

# The Walk (2015)

Rated PG. Running time: 2 hours 3 min.

Our content ratings (1-10); Violence 0; Language 2; Sex /Nudity 2.

Our star rating (1-5): 4

*Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.*

*1 Corinthians 16:13-14*

If you like caper films, such as the *Ocean* series or *The Bank Job*, you should love this Robert Zemeckis film featuring Joseph Gordon-Levitt as the French high-wire artist Philippe Petit. The planning and practice of Philippe and his accomplices are just as intense as those of any gang of robbers, but, unlike the latter, his intention is to give, not to take. He wants to offer to New York and the world what he calls “the most audacious work of art that has ever been done.” We might think this an egotistical boast—until we consider that the work of art, which he calls his “coup,” is the feat of walking on a cable stretched between the twin towers of the World Trade Center. His last name might translate as “small,” but his dream is HUGE.

We know that the dreamer made it, but the director, who with his co-writer Christopher Browne adapted Petit’s book *To Reach the Clouds*, adroitly keeps us on edge anyway as Petit and his cohorts run up against one obstacle after another, any one of which could have stopped them in their tracks. The latter even includes Petit running a spike through his foot while canvassing the roof of one of the towers a few days before the walk.

Petit narrates his own story from a perch on the Statute of

Liberty. Where else, we might ask, given that this affords us a fine view of the Twin Towers? (One of the delights of the film is the marvelous sets of the top of the towers and also the digital magic that places them on the skyline or towering over the actors!) In his narrative Petit takes us back to his boyhood fascination with the highwire, his leaving the home of his disapproving parents, and his earning a living as a juggler, mime and unicyclist. But he was not content to work on the street, in a circus or carnival. He wanted to do something bigger, so he rigs a wire between the towers of Notre Dame Cathedral and walks across. This risky venture brings him fame, and it also marks the beginning of his arrest record, such stunts being prohibited by law. Thus he becomes defiant of both gravity and the law.

In 1973 when he sees a magazine picture of the Trade Center towers being built in New York, he knows that he has found the ultimate stage for his art. (He is in a dentist's office at the time, which goes to show that you never know where a Muse will inspire you.) Earlier he had worked for Czech circus owner and high wire walker Rudy Omankowsky (Ben Kingsley), so he enlists him as teacher of the tricks of his profession, especially in regard to the correct way of rigging the wire. Reluctant at first, Rudy is won over, offering fatherly affect and support throughout the film.

Joining Petit is a singer he encounters on the street who quickly becomes his sweetheart Annie (Charlotte Le Bon). Other enlistees in Petit's "coup" project are Jean-Louis (Clement Sibony), a photographer; Jean-Francois (Cesar Domboy), a math teacher with a fear of heights; and some New York City adventurers. The latter include insurance broker Barry Greenhouse (Steve Valentine), who has an office in one of the World Trade Center towers, and the glib-tongued Jean-Pierre (James Badge Dale), seller of electronics.

Composer Alan Silvestri's score adds to the caper atmosphere as Petit goes over his complicated plan to get past the

security guards during the night in order to rig the cable across the gap between the towers. This involves his using disguises so that they can visit the tower tops and time the routines of the guards. They also in a field practice with the bow and arrow that will take a cord attached to a rope attached to the cable so they pull the latter across. How all this, with some unexpected obstacles, plays out makes for exciting viewing. The script plays a lot with Jean-Francois' fear of heights, as he is a key person atop one of the towers. The conspirators talk back and forth across their radio—J. P. had insisted it be a wired one because the police would have been able to listen in on one of the new wireless sets. (It is a humorous moment when the electronics store clerk cannot fathom why they insist on buying an outdated device.)

The last portion of the film is breath-taking in its beauty. After overcoming the obstacles that caused them to lose several hours of preparation, Petit is at last ready to step out over the void. At first there is a masking mist, but then it dissipates just as the sun is coming up, casting a warm glow on the proceedings. A quarter of a mile below Annie and the accomplices not on the towers wait, their faces looking up as the office bound workers pass by. When they spot heir leader, they quickly call to the passers-by to look up. Petit, carefully extending his long balancing pole, steps out, walking skillfully along the wire. His injured foot bleeds a bit, but does not hinder his progress.

When, in just a few short minutes he reached the other side I thought, "This is it? We have reached the climax so quickly?" However, the walk was far from over. Instead of stepping onto the turns, and heads back toward the other tower. Below the crowd of onlookers has grown, cheering for the seeming tiny figure overhead. Ahead of him two cops come to edge and demand that he come down off the wire. He comes close as one reaches out for him, and then turns and heads back. Eight times he makes the trip, with a second contingent of police on the other

tower urging him to come down. At one breath-taking moment, he kneels down and pays homage to the towers and to the great city. He even lies on his back in a death-defying gesture.

Dariusz Wolski's 3-d camera work is amazing, moving around and above Petit, the 3-D making us feel that we are there with him. This is not a film to wait and see at home—it must be seen on as large a screen as possible! Although not emphasized in the film, virtually every viewer will be thinking of 9/11, possibly from the moment that the towers are first shown, and certainly by the time that the WTC director gives to Petit a pass to go to the top of the towers any time he wants to. In this scene when Petit points out that there is an expiration date, the director crosses out the date and writes “forever.” Sadly “forever” lasted only from Aug. 7, 1974 to September 11, 2001.

Petit's feat could be characterized as that of a crazy man, and during one night as he hammers on the large wooden box containing the wire and tells the worried Annie that it is his coffin, his mind seems to have caved in to the intense pressure the caper confers on him. And yet, his mad stunt brought New Yorkers, many of whom were not pleased with the design of the twin towers, a new appreciation of the buildings. When he was arrested the cop who had tried to bring him in pays him the compliment of telling him he has real courage, words that reminded me of the words near the end of the apostle Paul's Corinthian letter. He not only walked courageously, but it was also done in love, as his kneeling on the wire in homage showed. In regard to craziness maybe Zorba the Greek was right when he told his shy friend Basil that he needed a touch of madness in order to cut the rope (that binds us) and join in the dance.

I missed the Oscar winning documentary *Man on a Wire*, so I am glad that Robert Zemeckis decided to make this dramatic version of the event. I think you will be too.

*This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the Nov. VP.*