



Interview with Bob Last  
(producer of *The Illusionist*)  
conducted February 8, 2011

QUESTION: The failure of the magician character to remain relevant in the changing world of show business could be interpreted as a metaphor for the decline (and near death) of traditional hand drawn 2D animation. Was that in any way something you and M. Chomet consciously wanted to convey with the film?

ANSWER: This was not a conscious intent-- this is not a pencils versus computer statement-- but we were aware of this possible resonance. To me the film is rather more about how we all have to deal with change and loss and how we can find dignity within this unavoidable process...

QUESTION: What do you think the future of hand drawn animated features is?

ANSWER: Although I do not think we will see the big studios reverting to 2D I believe that if the skills base can be kept alive you will see an increasing interest in 2D and an acceptance that it is one tool within a wider palette. I see parallels with what happened in music production in the 80s when for a while traditional instrumentation was abandoned in favour of exploration of new digital instrumentation. Once a certain maturity was reached in the new digital tools people began to re embrace the traditional tools again.

QUESTION: I read that a major influence on the design style for The Illusionist was Disney's 101 Dalmatians. One particular stylistic element from that film not present in The Illusionist is the rough, broken Xeroxed quality of the lines in Dalmatians (for characters and backgrounds). Was this line quality ever considered for The Illusionist and, if so, why was it ultimately not used?

ANSWER: This was certainly a very important reference point for Sylvain. Although we did not exactly emulate the Xerox look and feel a huge amount of work was done on the line quality in the film and a relatively complex digital ink and paint process created specially for the film so that the texture and artistry of the graphite lines could be retained as an important part of the overall look

QUESTION: When M. Chomet composed the film's music, did he write/perform it prior to the animation being drawn?

ANSWER: Some of his musical sketches were prepared very early in the process and incorporated in the animatic, others only came together much later in the process, in general by the time the final arrangements were worked on with Terry Davies there was at least an animatic of the relevant sequence available. The Britoons tracks were recorded by Malcolm Ross under Sylvain's guidance prior to animation. (I had worked with Malcolm on Backbeat and Chocolat).

QUESTION: There is a spectacularly breathtaking shot in the film from a point of view high above the city, with the camera looking almost straight down, and raindrops falling in extreme perspective. Can you describe the production process involved in creating this shot? How long did the shot take to complete? How many people worked on it?

ANSWER: This shot was worked on over many months but by a very small team, primarily by Campbell McAllister, but assisted by the art director and especially the compositor JP Bouchet.

QUESTION: Were there any scenes that the team was not able to execute in the way M. Comet originally envisioned?

ANSWER: I'm pleased to say that I think we managed to find a way of capturing Sylvain's vision for every shot in the final film- although much if the pipeline was created uniquely to deliver the specific look and feel of the film. Although it is great that so many people find the look of the film to be beautiful a huge amount of the effort was focused on getting nuanced performance for our lead characters and the pipeline was structured around this rather than being shot based.

QUESTION: Like Triplets of Belleville, The Illusionist often mixes computer generated props, vehicles and background elements into the hand drawn universe. Are you and M. Chomet satisfied with how the two media blend or do you think technology has not yet reached the level for completely seamless integration?

ANSWER: I feel that the integration of these elements was really very seamless and not hampered by technology, I particularly like the sense of 3 dimensional depth within the painterly 2d feel that was accomplished by integrating 3D elements and some sophisticated manipulation of 2D backgrounds in compositing (Largely using Fusion).

QUESTION: I personally feel the art and animation in The Illusionist is exponentially better than any other animated film ever produced. What animated films do you feel are examples of excellence?

ANSWER: First of all thank you! It is easiest to speak of those films that clearly occupy a different space to ours- so for example I enjoyed the Toy Story films and some other mainstream CGI movies, however for me personally I would have to say that I found a lot of Miyazaki's work inspiring.

QUESTION: I noticed in the credits that some Korean production companies were involved in the animation. Have you considered doing an animated production completely with Korean studios?

ANSWER: At the very end of the process in our final crunch we enlisted the help of a couple of Korean units to help out with inbetweening. It was challenging for them but they did well. However I do not envisage producing a film entirely in Korea as I don't think there is yet the skills base to drive the requisite production quality-- however this may change. I

know those people we worked with have been inspired to raise their game and have already worked with some of them again.

QUESTION: Animated films as beautiful and unique as The Illusionist are very rare in a marketplace filled with explosions, loud, brash characters and an eye on merchandising. What is the likelihood of you and M. Chomet attempting another animated feature this boldly independent?

ANSWER: I don't think either of us would want to try to repeat The Illusionist which was made possible by a unique combination of elements. Sylvain is keen to make a live action film and I have both live action and animation projects in development.

QUESTION: You come from a background in popular music. Have you considered producing an animated film with a heavy emphasis on the music, like Yellow Submarine or American Pop or even possibly a modern Fantasia?

ANSWER: I have often been approached about producing a music driven film, whether in animation or live action but have not yet found the right one- but I'd love to if the right script comes along. I know that there has been a plan to make an animated feature based around a song cycle of Rolling Stones material and this certainly sounds like an interesting idea.

QUESTION: In a few interviews you mention the “shifting light” in Edinburgh and how that influenced the film’s art direction. Can you explain (for people who live at lower latitudes) what the shifting light is like and how you used it in the film?

ANSWER: Edinburgh is more northerly than many people imagine so it has a kind of clarity to the light you get in northern zones and, at the same time, being a coastal island, Scotland has extremely changeable weather- a single day or even a single hour can feature intense sun, hail, rain; it is also a windy city so cloud patterns are often racing across the sky casting dynamic shadows. All of these things pose huge challenges for live action shooting but Sylvain found them beautiful and was determined to incorporate it in the film- and you will see that in many shots the light and sky is dynamic. Because in animation the weather can be controlled it can be used to contribute to the emotional effect of the shots..

Bob Last  
02/2011