



Jean-Jacques Annaud

DEADLINE – June 17, 2020
Exclusive by Andreas Wiseman

Pathé will launch sales at the Cannes virtual market on 'Notre Dame On Fire', a big-canvas movie drama about the fire at the iconic Notre Dame in 2019, which shocked people around the world. 'Wolf Totem', 'Enemy At The Gates' and 'Seven Years In Tibet' director Jean-Jacques Annaud is teaming up with 'A Prophet and Rust And Bone' scribe Thomas Bidegain on the ambitious French-language feature, which will combine archive footage with filmed drama to tell the story of the fateful day. One of the most widely recognized symbols of the city of Paris and France, the medieval cathedral has previously featured in a host of movies including Cary Grant-Audrey Hepburn starrer 'Charade', cult horror 'American Werewolf In Paris', animated film 'The Hunchback Of Notre Dame' and Oscar-nominated romance 'Before Sunset'. But this will be the monument's close up. Set over 24 hours and against the backdrop of national 'gilets jaunes' unrest, the film will unravel a string of chance happenings that led to the fire and how it took hundreds of firefighters to quell the inferno, whose epic flames reached 1500F and tens of meters high. The fire took hold during rush - hour, which hampered the relief effort, but by the end of the night, expertise and bravery had thankfully won out and the majority of the structure was saved. Within 24 hours of the conflagration, global donations for the landmark's restoration stretched to an incredible €900M. The cause of the fire remains uncertain, despite a major investigation, and reconstruction will take years. Annaud will direct and is scripting with Bidegain. Pathé CEO Jerome Seydoux is producing and the team is looking at a late 2020 shoot. Pathé, which will handle international sales and distribute in France, will have a sizzle reel for the Cannes virtual market and an English-language version of the script in early July. We spoke to Oscar and Cesar-winner Annaud, who is known for big canvas true stories and is coming off his most lucrative film yet in 2015 feature 'Wolf Totem'.

How did you come to this project and why did you want to tell the story?

I got a call before Christmas from Pathe's Jerome Seydoux. We have worked together many times over the years. We met up and he discussed the idea of showing what really happened on that day in April. He gave me a number of documents, which I swallowed with interest. Since then I've been reading a great deal. It's just amazing to see how, yet again, reality is far more interesting than fiction.

We're making a movie that will look like a fiction film but which is clearly based on a true story. It's like a thriller: it's emotional, touching. Thomas and I didn't dare invent what happened. I have met a number of protagonists from the event. I was even at Notre Dame a few days ago. I have become friendly with some of the people

put their lives on the line. Remarkably, more than one thousand precious pieces were rescued from the treasury and no one was killed.

The images were beamed all round the world, I remember...

The entire world knew the Cathedral was on fire. We want to show how the whole world, from Moscow to Beijing, was watching. I had so many messages from friends in Italy, China, the US, everywhere. It was one of those 'where were you when' moments.

Will you use a lot of CGI?

I don't think so. What I don't have, we will build. I will build angles. I will probably film at a few places that are very similar to Notre Dame. Sens, for example, has one of the first Gothic cathedrals in the world. Notre Dame was based on it. We recently did a scout there. There are a number of similar cathedrals to Notre Dame around France. Often they used the same architects. But the film will be made for the large screen with a big score. Thomas and I have been working on this like it's an action film, exploring the danger. We have followed the rules of an emotional spectacle film. Thomas has gone deep into suspense and emotions.

Will you explore the theory that the fire was started by a worker's cigarette?

We'll never know about the cigarettes. All the monuments in Paris have cigarette tips everywhere. We will explore each possibility.

What kind of budget are you thinking? In the \$20-30M range?

We can't say exactly yet. But yes, it's in that range. Possibly more. There will be some major set pieces. The knave alone is close to 40 meters high. However, we're not going for well known actors. I want credibility in the action. Some of the protagonists from the day have even come to me and said 'I'm ready'. I love working with actors who are willing but not famous yet.

Do you have any movies in mind as reference points?

'Apollo 11' and 'United 93' come to mind. Those would be references in terms of authenticity and shooting style.



who were right at the heart of the drama and the more I dig, the more surprising it becomes. It's such an unbelievable story that it's almost understandable why the fire department took as long as they did to respond.

I was speaking to a man responsible for security at Notre Dame and he explained to me how he called for help but people thought it was a joke.

The Cathedral is a mythic symbol: it has survived wars, it's the place Napoleon was crowned, it's the place where De Gaulle celebrated the liberation of Paris from the Nazis. People couldn't believe it would be on fire. You know, the volunteers were amazing. They put the fate of the Cathedral above their own lives. There were many young people who were willing to



ph. Claude Truong Ngoc

© Concept & design: GianAngelo Pistoia • Photo: Claude Truong Ngoc