

TIM PALMER

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

TV Production

Life

but not as
he knows it



In the hugely successful BBC drama series **Life on Mars**, 21st century Detective Inspector Sam Tyler (played by John Simm) is hit by a car and mysteriously transported back to the 1970s. The confused time-travelling DI finds himself in a Manchester he doesn't recognise in the era of flared trousers, Mark III Cortinas and cops straight out of **The Sweeney** who expect him to solve crimes with their out-dated methods. And if that's not enough, he sees weird apparitions and hears strange voices in his head.

Four Directors and four Directors of Photography were each responsible for two 60 minute episodes. DP Adam Suschitzky, grandson of Wolfgang Suschitzky (**Get Carter**), worked with Director Bharat Nalluri on episodes one and two. They had

previously collaborated on **Hustle** and **The Hunters**. "Bharat was very excited about the script and when I read it, I knew why," remarks Suschitzky. "It was tonally different to anything I'd seen before, with action sequences, highly emotional passages and comedy within each episode. I realised it would be a challenge to bind the real with the bizarre, the comedy with the tragedy and the modern day with the 1970s."

"Our visual approach was influenced by the bold staging, composition and colour palette of **Get Carter** and **Taxi Driver** and we watched **Catch Me If You Can** for elements of set design and Janusz Kaminski's magnificent mix of hard and soft light." Suschitzky chose Kodak VISION2 200T 7217 as his primary stock: "Its contrast range is fantastic, the colour rendition is natural and its sharpness and lack of grain is a delight!" He used Kodak VISION2

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100T 7212 for all exteriors and Kodak VISION2 500T 7218 for some night interiors. Suschitzky chose Panavision Primos for their "amazing resolving power, contrast and overall clarity" and introduced flares by placing large lamp faces in shot. "Bharat likes to move the camera a lot and work quickly and I take pride in achieving a look at a pace. It creates a buzz for everyone to feed off."

"Working with Adam is always an amazing experience; he talks drama first and then looks at how lighting can enhance the script and the characters' journeys," notes Director Nalluri. "We are both keen on very precise camera movement, blocking and using the camera as another character. Having grown up in the north of England, I was determined to recreate the world of my

Eastman EXR 50D 7245 with its wonderful 'Kodachromy' quality for daylight scenes. When properly lit, the added contrast and bite gives the shots real drama with the silkiest of textures."

Director McKay was delighted when Palmer came on board. "I chose Tim because **Life on Mars** is a very strong genre series with a clearly atmospheric look and he is always extremely good with visual dramas. I was also aware that Tim and Adam have known each other for a long time and, as Adam had set the look for the series, I knew they would liaise very closely, which boded well. Tim and I have a lot of shorthand at the coalface, but we spent time talking about the scenes, their look and references for them and watched a lot of films, including **The Sweeney** and **Get Carter** to

Alexander collaborated on episodes six and eight. "John and I have great shorthand and when we work together, it's always enjoyable. We love 1970s music and the tracks of that era in **Life on Mars** gave us a bond," says Cameron. "I didn't try to stray too much from Adam's original set up, but was actively encouraged to do my own thing. I had ample scope for expression and took the opportunity to find bold and dynamic solutions without feeling restricted in any way. I absolutely loved it."

"I'd like to mention 'returning' Camera Operator Nick Beak-Saunders' incredible contribution to the series," remarks McKay. "He allowed each director and DP time and gave them whatever they wanted". "I must give him credit too," agrees Palmer. "Nick's skill, finesse and gutsy operating

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youth. The 1970s was grimmer than most people remember and I created a slightly darker edge. I'm really pleased with the end result; it's retro without being pastiche, which is an incredibly difficult thing to pull off. It's hard to create stylish television at a fast pace, but Adam did it with aplomb."

DP Tim Palmer and Director John McKay were fellow students at the National Film School and worked together on **The Canterbury Tales**. They joined forces for episodes three and four. "It's a groundbreaking script," exclaims Palmer. "What attracted me was the sheer energy of the narrative and how well the characters were written. It demanded bold lighting and powerful camera angles, often well below the eye line, and there was a visceral quality to the action that could be realised very effectively through the camera. I was keen to use hard light to give the characters and backgrounds a really sharp, defined quality and make the colours stand out, as well as drawing the viewer more readily into the period."

"Thankfully, the decision was made at the outset to originate on film rather than HD and it suited me that Adam had chosen Kodak stock. I opted for Kodak VISION2 500T 7218 for high speed shots and night exteriors for its impressive colour rendition and grain structure. I also used Kodak VISION2 200T 7217, which delivered exactly the right look for the studio interiors and

get a whiff of the era."

DP Balazs Bolygo's first encounter with **Life on Mars** was with the scripts of episodes five and seven, which he was asked to read before meeting Director S.J. Clarkson. "I loved the concept of a contemporary perspective on the 1970s cop drama genre. It created an exciting atmosphere in which S.J. and I explored a range of dramatic storylines and stylistic ideas and had fun with the nostalgic comic tone."

"We stayed true to Sam's subjectivity. The **Life on Mars** world is his creation, so even in scenes where he wasn't the primary character, he still had a place. We gave the police station a subtle feeling of heightened reality, subconsciously reminding the audience of everything that's unfolding in his head." Bolygo used Kodak VISION2 200T 7217 for night and day interiors, Kodak VISION2 100T 7212 for daylight exteriors and Kodak VISION2 500T 7218 for night exteriors. "HD would have been the wrong format. It's a modern tool which would have inhibited our efforts to capture the nostalgia, style and essence of the era that is at the very core of the series," states Bolygo who used 10kW tungsten Fresnels rigged through windows, with pre-rigged fluorescents on set and floated 5kW's, 2kW's and Pups, as well as Rifa lights on the floor.

DP Grant Cameron and Director John

contributed enormously to the distinctive style. He brought fresh and inventive ideas to each scene, which really impressed John and made my job easier." "He was a vital part of our team," adds Nalluri.

"Kudos Film & Television (**Spooks**, **Hustle**) managed the series "in a clever way", admits McKay. "They cared deeply about the quality of the visual image and, in spite of the tight budget, whenever there was a genuine need for specialised equipment or a particular location or time of day to shoot, they happily obliged," reflects Palmer. "With such active encouragement, a great script, an inspiring director, an amazing cast and a hardworking crew, what could be better?"

Marcus Wilson, Kudos Line Producer acknowledges that "Panavision and Kodak went the extra mile. Martin Hammond suggested which stocks would suit the nature of the project and liaised closely with each DP to accommodate their preferences. One day when we had virtually exhausted our stocks of 7217 due to a great deal of coverage on a long and very difficult scene where each take was using a roll of film. Kodak rushed replacements up to us before the next day's filming. We couldn't have wished for better treatment."

Life on Mars will be distributed worldwide. A second series has already been commissioned. ■