

The Storyteller

THOMAS WOHLMUT,
DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKER
AND MEDIA PRODUCER

The intersection of art and technology is where Tom Wohlmut has always found his passion. It's perhaps no surprise, then, that his feature film debut centers on a 19th-century Bay Area marvel of creative and technical innovation.

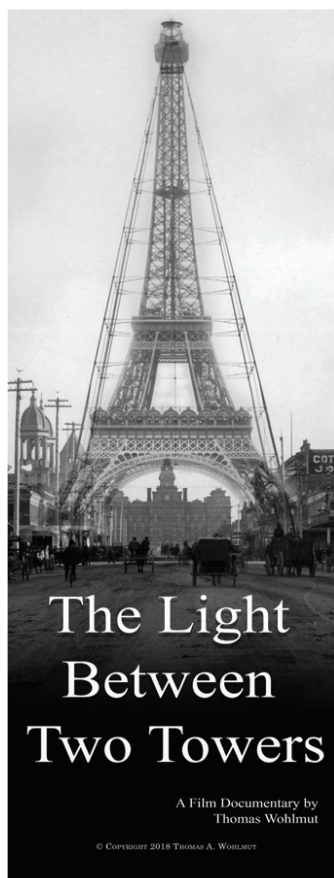
"My work doesn't really feel like work; it feels like an outlet for my energies and inspirations," says the San Jose resident, a producer, writer, and director whose latest effort is *The Light Between Two Towers*, about the gigantic 237-foot San Jose Electric Light Tower. Unveiled in 1881, the tower apparently helped inspire France's iconic Eiffel Tower, built eight years later—a connection Wohlmut's film is the first to reveal in research-rich detail.

A history buff with a naturally curious nature, Wohlmut first became interested in the San Jose tower, which collapsed in 1915 after sustaining damage from a windstorm earlier that year, following his move to the city nearly a decade ago. "There was a rumor that the idea for the light tower was stolen by the designer of the Eiffel Tower," he recalls. "At first I thought that was ridiculous, but part of me thought, well, what if...?"

Archival information he found at the de Saisset Museum at Santa Clara University—named for an influential French pioneer family who settled in San Jose—was tantalizing enough that Wohlmut traveled to France, where he uncovered clear links between Eiffel Tower designer Maurice Koechlin and the city and people of San Jose that had been lost over time. "There was a closer and closer relationship between these two towers," Wohlmut marvels. "In my work, I'm used to telling stories that people ask me to tell, or documenting something that happened in the past. This was a chance not only to tell the story, but to help discover it, to do original research that no one else has done." (For the full, fas-



PHOTO: JACK HUTCHESON



cinating account, of course, you'll have to watch the film!)

It seems fitting that this labor of love brought Wohlmut back to Europe, as he spent the years between ages 9 and 18 living with his family in Copenhagen, Paris, and Rome. He moved to Southern California in the early 1970s to attend UCLA, where he got his degree in Motion Picture/Television and also worked as a production assistant at CBS Television City on hit shows such as *All in the Family* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*.

Wohlmut fell in love with "the stagecraft of putting a production together," and in 1978 started the full-service media production company WMS media, Inc., which still operates today. Since filming his documentary, he also has co-founded The San Jose Light Tower Corporation, a non-profit seeking to design and construct an artistically inspired and iconic structure in downtown San Jose reminiscent (in spirit if not in appearance) of the Electric Light Tower. Donors to this ambitious effort so far include the Knight Foundation and two well-known Bay Area real-estate investors and philanthropists, Linda Lester and John M. Sobrato, among many others.

The Light Between Two Towers had its local premiere in late February, and Wohlmut hopes it's the first of many showings. "I see this as a legacy I can give to the city," he says. As for what may come next, he says he'll try to take a breather after spending years digging up this compelling tale. But probably not a long one. "I'm always full of ideas and I love the creative process," he acknowledges, "so I'm sure I'll find something else to sink my teeth into." —ROBIN HINDERY