

THE HIDDEN SECRETS OF WOLVES

with Andrew Simpson, Wolf Trainer



For 20 years, Andrew Simpson has trained animals for the film industry with a clear preference for wolves, animals nevertheless renowned for their untameable character. “They are the most difficult species to train,” he admits. “Wolves are highly intelligent. They learn fast but are extremely cautious and attentive to what’s going on around them. These are the traits that help them to survive in the wild. If they don’t feel at ease with the situation, their instinct tells them to leave. And that’s one of the reasons I enjoy working with them so much...” He devoted a documentary to them, *WOLVES UNLEASHED*, which was released in 2011, winning international success and as many as 18 prizes.



Understanding The Wolf

It was in 2010 that Jean-Jacques Annaud entrusted the task of raising and mastering the real Mongolian wolves for the film to this exceptional trainer, who has travelled the globe and collaborated with a large majority of the Hollywood studios. “From our first meeting, I understood what Jean-Jacques wanted. Not just for the audience to understand the hardships that the wolves face in the Mongolian steppes, but for them to really get inside the wolves’ heads, feel their emotions and grasp their intelligence.... For the first time, a fiction film was attempting to show these animals as they really are in the wild.”

Andrew Simpson admires the filmmaker’s work: “I had always hoped to one day work with him. Jean-Jacques has developed a very unique way of working with animals. He works with them in the same way as he would work with children. Stylistically and narratively, the technique that he uses and that he fine-tuned on *THE BEAR* allows the animals to understand the scenes that they will be playing. So he knows to wait for the moment when they will actually make it real in their head. When they run away, they are really afraid of something and so they behave like frightened animals: if they growl it’s because they are really unhappy.”



Socialising The Baby Wolf Pups From Their Birth



The Canadian makes his way to China for a first location scout. Having visited several zoos that Jean-Jacques Annaud had already spotted the previous year, he chooses Harbin zoo in the north of the country. Andrew Simpson's goal is that at least ten of the sixteen wolves that he will train be ready to play in the film. "I already knew that the difficulties would only increase as the shoot went on," he says. "To achieve my goal, it was essential that I socialise and raise the wolf pups myself almost as soon as they had opened their eyes."

A Relationship Based on Trust

In 2011, the trainer moves to China where he will spend two full years working the animals. "I spent every single day with the wolves. You have to spend time with them. In my mind it's the only way to create a solid bond of affection and win their trust. You need to bring them up before even thinking about training. If you don't take the time to create a relationship of love, care and attention with a wolf, you will never get the quality of action that we need for the camera. We couldn't control them, and by control, I mean gaining a respect based on a deep-founded relationship, and not on fear or threats. If you treat the wolves well, they'll reward you when it's time for them to give their all to the camera. Without the constant attention that I gave them over these two years, I know that they wouldn't have been capable of achieving the feats they did in the film. But it's a part of the process that very few people know about."



The Rise of a Star



In the quest for excellence, one wolf quickly emerges: Cloudy, the alpha wolf who, part of the magic of cinema, develops not only remarkable acting skills but also instinctively takes a liking to the director! “You can’t make a wolf like someone,” confirms Andrew Simpson. A dog can be tricked with a ball or a treat. Not a wolf. If he doesn’t like you, that’s the end of it – they’re animals of incredible integrity. Cloudy was fascinated by Jean-Jacques. Every time he visited the training centre, he separated from the pack to lick his face and wouldn’t leave him alone! We were sometimes forced to ask Jean-Jacques to leave so that we could start work again and so that Cloudy could concentrate.”

Two Groups of Pups

One of the main difficulties for the trainer was the different behaviour of the pup taken in by Chen Zhen, the hero of the film played by Shaofeng Feng, as he grows up. “I separated the pups into two groups, taking care to keep the first group in close contact with Shaofeng and keeping the other group away from him. When Shaofeng has to play emotional scenes, or when he plays with his pup, it’s one of the little ones from the first group with who he had formed a bond. When, on the other hand, he needed to come face to face with a hostile reaction, the pups from the second group took over. It made the scenes much more realistic, but, in the latter case, much more difficult to get right.” In total, three pups played Little Wolf. The one used to play almost all of the scenes of ‘adolescence’ (from 4 to 7 months, the end of the spring, summer and autumn) was the young wolf C-Saw, the most affectionate, and the only one whose fur became increasingly lighter as the months passed until almost white in the last scenes...



Andrew Simpson’s methods give particularly impressive results in the attack sequence of the horses by the wolves. “Making a wolf run behind a horse is one thing: getting a pack of ten wolves to do it is another. No one in the past had managed to pull off anything like it. Jean-Jacques Annaud knows what he wants to see on the screen, and my job is to do my best to help him get it.”

Pushing Boundaries



From the moment preparation started, both the director and the trainer decided that they were going to push the limits of what was possible: Jean-Jacques Annaud, who wanted 99% real wolves in his film and to use the very minimum of computer animation or animatronics, nevertheless did not neglect the question of the crew's safety: "He was ready to find other solutions if we weren't in a position to guarantee the safety of both the crew and the animals," insists Andrew Simpson. "I had to find new ways of working. It was a challenge that even Hollywood hadn't taken on."



The Trainer's Secrets

So what is this exceptional trainer's secret weapon? Not only focusing on his discipline, but looking at the filmmaking process as a whole. "Making a film is all about team-work, with everyone working towards a common goal. If you settle for doing your bit without looking at what is happening in the other departments, you can very quickly be left behind."



Back at home in Calgary, where he had relocated and continues to care for the film's sixteen wolves, the Canadian trainer regrets nothing of the adventure which forced him to put aside his personal life for so long. "WOLF TOTEM" is without any doubt the greatest and most amazing adventure of my career so far. I had already worked on an ambitious wolf project: Nicolas Vanier's WOLF, shot in Siberia. But Jean-Jacques Annaud's film was an even greater bet for me to take: I know that I will always be proud of my role in the film."

