

Pablo Rio gives Ace Image Factory a full house



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Media

Case study

Leading Belgian post house stays ahead with Quantel Rio.

Ace Image
Factory

Quantel Rio

Established 25 years ago, Ace Image Factory is one of Belgium's longest-established and leading film post production houses. Located just minutes from Brussels international airport in Zaventem, Ace shares an elegant, 100 year old converted tannery with Eyeworks, one of the country's foremost production companies.

Today Ace's founder, Stefan Rycken, is still the fulcrum of the company, providing not only the business direction, but also driving the creative side of the operation. A musician by training, as a student Rycken quickly found himself handling the video and audio recording and editing of concerts at his music college. From there it was short step to becoming a full-time freelance editor, while also holding down a full-time night shift job at Belgian pay-TV movie channel Filmmet creating trailers and commercials. "I often found myself working 24 hour days," Rycken recalls, "and I fairly soon thought to myself 'if you're going to work that hard, you might as well do it for yourself!' So with a partner, I founded Ace in Brussels in 1989."

Commercial decision

Befitting Rycken's musical background, much of Ace's early work was music concert-based and pop videos – the latter for big name acts such as Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark, Heaven 17 and top Belgian artist Axelle Red. In the 90s Ace moved very much into the commercials business after investing in a Quantel Henry and Editbox, and a Flame. "This was the 'golden age' of big budget TV commercials and we had the right equipment and talent to take full advantage of it," Rycken remembers.

Off to the movies

"In the late 90s we decided to make the move into feature film work, and bought a Spirit 2K scanner and Quantel Domino digital film system. We formed an alliance with other European post houses that owned Domino systems and together we worked on some major movies, including 'Enemy at the Gates', Peter Hyams' 'The Musketeer' and Laurence Malkin's 'Soul Assassin'." Ace followed up with the purchase of one of the first Quantel iQ systems in the 2000s, and this system quickly became the backbone of Ace's growing feature film business.

Ace's move into feature film post production was not just an evolutionary accident. "I could see the commercials business shrinking as ad spends reduced and more and more people were setting up with desktop systems," says Rycken. "Conversely, the move to digital in feature film post production demanded powerful systems – and still does with today's requirements for grading and finishing at 2K and 4K, and Stereo3D too of course. That's why nowadays feature film work and TV series make up around 80% of our business, with commercials accounting for the remaining 20% - basically a complete reversal over the last ten years."



At the controls
of Quantel Rio.

Ace's founder
Stefan Rycken.

Pablo – Ace workflow

Today Ace is home to a SAM Quantel Rio with Neo panel that sits in the main grading suite, a second Quantel Rio with the Nano panel and a Rio Assist station. "The Quantel Rios offer us fantastic grading possibilities alongside all of their built-in finishing tools. That makes Quantel Rio a really fantastic tool for us because it fits in our workflow as the center of the whole operation," says Rycken. Ace also houses Avid and FCP editors, After Effects graphics and 14 workstations that can all run Nuke, Maya and 3DS Max, depending on the requirements of each job. So what's the Ace 'secret sauce' – how has this company managed to survive and thrive for more than 20 years in an industry that is notorious for comings and goings? "We've always run Ace to the same principles," Rycken says. "We put the customer at the very heart of what we do – delivering a superb, personal service. We need to be very flexible to do that, and of course quality is paramount.

"That needs great equipment that's really reliable; we have the best of everything and we can easily switch jobs or parts of jobs between all the systems. But perhaps the most important thing is our professionalism – we're known for it and that makes me very proud. Clients like coming to Ace – because of its combination of great equipment and highly creative people dedicated to delivering the very best for our clients."

International co-production

"The international feature films we work on are mostly co-productions – English, French, Dutch – and recently Arab too on the movie 'Horses of God', says Rycken. "There's always a Belgian company as one of the co-producers thanks to the country's film-friendly tax arrangements. This is great for Ace because we can offer them world-class post facilities and talent on the spot – ready to help them finish their movies at the very highest quality and creativity."

Today all media comes in as digital. "Alexa is the most popular format for 2D shoots, while for Stereo3D RED Epics hold sway, because they are smaller cameras and so easier to accommodate on S3D rigs," Rycken says. "Alexa has a more 'filmic' look, but for effects work I would tend to choose RED shot footage because it is better for keying. Our Quantel Rios handle all the digital formats with ease – and we know that the quality will be maintained throughout."

End-to-end production

Ace likes to bring its expertise to bear way before footage arrives at the facility for finishing. "If we get involved early on – even at the pre-shoot planning stage – we can help our clients get a much better result, faster and more economically," says Stefan. "Often we will produce a 3D animatic so that, for instance, all the camera positions and angles can be worked out and agreed before the shoot takes place – this can save an awful lot of time and money on set, and dramatically reduce the amount of footage that is shot and has to be worked through."

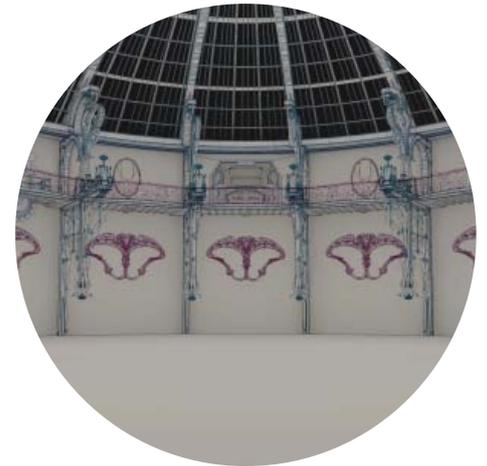
A typical example of this workflow is a 30 second commercial for Belgian energy supplier Luminus that Ace helped produce. "We created the complete commercial as a 3D animatic prior to the shoot, which the client signed off," Rycken explains. The 3D pre-vis also helps with establishing precisely which elements are best shot as live action and which as CGI. "We then went on-set for the shoot, supervising the VFX and actually testing the composites as we went along. It worked brilliantly; it helps people to understand what you need and want, eliminating guesswork and uncertainty so that things go smoothly on the shoot, keeping it on time and in budget with no unwelcome surprises. Budgets are fixed nowadays, so the better you're prepared, the less costly mistakes you make," Rycken adds. "Our 3D pre-vis workflow has other benefits too; the offline becomes much simpler and with Quantel Rio as the centerpiece of the post production workflow, the 3D elements can be dropped into the Quantel Rio timeline as layers and then any adjustments made, followed by color correction on a layer by layer basis if required and deliverables production."

Bringing post on set

"In future we're going to take the workflow one stage further by having the SAM Rio Assist on-set with us so we can take the settings right home from the shoot and transfer them straight into Quantel Rio. In fact we are now working on a follow-up commercial for Luminus which will use this workflow. And it's not just beneficial for commercials – it's equally effective on feature film work where there is a significant VFX requirement.

"Having Rio Assist on-set will become our normal way of working – because you can composite in it, check rushes, make LUTs, do trial grades – it helps pick up any problems early and provides a smooth workflow back to the facility for post production," Rycken adds.

Ace recently produced and posted a 30 second commercial for Belgian energy supplier Luminus, using its 3D animatic technique to carefully map out all the shots. The end result combines CGI and live action on Quantel Rio and closely matches the pre-vis.





Stereo3D

Ace's expertise extends into S3D, with a number of successful projects under its belt. The most recent of these is a spectacular 85 minute wildlife feature '3D African Adventure', for which Ace shared the post production with another Brussels facility, NWave. The footage was shot on a variety of cameras, including Alexa, RED, P2 and GoPro. NWave did the data wrangling, prepped all the S3D on their own Rio Assist and did the edit. The Quantel Rio archive (ie the recipe) was then sent over to Ace who did the conform, followed by the stereo color correction on the Quantel Rio. The film had its debut at the Berlinale in 2013, with international release following. Ace is also a beta test site for SAM's new SynthIA S3D high quality Interaxial Adjustment system. "It produces really nice results, making painful and even previously unusable shots watchable."

"I think Stereo3D will be much more for feature documentaries and events in the future – not for TV in any big way in the near-term," adds Rycken. "It will also continue to be an important movie genre unless someone makes a really bad S3D blockbuster – that might kill it almost overnight! Seriously, S3D's here to stay but it won't be taking over all our screens any time soon."

“ Ace on SAM

SAM has always given us very good service, and that's vital to us – our SAM systems work all the time and any problems can always be solved with the minimum delay," says Rycken. "SAM is genuinely responsive and that's really important to us. We always try to be a beta-test site for new SAM software versions. On a visit to SAM's Newbury, UK headquarters last summer, one of our colorists suggested some new features for Quantel Rio and three weeks later at IBC – there they were! It's nice to know we're listened to. We use our SAM systems all day, every day and we know what people want. SAM listens to its clients.

Quantel Rio offers us superb grading possibilities alongside all of its built-in finishing tools. That makes it a really fantastic tool for us because it fits in our workflow as the center of the whole operation. Quantel Rio running the new V2 software offers fantastic realtime performance – we can handle more layers at the same speed and of course can go up to 4K still maintaining great interactivity."



What's next for Ace? "We're just about to start a big movie on Marvin Gaye, who lived in Ostend in Belgium for a year near the end of his life in the early 1980s," Rycken says. "We'll be taking Rio Assist to the shoot in Ostend as part of the 3D pre-vis to post workflow that is being used." The film makes extensive use of SFX, and Ace have created many of the scenes as 3D pre-vis. "This has helped to make a breakdown of exactly how the movie will be shot – what will be digital and what's to be live action." Work is also underway (March 2013) on two Flemish movies 'Het Vonnis' ('The Judgment'), directed by Jan Verheyen and "De Behandeling" (The Treatment), directed by Hans Herbots.

Another big French SFX movie is booked in for the summer and also two new Flemish TV series. There's no shortage of work for Ace!

Fast forward

Where does Ace see itself in five years? "We'll be an important VFX house. Motion capture makes good animation much easier and more realistic – and far more controllable than live action too! Newer technologies such as scanning to recreate forms in 3D are also advancing rapidly. Every effect is different though and needs an individual approach. I'm sure we'll also have SAM systems at the heart of our workflow; SAM knows what post needs and continues to come up with great systems that sit at the very heart of the post production workflow."

Case study

At a glance

- Established 25 years ago, Ace Image Factory is one of Belgium's longest-established and leading film post production houses.
 - A long-term SAM user, Ace's hard-working Pablo and Rio Assist have recently been joined by SAM's next-generation Quantel Rio.
 - As well as high profile 2D films and TV programs, Ace also specializes in S3D movies – recently completing a spectacular 85 minute wildlife feature '3D African Adventure'.
- Aces uses 3D previs extensively - "things go smoothly on the shoot, keeping it on time and in budget with no unwelcome surprises."
 - "Quantel Rio running the new V2 software offers fantastic realtime performance – we can handle more layers at the same speed and of course can go up to 4K still maintaining great interactivity."



3D analytics from, '3D African Adventure'

