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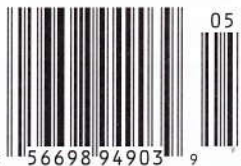
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Take This Waltz

Luc Montpellier csc

with Sarah Polley



Patch Town • Peter Luxford csc • *Flashpoint*

Luc Montpellier csc



Reunites
With
Sarah
Polley
for

Take This Waltz

By Fanen Chiahemen



After working on several films together, there's naturally a creative trust fostered between a director and cinematographer that often develops into a shorthand or language, and that in turn translates into visually arresting films. For her second feature, *Take This Waltz*, director and writer Sarah Polley collaborated once again with Luc Montpellier csc, and while the film may initially receive attention for its all-star cast— it features Michelle Williams, Seth Rogen, Sarah Silverman and Luke Kirby — it's also a testament to the foundation Polley and Montpellier have built for distinguishing themselves as a creatively dynamic filmmaking duo.

Take This Waltz traces the journey of a young woman named Margot, played by Williams, who one Toronto summer finds herself pulled between the love of her husband and that of a man who has recently come into her life. Polley says she wanted to create a film that would be “lush and delicious and as juicy as possible and as rich with colour as possible, really saturated.” Montpellier, acclaimed for his cinematography on such films as *Cairo Time* and *The Saddest Music in the World*, was a natural choice for Polley. She credits him with giving her an understanding of the visual side of filmmaking while shooting her first short film, *I Shout Love*, in 2001. “I was not that confident visually at the time, and Luc gave me a lot of confidence, and he was constantly kind of bringing out in me what I saw visually and translating it into real practical terms,” Polley says.

While Montpellier says he can't imagine turning down any opportunity to work with Polley, he was particularly drawn to the poetic quality in *Take This Waltz*, a story involving ordinary people in real-life situations. “There's a lot of poetry in the script,” he says. “The film moves from these beautifully intimate, improvised moments where you feel like you're in the room with someone to these extremely poetic sequences.” After three films together — Montpellier also shot Polley's first feature *Away From Her* — Polley could sum up her aesthetic vision to Montpellier succinctly, telling him: “I want this film to be like a bowl of fruit.” Montpellier understood that she was driving at the notion of having a “hot, colourful, welcoming, beautiful rendering of Toronto and the people within it,” he says. “She wanted this sexy passion to take over, that every frame felt like it was dripping wet with sweat.” The bowl of fruit reference became a motif of sorts and gave Montpellier a basis on which to create a uniform look for the film. “The most successful cinematography, no matter how bold it is, becomes seamless,” he says, and that seamlessness is achieved by “committing implicitly to the world that you're creating. You don't start the film with these beautiful saturated colours and bowls of fruit and then divert from it. From frame one to the very last frame of the film, there's a commitment to the world that we've created.”

Montpellier found the visual language for the film in the pages of the book *Lomo: Don't Think, Just Shoot*, an album celebrating the art and phenomenon of lomography, a style of photography typically taken with cameras like the LOMO or Holga to create highly saturated images of random subjects, often unfocused, and characterized by a disregard of traditional photography rules. “There was an immediacy to the photography that I really

wanted to try to capture,” Montpellier says. “[Polley] presented me with a script that had these extremely poetic moments in it. When you look at the lomography books, it's immediate, but there's poetry to the images. So that inspired me to go in that direction for the film.”

Take This Waltz is a film that explores the terrain of human emotions, and Polley relied on improvisation to document those quiet, close moments between people most naturally. For those scenes, Montpellier used Panavision's Genesis camera, which at the time could shoot 40 minutes of footage, so reloading could be kept to a minimum. “Sarah wanted the ability to have her actors not be restricted as much as we could, so the notion of using digital came up quite early for the simple fact that we wanted to keep the cameras rolling,” Montpellier says. “Also we needed a machine that would give us the poetic quality that the poetic moments in the film would demand. And also you can shoot in extreme low light with these cameras.”

With summer at the core of the film, photographing the light in a way that captured the heat was one of Montpellier's key tasks. Polley says they decided early on that “the heat should feel really tangible, that you should feel like you're in a really muggy, humid day in Toronto when you look at every frame.” That look applied to both interior and exterior scenes, and for the indoor scenes, Montpellier says he “wanted this feeling that the Toronto summer outside was seeping into the locations.” To this end, he lit the interiors from the outside with large lamps, using just a few lights on set. The result is a sense of the light of summer streaming indoors through windows and other openings. His lighting choice also translated into less distraction for the actors. “It satisfied the visual aesthetic that I was going for, but also there was a bonus of not having any lamps inside the house to maintain a kind of poetic naturalism,” Montpellier says, adding, “I didn't want the light in the film to be imposing or unmotivated. I just wanted to try to create as real of an environment as possible.”

For a scene in which Polley wanted to simulate the entire passing of a day as Margot lies on her bed contemplating her fate, Montpellier came up with the idea of simulating the movement of the sun in the studio outside the bedroom set. With the help of best boy electric Pierre Berube, Montpellier rigged a 10,000-watt bare Fresnel bulb to a 30-foot Giraffe crane that dimmed up and flew around the set to simulate the sun's movement throughout a day. “You would see the light move and the shadows shift as the electricians moved the giant arm over the set. The light would then dim down and become this beautiful orange-amber, simulating the setting sun,” Montpellier says. “It was very theatrical in its approach, but it worked beautifully. Sometimes the simplest solution works the best.”

The thread of intimacy in *Take This Waltz* is carried well beyond four walls, and capturing that also took some creativity. In one sequence, Margot and the man she is at-

Opposite page above: DOP Luc Montpellier csc on the set of *Take This Waltz*.

Photo courtesy of Accent Entertainment

Below: Writer-director Sarah Polley.

Photo courtesy of Mongrel Media

tracted to, Daniel, follow each other through the streets at night. It is an intimate, sensual moment between the two despite being in public. The scene was shot at night on College Street in downtown Toronto, and Montpellier and the crew had to find a way to make it a personal moment among the throngs of bar-hopping Torontonians. "We wanted to show that they're escaping their homes and going into this night life," Montpellier says. "But how do you shoot these scenes when you have two famous actors?" The Canon 5D Mark II DSLR, with its low-light sensitivity and interchangeable lens selection, provided the solution, enabling Montpellier to shoot without additional lighting and to outfit the camera with the Panavision lenses to close any visual gaps. Most importantly, the Canon's small size allowed the cast and crew to work without attracting attention to themselves. "It's compact so I could grab this camera and go into crowds and wouldn't look like a filmmaker at all," Montpellier says.

In what is perhaps the most beautiful sequence in the film, Margot and Daniel break into a pool at night to be alone together for the first time. Their night swim becomes a strange and beautiful underwater dance. It was a daunting scene to shoot, not only because, filming at a public pool at the height of summer, the crew was under great time pressure, but also, as Montpellier says, "Cameras and electronics don't do well with water; they work against each other." Fortunately, underwater expert George Willis csc was available to lend a hand, offering technical insight as to how to move the camera underwater. Montpellier says key grip Robert Johnson was instrumental in achieving difficult shots, rigging elaborate underwater pulley systems that enabled Willis to be pulled below the surface and follow the actors as they swam. Montpellier shot the scene using the Sony 950 HD camera, "which blended beautifully with the Genesis," he says, adding, "Because the underwater sequence was a completely different environment, I got away with using a different high def camera to photograph that sequence."

Back on land, shooting in the residential locations, the crew took over an entire neighbourhood in the west end of the city and easily became part of the community, a scenario that introduced a different set of responsibilities for Montpellier. "The big challenge was getting my big lights up on cranes in different strategic places and still be able to photograph the scene, but to not disturb our neighbours as much. Like good neighbours we didn't want to upset our neighbours, and that largely was up to me." Montpellier soon discovered that the locals were willing to cooperate thanks in part to Polley's reputation. "Everybody, when they found out that we were shooting a Sarah Polley film, was really on board because she is such a Torontonian at heart that people know that generally, and they really wanted to help her out."

Polley's quiet homage to Toronto was certainly one of the reasons Montpellier was excited to work on her second feature, but it was more than that. "It's her utter respect for the creative process," he says. "Sarah has a very strong point of view as to how to make a film, and to me that is such an amazing thing to be involved with." *Take This Waltz* premiered at this year's Toronto International Film Festival, and regardless of how the film is received in wide release, it's the experience of making it that Montpellier

cherishes. "It's been an amazing journey. When you get involved with a director after a few projects, you really do evolve as filmmakers together, and it's very much the case here, and it's been an amazing return for us to shoot this film together," he says.

For Polley, the journey seems to be far from over. "To be honest, if Luc stopped shooting films, I would stop making films," she says. "The main joy for me of making films is collaborating with Luc. I really can't imagine working without him." 🍷

Clockwise from top left: Actors Luke Kirby and Michelle Williams. Sarah Polley and Luc Montpellier csc. Actors Seth Rogen and Michelle Williams. Sarah Silverman. Luc Montpellier csc and Sarah Polley. Actors Luke Kirby and Michelle Williams. Photos courtesy of Mongrel Media.

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