

The expressive choices of Marco Pontecorvo, AIC

Marco Pontecorvo, AIC, is enjoying a magical period in his cinematographic career. The young, yet highly experienced Italian Director of Photography has shot three major international projects in the last 12 months: *Firewall*, a Warner production starring Harrison Ford; *The Last Legion* with Producer Dino De Laurentiis starring Colin Firth and Sir Ben Kingsley; and the HBO television series *Rome*. When *InCamera* talked to Pontecorvo, he was preparing to shoot the second *Rome* series.

Q *Two out of three of your recent film projects have focused on ancient Rome. How did you get involved with *The Last Legion*?*

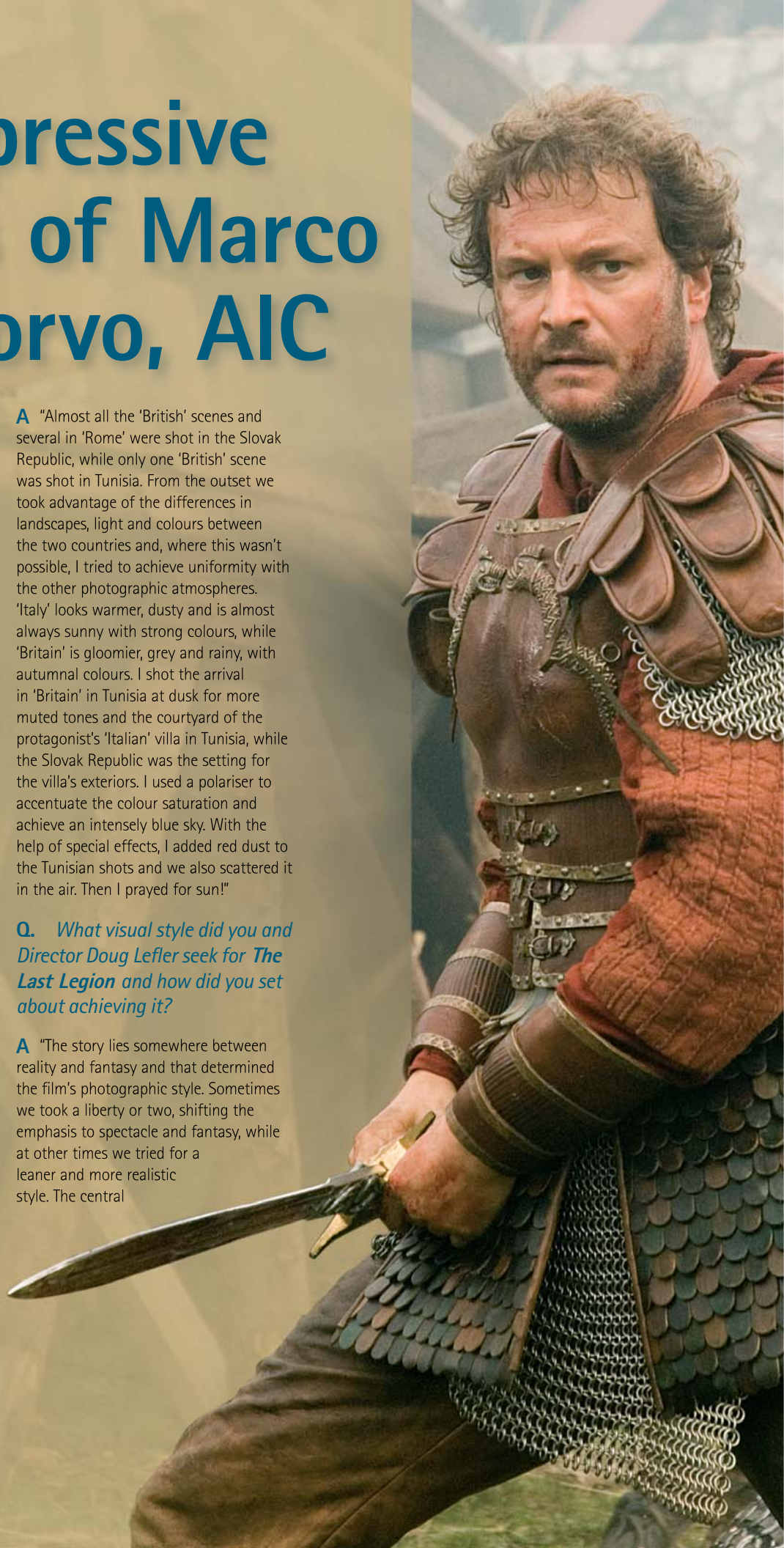
A "While I was shooting the first *Rome* series, Producer Lucio Trentini asked for my show reel for a forthcoming Dino De Laurentiis production. But although Dino liked my material and offered me the film, co-production and share-related issues subsequently dictated that it had to be shot by a British DP. At that point, he asked whether I was interested in shooting *The Last Legion*. The story intrigued me and the timing fitted my commitments on *Rome*, but then the film was postponed and in the meantime Richard Loncraine asked me to shoot *Firewall*. So I let the last episode of *Rome* go, but stayed in contact with Raffaella De Laurentiis during the *Firewall* shoot. After various setbacks, the starting date of *The Last Legion* was finalised: one week after the end of *Firewall*. It was destiny!"

Q *The Last Legion is set in Italy and Britain, but it was shot in the Slovak Republic and Tunisia. How did you maintain photographic consistency between the locations?*

A "Almost all the 'British' scenes and several in 'Rome' were shot in the Slovak Republic, while only one 'British' scene was shot in Tunisia. From the outset we took advantage of the differences in landscapes, light and colours between the two countries and, where this wasn't possible, I tried to achieve uniformity with the other photographic atmospheres. 'Italy' looks warmer, dusty and is almost always sunny with strong colours, while 'Britain' is gloomier, grey and rainy, with autumnal colours. I shot the arrival in 'Britain' in Tunisia at dusk for more muted tones and the courtyard of the protagonist's 'Italian' villa in Tunisia, while the Slovak Republic was the setting for the villa's exteriors. I used a polariser to accentuate the colour saturation and achieve an intensely blue sky. With the help of special effects, I added red dust to the Tunisian shots and we also scattered it in the air. Then I prayed for sun!"

Q *What visual style did you and Director Doug Lefler seek for *The Last Legion* and how did you set about achieving it?*

A "The story lies somewhere between reality and fantasy and that determined the film's photographic style. Sometimes we took a liberty or two, shifting the emphasis to spectacle and fantasy, while at other times we tried for a leaner and more realistic style. The central



Below left: Colin Firth as Aurelius fights in battle in *The Last Legion*.

Below right

Top: Marco Pontecorvo (Director of Photography) and Doug Lefler (Director) on the set.

Bottom: Thomas Sangster as Romulus, Coronation Day.

consideration was the division between the locations. I employed a lot of in-camera special effects as narrative elements, for example dust, smoke and flames. Apart from a polariser, I didn't use any particular filters to saturate the colours and the sky because I knew I'd be working in DI. I chose Kodak VISION2 500T 5218 and Kodak VISION2 200T 5217 and fitted the ARRI with Cooke S4 lenses."

Q *The Last Legion* is a \$50 million production based on a best-seller. What did it mean in practical terms working on a film with a high Hollywood-style budget?

A "Although the working method and approach are fairly different, I don't believe there's a golden rule implying 'resources equal quality'. Experience with limited resources has helped me a great deal because I've gotten into the habit of making do and finding solutions. That kind of experience can only help in the flourishing American film industry."

Q Did you experience any particular difficulties shooting *The Last Legion*?

A "Endless difficulties, both large and small. I had considerable trouble maintaining photographic consistency on the battle scenes in Tunisia and the Slovak Republic. In one scene I wanted sun and instead had days when it was so grey that it was like an endless twilight, while in another I wanted grey and got alternating rain and sun, preceded by a pea-soup fog! I tried to give the images minimal brightness and often met with the visual effects supervisor to provide elements that would enable him to add sky and sea on a sunny day. That way the audience's perception would be just a little off balance. I usually shot backlit and used smoke to help reduce the amount of sunlight."

Q *The first HBO television series Rome* received excellent reviews, high audience ratings and a Golden Globe nomination in the US. It was also popular in many other countries, so why did it attract only limited interest amongst Italian audiences?

A "Rome was created for American audiences, yet it deals with our Italian roots. That's hard for an Italian audience to digest. It was also shown two episodes at a time, which is not always a popular choice in Italy. I could speculate indefinitely."

Q Unlike many Italian television projects, *Rome* was shot in 35mm. What does the format mean to you in the context of television?

A "Rome was shot on Super 35 for the sake of accuracy. It is a superior format that has great formal and expressive depth and inevitably better quality. But the production effort can be frustrated if, as happened with the first couple of episodes in Italy, a product was released for broadcast that was created with a Beta SP loaded into an Avid, which was then downloaded to a fairly compressed digital format. It's a real sin because the expressive and formal richness of the 35mm format is lost. The quality of the product is fundamental, but so is the quality of the broadcasting – an important fact that unfortunately sometimes gets overlooked..."

Q How did the lighting package for ancient Rome in the television series compare with ancient Rome in *The Last Legion*?

A "Even though both productions dealt with events that occurred in ancient Rome, the story, the media, the audience and the shooting format were different. Having said that, the interiors were lit with torches and oil lamps and the costumes and sets were similar, but these are objective considerations. The diversity stems from my desire to innovate rather than repeat the photographic choices. It's an integral part of my philosophy that my approach to lighting is always aimed at the story."

Q What aspects of *Firewall* gave you the greatest satisfaction?

A "I had the pleasure of working with Richard Loncraine on *My House in Umbria*; he's a very talented director and a great professional, as were the cast, the production people, set designers, costumers and assistant directors. We worked as a team and achieved an excellent result. I'm pleased with the photographic choices and the overall atmosphere. They helped to tell the story, which for me is essential."

Q You tested the Kodak Look Manager System on *Rome*. Are you planning to use the new version of the software on the second series?

A "We've asked one of our apprentice trainees to handle it so the print will be calibrated during the day for each individual scene and the reference photos will start with the evening shoot. It's an extremely useful tool for dialogue with the laboratory – in this case Technicolor di Roma – and also for providing examples that simplify communication and obviate long discussions with producers and directors about the look of the film. I hope the new Kodak Look Manager System will be faster and more intuitive and that a shared vision system will be developed which requires less space than the current calibrated monitors." ■

