

# Un village français

## five year chronicle of the Occupation

Public television channel France3 is poised to broadcast *Un village français (A French Village)*, the most important French drama series for many years. The landmark programmes chronicle a sad episode in the history of France: life under German Occupation. With nearly 60 episodes of 52-minutes' duration, the unique series will run for five years.

The first six episodes were shot in Super 16 by director of photography Thierry Jault (*Mauvais genres*, *Un ami parfait*), who chose film as his preferred media over the HD format now being demanded by broadcasting companies. The episodes mark the arrival of the Germans in Villeneuve in central France and document the first tentative signs of resistance in a community faced with severe disruption, fear and hunger. Viewers are introduced to the recurring characters and their situations, including doctor Daniel Larcher (played by Robin Renucci) who attempts to change villagers' minds during the lengthy Occupation. The episodes were directed by Philippe Triboit (*Bel ami*, *La Commune*) and shot from July to October last year. They are set between June and November 1940.

Lensing the beginning of *Un village français* has given Jault the opportunity to define the lighting basics to which the teams responsible for future episodes will refer. "Un village français analyses human behaviour in the exceptional situation experienced in France in 1940," explains the DP. "The series paints a portrait of several families of different social backgrounds and cultures in a country cut in two by a demarcation line. As the period was historically very difficult for most French people, we decided with Philippe Tribout at the outset to move away from sad and melancholic images."

### History and memories

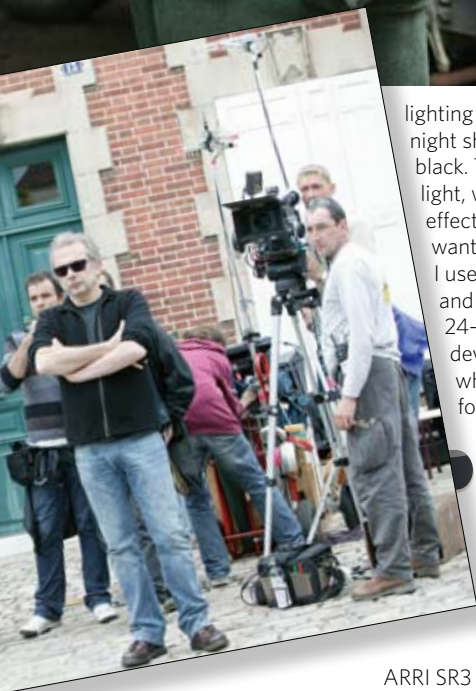
"When one tackles a stretch of history, one always asks oneself what lives on in the minds of people," continues Jault. "Do we have a memory of the 1940s that has any colour to it, or is it just those black-and-white images we are used to seeing in the archives? Or perhaps it is a mixture of the two. The period is firmly rooted in the memories of those who have lived through it, but for others it may appeal to a certain form of fantasy to which I have personally referred. In

contrast to the storyline, I stayed away from pastel shades in favour of bright, but not solid colours. If colours are sometimes muted, it is to help viewers towards the notion of heritage."

Which films, you may wonder, did Jault select for his visual references? "First of all, I wanted to revisit this French heritage; that which evokes the period of the Resistance, whether fiction or non-fiction. For example, *L'armée des ombres*, has some absolutely remarkable desaturation effects by director of photography Pierre Lhomme, or semi-documentaries such as *La bataille du rail*, by René Clément, which was made immediately after the war. Then I re-watched more recent films, such as *Saving Private Ryan* and *Black Book* by Paul Verhoeven. I worked in close collaboration with the set director and finally gave preference to slightly faded ochres, greys and greens. The colours of the costumes are bright, without ever being explosive. And I followed the seasons. The series starts in June 1940 with rather hot imagery, before gradually becoming colder as the story progresses in time to represent autumn and winter in episodes five and six."

Jault explains why there will be many days, but very few nights throughout this immense chronicle. "Exterior night shots in an epoch film quickly become expensive for production. Because of the curfew and the absence of public





lighting at the time, my exterior night shots are deliberately black. The interiors have little light, with only dim lighting effects. As the director wanted to work with zoom, I used a 11.5-165mm Canon and an Optimo Angénieux 24-270mm; a lens normally devoted to 35mm, but which I now use all the time for 16mm."

Jault shot interiors in the studio; locations comprise the Paris Ile de France region, Vexin and the Limousin region in the centre of France. He used two

ARRI SR3 cameras: one fixed and

one on Steadicam. In the first six episodes he worked with five different film stocks - KODAK VISION2 50D 7201, KODAK VISION2 250D 7205, KODAK VISION2 100T 7212, KODAK VISION2 200T 7217 and KODAK VISION2 500T 7218. He explains his strategy. "I used the two daylight films on the first four episodes and the three tungsten films for the last two, which I filtered only slightly to preserve a dominant coldness. In general, I like contrasts. For exteriors, I love KODAK VISION2 50D 7201 for its fineness and definition. It is a film stock that 'tolerates' changes of aperture well and preserves a high degree of contrast in quite significant lighting variations when one passes from an interior to an exterior, or vice versa. I also created points of light ingress with windows and backlighting using 12 and 18K HMIs. As I'm not a photographic realist, I sometimes have two back-lights: one opposite the other. Indeed, I allow myself some arbitrary choices that aren't always completely logical."

"In order to obtain maximum definition, I always start from the lowest sensitivity and I work it to the limits of its possibilities. In order to achieve as little grain and as much fineness as possible, I avoid using 5218 too much on daylight shots. During the 70-day shoot, I only used it during one week, which isn't much. I would certainly have been able to shoot *Un village français* with only one film stock, but it is an intellectual luxury that always ends up backfiring. It frequently generates passivity and sometimes even broadcasting problems; one cannot bury one's head in the sand. Broadcasters have become increasingly restrictive with regard to RTB technology. Nowadays not a single one of them will accept any other RTB than HD; that is, unless the director, the DP or the production team has deliberately chosen it. Grainy images are no longer acceptable"

### Top quality results

So, you might ask, why not 'film in HD'? "Neither the director nor I wanted it," repeats Jault. "Film remains the best quality image. In HD you always risk obtaining bright carbonised lighting, in particular with cameras used on television films which are much lower performance than those used for feature films. If we want to keep working in film, we really must continue to produce top quality results. I belong to a generation that could shoot on almost anything. We now have film stocks of such high technical performance that ultimately everything becomes easy. If it is only to defend our profession, we should work with film and change stocks as often as necessary, and make them develop on set in terms of takes. You should never agree to fall into a lambda image. Fiction films on television aren't throwaway programmes. They are creative works of art," he stresses.

*Un village français* was produced by Tétramédia (Jean-François Boyer and Emmanuel Daucé) and begins airing in spring 2009.