



MAN ON WIRE

Autumn
Season
2008

Directed by James Marsh, *Man on Wire* was first screened at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival

On August 7th 1974, a young Frenchman called Philippe Petit stepped out on a wire suspended between New York's twin towers, then the world's tallest buildings. After an hour dancing on the wire, with no safety net or harness, he was arrested and thrown into an underground prison. Until that moment no one but Petit and his team of accomplices, who had spent months planning their illegal 'coup' (as they referred to it amongst themselves) knew anything about it.

Review: (from) Peter Bradshaw, The Guardian

Philippe Petit was the 24-year-old French high-wire artiste who loved to trespass on famous high buildings and ply his marvelous trade, stringing cables between spires and ledges and masts and walking across without a net. On August 7 1974, he achieved his masterpiece: walking across the towers of the World Trade Centre in downtown New York as a stunned crowd gathered below. He and his crew had had to creep up both structures in twin teams, and then attach the wire by literally firing across the initial guiding rope from one tower to the other with a bow and arrow. It was the epat to end all epats: a sensational piece of victimless criminal daring which required enormous cunning and discipline, not merely in the extraordinary act itself - Petit impishly danced back and forth across the wire over and over again while fuming cops raged near the ledge - but in the preparation and the skullduggery involved smuggling in the gear and disguised personnel, as if for a bank job.

James Marsh's documentary about this sublime piece of audacity does full justice to Petit's vision, using interviews with the man himself and his crew, and using photos from the time, and dramatised reconstructions - there is evidently no home-movie record and no television footage, as this was before the age of rolling coverage and rapid-response news 'copters.

Petit was an artist and a genius: the WTC exploit surely entitles him to both those descriptions. He describes how he conceived a fascination with the World Trade Centre towers even before they were built, reading about the plans in a magazine in a dentist's waiting-room as a boy. He claims that there was something in the buildings that cried out for a tightrope walker's wire to be strung between them. They were built to be used as he wished to use them: a successful high-wire walk would fulfil not merely his own destiny, but that of the two towers themselves.

His planning was extraordinarily detailed, involving many recce trips and dummy runs and even an entire fake magazine-journalist expedition, in which, posing as a reporter, he interviewed construction workers at the top of the yet-unfinished structure while his photographer took photos of these men, and also, covertly, photos of the ledges and the structures they would need for the rigging and the harness. Heartbreakingly, I notice they did get some cine-film of this cheeky exploit, but somehow failed to get any of the main event.

What Marsh shows us is Petit's childlike innocence and almost transcendental faith: faith in himself, faith in his leadership abilities, faith that the escapade would be a success, and faith that he would not fall. His sheer hypnotic self-belief meant that I found it quite impossible to imagine him losing his balance and plunging to his death: he defies gravity. In our world of elf'n'safety, a world where success and fame means working within very well-understood corporate structures, Petit is a rare, exotic beast, and a wonderful one.