



Inspired by a celebrated cartoon strip which appeared in France at the end of the 1950s, the film **Michel Vaillant** arose out of the combined wishes of the two Europacorp Producers: Luc Besson – who had faith in the project – and his associate Pierre-Ange Le Pogam, who had the idea and the desire.

Michel Vaillant:

Bringing a cartoon strip to the screen

“You must appreciate that they are both motor-sport fanatics,” explains Executive Producer Maurice Illouz, “and that the character of Michel Vaillant is an ideal mixture of all the characteristics they like to see in a popular hero! What they are really good at is giving the audience a combination of entertainment and thrills: in this way, **Michel Vaillant** is a perfect film for anyone from 7 to 77...”

Freely adapted from the cartoon strip, the story is based on the clash between two families with a high profile in the world of motor-racing. On the one hand, the Vaillants – the good guys – and

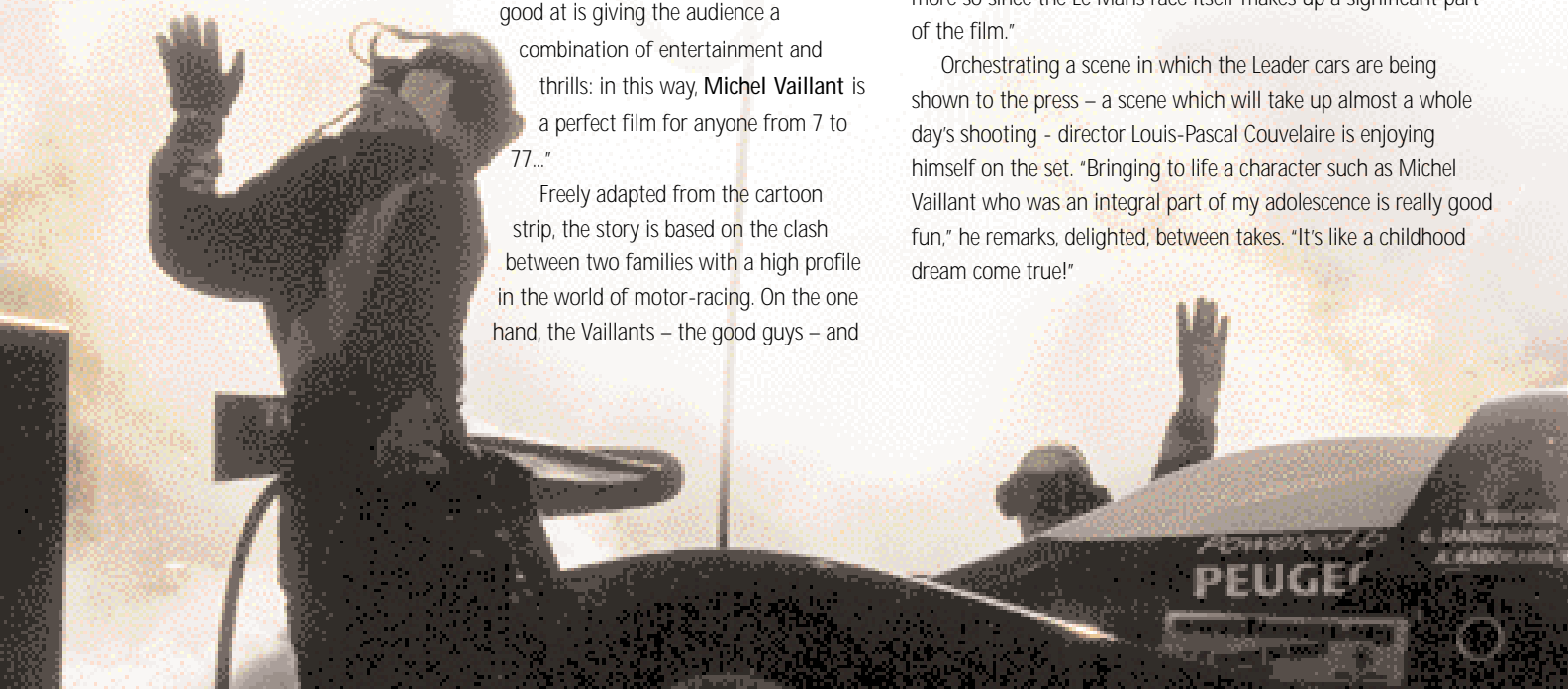


L-R: DP Michel Abramowicz, actor Sagamore Stevenin and Director Louis-Pascal Couvelaire

on the other, the Leader stable – the bad guys – prepared to resort to any means to eliminate their rivals and win the legendary Le Mans 24 hour race.

“The story is an excuse for endless twists and turns,” affirms Michel Abramowicz, the Director of Photography. “It allows us to stage lots of stunts and some really spectacular shots... all the more so since the Le Mans race itself makes up a significant part of the film.”

Orchestrating a scene in which the Leader cars are being shown to the press – a scene which will take up almost a whole day’s shooting – director Louis-Pascal Couvelaire is enjoying himself on the set. “Bringing to life a character such as Michel Vaillant who was an integral part of my adolescence is really good fun,” he remarks, delighted, between takes. “It’s like a childhood dream come true!”





The greatest problem with filming was the racing cars

Director of numerous commercials (and just recently of his first feature film entitled *Sueurs*). Louis-Pascal Couvelaire's greatest problem with the filming was, not surprisingly, the racing cars! "... quite simply, because they were designed for racing and not for making films. They were more temperamental than some actors."

Complex problems

The film required the resolution of particularly complex mechanical problems. "The first question before we started shooting," explains Michel Abramowicz, "was to determine how we were going to film the cars knowing that nowadays we are flooded with images of racing-cars on television and advertising. How, then, could we be original? We decided to place our cameras in the cars as often as possible. This led us – for the on-board cameras – to use Tyrex or Frazier which is a Panavision system that is perfectly suited to the ARRiflex cameras we use. The principle involved is one of a periscope which is bent at the end and can be moved through 360°, allowing the body of the camera to be installed in a strategic position while still having the lenses there where they are required, right behind the brake-pedal if necessary. These lenses have an additional special feature in that they have a great depth of field, subject to being used at a minimum aperture of 8. This type of equipment thus allows us to keep right in the foreground, two centimetres away from us, the clear face of the driver, while filming the car overtaking him."

However, filming from such cars gives rise to a complex problem, namely that of vibration. "These cars travel at speeds of between 200 and 380 kph," says Michel Abramowicz, "and cameras display all sorts of bizarre reactions, whether they come from the electronics, from microscopic impacts, or from the sheer speed. We noticed that the camera began to vibrate at exactly 330 kph, as though there were a line that we couldn't cross!" To capture the highlight of the film, the Le Mans 24-hour race required no less than twelve film-crews armed with seven ARRI

4x35 cameras, one Aaton and three ARRI III (Luc Besson himself taking several shots with an ARRI 5x35). As for the lenses, these were S4s from Cooke. "To be totally honest," he continues, "I must admit that for the shooting at Le Mans, we worked as though we were filming a report. Placed in a strategic position in the pits, I supervised a total of four film-crews while staying close to the 17-metre crane which ensured wide shots! For the static cameras I indicated the stop-settings from a distance: I couldn't do more, since getting around the Le Mans circuit during the race is really 'mission impossible'! Thus, in 24 hours, we got the maximum material in the minimum time: we shot 30,000 metres of film!"

Abramowicz used several different film stocks. "For all night scenes involving the cars," he explains, "I used Kodak Vision 500T 5279 film which gives sufficient contrast, while for the acting scenes and interior shots I used Kodak Vision Expression 500T 5284 film. Whenever the light was uncertain, I selected Kodak Vision 250D 5246 film, and finally, for the remainder of the film, Eastman EXR 50D 5245 film. As with my other films, I never had the slightest problem of calibration with these different types of film."

"For the lighting work," affirms Michel Abramowicz, "I am forced to work quickly, and so, for reasons of efficiency, I have to abandon certain things. However, I have one unchanging principle: never to neglect the actors. Even at the height of the race, I keep around me my chief electrician, diffusers, small facing lights and things to eliminate intrusive shadows."

How did they deal with filming inside the cars at night under these conditions? "Well, either I film just before nightfall with the driver's face still visible," explains Michel

Abramowicz, "or I make the decision to leave his face in the shade. In the latter case, in the studio, I then 'rework' the close-ups while lighting them with a light-box, that is to say neon tubes mixed with more conventional lighting which can resemble the lights of the track. And if the image does not stay within the interior of the driver's helmet, I film against a blue background in order to key in the lights of the track passing behind him. With the cars, it is actually simpler as they are so photogenic and their shine is universally accepted!"

"On this film," concludes the Executive Producer, "Michel Abramowicz truly gives full rein to his talent. He has two major qualities: that of never being defeated... and that of working very quickly. Thanks to his work and that of Louis-Pascal Couvelaire, **Michel Vaillant** will gain a poetic dimension." ■

