

Collecting is my life. The rest is waiting.

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03/11/2020 Inside the attic of an ordinary terraced house, there is a hidden treasure trove of film artefacts: a signed script, props – everything relating to McQueen's "Le Mans". Or, at least, almost everything. This is the story of Frank Wrobel: a collector unlike any other.

Life often makes the most exciting screenplay. A happy ending is never guaranteed, but you can always believe in one. In fact, you have to, otherwise failure is certain, and triumph is no longer an option. "So you're the one who won't rest until he's met me?" This question, posed by Richard Rüdiger, one of the supporting actors in "Le Mans", could be interpreted – by those of a sensitive disposition – as a reproach.

But for Frank Wrobel, it was a badge of honour. He had managed to make contact with another contemporary witness, another hero of a film which today enjoys cult status. Frank Wrobel, from the

German city of Saarbrücken, has heard these sorts of remarks many times before, since he is not a collector in the classic sense: he is a researcher, a dreamer, a fan. The fact that the word "fan" is derived from the root word "fanatic" is not lost on Frank. He would never have got this far without a touch of obsessiveness: he would never have met Siegfried Rauch, or been given his original script – with a dedication – or a large collection of private photos from the set, or a video cassette of the film signed by Hans Herrmann. But where does a passion like this start?

On the sofa. "Bullitt" was Frank Wrobel's gateway drug. Not that he wouldn't have had an affinity with this genre anyway. The proud owner of a red Ford Mustang, he has himself already played bit parts in films, as well as working as a presenter, bricklayer, advertising expert and photographic model. The now 53-year-old has never followed a conventional path, either in his professional or private life. He can be awkward – and ultimately wins you over with qualities few other people possess: authenticity, passion – combined with a good deal of obstinacy. Being a seeker is part of his DNA. Perhaps that explains his affinity with Steve McQueen. Perhaps that is why he is so fascinated by the great American screen legend.

Instantaneously in love with McQueens "Le Mans"

The Mustang vs Charger car chase whetted his appetite for more. Frank fell in love with "Le Mans" just as instantaneously. This was the film that took Steve McQueen years to make and cost him a great deal of money. While not a box-office success at the time of its release, the film has become iconic of the auto racing genre. It offered a more authentic portrayal than its contemporary "Grand Prix" by Frankenheimer. It was the prototype for "Rush" and – though with considerably more Hollywood sugar-coating – "Le Mans 66".

The attic of an ordinary terraced house near Saarbrücken is home to what is likely the largest museum of film artefacts from "Le Mans". Let's remove the word "likely". There is no other place on earth where you could find more original, signed props. Even the full-face helmet with the inscription "Ritter" is there. Johann Ritter, played by Fred Haltiner, drove one of the Porsche 917 KH racing cars in the film as a team mate of Michael Delaney/Steve McQueen. The helmet is missing a racing suit, sadly.

Frank Wrobel has twice come very close to acquiring the original costumes, which were raffled off in 1971 by "Bravo" as part of the film's promotion. Three racing suits worn by Steve McQueen in the shoot came into the hands of new owners and Frank Wrobel managed to track down two of them.

But whenever he thought he had secured one of these relics – sorry, costumes – fate would intervene. The owners would see their chance to make big money. The three racing suits were bought at auctions by wealthy collectors for high six-figure sums. But the heart of the film beats in Saarbrücken, where Frank Wrobel, with the support of his girlfriend Jasmin Kühnreich, has built up a network over many years which includes those who were involved in the film both in front of and behind the camera. He can count the sadly now deceased Siegfried Rauch as a friend. He was invited to his 50th birthday party by the chef who had catered for the crew, and who created the "Steve" steak for Steve McQueen:

marinaded in honey sauce and sweetened with pineapple pieces.

Frank Wrobel right next to Steve McQueen

And when Sandro Garbo's epic graphic novel "Steve McQueen in Le Mans, The Final Opus" was published in October 2019, Frank Wrobel was once again part of the story: immortalised in a drawing right next to Steve McQueen. Frank Wrobel is more than just a collector. He is a collector who has taken the story of the film forward, who has tracked down people and their stories with tireless dedication, and who, in doing so, has put together a living jigsaw puzzle from the props and costumes of the cult film. Rather than preserving the ashes, he is keeping the fire burning. No one else could make that claim, no one else has accomplished this.

Michael Delaney is not the first to cross the finish line at the end of the film, after 104 minutes. His team mate, Larry Wilson, drives to victory for Porsche. And yet the hero of the film is the true victor, because, with a single gesture, he ultimately wins everything: the respect of Erich Stahler, perhaps even the heart of Lisa Belgetti, the woman he loves – and, what's more, he makes peace with himself. A happy ending is, of course, what you make of it.

Info

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