



# Digital Factory

**Luc Besson's full-service residential audio postproduction facility has adopted a low profile in France despite the grandeur of its scale and ambition. ZENON SCHOEPE takes a day trip to the continent.**

**I**N THE HEART of the Normandy countryside, a comfortable drive West of Paris, is France's biggest and most elaborate audio post complex. It is also squarely on the map of film facilities in Europe and the World.

Taking it all back a little bit, the man behind it all, film maker Luc Besson, had clearly identified the mechanics of the film creation process as part of his creative process and started his Digital Factory audio postproduction operation in 1998 in a 17th Century chateau in Normandy. Besson is known for films like Leon, Nikita, The Big Blue, The Fifth Element and Joan of Arc and for his experimentation and technical innovation, but then he is also a cinematographer, director, writer, editor, producer, second unit director and casting director so his appreciation of the business of making films is total.

He wanted a 'world-class' facility for his own projects that would also draw outside clients and his choice of setting has created an atmosphere that is as unusual as it is stimulating. The plot is enormous and integrates a variety of refurbished and purpose-built buildings spread out over typically period landscaping and connected with paths and walkways.

So much space and everything done so tastefully and well — even the bits that clients wouldn't see regularly, like the machine rooms and backrooms, are finished to a very high standard using very high quality materials and boasting a very high level of craftsmanship. Digital Factory now employs some ten technical staff plus a selection of admin and other staff

for the other aspects of the operation.

The first dubbing theatre was built in 1999 together with a five-bedroom hotel and a small inn to accommodate production teams. Even from the beginning, the desire to make sure clients were comfortable and content away from the technical facilities was a high priority. Today Digital Factory is the largest residential facility in Europe with three dubbing theatres, a scoring stage that can accommodate 40 musicians, and a Foley ADR stage. There are also ten audio edit suites and a screening room. The residential facilities have been expanded to include 40 bedrooms and suites, a restaurant, outdoor swimming pool, sauna, tennis courts and a fitness room. General manager Bruce Guerre-Berthelot says that all the clients have to do is work, everything else is taken care of for them.

However, the jewel in the crown — and it is some crown and some jewel — is the very recently opened Audi IV. They had decided that they needed a dubbing theatre and one that would stand out in France, Europe and the World. Acoustician Christian Malcurt, who had taken care of the design of the rest of the complex, discussed the plans with Besson and arrived at the theatre dimensions. The building that houses the auditorium was then designed and built around this space. The result is the largest dubbing theatre in Europe (and again one of the biggest in the World) with over 3000m<sup>3</sup>, a 16m screen, JBL 7.1 monitoring and Kinoton plus Christie Projectors.

'Luc really wanted the theatre to be the best in

the world with no compromise, including a unique interior design that would inspire, and technical facilities that would satisfy even the most demanding mixers,' says Bruce.

That said, nothing really prepares you for Audi IV. What hits you first, because of the way you enter the theatre, is the size, or rather the length, of the Euphonix console but you are immediately distracted by the sheer size of the room it is in.

Most people's impressions of average mixing theatres would include swathes of carpet, table tops behind the desk and a good space, in a good theatre, from the desk to the screen. With the anatomy described, the décor of most mixing theatres is unmemorable with hessian and its many modern derivatives and substitutes block covering the walls. Colours will be bland and neutral and it is true to say that most look best with the lights down.

Audi IV on the other hand will take your breath away. The décor is staggering with elaborate pillars and coverings working together with arches and the most wonderfully decorative ceiling. The feel is arty 1930s but there are shades of Paris music hall themes here and some of the taste ingredients of Besson's highly visual Fifth Element at work here too. I apologise if I'm gassing on a little too much but this room is positively huge and quite unlike anywhere that you've ever mixed a film in before. Malcurt apparently had his work cut out making good acoustic sense of the high level décor but it has to be said that he's succeeded in producing an extremely controlled and pleasant environment. It looks and sounds brilliant.

Bruce quickly points out that there is no reason why dubbing theatres can't have a vibe just like some recording studios do because the people who use them work long hard hours in them. Making Audi IV a place where clients like to be is sound business.

The two-operator Euphonix System 5-F is the largest in the world with 620 channels and 144 faders. The size of desk was dictated by the wish to mix direct and to get away from premixing traditions to yield a faster and more creative mix environment. Ergonomics

were a big consideration as was the fact that the system is modular.

'We looked very carefully into all the top film dubbing consoles systems available and eventually made the decision to go with a System 5-F,' says Bruce. 'We had received very positive reports of the System 5 from other Euphonix dubbing clients, the general consensus being that the system is very powerful operationally, is stable and reliable and is backed by a great after-sales support team, which is very important to us. We are also happy to be working with 44.1, the Euphonix distributor in France, they are very professional and provide us with a great deal of confidence in our choice of console. The System 5-F was also the only console to meet our demands in terms of size and delivery time.

'Another important factor is the evolution potential of the system including the ability of System 5 to directly control workstations through their EuCon protocol,' he continues. 'It is a well-conceived product which will be approved by the majority of our users — Euphonix has a growing market share in our profession both here in Europe and in Hollywood. We have already been approached by a number of engineers from the USA who are looking to do projects here partly as result of the System 5.'

One of the unusual qualities of the set up is sophisticated routing and switching of keyboards, mice and monitors to a variety of different positions in the auditorium. It means you can take control of workstations from the editor table behind the console on to the console itself. This adds a flexibility of operation for different stages of a mix.

Besson has gone down on record as saying: 'There was no other choice. Euphonix is the only manufacturer



that can provide the power we need this moment and I believe the System 5 is the way for the future.' Films already mixed in the theatre since its opening in September include Banlieue 13, Ze Film and WAH WAH.

So what you have is a massive dubbing theatre, in a massive and well-featured complex that is residential and different and that works to complement Digital Factory's picture editing operation in Paris. The investment is clearly massive.

There's also an element of mystery around Digital Factory that it is keen to maintain. It is one of the biggest builds in Europe, possibly the World, in recent times yet its creation has been very low

profile and lacking the usual fanfare that traditionally accompanies the opening of even one new room anywhere else. It makes Digital Factory intriguing and undoubtedly of interest to genuine clients who would be drawn to the place for its superb facilities and, it has to be said, the Besson connection. I've never seen anything like it. ■

#### Contact

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