



The Black Dahlia

Behind the scenes with Vilmos Zsigmond, ASC

The *Black Dahlia* is a unique, international endeavor. The story is an adaptation of a novel that James Ellroy wrote based on the 1947 murder of an aspiring Hollywood actress named Elizabeth Short, aka The Black Dahlia. Some 90 percent of the movie was produced on sets built in Sofia, Bulgaria. The other scenes were filmed in Los Angeles.

The director and cinematographer, Brian De Palma and Vilmos Zsigmond, ASC, are from the United States, production designer Dante Ferretti is Italian, costume designer Jenny Beavan and assistant director Mark Egerton are English, and key makeup artist Zoltan Elek is Hungarian. Zsigmond's camera, grip and lighting crew in Bulgaria came from the city of Sophia, as well as Germany, France, Israel and the Czech Republic. He had an American crew in Los Angeles.

The novel was inspired by Ellroy's boyhood memories. He met Elizabeth Short at his grandmother's house when he was 11 years old and wrote about her in his diary. His father was one of

the first police officers on the scene when her mutilated body was discovered several months later. The novel and film both focus on intrigue and corruption in the police department that hindered two detectives who were hunting for her killer.

The *Black Dahlia* features Josh Hartnett, Scarlett Johansson, Hilary Swank, Aaron Eckhart with Mia Kirshner portraying Short.

It's the fourth collaboration for De Palma and Zsigmond. Their other co-ventures were *Obsession* (1976), *Blow Out* (1981) and *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1990).

After Zsigmond read Josh Friedman's script he spoke with De Palma and Ferretti. The director had a simple but eloquent vision. He told Zsigmond that he wanted beautiful film noir cinematography in film noir style. Zsigmond referenced still photography books and movies from the period to refresh memories of the style. He cites *The Third Man* as among the films that influenced his approach.

"Most of the story takes place at night," Zsigmond says. "Dante and I agreed that we wanted desaturated colors. We wanted it to look and feel like this film could have been made during the 1940s, or even in the 1920s when film noir was black and white."

Zsigmond suggested producing *The Black Dahlia* in Super 35 format with three-perf film using a digital intermediate (DI) process at 4K resolution. Although Zsigmond's experience includes more than 70 narrative film credits, three Academy Award nominations including an Oscar win for *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and a BAFTA Award for *The Deer Hunter*, *The Black Dahlia* was the first film he has shot in Super 35 format, and it was his first DI.

Zsigmond explains that a widescreen 2.4:1 aspect ratio was needed to put the characters into a Hollywood environment, and DI timing enabled him to put final touches on the film noir look by enhancing shadows and desaturating colors. He suggested shooting in three-perf 35 mm format to help offset the cost of the DI.

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"There wasn't time to do a lot of testing," he says. "We did it on faith, and I also spoke with cinematographers who had done DIs on beautiful movies I liked."

Nu Image Entertainment GmbH has produced or co-produced nearly 50 films in Bulgaria since 1997. Zsigmond says that the company owned all of the lighting and grip gear he needed, including HMIs, Chimeras, tungsten lamps, dollies and cranes. They owned an ARRI 435 and an array of Cooke and Zeiss lenses. They purchased ARRIcam Studio and ARRIcam Lite cameras for this project. ARRI modified all three cameras to accommodate three-perf 35 mm film.

Boyana Film Studios is located in Sofia but all the sets for *The Black Dahlia* were built at other locations, including an abandoned paper factory, a school that has been closed, a former government building, and a home that belonged to a former prime minister. The sets included interiors of the police department where much of the story unfolds, and a street in East Los Angeles that also served as Hollywood Boulevard.

Main Picture:
 (L to R) Actors Josh Hartnett and Scarlett Johansson in a scene from *The Black Dahlia*, shot by Vilmos Zsigmond, ASC.

"I did technical scouts with Dante (Ferretti)," Zsigmond says. "I just loved working with him because he doesn't compromise. On some sets, he was able to leave parts of ceilings open because the frame is horizontal rather than vertical. That helped me to bring ambient light to areas where we were shooting. We used directional hard light in keeping with the film noir look."

They spoke about where Zsigmond wanted lamps, chandeliers and other sources for motivating interesting lighting in interiors. There wasn't a budget to make TransLites in Los Angeles and ship them to Bulgaria, so Ferretti made his own.

"I am used to shooting realistic-looking movies where the audience can see through windows and doors," Zsigmond says. "However, on this film I was more impressionistic. Sometimes, I let windows blow out, so the audience can't see outside."

Beavan consulted with Ferretti to make certain that the colors of costumes worked with the production design in addition to being appropriate for the period and characters. She designed some period costumes and found others in Hollywood.

Elizabeth Short wasn't in the original script. She was already dead and the investigation was getting underway. De Palma decided it was important for the audience to get to know her. The scenes with Short include screen tests and some flashbacks where the audience witnesses her dream fading and her life deteriorating.

"It was important for this person to come alive, so the audience cares about her," Zsigmond observes. "Mia is such a good actress that she makes the audience feel sorry for her character. It was my idea for the flashbacks to be black-and-white because there is a connection to the film noir movies in that period."

Zsigmond tested various black-and-white films including KODAK PLUS-X and TRI-X, and EASTMAN DOUBLE-X, as well as the KODAK VISION2 500T 5218 film that was desaturated in DI. He decided on the latter. Zsigmond drew on a palette of KODAK VISION2 stocks, and made intuitive decisions about underexposing the film and pushing the negative, depending upon the time, place and emotional content of scenes.

Zsigmond generally covered scenes with two cameras. The ARRIcam Studio was used for master shots with a wider angle lens. The ARRIcam Lite was the B camera. It was generally used to cover scenes from a slightly different angle, or with a longer lens shooting a close-up of a character. There are also Steadicam shots.

"You have to find the right spot for the second camera and maybe add a little fill light," he says. "Brian likes to shoot master shots with one camera for up to five minutes without cutting away. That keeps the audience involved in the story."

Zsigmond notes that the three-perf film extended the time between the need to change magazines by 25 percent. That gave them the flexibility to shoot longer takes.



Above: (L to R) Actors Josh Hartnett and Hilary Swank in a scene from *The Black Dahlia*.

PHOTOS: ROLF KONOW/UNIVERSAL PICTURES

He says De Palma didn't use storyboards. The director had mental pictures of the angles and backgrounds he wanted, and how one shot would blend into the next one.

"There were many changes in the schedule, which made it difficult for Dante," Zsigmond says. "Sometimes we would learn at the last minute that we would be shooting a scene because the actor became available. This made it difficult to rehearse on the set. Many times, the day before we shot a scene, I'd ask Brian where he wanted the camera. He'd say, 'I think it's going to be here but don't blame me if it's going to be on the other side of the set after my rehearsal with the actors.'"

They completed production with two weeks of exterior scenes filmed in Los Angeles. The locations included the front of city hall, night shots outside the Pantages Theater on Hollywood Boulevard, and streets in neighborhoods with older houses.

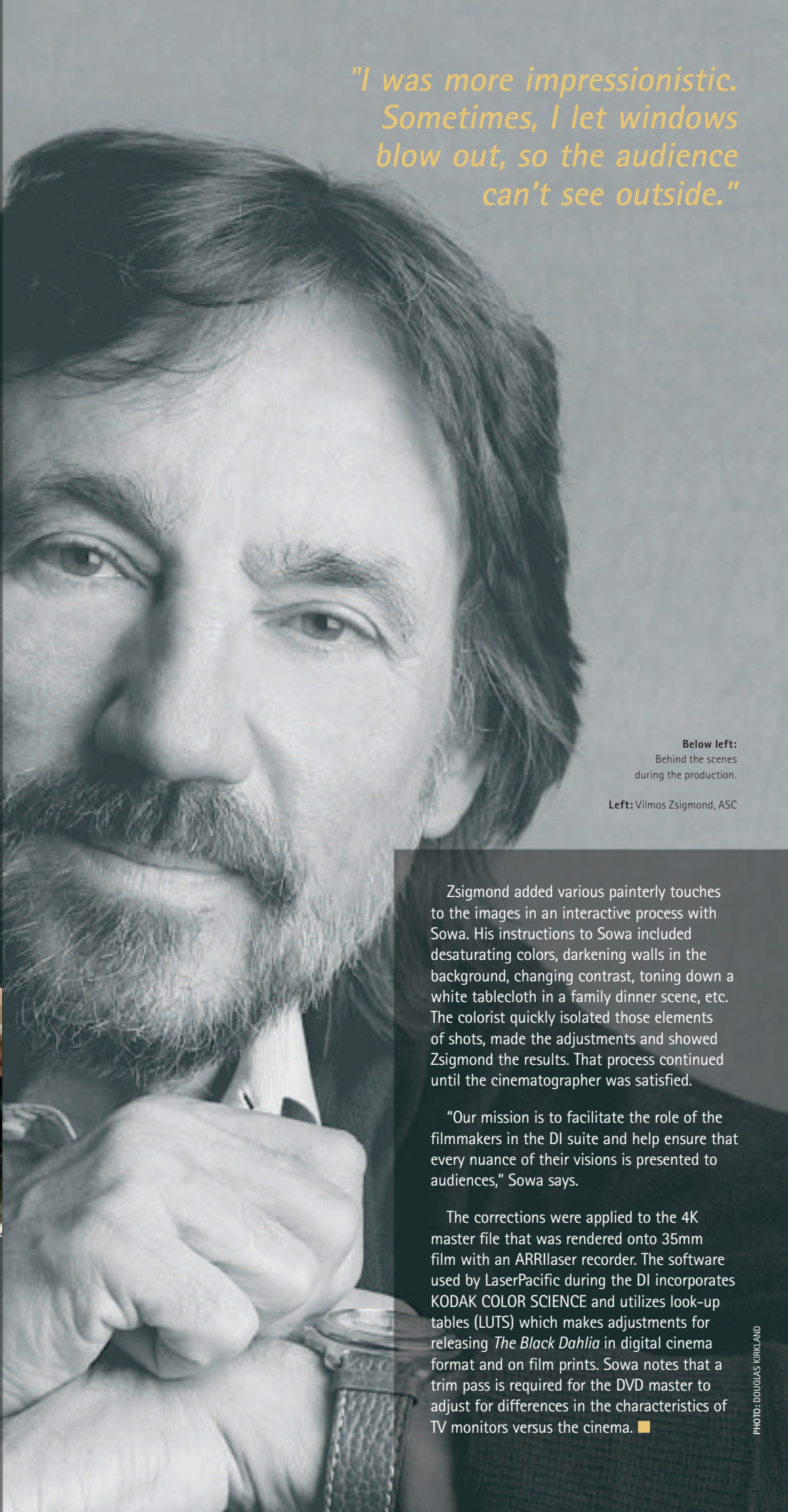
Zsigmond believes that the Los Angeles scenes, which are skillfully weaved into the fabric of the story, make an important contribution to the feeling of authenticity.

After the film was edited offline, the conformed negative was scanned at 4K resolution with a Spirit 4K at LaserPacific in Los Angeles. Zsigmond says that a 4K scan was necessary to capture subtle details recorded on the negative, including grain and nuanced colors that are integral to the film noir look.



Zsigmond worked with veteran colorists Frank Roman and Mike Sowa. They projected images on a 33-by-13 foot screen, which gave Zsigmond a sense of how the audience will experience the film in a theater.

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Below left:
Behind the scenes during the production.

Left: Vilmos Zsigmond, ASC

Zsigmond added various painterly touches to the images in an interactive process with Sowa. His instructions to Sowa included desaturating colors, darkening walls in the background, changing contrast, toning down a white tablecloth in a family dinner scene, etc. The colorist quickly isolated those elements of shots, made the adjustments and showed Zsigmond the results. That process continued until the cinematographer was satisfied.

"Our mission is to facilitate the role of the filmmakers in the DI suite and help ensure that every nuance of their visions is presented to audiences," Sowa says.

The corrections were applied to the 4K master file that was rendered onto 35mm film with an ARRILaser recorder. The software used by LaserPacific during the DI incorporates KODAK COLOR SCIENCE and utilizes look-up tables (LUTS) which makes adjustments for releasing *The Black Dahlia* in digital cinema format and on film prints. Sowa notes that a trim pass is required for the DVD master to adjust for differences in the characteristics of TV monitors versus the cinema. ■