

Notes on the *Dreamgirls* DI

Cinematographer Tobias A. Schliessler and DI artist Stefan Sonnenfeld on Getting the Look

By Debra Kaufman

Cinematographer Tobias A. Schliessler and Company 3 DI artist Stefan Sonnenfeld gave DI Studio an inside look at the artistry behind *Dreamgirls*. The two have worked together for over 7 years on commercials, and *Dreamgirls* was their first feature film together. *Dreamgirls* was scanned at 2K and color-graded on a daVinci 2K with multiple windows.



Dreamgirls

DI STUDIO: What were the challenges in shooting *Dreamgirls*?

TOBIAS A. SCHLISSLER: It was a big movie in terms of overall logistics, with dance, music, performances plus all the drama sequences. Having a fairly short schedule and shooting all the performances with three or four cameras made the performances tricky. That's where the DI came in handy for controlling contrast and color.

Did you know from the outset that you would be able to do a DI? If so, did you involve Stefan from the beginning, with dailies?

SCHLISSLER: I tried to have the studio commit as early as possible but a DI is a big item in the budget and it's not always immediately guaranteed. I was shooting thinking that I might not have a DI, so I had a good neg, my exposures were right on.

Dailies were done at Complete Post and I had a very good colorist there. Ideally it would be great to do the dailies in the same house as the DI. That would have speeded things up in the DI, but it doesn't always work out that way.

Stefan, what were your challenges in coloring *Dreamgirls*?

STEFAN SONNENFELD: Even though it's a very clean, saturated, rich look, when you have different lighting cycles and smoke levels on stage and editors choose shots based on performance, not lighting, it can be a little tricky to make sure everything is consistent — even though Tobias did a great job. And you have to be meticulous in matching the different cuts: close-up, medium shot, long shot.

Also, some of those subtle shades of saturated color are difficult to translate from the 2K projector to film. It was a little bit of a challenge and involved tweaking the LUT. One deep shade of blue was especially tricky to deal with. For color management, we use FilmLight's TrueLight, and we did a lot of work to manipulate the LUTs for this show.

Did your previous relationship help the artistic process? Have you developed a “shorthand” way of communicating?

SCHLISSLER: We do speak the same language. If I say to him, "It would be nice to push the whites and bring the blacks down or push the highlights," a little push of the button and it's just like I imagined it. Because you have limited time for a DI, the biggest thing for me is that you not to spend too much time at the beginning with individual shots. A good thing is to get through it once in bigger strokes and then fine-tune on the next go-through. We did the trailer first, which had a lot of different scenes in the movie, and what we got out of having done the trailer was being able to get the look approved. It gave Stefan a good base to work from.

SONNENFELD: Without even speaking we can get to something we both like. He knows my sensibility and I know his. I know his exposures. To be on the same page is huge. It is so pleasurable to sit in the room. Everything fell into place.