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INTERVIEW: MICHEL DURAN

Career's 'quirky moments' lead to a starring role

By Dina Medland

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Michel Duran's career is testimony to the value of creativity, determination and an open mind when working out how best to finance a chosen way of life.

He has worked in fitness, as an auditor with KPMG, as a product and business manager in sport and biomedical equipment – and for the past decade as an actor, director and film-maker at CMHL Enterprises, the film production company he founded.

But his twisting path towards finding the best career for himself could not have been navigated without support and partnership. “I have a wife who works – this is the real way I can do it,” he says, when pressed on the financing and making of films.

One of three boys, he was born in France's football-mad city of Saint-Étienne. Mr Duran's mother was a PE teacher, and he grew up with sport all around him. At 14 he wanted to play football professionally, but the parental push towards education and university prevailed. He compromised – he gave up soccer and concentrated on pole vaulting, later becoming the French national pole vault champion three times in the Team Espoir FFA category – a record.

After completing his end-of-school baccalaureate, with an emphasis on mathematics and physics, he studied for an MSc in exercise physiology at university in Saint-Étienne. His education continued with an MBA in industrial marketing at business school in Lyon. “A friend told me to do the MBA because I would get a job straight away and he was right,” says Mr Duran.

He worked for a company developing treadmills, becoming “the link between research and industrial development” and working with American football players in Phoenix, Arizona, to measure their power using the equipment.

He had reached his late 20s, and had “a crazy idea” – to organise sports expeditions around the world, built upon promoting businesses. The plan was to sail from France to Nepal to experience climbing, then tour Australia on mountain bikes, followed by more

climbing in Colorado in the US, and ending up in Alaska for an international pentathlon. “It was a huge project so I decided to give it a year. I quit my job and set up a not-for-profit organisation, tried to get scientists to organise research, and joined a programme for entrepreneurs. It took me a year to realise it was too big a plan,” he says.

Needing a job, a contact told him the French mountaineering federation was looking for a coach. He applied and for two years was coach and trainer for the French national back-country ski team.

“It’s not the type of thing you want to do for ever. We had a small child by this stage,” Mr Duran says. So aged almost 30, he became product manager for Taraflex, a sports flooring company.

But he soon felt the need for another change, and chose to move to Canada, where he had distant family.

“We left France in 1997 with two kids, aged three and five years, and no job,” he says. Was that a brave decision? “I’m not sure if it was bravery or something else,” he admits.

Settling in Vancouver, Mr Duran held a variety of jobs, including being an apprentice to a cabinet-maker, that led him to embark on a PhD in marketing for the wood industry, which the company funded. But again, it didn’t last. “It wasn’t the right path – I was thinking and moving very fast and not always making the right decisions,” he says.

Meeting a KPMG employee, he was persuaded to enter a fast-track training program and he became an auditor after six months. “It was very intense. My brain was racing at the end of the day – and it was all in English,” he says.

A year later, he decided he did not want to become a fully qualified chartered accountant and instead set up a company helping to create business plans for small organisations. “The first company I worked for was the cabinet maker and I ended up on the board of directors,” he says.

His introduction to film-making came shortly after, when he met a photographer at his children’s school. “The more I learnt, the more I wanted to do it. I spent months researching, reading as much as I could, and meeting people,” says Mr Duran. “I came to it completely from a business background. Everyone wanted to be an artist, nobody knew the business side,” he says. To broaden his skills, he attended theatre school, paying his way by working as a handyman, carrying out repairs and building sets. He also took up acting.

Today, as director of CMHL Enterprises – his wife is a silent partner – he directs films and acts in some, too. His first professional part was playing a knife fighter in a public service announcement; but in his company’s first feature film, *Soufflé au Chocolat*, directed by Fred Goldstein in 2010, he took the lead role.

Failing to find a distributor for it at the Cannes film festival last year, he tried promoting

the film with a chocolate tasting in Vancouver. “We were just about to abandon it when we got a call from the Sonoma International Film Festival saying they were interested in screening it,” says Mr Duran.

This year, Soufflé au Chocolat was nominated for five Leo Awards in British Columbia’s annual recognition of the film industry. “We didn’t win anything but were really happy to be part of the whole thing and to be in competition with established professionals,” says Mr Duran.

The British Columbia Film Commission describes the film on its website: “This modern character-driven story about love, sex and relationships explores those quirky unforgettable moments in life when you decide to throw caution to the wind.” It might seem as though Mr Duran’s career has been littered with such quirky moments. But conversation with him brings out his adept mix of pragmatism and excellent networking.

His wife, Helène, had trained as a cytogeneticist – working with chromosomes – before their move to Canada. She could not work in that capacity when they arrived in Vancouver and spent two years working as a technician, for which she was overqualified.

Gradually, she made her mark and is now director of a laboratory there. As partners in CMHL Enterprises, they are looking at their next big project – a sports story set in Saint-Étienne in the 1970s, with Mr Duran as scriptwriter. “It was when the football team became the best in Europe. The film is about parents pushing their kids away from soccer – you could say it’s a bit autobiographical,” he says.

Secret CV

Who were your mentors?

My professor in the sports physiology lab – a great communicator and open to ideas. Also, my official mentor for the MBA in marketing; and the cinematographer in Vancouver who introduced me to the movie industry.

Your first big break ?

Making the decision to move to Canada.

What else might you have done?

I had a real opportunity to become a professional athlete – I reached national level for pole vaulting.

Best career advice to others?

Find your way – take the time and be persistent.