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Short Takes



Above: Charting motion pictures' origins, the short film *La Première* includes a brief stop at the 1889 Exposition Internationale. The sequence involved a combination of 2-D elements and greenscreen composites to bring Paris' Grand Palais to life. Right: Brothers Auguste (Henri Lubatti, left) and Louis Lumière (Matthew Wolf) with their invention, the cinematograph.

Dramatizing Cinema History

By Iain Stasukevich

The year is 1895. In the United States, Thomas Edison tinkers with his Kinetoscope as a means of exhibiting short motion pictures. The device is conceived for an audience of one. Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, French brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière develop a different idea about how moving pictures should be seen, believing they should be experienced communally, and they begin patenting their own film processes while working at their father's photographic firm in Lyon.

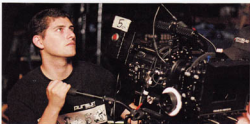
The short film *La Première*, shot by Matt Wise for sibling directors Michael and Nick Regalbuto, tells the story of the Lumières' struggle to develop the cinematograph — the world's first motion-picture projector — and present the first public screening of moving images. "As with most history, there are a lot of perspectives, and not a lot of them are definitive," notes Nick.

In their attempts to separate fact from legend, the Regalbutos unearthed contemporaneous articles about the Lumières' public



screenings, along with a program of the films that were shown. "Arrival of a Train at La Côté was one of their first films, and we noticed it wasn't projected at any of the early public screenings, so we tried to figure out why that might have been," says Michael. The filmmakers turned their attention to the legend that tells of a confused, terrified crowd fleeing a presentation of *Arrival of a Train* out of fear that the filmed locomotive would come right through the screen.

Nick continues, "According to history, the first screening to the paying public took place in Paris in December of 1895, but that's not the screening in our film. We know from the lineup that they didn't show *Arrival of a Train*, and our film suggests that the reason



Top to bottom: Louis inspects a strip of film; the brothers brainstorm with their father, Claude-Anoine (Ronald Guttman); Louis and Auguste prepare the cinematograph for a projection; director of photography Matt Wise finds the frame with a Red One camera.

they were afraid to show it was because of what happened at the earlier screening [seen in *La Première*], which went horribly awry."

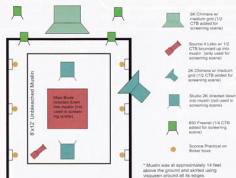
Ironically, to tell the story of two of cinema's pioneers, Wise found himself working with some of the latest camera technology, a Red One and a Canon EOS 5D Mark II. "But filmmaking is more than technology," he notes. "The point of *La Première* is that in spite of the technology in the room, those people in the audience really believed there was a train coming at them, and they ran out in a panic."

Wise shot most of *La Première* with the Red — the 5D was used for a few bicycle-mounted shots — and he found that the system presented a few hurdles of its own. Most notably, the Red doesn't perform well in low-light situations, and the sensor's signal-to-noise ratio is negatively impacted by warm light. Therefore, when shooting interiors, Wise shot wide open on Zeiss Super Speed prime lenses, and he used a 1/4 CTB filter behind a hot mirror filter.

Framed in 16:9, *La Première* begins with a brief montage that traces cinema's progression from the magic lantern to the camera obscura, the Daguerreotype, the zoetrope and, finally, Edison's Kinetoscope. Inspired by the look Roger Deakins, ASC, BSC, created with Kardan Swing and Tilt lenses for some shots in *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (AC Oct. '07), Wise chose to apply a selective-focus look for these early moments, suggesting that the lens in use wasn't yet a precise instrument. "We used a Lensbaby with a PL mount," the cinematographer explains. "The Kardan lens doesn't change the focus on the subject or the depth-of-field; it just bends the light coming through it to throw a certain portion of the frame out of focus."

The filmmakers considered applying a few other vintage looks to the rest of the picture, and they were particularly inspired by the period industrial tone that Wally Pfister, ASC brought to *The Prestige* (AC Nov. '06). "Our film is set in a time before electricity became widespread," notes Michael. "It's a story where a lot of the illumination comes from candlelight." Wise initially considered using windows and practicals as his sole motivators, but the tight shooting

'The Cafe' Scene Lighting Setup



Above: The lighting plot for the café set, where the Lumière brothers first project their moving images. Right: The same overhead source used in the café was also used above the Lumière's kitchen. Production designer Walter Martinez crouches in the background while directors Michael (at head of table) and Mick Regaluto (holding book) and 1st AD Jason Allen (far right) prepare the next take.



schedule forced him to instead shoot interiors under one big light.

Gaffer Eric Ulbrich and key grip Brandon Alperin designed the large source, a pair of cross-keyed 2Ks and a single lamp from the center of a Maxi-Brute softened through a 12'x8' frame of unbleached muslin. This rig was used for all of the interiors, including the Lumière household, the café where the cinematograph makes its debut, and a turn-of-the-century re-creation of the Grand Palais in Paris. All interior scenes were shot in an industrial space in Northridge, Calif. A Dusatyn skirt was used to keep light off the walls, and all of the lamps on the grid were rigged to Magic Gadgets dimmers on the floor. "I knew that

setup wouldn't detract from the look of the film," says Wise. "It was appropriate for the tone, and I could still swing the camera around and only have to tweak the lighting just a little bit. If we went with any other setup, we would have lost a lot of time and shots, and we would have lost the look we wanted."

The interiors have a chiaroscuro look that is aided by a candle, gas lamp or window source in almost every shot. "Adding a backlight for these scenes would have been distracting," muses Wise. "For the dinner scene [in the Lumière's home], the only accent I wanted was the 10K in the window. I didn't want to overstimulate the audience with unnecessary sources."

Before the Lumière brothers unveil their cinematograph, their father, Claude-Antoine, promises the skeptical audience "a brand-new technology ... that seems a lot like magic." The patriarch's speech inspired Wise to try something different once the screening started. "What was being projected was an alien experience for the audience, and I felt we needed to put the scene in a different context than the rest of the film. I asked my gaffer to turn off all the overhead lights and shoot a Source Four Leko gelled with Half CTB up into the muslin. It created a nice, soft, bluish tone on the audience."

The real cinematograph, which combined a camera, processor and projector in one housing, was less magic than a fusion of rudimentary chemical and clockwork processes. Working from archival blueprints and photographs, the directors cobbled together a non-functional reproduction of the original device. Much of its construction was based on guesswork. "The toughest thing to figure out was the shutter," notes Nick. "We'd seen a lot of shutters in our research, but they were all different shapes; there would be a frame-shaped cutout in one disc and a wedge-shaped cutout in another. Figuring out how fast the shutter spun and how the rods connected to the crank was also difficult. The original camera seemed so immaculately designed."

In *La Première*, the first film the Lumière show is *Arrival of a Train*, which quickly causes the frightened audience to flee. Staring at the upturned chairs littering the café floor, Claude-Antoine offers, "Maybe they weren't ready for it yet, but they will be soon." Sure enough, the shaken but curious audience creeps back in, eager to see more. The rest is film history.

"Story is what drives us as filmmakers, but the fact is that the Lumière weren't storytellers — they were innovators," says Nick. "They were interested in pushing the envelope of what was possible, technologically speaking. As much as we're telling stories, none of it would be possible without the innovators." Wise agrees, adding, "It's a given that technology will change. If people keep coming back, it's because they've been moved by what's on the screen. That's the factor that remains the same." ●