



High Art Time-space traveler Robert Zemeckis talks *The Walk*

IF YOU DON'T KNOW ROBERT ZEMECKIS, THEN YOU DON'T KNOW Marty McFly or Forrest Gump, two guys who kept trying to outrun time. Or Chuck Noland, who talked to a volleyball under a palm tree, or a film-noir-framed Rabbit named Roger. At 63, Zemeckis has for over three decades—through some 18 films he variously produced, directed, and wrote—made an outsize contribution to the fortunes of film companies and the imaginations of the young at heart the world over.

With his *Flight* closing the New York Film Festival in 2012, and his new film, *The Walk*, opening it this year, it's just like Zemeckis to grace Gotham by starting something he already finished. Need to backflip, roll over, and hang by a toe? Bob's the guy to do it.

When Joseph Gordon-Levitt in *The Walk* at last ascends all 110 stories and re-creates Philippe Petit's high-wire performance between the Twin Towers just hours before they officially began their brief, fateful lives in 1974, the film is pure cinema. Everyone knows how life turns out for the three heroes—the North and South Towers, and the tiny speck of a Frenchman in the sky that August day. No matter. It's gasp, laugh, cry. Repeat.

IN FOCUS: *The Walk* opens the New York Film Festival on September 26, and will be in theaters October 9.



So how did you do the walk in *The Walk*?

An illusionist is not supposed to tell people how he does everything. We live in the digital cinema world, which means you can do anything. The tricks we used are pretty advanced and not off-the-shelf stuff. It's not mechanical or technical anymore. Digital artists are magnificent, and they are finding their own voice in the world of digital painting.

Are these the Atomic Fiction guys?

Yeah, Kevin Baillie and his team. When I was over at Disney, we did a lot of groundbreaking work there. It was really cool to have a place where these young artists could come into their own. When Disney shut us down, these guys started Atomic Fiction. They're real gunslingers.

How does this differ from performance capture?

Everything is like a giant stew now. It's all just digital cinema, and it's not broken

down like it used to be—visual, mechanical, green screen. Everything is just like acrylic paint now.

You didn't have a guy on a wire, 1,500 feet in the air. Can you explain the process?

You have a little bit of a guy on wire and a little bit of your actor on something that is simulated to [look like] wire, and a little piece of a set façade. And a little performance capture, animation, and a lot of digital painting. We never went outside. We never had Joseph with real sky behind him.

Did he ever walk on a wire?

Oh, yeah, he went into 10 days of intensive wire-walking training with Philippe. He was never lower than 12 or 15 feet.

You cast English-speaking actors in French roles. You ask us to believe in the special effects but then risk the audience not believing the performances.

It only mattered that the actor could speak English with a French accent. Joe is

the guy who really fit the bill. Not only is he an amazing actor but he truly has an affinity for all the things that Philippe loves—the street performance and circus stuff. And he's a Francophile.

3-D has been used in the service of sci-fi, adventure, fantasy, but here it's reality-based.

That's what makes it unique. When you are building stuff digitally, you have so much more control over the dynamics of the 3-D. That's why cartoons work so well in 3-D. The idea of re-creating Lower Manhattan in 1974 digitally was very exciting.

I started the 3-D thing with *The Polar Express*. Old 3-D was mechanical, and the image could never be solid and rock-steady. Then filmmakers just started converting everything into 3-D with no attention to design. A movie should be in 3-D if it comes out of the source material. I was looking for something that would lend itself to 3-D. I came across Philippe's story [his memoir, *To Reach the Clouds*]. I backed into the movie.

The Walk sees in Petit's walk similarities with being a good producer and director.

I said to Philippe: "I completely get you. I know what a high-wire act is. I know what that obsessive thing I call 'white out' is: nothing is gonna stop me from making this movie." There was nothing going to stop Philippe from putting that wire across those towers.

When you make a film, is there anyone you have to worry about saying, "No, we can't do that"?

That never ends. You're always up against the art and

"When you are building stuff digitally, you have so much more control over the dynamics of the 3-D. The idea of re-creating Lower Manhattan in 1974 digitally was very exciting."

commerce thing. Like oil and water. It's always about what's costing what. The trick is to have enough confidence to skin the cat in different ways. You know what scenes are indispensable. You know which ones you can lift out of the script, and you have ways to make a scene work and knock out some money.

The whole process of making a movie is a giant, long negotiation. And compromise. You get up in the morning and just compromise all day. You get in your car heading to the set, you've got this beautiful vision of the scene and a shot list with 25 setups—and it's lunch and you haven't done the first shot yet. By 4 p.m. the light's going down, and you're sitting there saying, I just have to shoot something so I can cut it together. It's all just compromise.

The Walk uncompromisingly articulates the role of the artist: to provoke, entertain, show us our power, our fears. What do you think your role as an artist is?

Simplify the shit. The whole point of art is to simplify. It's to take these very complex things like emotions and philosophical thought and put them in a context that makes them simple enough for us to relate to.

By employing the device of Philippe narrating the story

while standing on the Statue of Liberty, it reminds us of France's first gift to America and suggests Philippe's high-wire walk was its modern counterpart. And the film lets the audience love the image of the towers and the era of New York they represent.

I approached the Twin Towers from Philippe's point of view. Everyone's going to bring their own history with the towers and fill in the blanks. But it comes from character. Philippe loved those towers. He called them "his" towers. There's a moment in the movie when he salutes them. It's the towers, the wire—everything is part of his performance.

I have a question about time...

It's not going to be about *Back to the Future*, is it? It's astonishing to me that film stays in pop culture like it does. Blows my mind.

You make films in 3-D, but you often are dealing with the fourth dimension.

That's one of the things I love about movies. The two art forms that are sensitive to time are music and film. Music and film only exist when they are moving. Life only exists when it's moving. A painting, a photograph, they are moments that are stopped. They move you emotionally, and they have their own life. But they're not as lifelike as music and film. Film is basically a giant clock. It's a piece of art that is moving in time. That's why scenes on trains work so well, because you know the train is on a track and it's going to get from point A to point B. You can create magnificent sequences with trains in films. Much better than with cars.

As a boy back in Chicago in the early Sixties, how did you know that you could do this?

I grew up in Roseland, near Pullman on the Indiana border. It's pretty horribly infamous now. I didn't know I could do this. I still don't know if I can really do it. I know that is ridiculous to say, but you know that feeling. I was driven. I just loved it.

What did your father and mother do?

My father was a construction worker, my mom a housewife. We thought we were middle class but we were working poor. We believed we were living the American Dream. I look back and think, oh my God!

Is this what your parents would have wanted for you?

No, no, no, no, no. My parents didn't understand it at all. Everybody in my world told me: "You know, Bob, kids from the South Side of Chicago don't become film directors." They were doing it to save me from myself. But I never believed them. I didn't tell them I applied to a film school. I announced at the dinner table I got into USC and was going to L.A. to become a moviemaker. My father literally said something close to the line that's in this film: "You mean my son is going to go join the circus?" Of course, he was completely right. That's exactly what I did.

What did they think you should do?

They wanted me to get a great union job where everything was taken care of and I could have two cars and maybe a boat. And I'd come over to the house on weekends and help my dad paint the screens. □

THE WALK: COURTESY OF SONY PICTURES; ZEMECKIS: PHOTO BY TAKASHI SEIDA, COURTESY OF SONY PICTURES