of the project through Roger Savage of Soundfirm, where he had previously worked with Director Zhang. We made a trip to China to meet with the Director and DOP on set, where we pitched the concept of conforming and colour grading the film digitally in a new Intercolour facility extended from the Soundfirm facility in Beijing, whilst in concert with our existing Intercolour facility in Sydney for the final finishing. The concept was accepted. I did a few film-out tests and screened them in Beijing to show a good result. The rest is history.

Q: How do you normally approach a grading project for a feature film?

WL: When finishing features, I generally become involved at the rushes stage where I supervise the dailies to deliver an accurate rendition of what the DOP

present these to the director and DOP to give a clear indication and feedback of how the movie is going to look on the cinema screen.

Q: How did you go about preparing for this undertaking?

WL: As this was the first film to be posted at the new Beijing facility, it turned out to be quite a rush to have the equipment delivered on time, particularly since we had specified the gear at the very last minute to take advantage of the latest technology. Plus we needed to setup a grading cinema equipped with a DLP and 5-metre screen before we successfully started working on the scheduled start date. A large part of the calibration and film-out test setup was done in Sydney before we moved it to China. Since we used the same gear as matching systems in both locations, this was a simple process.

stability testing. Recently upgraded for both the Sydney and Beijing facilities, the main grading software resides on the Boxx 4-way dual core computers, which are proving to be perfect for all projects.

Q: The palace scenes seem awash in gold. How did you manage to achieve that balance between bringing out that distinctive hue, and yet not allowing it to be distracting at the same time?

WL: This treatment was a combination of enhancing and balancing the complimentary colours that were naturally present in the art direction. The gold treatment was achieved with fine amounts of hue offsets in the red, yellow and green colour channels to create a rich but not too fake-looking

use more abstract choices in terms of the grading treatment. I have a good example of using the image treatment as an emotional motivator. In 2004 I finished a Korean film called "Yuk Do San". The main characters of the story are shown going through life's ups and down, at different junctions in their lives. The characters' emotions were subtly portrayed by the image treatment. We called it the emotional timeline. It was planned out to show areas in the script where even though the scenario and art direction looked happy and positive, the colour treatment was placed in an uncomfortable position to aptly relate the characters' inner feelings and personal obstacles at the time. This film was greatly received and I'm sure carried a lot of complex emotions as motivated by the image rendition.

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01-02: In this scene, the colorist opted for the warmer tones (right) over the bluish hues (left)

02



has photographed. These settings are fairly standard issue and relate to the chosen film stock. Once the calibration is set, we run each roll at the standard settings and transfer to tape for the equivalent of a one-light work print. Later during the setup for the colour grading, the same calibration is adopted to the grading screens to deliver a common starting point relative to the rushes. I then work with the director and the DOP at a few short grading sessions to work out the intended treatment for each of the scenes. I then work with the brief and go back and refine the treatment to a point where I am close to my final offering, then I invite the director and DOP back to have a screening and some final trimming if required.

Q: How did you work with the Director or DOP on this project?

WL: With this project, I initially worked through some of the more complicated scenes like the 'day for night' scenes with the DOP to establish a starting point and acceptable level of light to both retain enough visual information and also present as realistic night. As scans arrived online and reels become more complete, I worked through the sequences from the creative brief, then invited the DOP for grading sessions to refine the scenes. Once I had some of the reels in fairly good order, we invited the director for a screening of the work in progress. Notes were taken and some reference grades set from which I work as the final treatment. During the setup and treatment establishment period, I prepared various test film outs and

Q: Where was the film posted?

WL: Oriental Post in Thailand did the scanning and initial recording; VFX came from Centro Digital Pictures in Hong Kong and MPC in London. The second print film recording/LAB was done by DMC Hong Kong; and release prints were done at Technicolor in Thailand. Digital intermediate post production was done by Intercolour, which is our own company, established in Fox Studios in Sydney and Beijing. Weta Digital/PRP in New Zealand did the Final Recording while LAB and E-film/Deluxe in Hollywood did the final Digital Subtitled North American release.

Q: What were the biggest challenges on this project?

WL: One of the main areas – where small problems were evident – was my language barrier with the director and the DOP, who do not speak much English. My Mandarin is only good enough to tell Chinese taxi drivers when I want to go. These were only minor problems as most of the time, we used a translator to explain the more complicated creative terms.

Q: What equipment and software did you use for this project?

WL: My primary choice of software is the Digital Vision Film Master, formerly known as the Nucoda Film Master. I have been using this system extensively for the last few years. I was involved in its development both in performance and

gold. And most important of all, I work from finely calibrated screens that present precisely how the film print is going to react.

Q: What were the workflow issues that you encountered on this project?

For the most part, there were no workflow issues; there were no real deviations from the normal practice we have developed over many years of execution. As in most movies that have a large number of VFX shots, there was a fair degree of holdups waiting for the Final VFX shots to be delivered. Obviously all concerned want as much time as physically possible to create the best result, and generally due to good post production co-ordination and some clever technology, we all made it to the deadline.

Q: Directors talk about the differences between colors that one 'sees' as opposed to 'feeling' it. How do you communicate colors that go beyond the visual, extending into the visceral?

WL: It all comes down to tuning and harmony. My analogy is that of a musical instrument – if it's out of tune, then it doesn't sound right. It's the same with image treatment. If I choose to depict a scene as being 'pleasing and nice', I would make sure all the colour tones and contrast tunings are in harmony. Conversely if the scene needs an uncomfortable edge, I would

Q: There are colorists who seem adept at making low resolution formats look better or even good. What techniques do they employ?

WL: As with all image formats, the colorist does whatever they can with the given format to extract the best from the image. Sometimes it is as simple as applying what the shot needs to make it work and not trying to force the image into a compromised position. Of course there are also treatment tools available to enhance the resolution and minimize the noise or texture, all of which does help.

Q: What are your opinions on grading films like Collateral that was shot on various formats?

WL: I have not had the pleasure of seeing this film, however, I have known the DOP, Dion Bebe for many years, and I am sure he would get only the best and most appropriate image from whatever medium he chose for the job. I have worked on various mixed format films over the years and generally the choice of format was based on the type of scene and for plot point reasons. I am currently about to start a film in which the image capture is done with Sony HDCAM and Panasonic P2, where the applications of the two formats are specific. However, the image from both cameras mixed nicely in the final film version with a bit of careful image manipulation. I am very sure this style of image capture will be part of our lives as time goes on. ♦