

JÉRÔME SEYDOUX and FRANÇOIS PINAULT
PRESENT

NOTRE-DAME ON FIRE

A FILM BY
JEAN-JACQUES ANNAUD



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PATHÉ FILMS - 2, RUE LAMENNAIS - 75008 PARIS
TÉL. : 01 71 72 30 00





INTERVIEW WITH JEAN-JACQUES ANNAUD DIRECTOR

The incredible adventure of this film actually began on April 15, 2019 for you, the day of the fire in Notre-Dame de Paris...

I was out in Vendée for a few days, in a house where the TV wasn't working. When I turned on the radio to listen to the address President Macron was about to give, I found out about the tragedy unfolding at Notre-Dame. I didn't see it that evening: I imagined it. I know the cathedral well. As a child, I broke in my first camera, a Kodak Brownie, by photographing the pensive demon along the Chimera Gallery..

Later, an invitation to lunch oriented you towards the idea of making a film about this tragedy...

Jérôme Seydoux, CEO of Pathé, called me in late December 2019. Our relationship goes way back. He put an offer on the table that surprised me. He had in mind a spectacular archive montage film for wide screens and immersive sound on the Notre-Dame fire. At first, I feared there wasn't enough diverse footage to put together a 90-minute film, but I listened. I left with an envelope full of documentation, including articles in French and English. Before going to bed, I took a look at it. I pored over everything until the wee hours. It was too late or too early to call, but I'd made my decision.

What in these preliminary documents convinced you?

What I discovered in them was unimaginable. A fascinating cascade of setbacks, obstacles, failures. Totally implausible, yet true. All the components of a fiction script were there. In the title role: an international star, Notre-Dame de Paris. Her opponent: a formidable and charismatic demon, fire. Between the two, ordinary young people prepared to give their lives to save stones. Silver-screen action any scriptwriter might dream of, a visual opera with suspense, drama, generosity, and comedy. Everything struck me as wild, grandiose, burlesque, deeply human... I then needed to verify the accuracy of these extraordinary facts and focus on exactitude. I knew from the start that I would have to collect information, testimonies and possible hypotheses from those who lived through these mind-blowing hours...

How did you proceed from there?

At first, I decided to stick with the facts and so I undertook to establish a chronology of events. I had a terrible time just pinning down the precise timeline of developments: by comparing the various testimonies I had at that stage, I realized that everyone had his own version of when the smoke and then the flames first appeared, and when the fire department arrived. I quickly understood that in view of the intensity of the moment, no one had time to look at his watch. I gave Thomas Bidegain, Jacques Audiard's screenwriter, an embryonic version of the scenario to read. "What could I possibly have to contribute to that?" he asked me after reading it. I explained that I needed the critical eye of a harsh critic and the valuable insight of a talented author.

As you reviewed the events of April 15, 2019, what surprises did you unearth?

The fire was detected at the beginning of Easter Monday Mass, at 6:17 p.m., but it was not brought to the attention of the fire department until a half-hour later, by a friend of General Gallet's who was on vacation in Florence. Starting that morning, a relentless sequence of dramatic events was set in motion, in which everything seemed to converge toward inevitable disaster: it was the first day of work at Notre-Dame for the new fire safety guard in charge of monitoring a fire alarm control panel where alarms go off if a fire is detected. He had never visited the cathedral and was unfamiliar with the technical terminology of Gothic architecture. When the alarm went off and an indecipherable code was displayed, he called his boss. The person in charge was not reachable and didn't return the call until 15 minutes later. The guard in charge of verifying that a fire has indeed broken out understood through the crackling of his walkie-talkie that he was to check the sacristy attic, whereas the fire had broken out in the attic of the nave.

That was just the beginning of a staggering string of mishaps.





A thorny question remains: what was the precise cause of the blaze? Today, nearly three years later, we still don't have an official answer.

The legal inquiry is ongoing. The film was never envisaged as investigative or aiming to supplant the work of public prosecutors. It evokes various probable causes, but evidence is lacking. Notre-Dame on Fire deals with the details we know: the saga of saving the cathedral. We recount how the cathedral was rescued, not how or why it was almost destroyed.

The film is a spectacular fresco in which Notre-Dame de Paris plays the main role. You were able to shoot a few scenes inside the cathedral, but you had to create a partial replica of the cathedral in studio...

The building remained inaccessible due to the presence of lead everywhere and the risk of collapse. And in any case, we needed to fill the building with smoke, cover the floor in ash and dust, send down tons of flaming timbers and flood the paving stones. We rebuilt a replica. Flames were piped through hundreds of adjustable nozzles to light the set on fire.

We rebuilt to scale a large section of the nave, the spiral staircases, the exterior galleries and the rafters of the north transept, as well as the inside of the enormous bell tower in the final scene. In short, all those emblematic places in Notre-Dame Cathedral that were most affected by the disaster and that absolutely had to be shown before and during the fire.

Do you have to be a believer yourself to tackle such a subject?

You have to believe in cinema.

I come from a completely atheist, totally secular and republican family. The hereafter was an abstract notion in our house, but I remember that around the age of 10-12, I felt something was missing... I made up for it by developing a great interest in medieval architecture. I spent my pocket money on records of sacred music, Gregorian canticles, Tibetan chants, Sahelian songs, Bach oratorios, and Frescobaldi toccatas. In summer, at my request, rather than go to the beach, we toured Breton church closes or Romanesque basilicas in Auvergne. I can't recite a single prayer, but I have deep respect for other people's forms of worship and faith. This explains my fortunate harmony with the Buddhist monks in Seven Years in Tibet, with the desert Bedouins in Black Gold and the strict Benedictine monks in The Name of the Rose. Inside a temple, a mosque or a church, I like to feel the mystery of a faith I don't share, the serenity of worship and prayer. The clerics I met when working on Notre-Dame on Fire weren't surprised that I was the one making the film. And among things we also hold sacred are firefighters... It's interesting to see how the two come together on this project...



You do indeed make the firefighters rescuing Notre-Dame the heroes of the story, and particularly the six young people who were the first to tackle the flames.

Two young women and two young men just out of adolescence... Out of the four of them, two had never been to a fire. These “probies,” as novice firefighters are called, were under the orders of two young officers hardly older than they are! They arrived in a small truck, a 22-ft. First Response vehicle to fight a fire that was almost 400 feet high. They had a gurney, a ladder and small-diameter hoses. When I met them during film preparation, I was impressed by their modesty and humility. Never were any of the people in this profession I was learning about proud or boastful. All of them dedicate their lives to those of others, take incredible risks, have daily brushes with danger and death, but derive no glory from it. When I pointed out to them that their daily tasks were heroic, they dismissed the adjective, embarrassed. They reminded me of the Paris Fire Brigade doctrine, “risking our lives to save

other lives.” I objected that Notre-Dame is a monument made of stone. They replied that their own lives amounted to little compared to the thousand-year-old stones in one of the most emblematic sanctuaries in the world. They went on to tell the story of how, after wading with water nearly up to the knees through the galleries that had been turned into pools, they regretted being forbidden to get near the flames. Their turnouts are designed to withstand temperatures of 1,300°F. But drenched and exposed to nearly double that temperature, the risk was that the suit would turn into an autoclave and that they would “steam-cook” inside. On that April 15, the temperature at the seat of the fire was over 2,200° F. Listening to them, I fully realized what an ordeal this extraordinary operation actually was. Unbearable heat, suffocating fumes, 40 kilos of equipment on their backs, 15 kilos of hose, helmets and respirator masks that were necessarily uncomfortable, and all this on a more than hostile site, with, in the upper reaches of the cathedral, incredibly narrow passageways. Less than 50 centimeters wide!



The firefighters' testimonies were vital for the film. How did you go about approaching them?

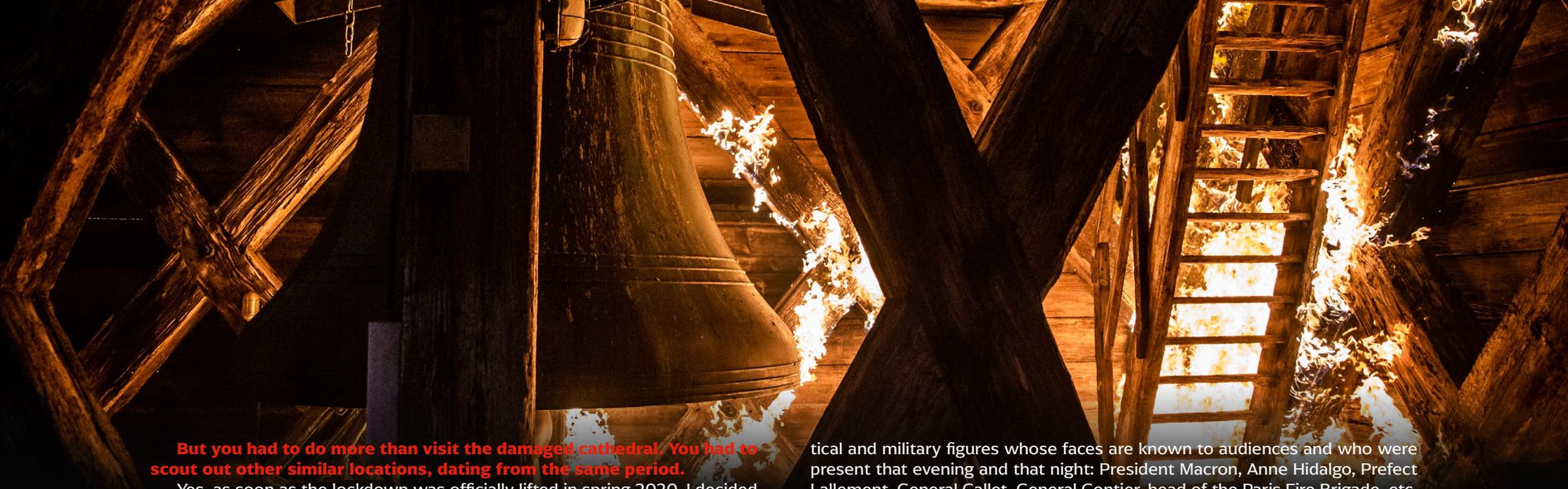
During film preparation and the essential work of documentation, we were in the middle of the pandemic, during the first lockdown. Our efforts to contact the major witnesses and actors in the disaster were nevertheless greatly facilitated. To arrange appointments with members of BSPP (the Paris Fire Brigade), Jean-Yves Asselin, my line producer, went through Lieutenant-Colonel Claire Boët, head of communications. The same goes for the Paris City Hall: Anne Hidalgo let us know very early on that access to the Notre-Dame plaza would be possible during the shooting... Florence Parly, (the Minister of Armed Forces, which oversees the Paris Fire Brigade), as well as the Prefect of Police Didier Lallement also worked to open doors and close off streets for us.

What is striking when watching your film is the incredible beauty of the images of the fire devouring Notre-Dame. Both terrifying and fascinating!

I agree: Gothic architecture and flames form a very photogenic couple! Among the testimonies were narratives of the arrival of the first-response teams in the vicinity of Notre-Dame as the blaze was already devouring the roof timbers and melting the roof. All of them described an apocalyptic scene, with the fire raging furiously. The fire was so powerful that whole sections of beams were picked up by the updraft and came crashing down on the plaza below and sometimes even much farther away. Ash carried off by the wind fell beyond the Musée d'Orsay! The gargoyles spat out sulfur-colored fumes and vomited lead from the molten roof... Everyone told me: the first thing that struck them (I use this word deliberately), was the flaming embers that raining down on their helmets and crackling beneath their feet.

One of the highlights of this preparation was your meeting with General Georgelin, whom the French president made responsible for overseeing the work of rebuilding Notre-Dame.

That was in May 2020... What a character, that Georgelin! Fit for a movie. From the start, without our really asking him, he suggested that Jérôme Seydoux and I visit the burned cathedral. We therefore donned protective gear against lead (oversized boots, and an insane getup made of several layers of disposable undergarments, pants and coats) and masks, and followed the general. With his baritone voice, like a guide trained at the Comédie Française, he described the state of the building after the disaster. A moving and fascinating visit. The opportunity to wander through the nave, the bays, and the choir enabled me to clarify what I had in mind. I also realized that the two breaches in the vault were at once enormous but of a size that left hope for a possible restoration. The architects in the Middle Ages who invented Gothic architecture counted entirely on the vaults and the fireproof mortar that covered them. The aim was to prevent the disasters that had affected Carolingian constructions, in which the walls supported the roof structure directly, without this invaluable fire retardant. Over the centuries, they formed remarkable protection against fire. The collapse of the spire perforated the vault, setting ablaze the flammable fumes that had accumulated beneath the nave. It was all evacuated upward in an impressive flare of about 100 feet high. According to some experts, that's what prevented a major explosion and saved Notre-Dame...



But you had to do more than visit the damaged cathedral. You had to scout out other similar locations, dating from the same period.

Yes, as soon as the lockdown was officially lifted in spring 2020, I decided to undertake a series of visits to contemporaneous cathedrals with or in the same style as the one on Île de la Cité. Sens, the first Gothic cathedral in the world, the true founding matrix for Notre-Dame of Paris, Saint-Denis, built with the same limestone, Amiens and especially Bourges, which also has a double ambulatory. I wanted to be able to set up my cameras in axes having considerable similarities to those in Notre-Dame and then be able to match them up with my replicated sets in the studio. That enabled me to avoid having everything made and to come as close as possible to reality. Doors, spiral staircases, lateral naves, radiating chapels, statues, cornices, galleries and flying buttresses... I drew up a huge catalogue of possible shooting locations. Then I had to figure out how to put together this Gothic puzzle so that it corresponded to an overall vision of the Notre-Dame in the film. That's where I realized (after having climbed thousands of steps in cathedrals, from their naves to their bell towers), just how close the firefighters' rescue of Notre-Dame was to being mission impossible. The spiral staircases are sometimes so narrow that they had to undress and then crawl and slide through cramped passages to reach the blaze.

We should also talk about the casting of your film. You chose to call on confirmed actors, but not on stars who are very familiar to audiences.

The men and women who saved Notre-Dame are anonymous heroes – and wish to remain so. It would have been inappropriate to have them played by stars who were too instantly recognizable. To emphasize the distance between documentary and fiction, barring a few exceptions, such as the "operations sketch artist," I decided not to hire the real firefighters who had been the heroes of April 15. It was a margin of freedom and creativity that I absolutely wanted to keep. On the other hand, the question arose regarding public, poli-

tical and military figures whose faces are known to audiences and who were present that evening and that night: President Macron, Anne Hidalgo, Prefect Lallement, General Gallet, General Gontier, head of the Paris Fire Brigade, etc. For some of these personalities, I decided to insert real on-the-scene footage, taken by tourists, journalists or the firefighters themselves. This footage, shot in the heat of the moment, enhances credibility. For other characters, such as General Gallet and General Gontier, who have extensive dialogue, I relied on confirmed artists with successful careers in television and theater. We drew from this pool of strong professionals. The audience will recognize Samuel Labarthe, Chloé Jouannet, Pierre Lottin, Jérémie Laheurte, Jean-Paul Bordes, Ava Baya, Vassili Schneider and Jules Sadoughi.

Let's talk about the set design and construction and the choice of studios. For a project of this scale, you had to find suitable places for it.

We needed spaces that were large enough to accommodate sets that could be 80 to 100 feet high. On top of it, most of these sets were slated to be burned entirely! We were determined to shoot in France, but the fact is that not a single studio has the infrastructure needed for this project. We had two choices: the Cité du Cinéma in Saint-Denis, and Bry-sur-Marne. In Saint-Denis, we shot indoors, and in Bry, on the "back lot," as they call it, a vast outdoor space. We also needed workshops for carpentry, ironwork, sculpture, plaster casting, etc. I managed to obtain the bare minimum space for my film, in terms of infrastructure. At the Cité du Cinéma, I was able to rely on the experience of technical crews who are used to this sort of production. I also benefited from the extraordinary know-how of Jean Rabasse, an exceptional production designer. Jean has worked on several of Jean-Pierre Jeunet's films as well as for Bernardo Bertolucci and Roman Polanski. Our initial discussions were inspiring and productive. Over and above all these challenges, I kept in mind the spirit of the project: it had to be shot in the right place. Where Notre-Dame was conceived, sculpted and constructed. Therefore in France...

How did you go about building the sets?

We set up our production offices at the Cité du Cinéma, taking up a whole floor. Drawings, scale models, 3D models: I asked for several scaled-down versions of replicas of Notre-Dame and its bell tower, similar to cardboard or wooden construction sets. Each one required several weeks of work because they were made according to the original plans. This allowed me to imagine very early on my cameras angles, the blocking of my actors, the segments to be set on fire and how to route the water and other safety devices through all this, and set up emergency exits. The meticulous preparation work saved us considerable time when I shot in real cathedrals or on the constructed sets. It also enabled me to rebuild only what I needed. At the same time, our crew developed special fireproof cameras capable of withstanding the heat of fire scenes. Throughout this meticulous pre-production process, as I went from one workshop to another, I was delighted to see the joy and pride of all the passionate craftsmen: cabinetmakers, plasterers, ironworkers, glaziers, painters, etc. All were true experts in their art who do not often have the opportunity to build Gothic columns and vaults. I took my set design crews on visits to several real cathedrals so that they could be inspired by the patina of the walls and statues, for instance. We also conducted tests to find the right way to reproduce the melting of lead from the heat of the fire dripping from the roofs to the ground or onto the firefighters' helmets. I felt truly buoyed by this collective enthusiasm.

In "Notre-Dame on Fire," the scenes of the fire ravaging the cathedral's roof structure are particularly intense. How did you approach and shoot them?

The roof structure of Notre-Dame, what was known as the forest, was made of oak beams (some of them more than 900 years old), went up in smoke in the April 2019 conflagration. We had to replicate this structure, which was unique worldwide and has now vanished, in a scene that took place in the cathedral's north transept, where the firefighters first intervened. The scenes are highly dramatic and spectacular. We first had the roof structure modeled in 3D and then went on to build it for real. This set was erected in Bry-sur-Marne and we set it on fire. The bells were made of reinforced plaster and could withstand temperatures of 750° F during the shoot.

In spring 2021, on March 9, the first day of shooting arrived. What do you remember about it?

Finally! It was in Bourges, where we spent a good week shooting the scenes inside the cathedral at the beginning of the film, showing the crowds of visitors to Notre-Dame. I wanted to show the cacophony of languages during these group visits. So I recreated the presence of tourists of all nationalities: Spanish, Italian, English, German, Chinese, Japanese, Hungarian, Canadian, Russian, etc. We then traveled to Sens to set up the twin scenes with Bourges but seen from a different angle, no longer in low angle, but from a high-angle. It was especially important to take advantage of the floor paving, which is identical to that of Notre-Dame. In Sens, I also shot the stairs leading to the belfry: the last 50 of the 350 steps are in an extremely tight spiral. I also found some superb medieval wooden doors made of solid oak that were spared during the Revolution.

One of the most spectacular scenes in the film is the collapse of the spire and the vault. For this, you shot in a studio at the Cité du Cinéma. Tell us about it.

It was April 5, 2021. A very important day indeed. It was a total reconstruction because there were no surveillance cameras in Notre-Dame to record this moment. The firefighters themselves, whose audiovisual department was understaffed that day, have no image of that pivotal scene. Actually, the vault fell from a height of 40 meters, dropping 500 tons of flaming beams, mortar and stone onto the cathedral pavement. This sequence lasts about 1 minute 30 on screen, but it took us weeks to prepare! I would like to commend the entire SFX crew, the best I have ever worked with. We carefully fitted out the largest studio in the Cité du Cinéma so that we had at least a 65-foot drop height for 2,500 cubic feet of flaming materials. Six large metal baskets were built by the metal workshop, equipped with grids on which were placed fake cork stones, mortar and balsa beams. These baskets were equipped with cables operated by a lever system similar to that of railway switches to open them. At the appointed time, everything was set alight and from that moment, we had one minute and 15 seconds before the heat and smoke would become uncontrollable, even dangerous. The fire was fully lit after 30 seconds, which left me only 40 seconds left to film the scene. So as not to have to redo anything, I shot using a dozen cameras at once, all from different angles, some of them placed in the middle of the blaze, protected by "crash boxes," ultra-shock and heat resistant steel boxes with ventilation. Not a single camera failed us. On the other hand, the intensity of the fire partly charred the studio ceiling. Fortunately, we had good insurance.

A month later, another crucial moment: you were able to shoot on the plaza in front of Notre-Dame

Yes, right in front of the palisades that fenced off the lead hazard area behind which almost no one is allowed access. It was an important phase in the film that was not easy to set up. We had extras, firefighters' vehicles, tour buses, as well as crew, cameras, crates of equipment, fans, smoke machines and other machines that projected charred wood above, etc. That also meant cordoning off part of the neighborhood and surrounding streets. We also had the exceptional authorization to shoot inside the galleries of Notre-Dame. There were about thirty of us (instead of the usual 150) and we came out very moved. Suddenly, Notre-Dame became real in the eyes of my crew. We went through parts of the cathedral still littered with charred embers, debris of beams, walls blackened by smoke, covered with solidified lead drippings. It was an overwhelming, gripping sensation. Between takes, on this plaza on Île de la Cité, I caught myself looking at Notre-Dame a number of times. I tend to identify her with a living character. She is my star and I love her. I tell the story of the tragic hours during which she nearly died. Her rescuers couldn't reach her because of traffic jams and construction work. Would the good doctors stop the bleeding in time? The wonderful news is that the cathedral has survived. She is still standing, even if the combined action of fire and water did nothing to improve her general state, which in any case was in need of major renovation work, as the stones in some places are in terrible shape. I owed it to her to tell the truth about what really happened to her. I was my duty to do so, with feeling and respect.



And then came the ultimate favor: you were able to shoot inside the cathedral itself.

We thought it was going to be impossible, inaccessible. Of course, it was with an extremely small crew and for a limited time, after having submitted to the extremely restrictive and yet indispensable protocol: our lead-protection suits and our actors costumes, which had to be discarded and taken to be burned once the scene was finished.

In spring 2021, you also launched a call on social media to collect photos and videos shot the night of the fire by tourists and anonymous passersby. The idea being to insert these documents in your film.

We received more than 6,000 films, videos and photos... On these images recorded on cell phones, I saw lots of details that (fortunately) illustrated exactly what I had already shot! I also got footage of the crowd gathered on bridges singing hymns. We were sent footage of what happened abroad when the disaster was announced, because the whole world was watching the event live. From China and Australia to the United States, England and Iceland, the fire made headlines.

Back to the studio in May 2021, this time in Bry-sur-Marne for another Dantean moment of the film.

Yes, the fire in the north transept gallery. Here again, we built a set true to scale... This gallery is the one the first six firefighters sent out were able to reach. They arrived on the scene over an hour after it was detected. They were confronted with a enormous blaze raging out of control, and had dismally inadequate equipment to fight it. The set was several dozen feet high: a very narrow catwalk some 20 inches wide with on one side a drop, on the other the fire. An exact replica was constructed in Bry, with a supply of propane we needed and pumps to project water. The roof was recreated in four versions depicting four phases of the fire until its near destruction. The set crews had to deal with crazy constraints, in particular to conceal the ducts that would carry the smoke and fire up and along the make-believe gallery. Each flame was fueled by an adjustable nozzle that was remotely controlled. The color of the fire had to be red, not blue, so they also had to manage the power of the fans that directed the smoke at the right speed and in the right direction. Depending on the stage of the blaze, the smoke was at first white, then black and in the end yellow. It was still a highly dangerous moment of the



shoot for my actors because the fumes, no matter what you do or how you anticipate, are toxic. As for the flames on this set, they reached temperatures as high as 900° or 1000° F and of course I expressly told my actors to move back and take shelter when the heat became unbearable. We had a team of real firefighters in case things got out of hand. During this scene, I saw once again the extent to which actors are motivated by this kind of situation, as long as they trust you and know that everything is done to ensure their total safety. It's the very essence of their calling: to incarnate extraordinary lives, and in this case, they certainly got it.

A word about another character in the film: the score. You worked with a British composer, Simon Franglen.

Our partnership goes way back. This subject of her most Gracious Majesty of England was introduced to me years ago by James Horner, the late great composer and friend who scored four of my films: Name of the Rose, Enemy at the Gates, Black Gold and Wolf Totem. If he hadn't been killed in a horrible plane crash in June 2015, we would have continued this wonderful collaboration and sincere friendship. Simon, whom James called "the best keyboard artist in the world," is also a brilliant arranger who has thousands of sounds of every instrument you can imagine on file and can play them for you on a keyboard. He's currently working with James Cameron on a sequel to Avatar. Writing the music for my films is a moment I long dreaded, for fear of losing control over things. While the initial idea, the script, the dialogues, the casting, the set design, the shooting, editing, color grading and mixing are all in my hands, the score has to be entrusted to someone else. Basically, the baby is mine, but I'm not the one who dresses it up. I can inspire it, but I'm not in command. Naturally (and it was true with Simon), I spend considerable time on the spotting, when we decide scene by scene, shot by shot, what needs to be expressed. We recorded in England. First at Abbey Road, the mythical Beatles studio, also one of the temples of film music recording. We recorded the chorus Simon wrote for Notre-Dame on Fire with the 35 singers of the internationally renowned Tenebrae choir, which in particular collaborated on the original score of Star Wars. In a rare moment, at the end of the recording session, the members of the choir rose to applaud Simon's work. We then recorded the orchestra (70 musicians) at Air Studios, also in London.

Regarding post-production, how much of the film required shots with special effects?

Mikros, an extremely competent French company, was tasked with this job, under the supervision of our VFX coordinator and supervisor Laurens Ehrmann. It involved about a quarter of the shots, i.e. about 400 of the 1500-1600 shots in the film. For half of them, the work involved erasing the security cables holding the actors or the water and gas lines used on the set. The other half of the job was more complex. They had to add smoke in the background or flames when it was impossible or too dangerous on the set.

This long and enthralling adventure is nearly finished. Notre-Dame on Fire is about to be released in theaters. How do you look back on this cinematic odyssey that began, unbeknownst to you, one evening in April 2019?

This moment in my life has been an enchantment! It only reaffirms an attitude I've applied since the start of my career: to always listen to that little bell I hear inside. If it doesn't ring when I'm considering a potential subject, I drop it. I'm driven solely by enthusiasm. From the moment I started reading the documents Jérôme Seydoux handed me, I have been excited, captivated, fascinated and surprised by this story. Every morning, from the location scouting to the shooting, including the preparation, the casting and the post-production, I woke up wanting to hop out of bed and delve into the new day beginning. What's both amusing and touching, is that I go by Notre-Dame nearly every day. I just have to stand on the balcony of my Paris apartment to see her across the way on the other bank of the Seine. I keep talking to her and calling her "my darling"! I ask her, "How are you today?" Of all the actresses I've been fortunate enough to direct, Notre-Dame is without a doubt the most dignified, but also the most fragile. She is as beautiful as ever. The most famous cathedral in the world will be undergoing repairs for a long time to come. Week after week I see the progress made on this enormous, unique and historic job site. She has come a long way but she's still standing. Her story will live on long after mine and ours.

I am happy to have believed, for a short while, that I was her lover.

Your film has all the makings of a thriller: the threat is known, you can hear it, imagine it, you know the damage it will cause, but you can't see it at first.

That's how suspended time works: you keep the audience on tenterhooks and sustain their pleasure as long as possible by maintaining the suspense surrounding the fire. I wanted to delay things as long as I could, by sowing a string of clues, by displaying on screen the hours and minutes before the fire inevitably broke out. That is in fact what thoroughly fascinated me from the start as I read through the initial documentation: the accumulation of failures in this incident is mind-boggling. I hadn't realized even a tenth of the truth. You wonder how Notre-Dame managed to be saved at all. To be frank, on the night of the fire, I was sure the cathedral was going to collapse. General Gonthier admitted to me a few months ago that he feared the same. He had planned to sacrifice, so to speak, Notre-Dame and secure the buildings in the vicinity to prevent the fire from spreading to the entire Île de la Cité when the cathedral fell.

The attention devoted to sound in your film is exceptional. Crackling, flames, water, ambient sound and dialogue: each sound element stands out.

It was indeed a mammoth task that took us more than six months, starting in summer 2021. The soundtrack was designed to be immersive and will be at its most powerful in major Imax, Dolby Vision, Atmos 4K, 7.1 and 5.1 theaters. I've been convinced since this project began that 50% of the emotion could come from the sound. Everyone saw footage of the cathedral on fire, but few people heard it, particularly from the inside. My aim is for the audience to be in osmosis with the firefighters in the heart of the blaze, for them to hear the beams groan and break apart, that they feel the rage of the "incendiary demon," the conquering devil that devours everything, that they breathe in the smoke that seeps into every corner of the cathedral, that the water sizzling on the white-hot tubes of the scaffolding give them the feeling that they themselves are wielding the nozzle of the fire hose. Atmos technology makes it possible to experience this with over seventy speakers placed horizontally throughout the auditorium and vertically overhead. Every sound detail becomes a component of the narrative. The Notre-Dame fire submerged a large perimeter of Paris in deafening din. I wanted the sounds to be more precise than what we were able to record during the commotion of the shoot. They were redone during post-production: the splatter of a heavy drop of molten lead on a firefighter's helmet or on an old oak floor, the scraping of chairs projected by the collapse of the vault on the flagstone floor of the cathedral, the creaking of medieval doors that slam into their frames, the clatter of water from the firehoses falling onto various surfaces, stone walls, flaming beams, tubular scaffolding, the bronze bells. A huge task, to which was added the work of the various crews in charge of different atmospheres (city sounds, sirens, traffic jams, horns, the clamor of the crowd, etc.) sound effects (squeaking hinges, locks clicking shut, the rattle of keys, the crash of stones breaking apart on the floors, etc.), SFX sounds (all that had to be perfectly in sync: the impact of boots on stone steps, the rubbing of uniforms against the walls, glass shattering). Plus, of course, a good third of the actors' lines had to be redone in post-synchronization, dialogue that was often covered during shooting by the racket of smoke blowers, machines to propel burning embers, fire nozzles, and so on. And finally, at the end of the line, the musical score that Simon Franglen worked for months to compose, to accompany the narrative twists and turns every half second, underscore tensions and draw out emotions. Dozens of hours of spotting were needed to decide on everything with me before composing, dozens of hours of fitting the mock-up to the preliminary versions, dozens of hours of recording, thousands of sound tracks mixed in London and then fitted to the image by Dick Bernstein, who came specially from the United States to fulfill this task. Few in the audience can imagine the huge amount of work that goes into all that. The fascinating and fundamental work of post-production remains a field that is as magic as it is mysterious.



INTERVIEW WITH CAPTAIN FRANCK

Jean-Jacques Annaud's movie retraces that frightful night during which the Paris firefighters saved Notre-Dame. Do you, as an active participant, find that his fiction film conforms to your experience?

The images are pretty incredible. And they alternate with those shot that very evening by firefighters and passersby. I find that the film completely immerses us in the atmosphere of the fire. It made me relive some of the sensations and moments we went through with my colleagues during the incident on April 15, 2019.

Your screen character takes part in rescuing the Crown of Thorns, a mission you actually accomplished. It's one of the most powerful scenes in the film.

Jean-Jacques Annaud was intensely interested in what I had to say and we talked at length as he was preparing his film. The operation was indeed a very particular one and my actions at the time were crucial in saving this genuine treasure from the flames. We had several exchanges, especially with regard to details that he was eager to understand or verify.

On screen, the actor Dimitri Storage plays your role, that of Captain Francis. Is it disturbing to see yourself in someone else's skin?

Of course it is, and it makes you worry and wonder: Does what I'm seeing really correspond to what I did? It all happened 3 years ago and sometimes memory alters things a little or erases certain details. I wanted to see how Jean-Jacques Annaud had brought to the screen everything I explained and shared with him. I'd say the end result is pretty faithful to what I experienced that night, despite a few inevitable chronological and logical shortcuts taken to facilitate the audience's comprehension.

Let's go back to that April 15 when you rescued the Crown.

Careful! I want to point out that I didn't «rescue the Crown»! All the Paris firefighters on the scene did it by performing a multitude of actions big and small. My fellow firefighters and I were in charge of safeguarding the artwork in the cathedral, so it was a whole crew that took part in this mission. It's important to say so.

Did all of you then realize the significance of your mission, which involved saving the most sacred relic in Christendom from the flames?

I immediately gauged the importance of Christ's crown. I was notified of it when we were given the mission. It clearly implied a certain degree of commitment to carry it out. But we also had to take care to safeguard other works of art, whether within the cathedral proper or in the annex next door. The idea was to minimize the risk to our person as much as possible, because even if they were relics, they weren't worth a human life. The film makes clear what our mission involved: getting the artwork out of reach of the fire either by moving it or by covering it and protecting it behind a shield of water that put out nearby seats of fire.

This sort of mission is anything but ordinary. You're a Paris firefighter, but also a man who has convictions, perhaps even faith. Did you have to put that aside during the intervention?

It's true that the operation at Notre-Dame was exceptional, and that there was something mystical about it, like a higher calling. But once in the midst of a mission, we are focused on what has to be done, and danger is ever-present. That's actually what worried me most: the safety of the firefighters under my orders. For that reason, we enlisted the fewest firefighters possible to accomplish this mission, and we put up safeguards so no one would go too far or go under certain vaults. So yes, the matter of personal beliefs was set aside.

The notion of heroism is very present in Notre-Dame on Fire. Jean-Jacques Annaud emphasizes the heroic aspect of the Paris firefighters that night. But it's not at all part of your philosophy to view yourselves that way.

Yes, and it's rather unsettling. For us, there is no individual action. It's all collective. What we do during an operation on the ground must be carefully weighed. Our motto is «save or perish,» but it's essential to always ensure the safety of those who intervene as much as possible. We are neither heroes or Superman!

Did you think that one day a motion picture might be made about the Notre-Dame fire?

Yes, it's perfectly logical. You know, a lot of books, reportages and documentaries came out fairly quickly after the fire. All of which were very factual. With Jean-Jacques Annaud's film, we're now dealing with a fiction feature that reenacts parts of the sequence of events rather faithfully. Some parts, as I said, alter the chronology somewhat but it's all mostly there. The film is beautiful, and it will enable audiences to understand what happened that night.





INTERVIEW WITH ADJUTANT RÉMI

Were you surprised when you found out a film was going to be made about the fire in Notre-Dame of Paris?

Yes, rather, but it was probably rather naive of me, because I remember that right after the fire, we were solicited by the media to recount the circumstances in which the cathedral was saved. Ironically, I'd been assigned to the Poissy firehouse, which is very close to Notre-Dame, from 2015 to 2017, and I always told myself that it was impossible for that monument to ever go up in flames. Goes to show...

How did you become involved in the project's genesis?

Jean-Jacques Annaud contacted me directly in July 2020, saying that he was preparing a film on the fire in Notre-Dame. He was interested in the role I played that night in saving the cathedral for his screenplay. Events were of course still fresh in mind and I simply recounted what my fellow firefighters and I did. I arrived on the scene 45 minutes after the first firefighters, and I think that gave me a fairly fresh eye on what was going on. I believe that was what enabled me to approach my superiors and suggest the maneuver that we ended up launching. Jean-Jacques Annaud asked me details about everything I did during those few fateful hours, explaining that it would nourish the character inspired by mine.

In Notre-Dame on Fire, your character is Warrant Officer Reynald. The scene in which you convince your superior officers to try your maneuver is very moving. The movie describes it as a «suicide mission.» Is that how you experienced it?

The idea of putting the squad together came from General Gontier. I just suggested getting the water up to the Chimera Gallery. We were some twenty men to embark on the operation and, indeed, I can say it was no small feat! The fire by then had spread to the north tower and then the south tower.

In the film, the general says that firefighters are there to save lives, not stones. Yet you decided to fight the flames that night even when no lives were in danger. Do you know today what prompted you to do it?

First, it was probably that fresh eye I mentioned, having arrived on the scene a little later than my colleagues. The roof was by then totally ablaze and I saw how the hose layout had been planned. I also think the idea came to me because of my seniority and my experience. Every incident is different from the others and we're constantly learning things about fires. So if the question is «do we think about risk before going in?» I'd say the answer's no. When we fight a fire, there's a sort of adrenaline rush that pushes us to accomplish our mission. I might add that on that day, the idea of saving Notre-Dame also had symbolic meaning.

Precisely, did faith or your beliefs come into play?

I just did my job. When you're a fireman, one of our basic missions (along with rescuing people, of course) is to put fires out, no matter what the fire. So I never questioned what I was doing, to the point that when I went up in the south tower of the cathedral, we had received the order to evacuate because the building was in danger of collapse, but I wanted to see for myself. At the time, I was three-quarters of the way up a spiral staircase and I went all the way up to get a «visual,» as we say. That's what enabled me, once I came back down, to suggest a last-ditch intervention to my superiors.

One can imagine that the night of April 15, 2019 remains etched in your mind as one of the major memories of your career as a firefighter?

Yes, of course, that incident stands out for all the men and women who took part in it. Attention has been focused on me – as this interview goes to show! And I'm not surprised, because three years after the fire people keep talking about it and asking us about it. But we're not used to receiving so much media attention. However, the fight against the Notre-Dame fire will remain an immense source of pride for us.



INTERVIEW WITH JEAN RABASSE PRODUCTION DESIGN

Do you remember your first meeting with Jean-Jacques Annaud when you first started preparing the shooting?

Yes, very well. I naturally knew Jean-Jacques' work, but I didn't know him personally. It was his line producer, Jean-Yves Asselin, who told him about various set designers, including myself. We met at a very pretty little café in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, very close to his home. It was like a moment of grace, during which I listened to him tell me about the film he wanted to make. Actually, Jean-Jacques didn't talk to me about a sweeping epic or a superproduction: he described a thriller! I immediately took to the story, which I found mind-boggling and kept me on the edge of my seat. Listening to him, I learned what the firefighters went through that night and it was like a real action-packed movie full of suspense with lots of

twists and turns. In fact, that's what everyone says who was there that night: a major catastrophe never has one single cause but a raft of reasons that all combine at the same time.

So you agreed to his proposal right away?

I'd wanted to work with him for a long time, and his story only increased my desire. Coincidentally or not, when the Notre-Dame fire broke out, I had just finished reading Victor Hugo's novel. When I met Jean-Jacques, my head was still full of all the descriptions of the cathedral and I had all these images in mind of that whole world spawned by my reading of the novel. I dreamed of going farther and really discovering this totally unique architectural and cultural world.

Did Jean-Jacques Annaud tell you from the start that he wanted to make use of custom-built sets as much as possible and minimize the use of digital effects?

Yes, right away, and I could only agree entirely! I love digital effects, they're a wonderful tool, but to my mind computer images can only be beautiful when they accompany reality. I've worked on films where I saw the poor directors shoot against green backdrops without really knowing what they were filming. They had no notion of the stakes, the danger or the beauty of the scene. Positioning one's camera is anything but neutral. Godard once said, «tracking shots are a matter of morality,» but that corresponds to a position you adopt depending on the story you're telling and the actors that embody it on a set. I couldn't imagine Notre-Dame on Fire shot with firefighters filmed against a green backdrop. It would have been soulless! Here, on the contrary, the entire cast and crew was placed in real fire conditions and all of the camera axes were defined accordingly. On the set, I can tell you that it was no laughing matter: everyone was wearing special gear that could withstand temperatures of 1,300° F.

That implies huge preparation beforehand.

Considerable research was done right from the start because we had to understand and learn how to recreate certain elements of Notre-Dame: the belfry, the transept, the nave and so on. We therefore went to visit several cathedrals, then moved into a phase of drawings, sketches and 3D models. But we soon realized that it was insufficient and that we had to build real models so that everyone understood what was happening and what to film. This stage was essential for the stunt crew, the SFX supervisors, the (technicians, the actors, etc. As for the fire scenes, we knew 6 months before the shoot where the ramps of fire would be set alight in the sets. Notre-Dame on Fire is the most technical film I've ever worked on.

Your painstaking work is clear when watching the film, especially in the three very Dantesque fire scenes – the fire in the belfry and in the transept, and also the collapse of the spire and the vault in the nave. What was the biggest challenge for you?

I'd say that the blaze in the belfry was probably the most complex and the most dangerous. You have to realize we shut up a portion of the crew (30 people) in a wooden tower in flames, inside of which we had also positioned a 50-ft. crane! The tower was over 40 feet high, constructed out of solid wood by carpenters working on the renovation of Notre-Dame. We then applied a patina to give it the color and texture of the original building. It was a huge job. Maximum safety conditions were of course ensured: we could light flames in three seconds and then put them out in a half-second.

In concrete terms, how do you build such a set?

The wooden beams were dug out to insert a pipe that released propane that was lit to start the fire. I'd never done this sort of thing, and with my SFX colleagues we did considerable research beforehand to learn. We had to study the set's feasibility, the risks related to propane volatility and hence how the fire would move. That's why we used old wood beams instead of plywood boards, which would have been less expensive. Inside the beams, each ignition ramp was controlled remotely by a truly impressive propane network. Another anecdote: Jean-Jacques asked me to increase the size of the bells in the belfry that we had constructed, so that the audience would understand that if the bells came down due to the fire, they would have brought the whole north tower down, and probably the whole cathedral down, when they collapsed. You know, we make movies based on emotions and we have to help the audience feel them.

Talking about the collapse of part of the vault in the nave reconstructed at the Cité du Cinéma studios, one imagines it must have been a powerful moment for a set designer. With a twinge of sadness to see a huge set that took weeks to build destroyed in 30 seconds.

This might seem strange, but I'm not affected by the destruction of my sets! To my mind it's a job done for a director, for a precise scene in a specific moment of the film. In fact, I've rarely recovered parts of my movie sets. What's important is what you've made for a film, not what you keep of it. The set design crew was made up of about 150 people, not counting subcontractors, and for this scene in the nave, there were about fifteen of us working to make everything look real and beautiful on screen, because we are all fascinated by fire. Once a shoot is finished, you have to demolish everything. I want to point out that we paid considerable attention to recycling of the sets on Notre-Dame on Fire. Mentalities have changed a lot in that regard. I remember that on Claude Zidi's first *Astérix*, we built the Gallic village in the studio and at the end, bulldozers came in to level it all and put it in dumpsters. On this film, everything was recycled: the belfry was sold to some Americans, the roof structure of the transept was dismantled and used to build houses in Brittany, and so on.

And this time, did you take a piece of the set back home?

Well, yes: I kept a small piece of the window from the north tower. Right after the shoot, I built a garden shed in my yard and used it. My friends are impressed when I say, «It's a window from Notre-Dame!»

Looking at your filmography as production designer (for Caro-Jeunet, Zidi, Bertolucci, Joffé, Barratier, Jewison, Polanski among others), it seems logical that you would one day cross paths with Jean-Jacques Annaud. You both share a love for craftsmanship.

You're right, and I loved it! I remember, when I started out in this career, I was about twenty years old and Jean-Jacques was already shooting films I dreamed of working on. It's for people like him that we want to make movies. When I saw *The Name of the Rose*, I was blown away! I was jealous. It was exactly what I wanted to do. Few people realize the work that goes into making this sort of huge historic set. It's a journey back in time every time. I experienced that on Roland Joffé's *Vatel* and I'm reliving it again now because I'm working on François Ozon's next film, which takes place in the 1930s. You have to do tons of research, go see art shows, do lots of reading, etc. Do you realize that on Jean-Jacques' film, we made a replica of the cathedral transept and clock? On occasion I ran into Philippe Villeneuve (the architect in charge of restoring Notre-Dame), and I talked to him about our set design techniques. He was amazed and didn't think that in filmmaking we could be so rigorous and precise. In my design crew alone there were six 6 qualified architects, highly specialized professionals. It's not the film's budget that matters, it's the voyage the director offers you. And when shooting begins, when everyone is in place, in costume on the set, honestly, I'm a kid again: I'm living the moment!



**INTERVIEW WITH
JEAN-CHRISTOPHE MAGNAUD
SPECIAL EFFECTS & PYROTECHNIQUES**

Your career as supervisor of physical special effects in the movies includes major films produced by Luc Besson, Philippe Lacheau's comedies as well as American projects such as those by Ridley Scott and recently Wes Anderson ... How do you regard the adventure of Notre-Dame on Fire?

I'd say that Jean-Jacques Annaud's film is truly exceptional. I believe it's the first time in France that we have been given the means to go this far in fire effects, in the sheer volume of fire shown on screen and in its complexity. I have to admit that since this film, I've had a lot of work dealing with fire, in particular a big American film being shot in France and for which I was chosen owing to what we managed to do on Notre-Dame on Fire. To talk about the director, I place Jean-Jacques on a par with great filmmakers with whom I've had the chance to work with: Ridley Scott, Brian De Palma and Wes Anderson... It's an honor to have worked by his side on this film and I often had the feeling I was in film school again. He knows all the tricks of the trade, he foresees everything, he's incredibly hard-working. And he trusted me to carry this huge cinematic challenge to the end. It's one that will remain an important step in my career.

At the very start of your discussions with Jean-Jacques Annaud, how did he describe what he expected of you and how did you visualize the work that was expected of you?

Initially it seemed like a high mountain to climb! At first, my crew and I wondered if we'd manage, and then we just took the leap. The technical demands were gigantic, all the more as they were compounded by indispensable safety constraints for the men and women who would be on the set, directly in the immediate area of the fire, and even in it for some actors. We had to be better and more spectacular than usual. It's a little like a high jump: we were used to clearing 1m90 and there we had to clear the 2m50 bar!

All the more as your director wanted the fire to actually appear physically on screen.

Yes, he wanted to come on strong, using VFX digital effects, which we generally resort to when things get complicated, as little as possible! What helped us is that all the actors were in real firefighter turnouts, so in protective gear, which meant we could push the envelope. Right from the start, Jean-Jacques was able to describe perfectly what he wanted. He's an incredible storyteller who peppers his remarks with tons of anecdotes. In short, he knows how to trigger your enthusiasm!

To go into the film in detail, we can identify three Dantesque fire scenes: the collapse of the spire into the nave, the transept fire and the belfry. Let's start with the shortest one on screen but the most impressive: the spire.

There were different constraints for each of the scenes you mention, and each time we had to invent, anticipate and build everything. In that regard, the collapse of the spire into the nave was definitely the most complex. We had to build gigantic metal baskets that were raised to nearly 50 feet high in the studio, operated by 55 motors, in which we placed over 6000 cubic feet of fake balsa wood beams and stones made of cork and plaster (about 10 tons' worth), which were set fire to using 25 gallons of gasoline, all that dropped at the right moment onto the set below. We were only allowed one take because it took over a week to arrange the setup! It was a very, very complicated setup to arrange. It took a huge amount of work and

concentration, for a result that lasts a few dozen seconds in the end! Fortunately, I was able to rely on some twenty members of my crew, smart and clever people who were 100% committed. We also had to insulate the lighting ramp inside the Cité du Cinéma studio where we were shooting because when the baskets were set alight, the temperature instantly rose to 460°F. We only burned three rows of neons, which isn't too bad!

Let's talk about the set of the transept, set on fire at the Bry-sur-Marne studios this time.

Another challenge. There we had to take into account the materials used to make a replica of the real transept of Notre-Dame and work with elements that gave the impression of burning when they came in contact with the flames. Everything that pertained to fire was fueled by propane supply lines that required a complex technical installation to light and put out the flames in compliance with French regulations, in other words 4-ton propane tanks, emergency systems, etc. What was interesting with the transept was the volume of what we had to set fire to in Bry.

For the belfry sequence, you were back in the studio in the Cité du Cinéma...

There, we had to pipe fire into real wooden beams and the flames had to espouse the shapes of what they were going to devour. It forced us to be crafty! The graphic aspect of fire was important. People aren't always aware to what extent the special effects trade is an artistic one. Sure, we're technicians, but we work to make the image aesthetic, all the more with filmmakers like Jean-Jacques Annaud. The work on the belfry was really fascinating because it combined beauty and technique, in particular with a secure automated system for igniting and extinguishing the fire, with thermal, CO and CO2 sensors. I know that American colleagues I've spoken about it to since recognize the exploit and the quality of what we accomplished!

Added to that was the human factor that had to be considered. It's not just a set that was burning; there were actors and crew in the middle of it!

There, too, production gave us the means to protect ourselves as much as possible, whether behind or in front of the camera. The actors had the benefit of their firefighter turnout gear and helmets specially designed to withstand fire. That enabled them to go through the flames and even stay there for several minutes without risk. The same principle was applied to all the technical crew: firefighter suits were bought for all those who had to come in contact with fire.

You nevertheless have a reminder of this shoot a physical reminder, because you burned your hands when the spire collapsed into the nave.

Nothing serious. You know, in my line of work, I've learned over time that fire burns! After having made sure that everyone was safe, I simply forgot to put my gloves on. It left me with a nice scar but nothing traumatic. I don't like the cold, but I love heat, and when all is said and done, those are the risks of the trade. Do you know any stunt performers who have never broken a collarbone, a leg, or simply got hurt? That episode will remain incidental. That main thing was to pull the scene off successfully and I know we did.

CAST

SAMUEL LABARTHE	GENERAL GONTIER
JEAN-PAUL BORDES	GENERAL GALLET
MIKAEL CHIRINIAN	LAURENT PRADES
GARLAN LE MARTELOT	CATHEDRAL ADMINISTRATOR AURELIEN
DIMITRI STOROGE	CAPTAIN FRANCIS
JEREMIE LAHEURTE	CHIEF ADJUTANT JOEL
MAXIMILIEN SEWERYN	WARRANT OFFICER REYNALD
PIERRE LOTTIN	LIEUTENANT ALEXANDRE
JULES SADOUGHI	WARRANT OFFICER CHEF JORDAN
CHLOE JOUANNET	CHIEF CORPORAL MARIANNE
VASSILI SCHNEIDER	CORPORAL SANDRO
AVA BAYA	FIREFIGHTER MARIE-EVE
NATHAN GRUFFY	FIREFIGHTER VICTOR
SEBASTIEN LALANNE	CAPTAIN MARCUS
BERNARD GABAY	COLONEL ROLAND
OUMAR DIOLO	MOUMET.D
ANTONYTHASAN JESUTHASAN	JONAS
ELODIE NAVARRE	MOTHER
CHLOE CHEVALLIER	LITTLE GIRL

CREW

DIRECTOR **JEAN-JACQUES ANNAUD**
SCREENWRITERS **JEAN-JACQUES ANNAUD THOMAS BIDEGAIN**
ORIGINAL SCORE **SIMON FRANGLÉN**
PRODUCTION DESIGN **JEAN-YVES ASSELIN**
1st ASSISTANT DIRECTOR **MATTHIEU DE LA MORTIERE (AFAR)**
PRODUCTION DESIGN **JEAN RABASSE (ADC)**
CINEMATROGRAPHER **JEAN-MARIE DREUJOU (AFC)**
EDITING **REYNALD BERTRAND**
SOUND **LUCIEN BALIBAR
GURWAL COÏC-GALLAS
CYRIL HOLTZ
DAMIEN LAZZERINI**
SPECIAL EFFECTS & PYROTECHNIQUES (SFX) **PHILIPPE HUBIN
JEAN-CHRISTOPHE MAGNAUD**
VISUAL EFFECTS SUPERVISOR (VFX) **LAURENS EHRMANN**
PRODUCERS **JERÔME SEYDOUX AND ARDAVAN SAFAEE**
COPRODUCTEURS **MARIO GIANANI AND LORENZO GANGAROSSA**
IN COPRODUCTION WITH **WILDSIDE REPERAGE VENDÔME PRODUCTION**
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