

Return to Warner Bros

Day I

“It all started in Los Angeles,” I wrote five years ago in the opening chapter of my first novel. It is at that time that I was claiming to have made a tour of the city, to have roamed its alleys, to have walked down its boulevards, its suburbs, to have entered its buildings, to have sketched its inhabitants, (the lively and gaudy, the lost and dismal). I was exaggerating: I had not bothered to go everywhere, it was naturally impossible, and on top of this, I had been turned away from numerous places – including Warner Bros. Yet I approached, negotiated, put up with the guards... Oh, I was offered to pay a fee! To get squished in a bus full of other tourists where an excited tourist guide nasally spluttered information in rapid succession in three different languages at a time. But it wasn’t the visit that I had expected. I was demanding depths, complexity; I was being offered only the surface. Five years ago, I finally surrendered: I put the car into reverse and backed out onto Hollywood Drive, annoyed, while the guards at Gate 4 were half-smiling.

Things have changed today. Back to Burbank. I am not a driver anymore, but rather, a passenger. It is 11:15am, the sun is burning the hood of the black Jeep, and we are entering into Warner’s bastion. Passports were checked. The trunk was duly inspected. Our destination was showing on our passes: *Eastwood Scoring Stage*. Renowned for its acoustics, prized by composers of the film industry (Christophe Beck, Junkie XL, Michael Giacchino), recently saved from destruction by Clint Eastwood – and therefore, renamed for the occasion – the studio is legendary. We are moving slowly, going around the famous water tower, a business card of the firm. We are being blocked for a first time: a dozen technicians are bustling about in the back of a truck, unloading amplifiers, poles, cameras, backdrops. Five minutes. We get going again. But soon a guard asks us to make a detour. In the middle of the road a film crew is hard at work. Which production set would that be? We will not know more than that. The driver pulls up at the back of the studio and off we go: Didier Mouron, Don Harper and myself.

We enter the studio. The five Totms are standing in the middle of the room: bare, without lighting, without artwork. It’s not show time yet. Three technicians are conversing next to the last stand while the production team is already working in the middle of an incredible profusion of cables, reels and electronic equipment. One of them turns to us: Randy Petersen, the director. Handshakes, congratulations: the man is enthusiastic and doesn’t miss the opportunity to let us know. “Have you been to Warner yet?” he asks. A negative response from my part. “Well then, we’ll make sure that your start will be a memorable one!” It was settled. His assistant brings bottles of water. Don expresses some concerns related to his field—has the distance between the Totms been respected? Will the musicians have enough space? Won’t the lecterns interfere with the spectators’ view? As for Didier, delighted, his eyes slightly moist, wanders around the studio, taking possession of the place, doing – one would say – “the owner’s tour”. “It’s huge,” he whispers to me as Randy’s assistant comes to fetch him, “You are being called for your make-up session.”

The camera light turns red as does the light bulb above the door. The message is clear: no one must enter. Didier Mouron, made-up for the occasion, focused, almost tense, is sitting in front of the director. “We will now begin, Mr. Mouron.” The questions – which I am asked to translate in order to make sure that Didier understands them perfectly – begin flowing: “Is it true that you did not graduate from art school? Your first American exhibition in 1985 was

held atop the Trump Tower? How do you feel here at Warner Bros? You speak about the world of dreams... Have you been contacted by psychoanalysts, parapsychologists and other specialists of the mind?" The artist, as the questions go along, relaxes to the point of being completely comfortable: the voice calms, the flow becomes regular, words gain more depth, some humour here, an anecdote there. "Well, there won't be much to cut." Randy says joyfully at the end of the interview, preparing to subject Don Harper to the same exercise.

Day II

Entrance number 4: same guards, same game. Passports. Trunk. "Move!" We enter the studios through the main door. "The musicians will arrive," Don tells us while I am watching the technicians from the corner of my eye, who – wearing black gloves – are handling the artworks. The lighting team has finished its work, and a set of blue and yellow lights magnifies the place – adding a little more mystery. Five cameras are on and are filming the comings and goings of the technicians. "I can already tell you that we have beautiful images, plenty of beautiful images," rejoices Randy whom we come across in the control room. Meanwhile, we don't have much to do here anymore, and because I fear disturbing the musicians, I propose to Didier to explore the surroundings.

We meet outside, left to ourselves at Warner Bros, free to roam anywhere we like, and it seems like a good idea to go eat first! A restaurant-cafeteria made for employees and guests of the firm is where we settled, I on a shrimp burrito, Didier on a more traditional chef's "cheeseburger." As we ate, we observed the people around us: cameramen, extras, actors, musicians, Warner's management and two security guards – more relaxed, more reassured as they are devouring their ketchup-covered French fries. The entire anthill reunited, in repose; and everyone is greeting each other, smiling at each other, happy to be taking a break under the shade of the trees in the pleasant October heat. We take the opportunity to push into the "tourist zone" where small buses are taking around the visitors, allowing them to see the real and fake buildings used as decor, the traditional water tower, the fake restaurant, and the hundred other illusions based on cinema, yet this art is so real – with its momentary passions, emotional breakdowns, its screenwriters' strikes, its tens of thousands of employees.

The Eastwood *Scoring Studio* is plunged into darkness. "The audience will soon enter" warns Randy while Didier and I are looking over the musicians from the control room: pianists, guitarists, harpists, flutists, drummers and other viol players – all focused, with their faces slightly illuminated by the light of the lectern. The tension is at its highest. A few sips of Ruinart do not suffice to dilute it. Even among the members of the production team, well-experienced with public performances, one senses mild stress: one snaps his joints, another plays with his mobile phone. The collaboration between Didier Mouron and Don Harper does not look like anything known; impatience inevitably mixes with fear. Finally, the door opens. A silhouette, a second, third; ten, twenty, thirty, more than forty people – in absolute silence – enter the studio, moving, reaching inside the circle formed by the Totms. A quiver. The harp's strings vibrate. A few notes. The audience converges to a first artwork. A violin. A second artwork. The drums. Following the first moments of surprise, astonishment, emotion, portable phones are taken out and pictures are taken, the videos – deviating from Warner's strict rules. Faces are marked by emotion: huge smiles, mouths half-open, a few tears. The audience responds enthusiastically to the musicians' virtuoso call. They wander from one artwork to another: contemplating them, absorbing them. I also speak for Randy. For Didier. For Don, whose face streaked with two bright tears, whispers something into my ear, but I do not understand. The fifth group finishes its set of music... Is it over? The question is written in

capital letters in everyone's eyes. The answer arrives quickly as all the musicians start together in a dizzying, frenzied finale. Meanwhile, in the audience, we close our eyes, we approach an artwork, a musician. We take a last picture. Then the lights come on. Abruptly. We leave the dream. Bewildered and staggering, the audience is slowly making its way to the exit, the buffet – not without a look back. The artists and I are walking behind. We now need the familiar surroundings of the studio – the sun, the palm trees and the beige Warner buildings – to make sure that what we experienced is very real. It all happened so fast. So intensely. “You made me enjoy two wonderful hours,” says a spectator to Don Harper who is forced to reply that the performance only lasted twenty minutes...

Quentin Mouron

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French original text sympathetically brought into English by Raya Mileva | Geneva, Switzerland, November 2014