

How to use VFX to Provide Creative Solutions in Low Budget

At DPCII 2018, production editors Alexandre Donot and Alexandre Westphal discussed their work on the mockumentary *Guy*, directed by and starring celebrated French actor Alex Lutz, produced by Oury Milshtein for Iliade & Films. The film was co-produced by Studio Canal and JMD Production.

Guy is a hilarious mockumentary about the fictional *chanteur* Guy Jamet, as told by a docu-journalist who has recently discovered that he is Guy's son. Told much of the time in reportage style and interview, the film also uses specially constructed "archive" to present Guy's invented back story.

Editors Donot and Westphal described the production's chronology with specific emphasis on their contribution after arrival. They kicked off with an overview of director/star Lutz and his very successful career to date on French television (eg *Catherine et Liliane*). His first feature as director, *Le Talent de mes Amis* (in which he also starred), was no masterpiece but "he built *Guy* on the failure of this movie", they said. *Guy* is Lutz's second film as director.

Producer Milshtein (who line-produced *Elle* by Paul Verhoeven) didn't know Alex initially but was happy to bring in Arthur Sanigou as editor (who also edited Lutz's *Catherine et Liliane*, as well as helping out with direction and scriptwriting). But as *Guy* was a considerably bigger production, Milshtein insisted on young editors as back-up, and so Westphal and Donot were drafted in.

The pair immediately assessed the "archive" footage which had been already shot, at which point Sanigou decided he would prefer to concentrate on Second Unit director work, leaving the bulk of the editing to the two Alexandres (in two independent editing suites). For both, this was their first feature and therefore were determined to be deeply involved in the whole process. It helped that both had solid experience in directing and editing documentaries and they subsequently gained Lutz's trust very quickly. He therefore very much left them to get on with it.

But there was no assistant editor, whose key tasks were listed by the two Alexandres.:

- Syncs the footage
- Prepares the project for the editor
- Tidies the wild sounds
- Helps the editor to prepare the screenings
- Compiles VFX lists & rough draft of VFX
- Sends the plates to the VFX companies
- Exports the reels to the sound editors, the sound mixers, while keeping everyone up to date
- Depending on the editor he/she does a rough cut
- Dialogue retranscription which is very important to prepare the ADR sessions
- Exports for the company making the trailer

The assistant editor, they said, is the “control tower” of the whole movie. That said, they *shared* those very specific duties, with no provision made on the production for a specific assistant editor appointment. “Editing is going much faster when you have an assistant to do this sort of stuff”. They pointed out that they also cut the trailer towards the end of editing. “Yes, we did everything on this film,” they joked. “Nothing was very common on the project.”

There was no real script, just a 16-page synopsis, written between February/March 2017. Pre-shooting began at Cannes 2017 and the film was completed in December 2017. Lutz wanted to make something “wilder” than his previous work, and the speed of the production/post-production fed into this energy, they said. But it was stressful nevertheless, the editors pointed out.

The pre-shooting period included the retro music video sequences. There were also two days of pre-shooting in Cannes where they experimented with the make-up on Alex, who was in make-up for 5 hours every day (not including its removal). His prosthetic mask, consisting of 7-8 distinct silicone pieces, extended into his eyelids so as to give the impression of age.

The camera set-up was very simple, one cinematographer, one focus puller, one second assistant and data manager and one gaffer. The crew was small so as to give a specific documentary feel to the film. They worked with a camera house who advised on the multi-camera use to overcome all problems/needs that the production might throw up, “different solutions for different sequences” as Philippe Ros termed it. The production used a light hand-held Red Helium with a 7K full frame as they knew at the beginning that they would be reframing. (Also used Red Scarlet, a Canon C300 and 5D for the music videos and the very precise Sony Alpha 7RII for some of the horse sequences).

The production also used very light and efficient lenses, such as the Optimo 45-120, Optimo 28-76 and Optimo 15-40.

Most of the dialogue was improvised so everything had to be set up very quickly, at the director’s insistence. Sometimes there were 25-minute shots during which the DP couldn’t change the lens so he had to be very flexible. In fact all personnel had to be very flexible in order to respond quickly to Lutz’s new ideas for the film when they occurred to him.

Archives: the first elements to be assessed were the music videos which were shot at 25 frames per second, the same as for TV (the production obviously hadn’t thought this through in the pre-shoot). There were also “fake” archives set in the 60s and 70s that were shot on Red, and the regular contemporary shoot was done with the 7K camera.

The Alexandres already had 60 hours of footage to wade through when one evening Lutz supplied a hard drive with a further 10 hours of real archive that he wanted them to consider and/or do something with (train station building, Johnny Hallyday concert etc). At first this was a nightmare for the editors, but subsequently proved inspiring.

The editing period was 5.5 months in total, and much of film's actual script was completed during this period. The editors started in June 2017, had a first assembly ready by the beginning of August and then picture-locked early November. Meanwhile, sound editing commenced in September for eight weeks and 6 weeks for dialogue editing. Doing both in tandem is generally a good idea but it calls for very careful communication between both departments, the Alexandres pointed out.

They further commented how they had a quiet chat with the costume supervisor to limit Lutz's costume changes for ease of editing across all sections of the film. This way they avoided "a major pain in the ass," from an editing perspective.

They explained the demarcation of duties in clear terms. Firstly, the music videos and the fake archives were delivered in a pre-edited form by Sanigou directly (but only handles, not full-length takes). Then they were delivered the sequences from the shooting. Alexandre Donot concentrated on the first half of the film while Westphal concentrated on the latter part. First of all they would supply very quickly assembled rough cuts for Lutz so he could see what he had shot the day before - not everything, just the interesting stuff that could be considered for eventual use in the film. They worked a lot with the scriptwriter who did a great job indicating Alex's preferences and what she felt was most relevant to the project.

Together the editors worked on AVID to share the file material, which they thought was "amazing", light and convenient, but it called for "super concentration" to stay up with all the bins transferred back and forth by email.

In terms of dailies, these were placed on the post-production company's server where they were accessible by the production. The two Alexandres would receive the same dailies at the same time (already synchronised picture and sound) and would make rough cuts of these, also to be placed online and accessible by the director and other interested personnel.

The first assembly of the film was 8 hours duration, which took a day to watch, but they quickly came to a 4-hour first draft. Eventually it was cut down to a 1h 40 mins final cut.

When they received the created archive footage, it was not clear *how* they would use it, whether as a real archive, a fake real archive with added fuzzing or blurring for authenticity or should it be a memory of Guy, as a separate sequence between the other parts of the movie?

Alex knew he wanted to have a voiceover at least at the beginning of the movie. There was a first version that was completely re-written during the editing and it was cut back a lot. But poignant questions arose as to what type of mockumentary the film should be. Are we watching a director making a daily record of his reconciliation with his father? Is it an essay documentary? Is it a journalistic film? It ended up being a creative documentary by a "good director" about his father. "But we had to answer that question before we finished the movie," and clarity on this point came around mid-August.

From a narrative perspective Lutz didn't have any precise references in terms of how the movie should look. All his inspirations were completely different to what he wanted to show on screen. He was very touched, for example, by *Twenty Feet From Stardom*, Morgan Neville's documentary about backing singers - but it was a very US doc, with lots of talking heads and archive, and not handheld. Nevertheless what moved him was the theme of singers within sniffing distance of success, but never quite making it. "Guy deals in what it is to be successful, what it is to be part of your time, and that is what he liked in *Twenty Feet...*, how you are just *one step* from being very successful," said Donot.

As they were each working on one half of the narrative, the two Alexandres were working on two different timelines, and each time there were new edits they would swap back and forth for further refinements to be applied. And then the same process was applied at reel-level, ie across each 20-minute segment. They would work independently during the day and then share their work at the end of the day. "It was great to have a sense of distance from the material," said Westphal, whose mantra was "refine, refine, refine". That said, even though the film changed out of recognition during editing the opening and sequences remained intact. The film, he underlined, was *created* in the edit.

German producer Martin Hagemann was impressed how the MacGuffin aspect of the script, ie the son/father relationship, was dealt with in an offhand, casual way at the beginning of the film. There was never a demand that there should be a big "revelation" at the end. Would the audience really *care* about this aspect of the film? Probably not, and the casual way the info is dealt with is in keeping with the rest of the film.

In the initial script, Guy's son Gaultier assumed greater prominence, but his screen time was eventually limited as his presence was neither key nor convincing. The main character shift in the production was that Guy was no longer a loser - and this changed during the shooting and edit. When Donot and Westphal saw the first footage of the shows, they could see full auditoria with screaming and adoring audiences. It was obvious that attempts to portray Guy as a sad and pathetic character would be contradicted by the very footage that had been shot.

The concert sequences were shot in three theatres, with each set performed five times per venue. Each concert had its specific characteristics and atmosphere (orchestral/acoustic), with different orchestrations and arrangements (60s style/80s style) and tempo. The narrative functions of each concert were constructed during the editing.

The film's songs were all original and many were written during the shooting of the film. The songwriters also wrote for *Catherine et Liliane*, "and they know that when Alex asks for something he wants it yesterday. They know it has to be really fast."

In many sequences they had to match the "archive" material, such as in the night club segment which is an amalgam of real, genuine 80s Parisian night club footage and material shot with the Red camera on a filmset in Paris. The archive qualities were effected through editing, VFX, grading and sound, all of which had to be matched very carefully to create a seamless sequence. Music was added/applied/manipulated accordingly to further tie all aspects of the sequence together.

Reframing was used judiciously within some of the interview sequences to present what looks like an edit but is in essence a rapid zoom in or zoom out. “As you are in the same axis all the time it is pretty much seamless, but also helps it look more fluid and dynamic”.

In conclusion, the Alexandres stressed how this film underlines a core maxim of filmmaking, that a film is made three times: in preparation, during shooting and during editing.

Looking back on the production they list the plus points and the inconsistencies they would look to eliminate on further productions. Lutz’s confidence and vision was a real driver, as was their expertise in documentary filmmaking. On the other hand, the editors would have liked to apply tests to harmonise the textures of the archives, and would have loved to have been able to edit the archive music videos themselves. Also, it is essential that meetings are scheduled in advance to iron out inconsistencies at source, to avoid (for example) the late grading and grainy texture that the colorist was asked to apply to the music footage. “The more you talk about it before, the less you have to deal with it later. It saves money and arguments, and it keeps a good energy.”

They also pointed out that the editor(s) should receive greater acknowledgement for their role in bridging and uniting all the disciplines within post-, especially after the director may have moved onto another production. “We are involved in all the post-production process from the beginning of editing to the end of the editing of the trailer, and that includes all the sound editing, all the mixing, all the colour grading... We would be in the sound editing room at least two times per week, and in the sound mixing room two or three times per week, and in the color grading room also. We are not control freaks, but editors should be paid to go to the mixing. It is very important that there is control by the editor, because he is the *memory* of the movie.”

See link [here](#) to Philippe Ros’s workflow chart.