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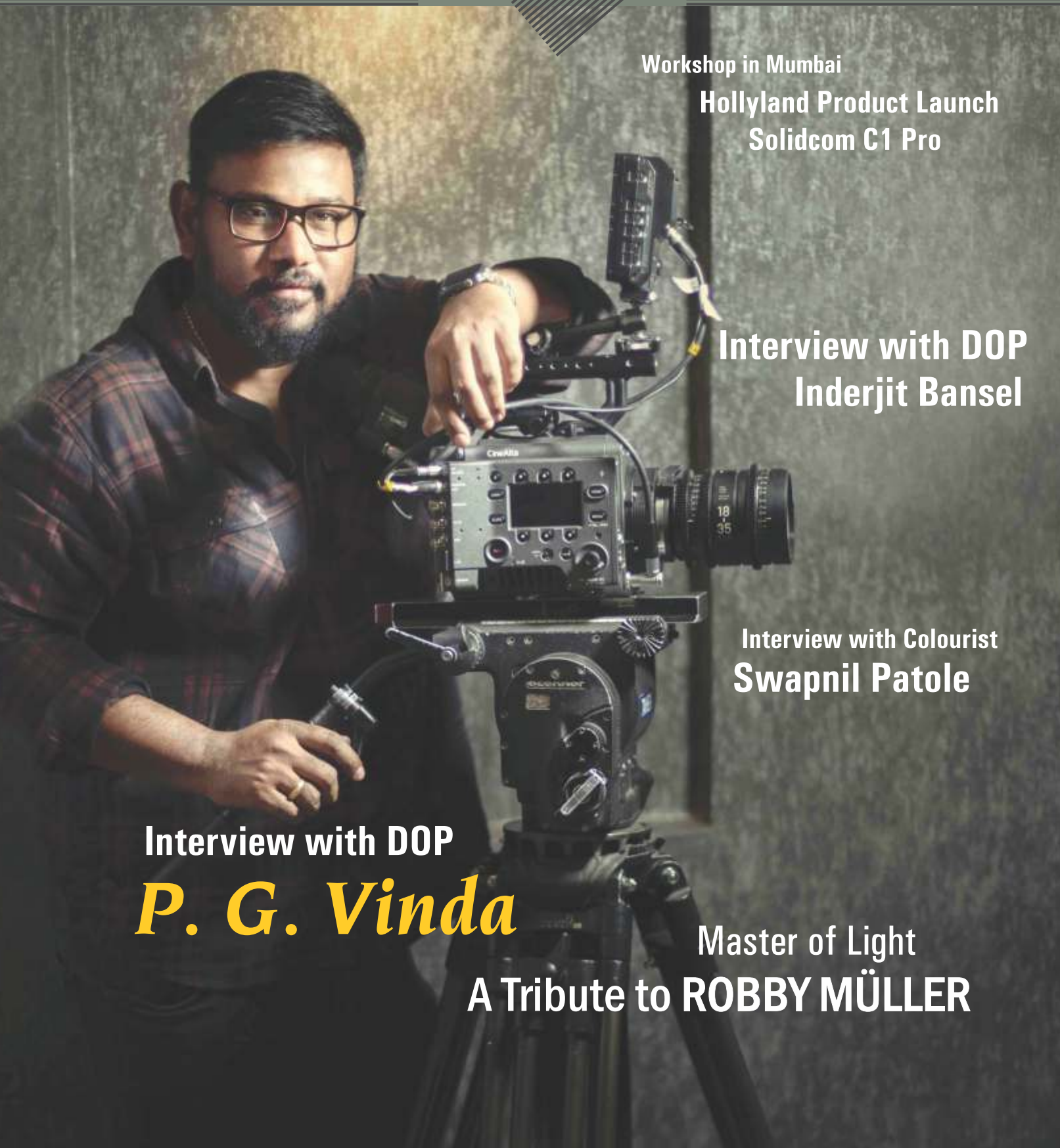
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Master of Light
A Tribute to **ROBBY MÜLLER**





Interview with Colourist *Swapnil Patole*

Swapnil is a Chief Colourist based in Mumbai. Since starting his career 20 years ago, he has graded a uncountable TVC in all genres and for brands such as Amazon, Honda, Ponds, L'Oreal, Garnier, McDonalds, BMW, Mercedes, Tata Motors, Mahindra, Pepe, Levi's, Lee jeans, to name a few.

Recently Swapnil has won Animation Express VAM Awards TV serial 2022 Digital Intermediate Colorist Award for RaftaRafta series (streaming on Amazon Prime),

Swapnil is Only Colourist Nominated Twice from India as Best Colourist in Feature film category (code name Tiranga) at Independent Colourist Guild awards year 2022 Globally & for Web Show "Paurashpur" (alt Balaji) at Independent Colourist Guild awards in year 2020 globally.

His Recent Colour Graded Series 'Half Pant Full Pant' on Amazon prime has been huge success & globally appreciated with IMDB Rating of 9.3.

Very soon he is gonna work on Web Series which is based on Historical Periodic Events of India. He has more recently worked on feature films & OTT web shows for Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney Hotstar, Sony Liv, festival short films and music videos for Tseries, Sony Music India.

Today he is Regional Head of ICG INDIA Association & Chief Colourist/DI Head of Department (HOD) at Famous Studios in Mumbai.





How did you learn the basics of Colour Grading ?

For me, the teaching came through hands-on experience on the job itself. Consequently, I joined Prime Focus through the recommendation of a friend and was placed in the machine room. "This is where you may start learning your foundation," my senior explained, "and subsequently decide whether you want to be a part of color grading or whether you want to be an online or offline editor."

I started in the machine room as a tape operator. Back then, it was referred to as "dumping the footage." After six months, I gathered everything, and I went down to Telecine to work as an assistant doing "film can loading." After mastering the technical aspects of the color grading process, I began assisting senior colorists at Telecine. Because Indians were not well educated in the color grading process in those days, many foreign colorists worked in India.

I began learning under them by doing a very practical job, just looking at them and observing what they were trying to accomplish, how they spoke to the client, what kind of thought process they had, and so on. It was a remarkable two-year journey in Prime Focus, where I had taken off from the base, and then I joined Pixion, one of the largest studios in those days.

It was there I met my mentor, Mr. Albert Gu, a Singaporean colorist who worked in India for nine years. He was looking for a junior colorist to work under him who could do his layering job. He trained me in colors, so that is where my actual career as a colorist began. He taught me the aesthetics of what cinematographers and directors look for. He gave me insight on how to do post-production lighting once the footage was shot and how to deal with various issues that arose during the shoot, such as DOPs not having enough time to light the scene properly. Thus, we had to handle it and make it better in post-production.

He explained that as a colorist, we are not only responsible for adding tonality to the film, but we are also second cinematographers throughout the process. Therefore, we must consider things from their point of view. Hence, I learned a lot from him.

How many other studios have you worked with since Prime Focus to Pixion up until now?

I worked at PIXION for seven to eight years before relocating to the "AFTER" studio, which had just been established. I worked as an individual colorist for two years down there. Then, Famous Studios presented me with a major opportunity in my career by offering me the role of department head. It was a big deal for me to be the department head and set up all the pipelines for color grading. I faced a significant challenge because I had never done that before. I was merely an individual colorist working on a couple of jobs.

At Famous Studios, my primary responsibilities were to bring in clients, handle marketing, manage the color grading



business, and position myself as a competitive colorist in the market. I am grateful to Mr. Arun Roongta, who has been a tremendous help to me. Since then, I've been here for ten years.

When a DOP or a Director chooses to work with you as a colorist, what brief do they typically provide to make the colorist's job easier in advertising films or feature films?

Both the director and the DOP provide the brief. The DOP explains how he shot and what he wants to achieve in terms of lighting and color palettes in the grading, and he walks me through it. He informs me if he is unable to light up certain areas properly due to the crisis he was experiencing.

When a director creates a storyboard, they have a vision, an idea of how they want the final film to look. Therefore, they provide me with access to the storyboard and color schemes. Once I have a good understanding of the color scheme, storyline, plot, and how it's being shot, I begin processing the grade and creating a few looks.

They pick it up from a couple of places and put the stills in the storyboard, saying that this is the look we're going for. This is the costume colors or the art that must be used, whether exterior or interior, and from there, we begin. Then I start creating a few grade options and color options, and from there, we proceed to the next step and finalize an option that we like and work on it and fine-tune it. If we need to bring in a little sun, the entire layering process begins. Desaturating the skin or pushing it a little bit, bringing up the costumes, and so on.

How do you handle different footage formats that may be coming from various cameras?

I first match it as closely or evenly as possible to the primary camera, say Alexa, and then secondary cameras like GoPro or DJI. I have metadata of each camera that I can modify. Suppose certain color temperatures were not properly set. In that case, I still have the metadata to change the color temperature of that shot, and that is how I begin the first base layer of matching a shot to a shot right from the metadata. Then I start grading from the primaries and move on to the secondaries.

In what other ways does the camera's metadata assist you in the color grading process?

When they shoot it, the standard ISO level is 800. If it is a little dark, we can still push it to 2400, depending on how you have to match it. Hence, the first is the ISO level, which we can change. The second factor is the color temperature, which is usually 5200K or 3200K but can be manipulated. The third factor is the tint of the shot, which you can bypass by going green, red, or magenta. Thus, you have numerous levels of metadata from which you can fine-tune it. The digital medium provides excellent flexibility.

What are the issues that cannot be resolved in DI?

Suppose there are artifacts that must be



removed—probably in CG or online—or there is some sort of dust on the lens that cannot be removed during grading. VFX must once again be involved. There is no way out if it is truly poorly filmed. All that has to be done is replace the shot.

Given the availability of various types of machines, both expensive and inexpensive, such as Baselight, how much does the machine aid a colorist in achieving their desired results?

Every system now has its own advantages and disadvantages, whether a Baselight, a "Black Magic Resolve," or any other grading system. The system's features for color grading, adaptability, and ease of use each have pros and cons. I used to grade on Lustre, an Autodesk-based system at that time. But, in terms of the power of the color grading system, I think Baselight is fantastic. It can handle all types of metadata from any camera with ease. Raw files with 6K and 8K resolutions and multiple unreserved layers can be processed smoothly. Baselight's color stands are strong compared to Resolve or Lustre. We have a lot of budget crises, so I prefer Baselight because it's faster and can finish the job in the allotted time. Nowadays, metadata is so heavy in digital media that you need a very powerful system, and it is designed in such a way that you cannot work on a low-end system.

Can you explain your process for grading films which involves heaving VFX ?

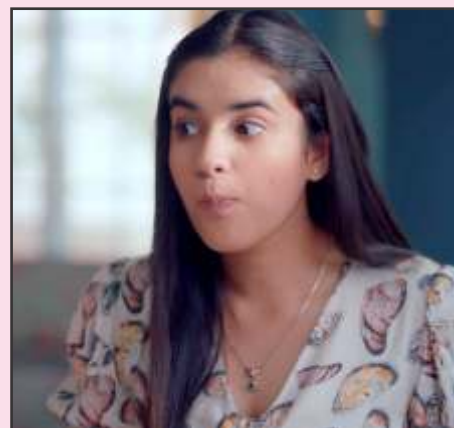
The first thing I do for VFX films is export a raw DPX from a system or a raw EXR file recommended for VFX. I have a developed LUT, which helps the VFX guys when they work on the background or any other type; they can apply those LUTs and begin creating the required VFX world. Simultaneously, the director and DOP tells me, "Okay, this is how the background is going to look, this is how we shot, and this is the kind of look we're trying to achieve post-VFX." Thus, the first thing is the raw files I export to the VFX guys. Then the entire compile file comes back to me in raw format because they send me back the same color space and color gamut that I used in my raw, and from there, I start grading as per the tonality required with all of the alphas that the VFX guys provide, and I start blending things. I inform the VFX guys of my requirements if I am missing something. Therefore, it's a back-and-forth process for me whenever I grade VFX-related jobs.

Can you discuss the importance of LUTs in the context of DI and what potential issues can arise when applying LUTs in DI?

Lookup tables (LUT) are typically used to provide a reference for how your image will appear. It's not the final look, but you can use it as a reference. However, I do not grade with LUTs in the first place; instead, I grade from the raw.

When it comes to having a reference for cinematographers, I guess I do create a LUT based on their





requirements and what kind of look they're looking for in their film so that they can use it on their monitors while they're shooting and have a reference, "Okay, this is how it's going to look but much more enhanced when it comes to DI." Nowadays, many people use LUTs as presets for color grading, so a base kind of look has been set up. I don't prefer to go that route because it comes with many restrictions and sometimes puts you in the wrong place if you want to tackle some other colors or in terms of exposure. Therefore, I believe grading from the raw base is the best way.

How do you determine if there is an issue with the software when performing color correction and other tasks? Can you explain the level of support provided by the company that sells the software?

These days, the software has such advanced intelligence that it will alert you if there is a problem. Regardless of the commands you give, it begins to lag, hang up, or does not respond to them. We check to see if the system has identified the error in the plugins. If there is a bug or malfunction, we immediately shut down the system and notify the IT department to rectify the problem.

The support system is perfect. I'll say that whenever we have any issues, we simply put our system into the tunnel, through which they can actually look into our system and diagnose whatever the problems are. We only need to notify them and provide them with the tunnel channel password and codes, which our IT guys will do, and they will enter our systems and fix it.

When selecting a monitor for color correction and other tasks, what factors do you consider to ensure it meets your needs and allows you to view the final product accurately on various types of users screen?

Numerous companies manufacture broadcast monitors, such as TVLogic, Eizo, Acer, and Sony. I have a clear preference for Sony, as they have the best color-grading monitors, which I have tested and been working with for many years. Therefore, Sony provides colors, contrasts, the kind of blacks, the kind of PSI, the type of highlights, or any type of color gamut that is necessary on any type of resolution from 2K to 4K, or any type of color space from Brick79 to HDR to Rec. 2020, which are the best in the world.

Can you recollect any instances where the final result of your color grading did not match your intended outcome, and if so, what could have caused this discrepancy?

It happens all the time. Since we work on broadcast standards, everything has been so well organized and calibrated that you cannot expect the same visuals to be on television or even phones. For example, if you take two similar phones, the latest iPhone and iPhone X, and place the same image on both, the image will appear differently.

When working on web series that will primarily be viewed on phones, how do you take into account factors such as limited brightness and contrast range?



I consider those factors, especially if I work on a long format like OTT, which consumers mostly watch on phones. My assistants use Android, but I use an iPhone, so when I grade something, I load the images into my phone to see how they look on different phones. This is a very manual process, and nothing is technical about it. I grade according to the broadcast standards, but if that doesn't look good on phones, iPads, or even television, I manipulate the image in such a way that it looks very close on all devices. Thus, that's what I do; once I'm finished, I add one more layer on top to ensure everything looks correct. If I am unsatisfied with the image, I add another layer on top of it and increase the brightness, decrease the contrast, or increase the saturation to make it look correct and push it across.

Is there any specific experience or topic related to grading that you would like to share and discuss?

When I started grading, I realized the console, its resemblance to a spaceship, or the interface of the color grading would be difficult for a novice to understand. But a ten-year-old kid can learn how to use the console, the user interface, and the buttons in about a month. In the sense of

colors, grading is not technical. Colors will only come to you if you have passion and love for them. It also comes with experience, how your eyes look at it, and how your heart and eyes connect simultaneously to your brain. A brain can tell technical facts, but your eyes and heart can speak for the colors you adore.

Therefore, to become a colorist, you must also have experience and a great deal of love for colors. To become a skilled colorist, you must go through the process. Technically, you can learn things, but aesthetics and color principles can only be learned through experience. It cannot be rushed.

Can you name any colorist that you admire and respect in the industry?

I admire and respect my mentor Mr. Albert Gu. I still learn a lot from him. I have a lot of phone conversations with him. He calls me after looking at my work. "What on earth have you done? "Why do you have to do that?" He still yells at me and chastises me. He calls me and says, "Great Job!" if he likes my work. That makes me very happy.

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