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Man on Wire

DIRECTOR

James Marsh

PRODUCER

Simon Chinn

Oscar Winner, Best Documentary Feature, 2008

SUMMARY

The behind-the-scenes tale of French wire walker Philippe Petit's dramatic and daring 1974 high wire walk between the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center.

When English documentary producer Simon Chinn first asked around about making a film on high-wire legend Philippe Petit, friends who'd known or worked with Petit begged Chinn to keep a distance—for Chinn's own sake. Amazing story, but a difficult character. Erratic. Stressful. But this only upped the stakes for the dogged producer. Chinn wanted him and would spend about as long pursuing Petit as it would take to make the splendid film that emerged from their encounters. His and director James Marsh's relentless wooing and nurturing of their wary subject birthed the critical and commercial darling, *Man on Wire*.

His quest began in April 2005, when Chinn found himself professionally restless. He was feeling like, in his words, "a corporate gun for hire," working

way too hard on a TV drama for a company in financial trouble and feeling a bit adrift. "Ennui was setting in," he recalls. But then one Sunday morning, an idea came to him through the airwaves. He'd overslept and woke up listening on his clock radio to the BBC Radio show "Desert Island Discs," where a "castaway" and guests come on to talk about the music they'd bring with them to a desert island. That day, the castaway was Philippe Petit. His stories about his magic and stunt performances in the streets of Paris as a child, and the way he savored his "artistic crime" of tightrope-walking across the twin towers of the World Trade Center riveted Chinn.

"I was totally and immediately struck by him and his story," says Chinn. By chance, he had lunch the following week with the producer of that show, and he asked her if she thought a documentary would be possible. The reply was blunt: "Don't go near him. He's a control freak." Appetite. Whetted. Then Chinn went and bought Petit's autobiography, *To Reach the Clouds*, and his zeal to make the film grew even more. There was no suppressing his ardor: "He was just an extraordinary man." So, Chinn reached out to Petit directly about making a film, and got an answer that didn't surprise him at all: "Join the queue..."

The non answer didn't come from Petit but from his chief gatekeeper and partner in all things, Kathy O'Donnell. "Philippe doesn't use email, he doesn't have a mobile phone, nothing like that. Kathy protects him from the world so he can go be this creative force," explains Chinn. She made it clear to Chinn that there were several others who'd already inquired about making a film on Petit's life and work. But Chinn stayed in touch with O'Donnell and found out that Petit would be coming to England to work on a stage adaptation of his memoir.

O'Donnell invited Chinn to meet Petit there in person. But that first meeting was a disaster. "I wasn't prepared, I got stuck in traffic, and I was terribly late. I made the worst impression. I was so disappointed and angry with myself," Chinn recalls, ruefully. But instead of discouraging him, he says the awful encounter "tripled my resolve."

Blunted by an underwhelmed and skeptical Petit, Chinn licked his wounds and turned back to wooing O'Donnell. "I realized I really needed to impress her," he said, and as time wore on, he sensed that his campaign was slowly starting to bring him back into the duo's good graces. She started dropping welcome clues, hinting that other Petit film suitors might not be experienced enough. She urged Chinn to write Petit a creative proposal for a collaboration, in the form of a formal letter. So Chinn lavished over the document, spelling out the exact nature of a partnership, a production schedule, and other details on his wish list.

Finally, Petit called him. Chinn was nervous. Petit told him that, yes, he could shoot him, but not a film about his life—just to promote a tightrope walk he planned over the Grand Canyon. Chinn was furious at Petit's agreeing to something so small but not to the quarry he was really after. Chinn got irate with him even though he knew anger could wreck his chances of making any sort of film about the Frenchman. It was a tactical risk, but Chinn was at his wits' end. "Would he admire me more for tenacity than diplomacy?" he wondered. As it turned out, yes, he did. Petit seemed to admire Chinn's passion and spunk. If it was a test, Chinn might have passed, and his hopes were suddenly alive again.

A summit with the two followed, in Paris. A determined Chinn prepped like crazy for the gathering and made sure to turn up precisely on time. He even played a trick of his own. After finding out, by chance, that Petit was an obsessive color-coder, Chinn very carefully color coded his research notes. During dinner, he nonchalantly started leafing through the notes and Petti's eyes lit up: "You're a color coder like me!" And at that point, Chinn says he just knew in his bones: "I got him. He's mine." Petit handed Chinn a coffee table edition of his book inscribed with the words Chinn had craved for months: "Let's do it."

But as with most things Petit, it would not be easy. After embracing his new partner in Paris, the supremely confident showman made Chinn walk across a series of legal tightropes for another six months of tense, volatile negotiations

about the terms of their agreement. Chinn and his lawyers haggled tenaciously over the rights to the book and terms. At one point, in a marathon phone call, Petit and O'Donnell's lawyer ended up screaming at Chinn's production team and their lawyers. But in the end, peace was struck, and Chinn ended up with the element that they prized above all: Petit would have consultative rights on the production but not any contractual rights to approving any content. "All that did was give us the obligation to listen to him, but by God, was he going to be heard!" recalls Chinn. And, in truth, legalistics aside, each needed the other to pull it off. Chinn would need Petit's cooperation all throughout the production and then marketing the film. If Petit turned against the film team, Chinn knew, he could upend the whole enterprise.

Perhaps banged up a bit, but intent on executing their newly struck deal, the two sides then worked to find a director that Petit could accept. He had veto power over the director, and Chinn knew very well he'd likely exercise that right liberally.

Chinn had been developing the film, and negotiating with Petit and his team, from a very attractive home base. His company, Red Box Films, partnered on the project with the prestigious Wall To Wall, one of the United Kingdom's leading production companies. An executive there suggested to him that he ask the director James Marsh to take on the Petit project. Marsh had directed documentaries for some of the BBC's most celebrated and innovative series, and he'd also made the experimental, darkly comic and cultishly popular "Wisconsin Death Trip" (1999).

Marsh, for his part, couldn't have been more grateful for a chance at the high-profile film this could become. For in that summer of 2006, Marsh was in the dumps—on many fronts. He'd just come off an unhappy experience in the narrative filmmaking world. He'd made a feature called "The King," which tanked at the box office and garnered mostly sour reviews. He'd not done a documentary in three years, and was feeling "sort of washed up at that point." He was so broke that he had to send his wife back to her native Denmark with

his kids for the summer, while he sublet their Brooklyn apartment and Marsh slept on the floor at a friend's house. In this precarious state of affairs, Marsh threw himself headlong into the treatment, script, outline, and timetable for *Man on Wire.*

Chinn strongly backed Marsh, known for his efficiency, production rigor and a ballooning imaginative style, feeling that he was a strong storytelling choice and a fitting match for the film's demanding subject.

With the key members of the production team in place, the film locked down funding from the BBC, the UK Film Council, and Discovery Films (part of Discovery Channel) in the United States. Each came in with about a third of the total 1.2 million pound budget.

Now they needed to get Petit to agree to their director.

But Marsh's first phone conversation with Petit, as with Chinn, did not go well. "Initially, he wasn't very impressed with Simon and he wasn't very impressed with me. He's quite a difficult man when you first encounter him... He wasn't going to work with somebody he didn't want to work with, and so that was a great, tricky dance," recalls Marsh. Marsh realized he would have to launch the kind of courtship with Petit that his producer partner had just endured.

And so, as with Chinn, Marsh soldiered on and suggested they meet in person, hoping this might go better than the unhappy phone call. "After a long, alcoholic lunch, he told me as we left, 'Let's do this together. I want to do this with you.'" Marsh thought he was home free, but then realized that what he thought was the final exam, was really more of a pop quiz. "That was just one of several early tests he set for me..."

Critically, after getting the thumbs-up from Petit, Marsh would still have to wait for six months before Petit would get to him the archives of his life and work. Petit made clear to Marsh that he saw himself not merely as the subject of the film but also as a collaborator—a dicey situation for any filmmaker. "That can be a very dangerous thing for a filmmaker and his subject, because they are not

always the best judge of their own stories," Marsh says. "The production could be quite combative, built on a kind of affection we had for each other as people."

That tough love way of interacting could involve near fisticuffs one minute and embracing the next. This would last for much of the production. After their bumpy first steps, Marsh says he often had to swat away many of Petit's shoot plans. "His ideas for the film were often either impossible to execute or self-defeating," Marsh insists. That said, Petit's ideas couldn't be hastily dismissed because his cooperation was vital. Near constant give-and-take, and testy negotiating over points large and small followed the headstrong men to the finish line. It may have gotten "sparky," recalls Marsh, "but never ugly or personal."

"You have to have strong opinions in filmmaking," says Marsh. "If you don't you shouldn't be making films. So definitely we clashed as we were making the film, but never in a way that was personal. It was always about the ideas. And we always still liked each other even when we fell out or had disputes about the subject matter and who to interview."

Marsh recalls, for example, how Petit was adamant that they not interview two of Petit's key American co-conspirators. Petit felt they didn't carry their weight in the operation and wouldn't fit into the heroic portrayal of the wire walk that he was hoping for. Marsh partly agreed with Petit's assessment: "They were feckless in some respects. They were not reliable." But Marsh wasn't about to toss away two characters who may have been bumblers but indeed were among a very small group of people in the thick of the action during the wire walk. "There was no question to interview them whether he liked it or not. And he didn't like it. But to give him credit, he saw the value of them when the film was finished."

Petit also wanted to be on set for key interviews as often as he could, even for scenes where he was not directly needed. The filmmakers saw this as a major distraction. "He wouldn't accept being forbidden from the set, but I talked him out of it. I persuaded him that it would not be a good idea," says Marsh. Marsh felt Petit, with his big personality and vocal opinions, would have been too

risky to have around during key scenes. He was prepared to insist Petit leave if things got dicey, but luckily for both, it never came to that. In the end, Marsh's simple but stern requests did the trick.

Marsh attributes the tense but relatively peaceful mood that prevailed over the course of the year of production in large part to the amount of time the two spent off camera. Marsh wanted badly that Petit not simply see the filmmakers as "extracting" material for a final goal. Many hours—off-set—of listening to music, cracking jokes, eating and drinking, all helped buoy the mood for what might otherwise been a much more difficult arrangement. "That was what he wanted, and that's what I wanted too. He's labor intensive, but I enjoyed his company too. So this trust developed across time," says Marsh.

But despite the frequent drumbeat of tension with his subject, making the film was an exhilarating joyride for James Marsh, a perfect format for him to make use of a whole directorial "bag of tricks" he'd always wanted to deploy together in a film. "I see the film as sort of a sum expression of all the things I knew and liked about the medium itself... It was a chance to make something great for the big screen." Even this quintessentially "glass is half empty" Brit will go out (very far!) on a limb to admit of *Man on Wire* that "this one I quite liked."

The film has a powerful way of never trying too hard to win viewers' attention and yet does so with ease at nearly every turn. The story is delivered with confidence and a hypnotic style, as viewers are lured as accomplices into the dazzling crime to which the story builds. Even though viewers know the outcome of Petit's wire walk, the film still manages to capture genuine drama, a feeling of high stakes, and dense emotional freight wrapped around the culminating stunt. Even three decades later, the filmmakers capture Petit and his wire walk partners with frequent tears in their eyes and looking up in the air, expectantly, as they describe the events of August 9, 1974.

A key breakthrough, in terms of their approach to the material, was when Marsh and Chinn decided that the film needed to be told as a genre film—as a heist story, with the heist in the foreground and then weaving in the past to

give the caper shape and context. They had laid out the story chronologically but felt it lacked excitement. "Philippe wrote his memoir as a sort of caper, where half the struggle wasn't the walking on the wire—that was the sort of easy part. It was the actual adventure of getting in. This appealed to him as sort of a mischief-making petty criminal, and to me too," Chinn says.

Drawing our attention to the build-up to the wire walk—rather than the walk itself—serves two purposes. On the one hand, it's a riveting escapade—tricking all the security guards, getting up to the not-quite-finished Twin Towers, setting the cables for the walk, etc. These plot points allow Marsh to lay on thick helpings of the heist genre motifs and look—lean black-and-white dramatizations, taut and minimalist music, plenty of visual play with darkness and shadows. And by making the build up to the stunt the film's narrative engine, viewers are drawn away from the moot "Will he or won't he make it across?" questions.

Add to this a strange twist in the tale that no one could have foreseen. Petit's point person for the arduous job of rigging the massive cables across the Twin Towers that day was his key ally, Jean-Louis Blondeau. But on the morning of the walk, a series of slip-ups made that already difficult job even more physically taxing for Blondeau. To make things worse, rigging cables was not his only job that morning. He was also the designated cameraman. He had a 16 mm film camera with him, but was so drained from hauling cables that he could not even lift the camera—let alone shoot with it.

So the filmmakers would have to make do with a small and motley batch of mostly out-of-focus stills Petit's team shot, to capture the climatic moment of the whole film. To Marsh, this was the biggest production challenge they faced. Animation? Special effects? Might not look credible, or fit with the rest of the film's tone. Then Marsh began mulling over one of his favorite films, the grand and mournful *La Jetee* (1962) made by Chris Marker using almost exclusively still photos. "Chris Marker is a genius. I'm not. But if Chris Marker can do a whole time travel, apocalyptic story with just found photographs,

then I should be able to somehow render this walk with actual photographs of the walk. We just had to trust these above all else." And so they did. No effects of any kind. A sequence of slow moves, and the film's insistent, haunting score, would carry these scenes through very capably. Also, the team relied on frequent cutaways to the enraptured recollections of the team there that day. In particular, his girlfriend at the time, and Blondeau, give intensely moving and emotional insights, looking heavenward as they recall the frightful and luminous moments when Petit seemed to float in the sky. "They put us up on that wire, very successfully," says Marsh.

Marsh and Chinn would take another major narrative risk to tell the tale of a seminal event that went largely undocumented by either still images or film. They chose to rely heavily on dramatizations, using actors to play Petit and his wide cast of co-conspirators, antagonists and lovers. Marsh had done dramatizations before for BBC documentaries, and was keen to take on the technique for the big screen. The whole film is structured along parallel paths—one being the action in the days before and including the walk, and the other, longer view, about how they all got to that point in the first place. Both broad paths, woefully lacking in archival material, would require heavy use of dramatization to work effectively.

But any dramatizing in documentaries is problematic. The technique has a controversial reputation, and it's one that has divided many broadcasters and filmmakers for years. Some embrace it as a cost-effective way to add energy to scenes for which there is no visual record, and as a device that affords a high-degree of control in terms of look and pacing. Many others, though, abhor it, calling it visually cheesy and claiming it forces filmmakers to take sides and editorialize when they recreate scenes for which they have little detailed knowledge. The *Man on Wire* team was acutely aware of this debate. "You have to be very wary," says Marsh. "You're bending the form ... you're representing your own imagery against people's stories in a way that's entirely invented." Chinn too adds that it always a roll-of-the-dice. "You do them, I guess, more

out of necessity than out of design. You just hope you're going to be ambitious, and the reenactments will have, at the very least, some real production value."

So to combat some of the built-in problems with dramatization, Marsh and Chinn took a number of steps to try to use them most effectively. They worked to get copious details about actions and locations from those whom they were preparing to dramatize, they mixed dramatizations with still photos whenever they felt those could boost veracity, and they made the decision to never use any sync dialogue with the dramatizations. Dialogue, they decided, would be pushing an already risky technique one step too far.

Marsh scripted the dramatizations as precisely as he could, and the team took 5 very long days to shoot them after most other filming was complete. They are directed simply, typically with very few characters in frame and scant camera movement. In sync with the fairy tale, Peter Pan-like atmosphere conjured up by Petit, the direction is fanciful and relaxed, rather than obsessed with exact replication. The black-and-white scenes carry us through many of the plot points leading to the wire walk, and it's hard to see how else they could have proceeded. Reaching for us as much verisimilitude as they could gather, the team even persuaded the owners of the building that is replacing the destroyed World Trade Center to let them film from the top of the not yet completed structure, providing them a very similar vantage point to that Petit saw from the towers in August 1974.

As with so much of the shooting for *Man on Wire*, the filmmakers had to wrestle with Petit's wishes when shooting the dramatizations too. Even though everyone they filmed in the dramatizations was an actor, Petit wanted to play himself. The answer? A firm no. Not helpful.

Petit also wanted to do part of his interview going up a tree on a cherry picker, for sentimental reasons—he used to climb trees as a child. The filmmakers broke open their wallets and had a cherry picker drive up from Manhattan to Petit's farm upstate. The interview, however, didn't come off well, and it never made it into the film.

But the filmmakers did find an imaginative way to accommodate one of Petit's requests, and it ended up paying off enormously. Petit, the consummate showman, asked the team: "How about if I perform my interview, re-enact it?" Marsh was open to it, but wasn't sure where this was headed. The producer, Simon Chinn, worried the format would invite Petit to veer off course, to embellish or would simply look too weird. But, they went along with Petit's idea of a "dramatized interview," and the fruits of these odd and inspired scenes end up being some of the most memorable in the whole film.

"It ended up being a wonderful idea because it freed Philippe to be who he really is. He's a performer, and he performed his interview. It was, to a large extent his own mythologizing of his own story. But you know what? It works," admits Chinn.

At one point during this interview, describing how he and his team had to hide from security guards under blankets in the building's upper reaches, Petit drapes a blue cloth over his head and whispers the tale. There's a wonderfully mischievous and childlike quality to the recounting, like a young boy in a tree fort passing along a secret code to his clubmates. At another point, Petit demos how they strung cables between the towers using colored string slung across a scale model of the towers—another delightful and whimsical touch.

"This is an unusual gift, to have your principal contributor, who is a showman, who wants to enact his story. By doing this he was connecting with the emotions that he experienced at the time," says Marsh.

Petit's re-enacted interview bites are woven in with more conventional bites, and viewers enjoy a rounded sense of the film's star, both "on" and "off" stage, as it were. Marsh and his team worked at a fairly quick clip, shooting while cutting, and after a year or so of on-off shooting, by Fall of 2007 the bones of the vérité and archival material are edited. Instead of ending on the triumph of the wire walk, though, Marsh makes the decision to play up the bitter feelings between Petit and his co-conspirators that erupted almost immediately after he got off the wire, and which have mostly lasted to this day. "It's like, they

were all up in the air together. He comes down, and everything is different. It's bittersweet. But it's real life—not a superhero movie," says Marsh.

In the early going, there had also been a brief discussion about whether or not, or how, to mention the grisly fate of Petit's towers on September 11, 2001. No way, insisted the filmmakers. "I made the film, in my own mind, to rebuild the Towers," says Marsh. To him, the culminating act of the Towers was Petit's majestic walk, not the vicious attacks that felled them 27 years later. "This film could, its own very small way, give you an hour and a half with the buildings as if they were alive in the best possible life they had. Not the business of American capitalism that went on there, but this beautiful performance."

In the fall of 2007, the team submitted *Man on Wire* to Sundance, and got accepted into the World Documentary competition. Sundance slotted its premiere in the perhaps not-so-glamorous second week of the festival. During the screening, the vibe seemed to be going well when the filmmakers were baffled by a small exodus of people suddenly leaving the theater. But as it turned out, it wasn't their film that provoked the departures. Hollywood star Heath Ledger had just died in New York, word was filtering down to Utah, and some attendees stepped out to swap news about the death. Despite little pre-screening publicity, buzz about *Man on Wire* built quickly after it screened, and it would end up winning a rare double coup—both the Grand Jury Prize and the Audience Award.

Soon after Sundance, Magnolia Pictures struck a deal to release it theatrically, box off receipts came in strong, and then the capper—an Oscar nomination for Best Documentary Feature of 2008. And the following Spring, it won that Oscar. And even Philippe Petit, who claimed to dislike the movie when it was finished, seemed to warm to it as audiences did too. "I think he wouldn't have made it that way himself, but he did end up respecting what we'd done with his story," Marsh says, reflecting on Petit's reaction. And perhaps, the director speculates, "we gave him a whole other sort of cool all over again."