

Adventures
with
Robin Hood

An Interview with
Pietro Scalia, A.C.E.

BY ALEX ASHER SEARS



Beginning in the thirteenth century, the name Robin Hood was synonymous with criminals, often noted in court records of

outlaws and fugitives,

(Guy Fawkes and his accomplices were

referred to as "Robin Hoods"

following their attempt to blow up Parliament in 1605). Yet, one particular Robin Hood myth has captivated both artists and historians for centuries. From Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona* to Disney's animated *Robin Hood* (1973), Robin and his Merry Men of Sherwood Forest have been portrayed in drama, comedy and musical. Almost ninety years after a swashbuckling Douglas Fairbanks gave us the gentleman Robin Hood, stealing from the rich to give to the poor, Ridley Scott brings us Russell Crowe in a complex, darker tale of the man from Nottingham.

The film's editor Pietro Scalia, A.C.E. describes the movie as "the story of a common archer returning home to England from the Third Crusade at the end of the 12th century." Unlike more recent interpretations, "It focuses on the circumstances of the "historical" Robin Hood, the one that appears in ballads and tales from 700 years ago. It deals with the revelation of his true identity while uncovering the mystery behind his origins and the consequences of fate and destiny." We spoke with the award-winning editor about the film (his seventh collaboration with Scott) and his career: past, present and future.

For Scalia, a career in film was realized early on. "As a teenager growing up in Switzerland, I wanted to become a filmmaker. I studied film at UCLA where I wrote, shot and edited short films and documentaries. I fell in love with editing while making my documentaries. The creative process combined with the new technologies of video editing allowed me to discover the power of editing. I saw it as writing with images and sound."

While a career in post had not been his goal he had learned its impact while making his own short films. "I could see how the evolution of film language and narrative was closely tied to the evolution of editing, in that the new generation of filmmakers would absorb the innovations of the old masters in their visual storytelling and marry them to their own artistic sensibilities, thereby creating a new cinematic language or style to their films."

After receiving his MFA, plans to become a filmmaker in Switzerland were put on hold as "the realities of making an independent film in

Europe were more complicated than I had expected." He obtained a work visa and returned Los Angeles with the hope of finding work in the industry. "My goal was to work on movies in the editorial department in order to improve my craft and to learn how to become a director by being close to a director whose work I admired." The director would be Oliver Stone and the film, *Wall Street* (1987).

David Brenner, A.C.E. introduced Scalia to the film's editor, Claire Simpson and the editorial team which included Joe Hutshing, A.C.E. and Julie Monroe. It was an experience he looks back on fondly. "I felt fortunate to have had the opportunity to learn some editing skills while assisting [Claire] that were passed down from her mentor [Dede Allen, A.C.E.]... This idea of one generation of filmmakers passing the baton to the next shows the continuous evolution of film. This is evident in the work done by Dede Allen and Thelma Schoonmaker, A.C.E. the godmothers of modern film editing."

He would receive credit as an associate editor on Stone's film, *Born on the Fourth of July* and additional editor credit on *The Doors* (1991). Then, in 1992, he would take home both the Oscar and ACE Eddie for his first feature credit as a film editor on *JFK* (co-edited with Joe Hutshing, A.C.E.).

Following the critical success of *JFK*, Scalia spent the summer in Rome where a chance encounter would bring unexpected opportunity. "[I] met Bernardo Bertolucci at a friend's party in Sabaudia, a beach town south of Rome, where he had shot *La Luna* (1979). Bernardo told me how much he loved *JFK*, was complimentary about the editing and was mostly surprised by my young age and that he had never heard of me before (obvious, since *JFK* was really my first film). Meeting one of Italy's cinema masters was a great honor."

A month after their first acquaintance, he got a call from Jeremy Thomas, who'd produced Bertolucci's films *The Last Emperor* and *The Sheltering Sky*. Thomas asked if he was available to speak with the director about an upcoming project, *Little Buddha*. "A few weeks later I was in Kathmandu, working on a Steenbeck flown in from Rome, editing in a large suite at the Yak and Yeti Hotel. Screening dailies with Bertolucci, [cinematographer] Vittorio Storaro and his Italian and English crew was for me like a homecoming.


"My early influences were the Italian neo-realist films that I saw on Swiss TV on the Italian-speaking channel. For many Italian immigrant families, watching these classics on Saturday evenings was a wonderful experience and for me not only an insight into my own cultural roots but also an exposure to the great Italian masters...I

was working with people I admired as a teenager and now being accepted as one of their equals was an unbelievable feeling."

Scalia would team with Bertolucci again on the 1996 film, *Stealing Beauty*. These experiences would leave a marked impression. "My working experience with Bertolucci was very rewarding. I was worried at first about not knowing his methods of working, but he told me not to worry about what he wanted but encouraged me to discover the "design" for myself. By design he meant the inherent soul of a scene and the "dramatic design" he envisioned while shooting. He wanted me to have my own ideas and personal interpretation of the material that could best express or reveal its essence."

The following year Scalia would interview with Ridley Scott for a new film. The project was *G.I. Jane* and though he would not know it, this would be the beginning of a pivotal relationship. Hired just weeks before filming began, the two would not get to know each other until they'd arrived in Florida to begin production. "We started work immediately in our cutting room watching dailies on a flatbed without any real discussion about the film. However, before cutting any of the new dailies that we screened in the first days, Ridley asked me to cut an opening sequence he had already shot a few months prior to Demi Moore practicing the luge on a run in Lake Placid. He asked me to cut this scene with no specific input on his part. I had a lot of footage from one weeks worth of shooting for an action sequence that would last two minutes at the most. I put it together in a couple of days, with music and sound effects since it was all shot MOS. After I screened it for Ridley he was visibly impressed with the visual energy this sequence had and loved the music track from the Chemical Brothers that I used. I noticed his smiles and the big relief on his face, which in hindsight made me think that it was a test of some sort. Be ready, have a point-of-view and deliver something exciting.

"From that moment on a bond and an understanding formed that helped us develop our trust in each other, which I believe is the best foundation for every director and editor relationship. When you end up spending so much time with another creative individual doing concentrated work, it is inevitable that you develop shorthand in communication." Their long term relationship has created a great balance in the cutting room. "At times there seems to be no need to communicate at all since we are in "sync" with our thoughts and instincts, and the choices we make. However, when there are disagreements, I never shy away from a good argument if I am convinced that discussion improves the picture. I've also learned to listen more carefully, to understand more clearly the driving point of the director's vision, and to



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realize that not every argument needs to be won and not every disagreement has to turn into debate. Ultimately the ability to speak one's mind, to mutually challenge each other and to work with honesty, passion and reliability is what makes any relationship work." Over the next decade, he made five additional films with Scott, including *Gladiator* (2000) for which he took home an ACE Eddie, and *Black Hawk Down* which garnered him both the ACE Eddie and an Oscar.

When speaking about *Robin Hood* to MTV News, producer Brian Grazer expressed that the film was "the *Gladiator* version of *Robin Hood*. I think it will have the same propulsion that *Gladiator* had—the same adrenaline hits." And there are comparisons to be made beyond the fact that Russell Crowe is returning in the lead role. In the same way Scott used CGI to recreate the spectacle of the ancient Roman arena in *Gladiator*, this film uses close to a thousand visual effects to enhance the look and feel of 12th century Europe. For Scalia, the greatest challenge he found was in creating the final battle sequence in which the French Armada attempts the invasion of England. "The logistics of actually shooting the scene on a beach with a crew of seven hundred, [plus] hundreds of horses, boats, barges and helicopters and a constantly moving tide proved to be

extremely demanding not only for Ridley, but for the entire crew. The complexity of multiple actions, the timing of the events, the choreography and strategy of the battle presented logistical obstacles similar to what we encountered on *Black Hawk Down*. Ridley shot the action in the same way as in *Black Hawk Down*, producing approximately forty hours of footage for a five minute sequence."

For the battle scene, Scalia had material shot with seven cameras, plus aerial and second unit footage, to contend with. It was a challenge he found "daunting yet familiar. I spent the first few weeks selecting, organizing and reviewing the footage over and over again before actually starting to edit the scenes. The sequence consists of many moveable parts that I first build into smaller blocks determined by continuity of action and geography. The action itself varied from the script and storyboards with multiple parallel actions shot simultaneously at times and with variations from day to day, made it particularly laborious to find the proper shots and create continuity of time. The sequence of events had to be determined by hundreds of moveable parts that depending on their position and placement within the scene would cause an infinite amount of possibilities. I built the scene in documentary fashion, by searching for the proper shot that would fit in the right place at the

right time. Finding the right formula and the proper structure, by trying different combinations was simply a question of time. It took me until the final picture lock revising and fine tuning this sequence, condensing the action and embellishing the cut and adjusting shot lengths with improved visual effects."

The editing department, working both on location in London and later in Los Angeles, "consists of several people who have worked with me for many years. We know each other well, which allows for an efficient workflow and stress free work environment. My immediate crew consists of Additional Editor, Billy Rich, First Assistant Editor, Bob Mead, Second Assistant Editor, Kathleen Latlip and Editorial PA, Hopi Allard. First Assistant Editor, Tom Harrison-Read and Second Assistant Editor, Laurence Johnson assisted me with dailies during the filming in the UK. We have our own Post Supervisor, Teresa Kelly, who oversees schedule and coordinates all aspects and logistics of postproduction. She has been part of my team and all of Ridley's films since *Hannibal*." The department had five Avids Nitris Dx's with Media Composer v3.5.4 and a close relationship with the visual effects team; crucial on a project of this size. "We were also fortunate to have had the visual effects team near our cutting rooms. Visual



Effects Producer, Allen Maris, juggled several vendors in the UK and here in LA to bring the nine hundred visual effects in on time and on budget. Visual Effects Editor, Jody Rogers and Visual Effects Coordinator, Amy Spanner, helped Allen, Billy and myself continuously with the latest visual effects revisions in the ever-changing cut. Our Visual Effects Composer, Dick Edwards, helped me during the director's cut by creating new shots and compositing 2D visual effects. These preliminary composites or sketches were extremely beneficial for communicating Ridley's ideas about content, color and composition to Richard Stammers, our Visual Effects Supervisor at MPC."

Even on such ambitious projects, Scalia looks for moments to bring his assistants into the cutting room whenever possible. "I'm a strong believer in involving my assistants throughout the process... The exposure to the creative process is extremely important and difficult to experience unless you witness it immediately as it happens, or if you are actually doing the editing yourself. For assistants who love film and are passionate about becoming editors, my advice is to think as a filmmaker and to use one's personal life experiences to guide them in their choices when editing. For me it is especially rewarding seeing former assistants reach their own level of success

and finding their own personal voice."

In the course of his career, Scalia has witnessed the evolution from film to nonlinear post. "I've worked on every possible format from Super 8, 16mm, Super 16, 35mm, 65mm, video and digital. I've edited on all editing platforms from Moviolas to Steenbecks and KEM flatbeds, on English, Italian and French systems and even on an Edit-droid that we used on *The Doors*, a LaserDisc and tape hybrid that was a precursor to digital nonlinear editing developed by George Lucas, and then later on Lightworks and finally with Avid." But does he wax nostalgic for the days of splicing by hand? "I can't say I miss it now after so many years, but I have fond memories of the past methods and tools we used. 35mm workprint and 35mm magnetic soundtracks made the artificial and ethereal qualities of "making a film" a concrete and physical reality. For me there was a pleasure in the physical touch when manipulating images by hand."

No matter the platform he's cutting a film on, it's clear he appreciates the experience of having known both worlds. "I miss visiting the labs and checking prints, the pristine conditions of the negative assembly room, the mayhem at the optical houses and their optical printers, marvelous-mechanical machines with precise optics that

would create movie illusions. I miss the clever technicians and lab color timers who taught me their secrets and tricks about how chemicals, temperature and time affect color. It is shocking to think how much everything has changed in the last years, but ultimately it does not matter what tools we use, it's how the tools enable us to communicate and to entertain as storytellers. Today I still edit using the techniques I learned when working with film."

With production on *Robin Hood* complete, Scalia is looking ahead at projects bound to produce wonderful images without the use of CGI. "A vacation with my family in Tahiti, getting my Scuba PADI Certification together with my daughter, and a fishing trip in the Sea of Cortez with my son."

Robin Hood opens on May 14, 2010 in theatres nationwide.

Addendum {Editor's Note}

In the 2001 winter issue of *CinemaEditor*, Edgar Bureksen, A.C.E. spoke with Pietro Scalia, A.C.E. about his work on *Gladiator* (2000). If you are interested in reading the article, which is no longer available as a hard copy, please visit the ACE website at www.ace-filmeditors.org. 