Dissonant Chords

The Beat That My Heart Skipped, shot by Stéphane Fontaine, is an impassioned homage to the cult classic *Fingers*.

by Benjamin B

Unit photography by Jean-Claude Lother

During a lunch in the 19th district in Paris, director Jacques Audiard and cinematographer Stéphane Fontaine are discussing their collaboration on *The Beat My Heart Skipped*. Audiard has made a handful of acclaimed films, including *See How They Fall*, *A Self-Made Hero* and *Read My Lips*. Fontaine's brief list of credits includes *Bronx-Barbès*, *A New Life* and *Look at Me*.

Audiard maintains that *The Beat That My Heart Skipped* is "a very small, very modest film. Every time we tried to get out of the small format, it didn't work. For example, at one point I said to myself, 'We need a visual drum-roll,' and I got the crew to set up 20 meters of track for a very long dolly move, but it just didn't work." Fontaine adds, "We ended up putting everything back in the truck and shooting the whole scene handheld. In fact, there are maybe six shots in the film that aren't handheld. Every time we tried to go on sticks, it didn't work."

"I think this film often asked the question, 'Who is seeing this?'" muses the director. "That's a very good question, but it eventually became not 'Who is seeing this?' but 'Who is living this?' The only answer was the hero, Tom [played by Romain Duris]. We always had to be not in Tom's viewpoint, but in his perimeter, in his life. That's what

Opposite: Tom (Romain Duris) rediscovers his passion for classical piano after he lands an audition with an influential talent agent. This page: In the meantime, Tom must deal with his "real job": hustling real estate with some ruthless, intimidating partners. Below: Adding to Tom's angst is his problematic relationship with his difficult and dissolute father, Robert (Niels Arestrup).

motivated our solutions."

Loosely based on *Fingers* (1978), a cult film directed by James Toback, *The Beat that My Heart Skipped* is worth investigating on its own merits. As Audiard's co-screenwriter Tonino Benacquista puts it, "We kept Toback's initial premise but changed everything else." The main character, Tom, is a real-estate hustler who is not above forcibly evicting poor families from an abandoned building in the wee hours of the morning. He has given up his childhood dream of becoming a concert pianist, like his mother, and instead is whittling away his life, following in the sleazy footsteps of his father (Niels Arestrup).

Tom's life is energized when, by chance, he is invited to audition as a pianist by his mother's agent. Once Tom's fingers return to the keyboard, he begins to distance himself from his colleagues and work, finds solace in a passionate affair, and submits to the austere piano lessons of an Asian virtuoso. The stakes are raised after his father gets crossed by a dangerous Russian gangster, and in the end, Tom must choose between mother and father, music and violence.

Much of the picture's power comes from its raw storytelling energy. With minimal lighting and handheld camerawork, Fontaine crafts a lyrical world of garish nights, colorful bars, moody interiors and softly lit cafés. "I have a theory," says Audiard, "which is the theory of tilted planes, invented by an old French architect who made buildings where all the floors were slightly tilted. He started from the principle that man must move forward. In a

Photos and frame grabs courtesy of Why Not Productions and UGC.

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Top to bottom: Tom attempts to connect with his demanding dad during lunch at a café; the frustrated pianist hears music in his head; to prepare for his audition, Tom takes a crash tutorial from a strict but sympathetic teacher (Miao Lin).

certain way, when it comes to the work of directing actors, I'd say that my job is to create tilted floors. You can't tilt them too much, or everyone will fall, but you can't have an even floor, either, because then everything is too predictable and everyone snoozes, and that's not cinema. My job is to destabilize things." Audiard's brief to Fontaine was "tilted" indeed: the director wanted to shoot very quickly, mostly handheld and mostly at night, using existing lighting and with no depth of field. He wanted to give the actors considerable freedom by shooting successive one-shot takes on each character in a scene.

"I recall Jacques telling me that he wanted an image that was dark in the foreground and sparkled in the background," says Fontaine. The "sparkles" are provided by soft-focus lights, haloed sources, colored lens flares and urban neons that sweep across the frame like moving paint strokes. The characters move through bold washes of orange, gold and red. This impressionistic world is given its rhythm by Fontaine's camera, which is always following the characters, particularly Tom.

Fontaine used few movie

Top: Aline (Aure Atika), the wife of a friend, discovers that Tom has been enabling her husband's infidelities. Middle: Capitalizing on Aline's emotional distress, Tom confesses his pent-up desire for her. Bottom: Lens flares and other anomalies were used to lend "sparkle" to various scenes.

lights on the film. There was no generator, and his workhorse units were Kino Flos and the household lightbulbs that were in practicals on the set. One of the film's opening scenes is lit mainly by a Xenon flashlight. The cinematographer explains that location scouting was essential to the night exteriors. A gritty early scene inside a car, for example, was shot on a stretch of Paris' beltway that the filmmakers chose for its colorful background. A night exterior where Tom declares his love to his friend's wife is emblematic of Fontaine's lighting approach. The filmmakers scouted a street with brightly lit shop windows, and used them as the principal sources. "We really didn't know what we were going to get," says Audiard.

In night interiors, Fontaine's interventions were often serendipitous, working with existing backgrounds and set elements. In a scene shot in a red-painted bar, for example, the cinematographer added soft-focus background circles by repositioning bottles. In another variation, he placed a glass to create a large halo around Tom's head.

Fontaine shot the picture on two generations of fast, tungsten-balanced film stocks, Kodak Vision

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Right: Cinematographer Stéphane Fontaine (shouldering camera) catches some action on the fly. Below: Makeup artists help to "beat up" Tom's foe during the filming of a climactic scene.

500T 5279 and Vision2 500T 5218. He used 79 for day scenes and 18 for nights, and he rated both at ISO 500. "I find 5279 to be very beautiful in day exteriors — you get magnificent overexposed whites and great contrast," he says. "And 5218 is great at seeing into the blacks." He occasionally pushed 5218 by ½ or one full stop on night exteriors "not to gain exposure, but mostly to obtain more or less contrast, and therefore more or less detail in the blacks.

"I find 5218 to be a little more yellow than 5279, which I find is more red," he continues. "So I didn't respect my rule for shooting nights on 18 when it came to shooting two actresses, Emmanuelle Devos and Aure Attika. I almost always shot them with 79 to get redder skin tones."

Fontaine shot the picture on an Aaton 35-III and says he "couldn't imagine" using another camera on the film. "I chose Cooke S4 lenses because I really like their texture; they're soft and contrasty at the same time, and I like their look when the image is slightly out of focus. We shot between 32mm and 65mm." Many scenes were filmed using two focal lengths. "If we shot with a 32mm then we tended to go to a 50mm, and if we started with a 40mm we went to a 65mm."

"I wanted no depth of field, maybe because I'm nearsighted!" says Audiard. Fontaine shot much of the film wide open, at T2. The shallow depth of field underscores the film's almost claustrophobic focus on Tom.

Fontaine shot the entire film with a ⅛ Tiffen White Pro-Mist filter on the lens, which softens the image and adds distinctive halos around bright sources. "I used the filter to avoid creating an image that was cut

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Audiard (wearing glasses) guides Fontaine through one of the film's many handheld shots.

and dried," he explains. "Of course, I also wanted contrast, which is a bit contradictory. I wanted the image to be soft without being gray."

When asked about managing the extreme underexposures of some of the night scenes, Fontaine says, "After a while, the measurement became abstract. My meter was giving me 'E' for error, but my eye was telling me it was okay, and 5218 sees into dark areas very well." In the opening scene in a car, Fontaine pushed the stock one stop and wedged a 9" Mini Flo tube below a headrest to get a minimal exposure. "Darkness was a way of creating a cocoon for Tom," he notes. "Night has a reassuring aspect for him. Tom is obviously more at ease in the shadows than in the light."

Fontaine acknowledges that he is a stickler about color temperature, and on night exteriors he often filtered his sources with green gels to match the existing sodium-vapor city lights. He later removed the green during photochemical color timing at Éclair Laboratories, where he worked with colorist

Isabelle Julien.

Fontaine states that red and gold were the emblematic colors of the film. "I defined a lot of the color at the moment of shooting. When I used tungsten sources at night, I never used them naked; I always colored them with CTO or another gel. I never had white light. Then Isabelle and I refined the colors in the grading."

Julien, who practices both digital and photochemical grading, adds, "I love photochemical timing. With it, you get a contrast, a brilliance, and it moves on the screen. Film is a living substance [whose qualities] can sometimes get a little smoothed out by a digital intermediate. If you're curious, you can develop photochemical systems that can give a cachet to the image that goes beyond the negative; you can go further with the colors."

"Of course, the danger of working at this level of underexposure — two or three stops under — is that the image becomes gray," notes Fontaine. He explains that he strove "paradoxically" to obtain an image that had both contrast and softness. Julien adds that the internegative was "slightly push-processed. By pushing a little, the contrasty shots didn't budge, while the softer, grayer shots got a little more brilliance, with deeper blacks."

On the lunch table in Paris are wine and cheese, the traditional Gallic cue to get to the heart of the matter. Audiard turns to Fontaine and says, "In the end, when all those moments we had discussed became a single moment called a film, I was really surprised. I had foreseen something much more disparate, more heterogeneous, but you found a unity of 'darkness that sparkles,' and that's astounding. I don't know whether this was something that was behind every lighting action you did, but it was really unexpected." With a smile, Fontaine responds, "The director doesn't only direct actors, he also directs the cinematographer.

"Darkness," he adds, "was always present for me. I simply identified myself with Tom and asked, 'If I were Tom, what kind of lighting would I be in?'" ■

TECHNICAL SPECS

1.85:1

Aaton 35-III
Cooke S4 lenses

Kodak Vision 500T 5279,
Vision2 500T 5218

Printed on Kodak Vision 2383