

# MAN ON WIRE

James Marsh / UK 2008 / 93 min / cert: 12

## INTERVIEW WITH PHILIPPE PETIT by Will Lawrence

*Why did you choose to make the documentary with this particular filmmaker, James Marsh?*

The producers introduced me to a short list of interesting filmmakers, and, I must say I was not a giant fan of James Marsh, but I felt I should not work with a filmmaker whose work I dearly love. So the fact that I had some reservations about some of his films prompted me to think: "That's actually interesting. Let's meet this man!" I had a phone conversation with James and found him to be a very sensitive man. We then had lunch and by the end of the lunch we were shaking hands on this project. I said, "Okay, I don't want to look any further. It's going to be an adventure anyway, so I'll have to have faith and put in some intellectual risk." So that's what it was and it proved to be good because the result, *Man on Wire* is a pretty good film.

*What were those initial reservations about his work?*

I have in a strange way lived my life as a moviemaker — a frustrated moviemaker since I haven't even done my first film — but the way I see life, the way I write (I have written six books), is in a very cinema-graphic way. If I tell a story I cannot sit in my chair. I'm going to start mimicking all the characters and edit myself, and conjure scenes and construct the script. I love movies and I have a very, very strong vision of what to do. For example, I have dreamed of making my own documentary about the WTC walk but it never happened. So you can imagine when I see a film, I have my own artistic disagreement with the way it is cut, the way the music is added, the way the scenes are painted. I am an art critic and sometimes I wholeheartedly love an artistic work, a film, a tableau, a piece of theatre and sometimes not; if the creator would like to receive my criticisms, I have five hours of lecture to give him! Here though, I had to realise that I'm not the director. He is! And that was hard at times. It started with collaboration and it ended up with a work that is his film. And I applaud *Man on Wire* when I look at it in a packed theatre, and when I see the audience's reaction; I forget all my personal criticisms.

*Who else has tried to make a film of your story, because now you have signed a feature film deal, right?*

Yes, a feature film is in development with ImageMovers and Robert Zemeckis as the director. From the moment I walked between The Twin Towers in 1974 until I signed for *Man on Wire*, there had been countless offers, really, dozens of feature film offers in the past two

years alone, along with many documentary offers, and always I said no. Today there is this completed documentary, and a feature film project in development from my book *To Reach The Clouds*. Also, I did allow a play to be produced for a limited run in England, but that was not really something that I like to remember! I know it is interesting to let other creators see my story their way; I just have a hard time doing that. So, yes, for the past 34 years I have received many offers to do films, books, plays and diverse works...

*Having done what you've done, what is left to fear? You must believe you can do anything...*

Well, I am not inhabited by fear. I am inhabited probably by the opposite, the feeling of life rather than of death. I know the boundary of my work is losing my life, but I do not let it become a matter of chance. I make it a matter of artistic mastery. I firmly believe I would not get on a cable without knowing the outcome: that I would end up victorious on that walk. Now, of course, in the instance of World Trade Center walk it was so out of scale, so out of human scale, that it was probably terrifying but I do not remember it as a world of fear. I remember it as stepping into the unknown, as a profound and joyful voyage.

Plus, I had dreamed of being there for so many years, as you know, so the long path of working the dream helps me prepare. That's what I do. I prepare like an engineer, like a man of theatre, a poet, and there's a lot of work involved in finding myself there. There have been moments of sheer terror, of course, but I am not a person invaded by fear and I'm not living with death in my daily life. It's really the opposite. I have elation and inspiration when I walk on a high wire— and humility and patience, too.

*How old were you when you did your first public high-wire walk?*

I was 17 years old and it was in a little village in the centre of France. It was an inclined wire over a lake, which was more of a swamp called a lake. There was a little fête, like the French do, with a fishing contest, French fries and loud music. It was quite pitiful. It was the worst performance of my entire life, too, the first one.

*Did you almost fall? I understand that you have never fallen during a performance...*

I did have a moment of difficulty and also there were people who were not even caring to look. They were busy measuring the fish they were pulling out of the lake to see who was going to win. Also the sun had warped the records: Greensleeves was playing and it was

scratching and scratching, repeating the same note. It was a total disaster!

*Do you undergo any form of meditative ritual or thought-process before you step out on that wire?*

Not in a regimented, organised kind of way. I do not study how to prepare myself to carry my life in my hands, as I grab the pole and as I do that first step on the high wire, but I learn by doing it. If I don't turn the page from the madness of the everyday world, to enter the world of peacefulness, birds and clouds on the high wire, then I will not come out triumphant. So I force myself, again, in a kind of intuitive, child-like way, I force myself to turn the page and sometimes I have only five seconds to turn the page. Nowadays, I might have two or three hours, if I wish. I put down my helmet and rigging belt, I take a shower; I put on my costume like an artist should prepare for entering the stage, but when I was a kid there was never a situation like that. With The World Center walk, it was really a matter of maybe five seconds to put on my costume, to clean my face, get out the pole and start walking, because the workers were arriving on the roof! But today things are more organized.

*So what do you do today?*

I still draw on that self-taught chemistry, preparing myself to do a walk. If you see me getting ready before a performance, abandoning the hectic rigging and becoming the artist, half man, half bird, you will notice that my demeanour can be compared to that of people doing yoga, people meditating, it involves intense concentration.

But it's my own world. You have to see it. It's hard to describe. I think what it is (and it doesn't matter if it takes two weeks, two hours or two seconds), is to slowly narrow my field from the hectic outside world to that of the wire. I can do that. Usually it's a few days process. I even have an assistant helping me, protecting me from the outside world. Before a walk, if you want to ask me something you have to go through somebody who is making sure the interruption comes to me at the right moment. Basically, I narrow my field of intellectual vision, my feelings, my view of the world, to the point that the outside no longer exists. The only thing that exists is the cable. I became a master of narrowing myself to become cable.

*Do you have to block out random thoughts when you're up on the cable or are you entirely focused all of the time?*

It is a little bit of both. I can only talk personally. I don't know how other people concentrate and I don't care. But, the chemistry I have mastered calls for me to be so concentrated and yet if you study Japanese martial arts you will understand that to concentrate and to meditate doesn't mean that you are totally cut off. It would be a poor state if you were completely locked into your own world. It could be dangerous, especially for the man on

the wire. So what I do is create this intense concentration and lock myself in this world where I have lots of doors and windows ajar. Then if there is a little noise in the rigging, which indicates that something is wrong, I will hear that little noise. If there's humidity in the air that indicates rain, I will feel it on my skin and in my nostrils. So I am a very open, completely concentrated person.

*In the film, the logistics of The World Center walk seem insurmountable. At the time, did you enjoy that process or was it a complete nightmare?*

Sometimes I had nightmares, thinking it will never happen, the odds are against me; it's suicide. But I always kept going. In life, it was constant joy. You see it in the film when I was rehearsing in the field with my friends in France. We were rolling in the hay; we throw things at each other. We tease each other. We make jokes. We were a bunch of kids in a way, a bunch of young people. It was a life full of camaraderie and of joy and of pleasantries. I would call it an adventure full of laughter, and a few tears.

*How did you support that endeavour financially?*

I was a budding wire-walker. Even at the time of The World Trade Center I had done only a few walks. And I never was a rich man, so I would support myself, and my illegal project, with street juggling.

For years there was just street juggling: I was simply passing my hat in the streets of Paris, and then for eight months on the sidewalks of Manhattan. My silent character in the streets is unique and people are intrigued and inspired. I would get a big crowd and I would make a lot of money. Of course, that was not sufficient to finance 'Le Coup', as I called The World Trade Center walk (...), so Francis Brunn, the greatest juggler in the world and my best friend, put something in my hat which was more than a few quarters. It was all done like that.

*How does it feel after you achieve a lifelong dream like 'Le Coup'? After that well of satisfaction is there any kind of emptiness?*

That's a very good question. There's constantly the woes of the up and down of creating. If I spend months preparing for a high-wire performance (always a theatrical performance for me), after the show I feel empty, dead, lost. Also in my life, project after project, I have moments of emptiness and doubt. It's hard. In my kind of work, I only know that it is real when it is happening. Before that, the pyramid can always collapse... and it has, more than once! It's the life I have chosen so I am not to be considered with pity, but it's a life that's very uncertain while I have to be very certain all the time. As a creator I must believe in myself and in my project: it is not an easy life, it is a fascinating one.

*How did your life change after the World Trade Center walk?*

It's strange because it did change everything and it also changed nothing. What did change is that the phone started ringing and I got lots of commercial opportunities that would've made me an instant millionaire, by having me endorsing products and doing commercials on TV. I said no to those offers. It did change my life in the fact that I became even more known than a couple of years earlier when I put a wire illegally between the towers of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. Now I am well known and I have professional offers. What did not change is that facing those offers, I still had to fight as an artist to hone my vision as close as possible to

my dream. You cannot buy that with fame and money.

*Are all your high-wire walks now fully legal?*

Not really. I have done some strange things. For example, In Tokyo I did a walk that was actually illegal. The producer was hiring me, but for some reason I had to do it half-illegally! I keep putting a high wire illegally here and there but of course today the world has changed. You can imagine in a giant metropolis it would be probably unthinkable to install a high wire without permissions between two prominent buildings. Nonetheless I persist in thinking like an artist-criminal.

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