

▶ Life on the Line

One of Westobou Festival's most intriguing events involves the appearance of high-wire walker Philippe Petit



At 7:15 a.m. on August 7, 1974, Philippe Petit embarked on what has become known as “the artistic crime of the century,” when he illegally performed a high-wire walk between the yet to be completed twin towers in New York, then the world’s tallest buildings. The walk took more than six years of planning and was the subject of Petit’s book “To Reach the Clouds,” which gave way to the documentary “Man on Wire.”

For those not familiar with Petit’s artistry, one might wonder why he would be possessed to do something as crazy as cross the sidewalks of New York 1,350 feet in the air on a one-inch wire.

“If you read my book ‘To Reach the Clouds,’ which the movie ‘Man on Wire’ was taken from — and if you see the movie, I think, in a sense there is no answer,” explained Petit, during a phone interview last week. Here I was, a young wire walker, and I decided to impose myself, so to speak, by walking places illegally — Notre Dame in Paris, Sydney Harbor Bridge in Australia and the New York twin towers.”

It was a mix of passion and a dash arrogance — and it was a very personal thing. It was not to become rich and famous,” he laughed, “which I’m still not.”

Passion is one thing, but to seemingly defy gravity also requires a confidence and skill that the majority of people in this world do not possess. But fear is not something that Petit considers very often, if ever.

“I do not fear,” he admitted. “I am probably too focused on what I am doing, and also because fear is an expression of not knowing. We are fearful of the unknown and I know my wire. Maybe not as well at the time as I know it now — you know 50 years later — but I don’t see anything risky in it.”

Not risky?

“I mean, it’s dangerous, of course,” Petit clarified. “If I put my feet one minute in one way, I will lose my life. I know I cannot do such big mistakes — putting my feet in the wrong place — so there is no fear. But at times before, during or after a performance — very often after — I look at what I have done and I feel shocked, almost in fear at the enormity of the impossibility of what I have just done. But actually before and during, I don’t really have doubts. Very few times in my life have I thought, ‘Is this too big for me? Am I going to make it?’ But usually I know I am perfectly safe.”

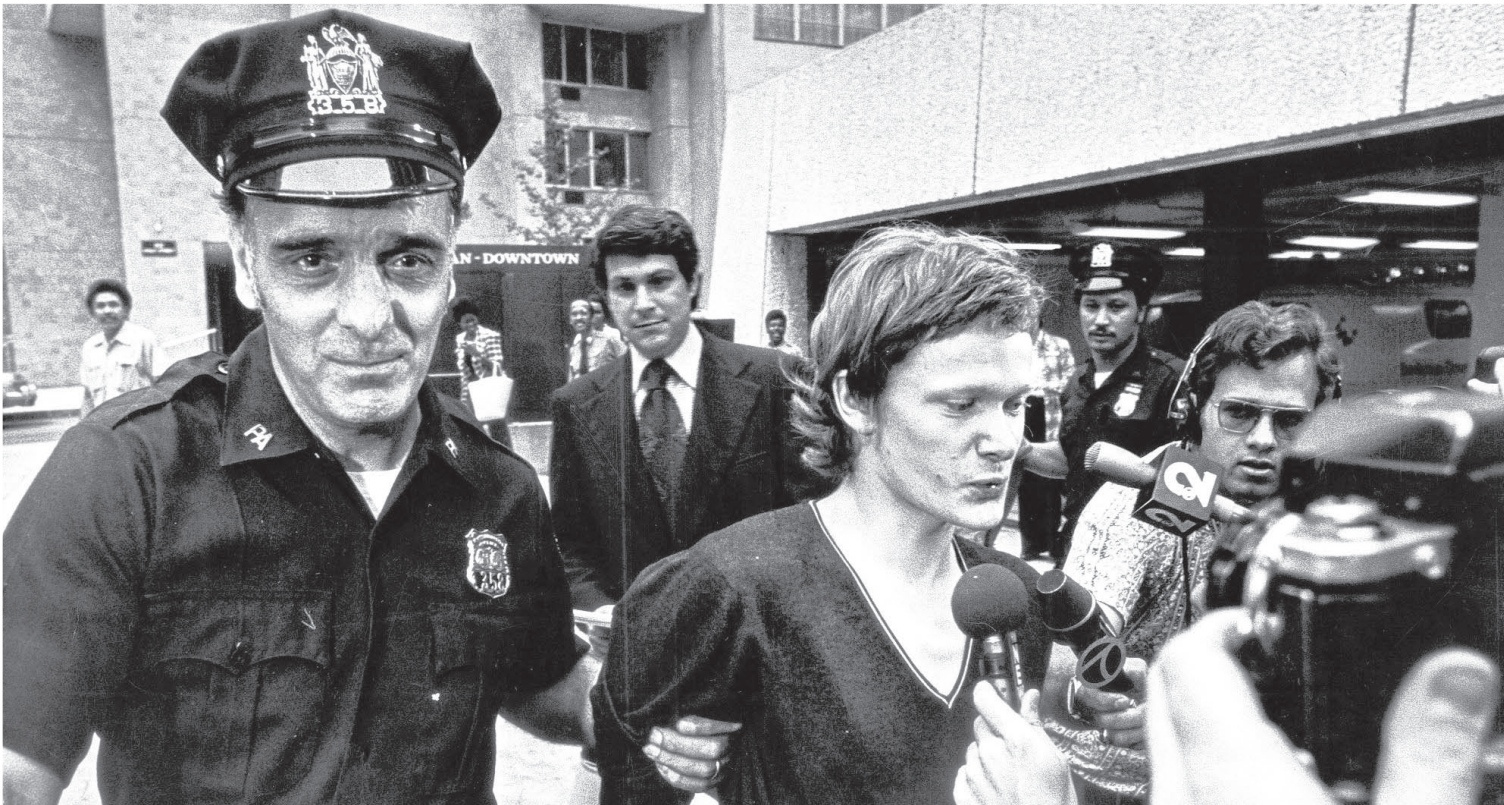
The walk between the twin towers occurred in 1974, but

it was only turned into a full-length documentary in 2008 after Simon Chinn decided to pursue the film rights to Petit’s book. Eventually, Petit agreed.

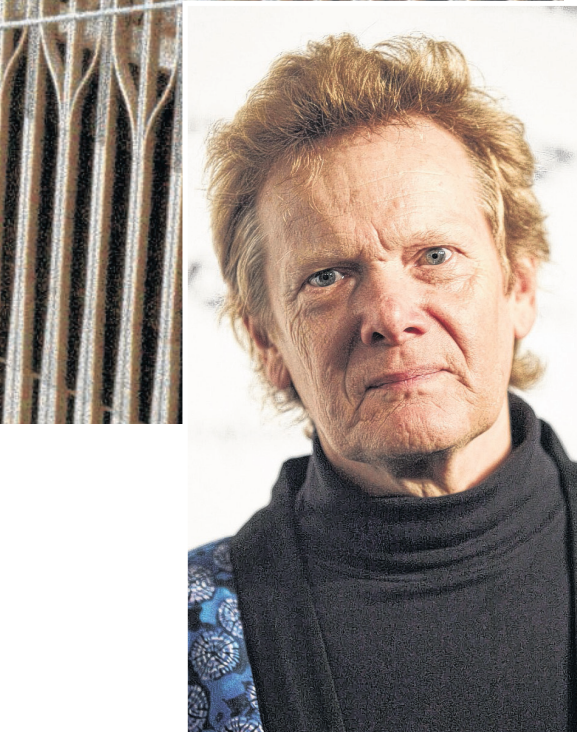
“I have been approached throughout dozens of years by dozens of people wanting to do a movie,” explained Petit, “and somehow I never said yes. Maybe because inside me there was this dormant moviemaker who wanted to do his own movie. But that’s a very naïve concept for me to have, so finally I said yes. It was purely a personal feeling. I felt safe in this man’s ability to take my story and to involve me in a creative way in making a film.”

Petit’s trust, like his feet, proved well placed. “Man on Wire” won the Academy Award in 2008 for best documentary, and the Grand Jury Prize: World Cinema Documentary and the World Cinema Audience Award: Documentary at the Sundance Film Festival that same year. Not only is Augusta fortunate enough to have the opportunity to see a screening of “Man on Wire” in conjunction with this year’s Westobou Festival, but Petit himself will conduct a talk after the movie.

“My presentation is centered about the World Trade Center adventure,” Petit said. “Many many people have seen the documentary ‘Man on Wire,’ and quite a few people have read my book, so why should they come to this evening to hear about it? Well, my statement there is



actually [that] there are so many things I couldn't put in my book, and so many things that were not shown at all in the film. I am going to share with the audience things maybe they've never seen or heard before, and also I am going to reenact, by my presence, what happened between the towers and answer in a different way the question, "What were you thinking up there?" So I think even if you read the book and even if you saw the film, you must come."



"Man on a Wire"
 ASU's University Hall room 170
 Friday, October 5
 11 a.m. and 3 p.m.
 Free

The First Step: A Conversation with Philippe Petit about "Man on a Wire"
 ASU's Maxwell Theatre
 Friday, October 5
 7 p.m.
 \$25
 706-755-2878
westoboufestival.com



Philippe Petit on...

What motivates him

"One day I should write the story of my life, and when you read it, you will see that the motivation needs to be extracted from an entanglement of many passions, many interests that I had in my young life. You know, maybe from [age] 6 to 16 I did an extraordinary area of activity. Some were, you know, proposed by my parents and some were individually my choice and I think these brought me to the state of wanting to be an active poet in life. And there's no better line to walk on than to become a wire walker. It's my entire childhood life that brought me to choose theater and to choose a very strange stage for an actor — a very narrow stage, a very dangerous stage in the eyes of the onlooker."

Whether he's done and what's next

"Yes, if I look at the resume of my life, I see all those walks, all those films, plays, books... many, many things I have done and drawings and speaking languages and venturing in so many places that fascinates me, so it seems like that. But actually for me, it's more the opposite. I feel sometimes I have done nothing. All my projects are still hanging. You know, I need to meet the right engine of the arts to write the check to make it possible. So I still do all of what I do — the street juggling, the magic, the high-wire walking and the writing, everything. It is almost increasingly harder, maybe it's the way we live now, for an artist like me to really form all the time and that's basically what I want to do. So no, I have not stopped at all; I have not achieved it all. I have achieved, in my opinion, very little of what I want to do. I have millions of projects and I am ready to start tomorrow morning on my next walk, my next film, my next book, and some of it is happening. I have a book in the making called "Why Knot?" and it is about the art of tying knots. I just finished this book and it's going be out in spring of next year. And I am jumping on another book right now about creativity, so I have many activities, projects in the making. I know exactly what I'm doing and I'm very busy trying to do it."

BOX THIS INFORMATION SOMEWHERE PLEASE

The Westobou Festival continues through October 7. For more information on other events, visit westoboufestival.com.