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**Van den Abbeele Stocks Watts RENTAL with Matthews Grip Gear**

Gaffer Tom Van den Abbeele (*Déjà Vu - Alles is Voorbestemd*, *Renaissances*, *L’Opéra*)is based in Belgium where he doubles as owner of Watts RENTAL. Twenty-five years of experience in the film, television and commercial industry has given Van den Abbeele a gaffer-first, problem-solving approach to stocking and running Watts. Over the years, as his company grew from a single truck to a warehouse and fleet of 14, he has embraced technology to help build a customer base of lighting professionals who trust Watts will prepare them for anything on set. When it comes to saving the day, nothing beats his two favorites from Matthews Studio Equipment: the stalwart MAX Menace Arm and Air Climber

In 2002, Van den Abbeele purchased his first truck, thinking it would just act as a personal kit. By 2007, Van den Abbeele and his gear were in such demand, he decided to buy a second truck. From then on, it was off to the races, and he was adding another 1-2 trucks each year.

His introduction to Matthews came via the C-Stand. Van den Abbeele says, “In Europe Matthews is not the main grip company used. However, when I first got ahold of some Matthews C-Stands I realized they're much more convenient than other stands; you can even open them up with one arm.” He adopted the C-Stand, eventually amassing a stock of over 500. “After that Matthews started sending us their catalog. I started futzing around in the catalog and that’s when I saw the Mini MAX Menace. I fell in love with it immediately.” Its small footprint, easy maneuverability, and ability to boom an arm at a perpendicular angle was the perfect answer to current lighting trends. “That was back in the days when we still used a lot of Kino Flo, Tungsten Lanterns usually rigged above a desk or as a top/backlight. The Mini MAX worked really well for that.” Watts began equipping a Mini MAX on each of its trucks and vans.

One of the first TV shows Van den Abbeele used the MAX Menace on was a Flemish police procedural, *Salamander*. He describes, “I was working with DoP Lou Berghmans, SBC. He always wants a big punch of soft light coming from one way. He likes to be able to adjust his main Key light fast in order to capture huge Dolly tracking shots.” The MAX Menace, able to be adjusted and moved unobtrusively by a single crew person, was like the answer to a prayer. A big part of the show took place in an historic European town, filled with sensitive locations where the MAX’s ability to boom a light in without additional rigging frequently made the day. “From then on, every show I did with Berghmans we brought two MAX Menaces with us.”

During one scene in a hotel room, Director David Horegue came up with a complicated shot using a Dolly Track with a Jib Arm and Ronin 2 attached. “We would follow our main actress from the moment she closes the hotel room door to the bed, where she has a semi-panic attack before relaxing herself by putting on headphones and we end up in a top shot. Basically, we saw the whole room.” Since rigging to the ceiling was out, the MAX Menace Arm was the only way to place and maneuver the Aladdin Fabric Lite 350 that acted as the key. “We made a 6m boom and stood the MAX against the wall to keep it out of shot.”

Later on the in the show, a huge rainstorm prevented the pre-rig for a house set. The rain the dirt road leading to location partially inaccessible and it was impossible to get a cherry picker in for the 12KW Maxi Brute needed to create “sunlight.” Abbeele had to think fast. “I convinced the DP to give us 20 minutes. We brought the MAX Menace Arm to the second floor. We cleared a bedroom and attached the light to the Arm and boomed it down a floor. All this in less than 20 minutes with a crew of three.” For the gaffer, having a pinch hitter like the MAX Menace was a no brainer.

Watts’ relationship with Matthews Studio Equipment further developed at one fateful BSC Expo, when Van den Abbeele laid eyes on a “game changing” piece of equipment: the Air Climber. Easily transported in a standard grip truck, the pneumatic powered Air Climber enables lighting in hard-to-reach locations like rooftops, penthouses, and courtyards with narrow access points. “It's super easy to explain why you need it: if the light needs to be placed higher than six meters, there's only one stand that reaches as high as 7.5 meters, and that's an Air Climber,” explains the gaffer. Van den Abbeele worked with Matthews CEO, Tyler Philips, to acquire MSE's tallest stand.

He was quick to put the Air Climber to use when he was hired to gaff a very special project for his home nation: a televised interview with the Belgium Queen Mathilde celebrating her 50th birthday. The first time the Belgium Royal Palace was ever opened to a film crew, there were serious restrictions on the film crew’s footprint.

“We only got the Queen for half an hour,” explained Van den Abbeele, “and we needed to do two moves in that time.” He decided to take advantage of the building’s large windows, placing two FilmGear® Power Beam Tungsten 12kW lights on Air Climbers in the front yard of the Royal Palace. A cherry picker or scissor lift would have been out of the question. “We carried the Air Climbers up four stairs and then down another four stairs to position them. There was another door closer to the front gate we wanted to use, but apparently only the king is permitted to open it,” he describes. “It was the only way to light the scene.” Each Air Climber was equipped with a Litemover universal remote head, allowing the fixtures to be easily adjusted by a lighting technician at ground level.

Van den Abbeele’s personal experience searching for the best solutions on set forms the foundation of Watts’ RENTAL business principles. “We have a different philosophy from a typical rental house which may not invest in new or uncommon equipment that is not guaranteed to make money. However, we choose to invest in gear like the Air Climber and the Menace Arm because we want to have the equipment that ever so often, you *really* need.” That might be why when Middle MAX Menace entered the scene, Van den Abbeele was one of the earliest adopters.

Van den Abbeele’s ongoing on set work has shaped his approach to serving the lighting community. He says, “The industry is changing so rapidly the last 8 to 10 years. By working on set, it’s handy to have a good idea of what is currently working and what is not. The most important thing is to support gaffers in a way that that nobody else does. That means buying stuff that nobody else is buying yet.” From C-Stands and the MAX Menace to the Air Climber, and whatever comes next, Watts will be at the forefront in the Belgium film rental community.