

# AS HIGH AS THE EAGLES ON THE SET OF EL CANT DELS OCELLS

THE ANGEL HADN'T PLANNED ON SPEAKING THE WORD OF GOD.

The day after surviving the 16-day marathon known as the Vancouver film festival, I am on Fuerteventura, surrounded by Catalan speakers, wearing a white robe and holding a Handycam I kind of learned how to operate by reading the manual on the airplane. Somehow, this is in the spirit of shooting an Albert Serra Biblical project, which I soon discover is a combination of Straub, Pasolini, Warhol, Herzog, and high-school drama class. There is a script, if you could call a 30-page outline a script, which Albert claims he's written in three days. There are actors, if you consider a retired tennis teacher, an out-of-shape construction worker, his father, the film's producer (Montse Triola), and me, as actors. I am the one not from Banyoles, Spain. But I am the only Jew.

BY MARK PERANSON

And there's also an Angel, quite nervous upon discovering that Albert has decided to make up a speech, on the spot, for her to deliver. So for about an hour, she stands shoeless, wilting in the 35-degree sun, as he repeats the words over and over, like an incantation, looking alternately peeved and vaguely satisfied as she runs them back. Of course I have no idea what's being said, but take it as a blessing for the shoot.

My scenes, I quickly learn, are far less structured. "You know, Joseph and Mary, their quotidian life, but slightly poetic," Albert explains. In the text message that invited me to play Joseph, Montse told me to be prepared to improvise. What follows on Day One includes improv games with a lamb and a Catalan-speaking Virgin, eating oranges, and talking about the weather. I should add that the night before, just off the plane, I casually mentioned learning Hebrew long ago, thinking this was somehow pertinent. "Okay," Albert said right away, "then you can speak in Hebrew."

Day Two. I feel hotter, especially covered by a black blanket, the takes go on for longer, the direction less concrete. First there is the Adoration, which features a fat baby Jesus, and Hebrew dialogue that wasn't about the weather, but I think I pull it off with minimal grammatical butchering. (Flash forward: When the five of us perform a major scene not in the script, shot on a day I'm not supposed to be on set comes, I even attempt some Biblical Hebrew phrasing. Though Sancho keeps ruining my takes by laughing. "He finds your language funny," someone translates. My untranslated retort: "I'm going to call Torino and tell them to take back your best actor award.")

But the following scene gives me a better feel as to what it means to act for Albert: without any direction, any indication as to how long the scene will play out, nor, really, what the point is, I sit in front of Joseph and Mary's house, pretending to sleep, a decision that seems best considering the weather. As the cameras roll, soon the two DPs are changing tapes. About 45 minutes in—by which time I've forgotten where I am or what I'm doing, though it involves a now well-behaved lamb that I occasionally pet—Albert yells: "Look at the horizon!" So, wearing contact lenses for the first time, I spend the next half hour staring directly into the sun.



Albert isn't one to praise his actors—rather than praise, the kings are content to take as much wine as they can drink—but after he decides enough is enough, he leads a brief round of applause. Before passing out, I hear him say, “That was very actor’s studio.”

The next day I find out the film is being shot in black and white.



And then there are the three kings, fearless Superstars all named Lluís (nicknamed Gigi, Sancho or Sanchini, and Pere Sancho, or, Lluís). The bulk of the shooting of *El cant dels ocells* involves the kings, slightly buzzed, walking aimlessly in deserts, bathing, making shit up that has nothing to do with the Bible, or, just as often, absolutely nothing. While being filmed. For hours on end. Even more than on a typical set, there's lots of doing nothing. Two HD cameras shoot continuously—with these guys acting, retakes wouldn't be a good idea—often changing camera setups *during* takes. No “action” or “cut,” no make-up, and, oh yeah, no lights. But the amazing scenery—perhaps slightly less picturesque when transferred to black and white, though I'm shooting in colour—leaves us all in awe.

We're on Tenerife now, in the shadow of Teide—the nipple of Spain—elevation 3000 metres, as high as the eagles. That morning, we drove, stopped, disembarked, and Albert pointed upwards. An hour later, after having climbed a mountain, and waiting an eternity for Sancho to plod to the summit, we set up camp on what could be the moon's surface.

There is a lot of waiting for Sancho.

After some days of observation, I've concluded Albert's direction consists of sitting back and watching for long minutes of silence, or barking out instructions. Albeit, with variations. For a scene (actually in the “script”) where Sancho is supposed to laugh, Albert alternately yells “blow job,” something in Catalan I'm sure is very funny, and “Real Madrid.” (Sancho, who has a Barca tattoo, responds, “Real Madrid! Cabrón!”) Meanwhile Montse, who often wears the headphones, listens to the kings. Given complete freedom to shoot whatever I want as long as I stay quiet and don't block the cameras, I'm focusing on their interaction, which is just as interesting as what the kings are or aren't doing: there's muted gesturing, notes scribbled on paper. With a glance and a nod, a camera is picked up and moves to a different location.

What shows up on screen is the result of the curious combination of a director who knows in his mind what he's looking for and opts to keep it there, dedicated, amazing personalities who'll do whatever he says (how Sancho doesn't have a heart attack is beyond me), and a crew with high spirits—maybe because on this shoot, unlike on *Honor de cavalleria*, they aren't sleeping in tents and have now minibars. A family. I know I'd balk at spending an hour climbing a mountain toting a camera to reach a location. Or, the following day, hiking for 90 minutes. Or driving around aimlessly for hours through low-lying cloud cover trying to find the best place to shoot the kings in fog, for a director now sporting Sancho's red robe—an image which, to an outsider, might lead to a conclusion that this project is more than Quixotic, rather, downright crazy.

That's what you get for trying to be Angelopolous, I tell Albert. “No!” he yells back. “Fellini!”



In the little more than five days that I was on set I barely heard Albert talk about the project, but that night I am enlisted to record an interview to air on Catalan TV. He starts by saying one of the wisest things I've heard a director say: “We shot this scene up at the mountain because it's always better if the actors are tired.”

But then he moves to the larger picture, explaining *El cant dels ocells* is about “shooting people I love, how do they move, their gestures, how do they say things...,” After five days, I've realized he's nailed the essence of one kind of filmmaking, as I've been doing the same thing 🍷