



Azur & Asmar

THE PRINCES' QUEST

www.theprincesquest.com

A FILM BY MICHEL OCELOT

95 minutes | France-Belgium-Spain | 2006

Directors Fortnight, Cannes Film Festival 2006

Cert: U

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Synopsis

From acclaimed director Michel Ocelot (*Kirikou and the Sorceress*) comes a wondrous new animation for the whole family to enjoy.

Once upon a time there were two children brought up by the same woman. Azur, the son of a nobleman, and Asmar, the son of the nanny who tells them many enchanting stories. Their favourite is about the Djinn fairy waiting to be rescued by a heroic prince.

One dark day fate cruelly separates them. Some years later Azur sets out to rescue the fairy only to be reunited with Asmar. And so begins the Princes' Quest – a fantastic adventure across magical, mythical lands and seas.

Interview with Michel Ocelot

How did you start the project for Azur & Asmar: the Princes' Quest

Michel Ocelot: First of all, there was the conception: finding a subject and writing about it. Once that's done, things go very fast. For *Azur & Asmar*, once I'd come up with relations between France and North Africa, I thought about foster brothers, with very clearcut positions – one rich, one poor – then I imagined them swapping roles over the course of the story. I wrote the first draft of the screenplay in two weeks. Then, I had to concentrate on the huge task of researching and drawing it. There were about a hundred clearly visible characters and two hundred extras to be created. I draw the main animation models, i.e. each character from the front, three-quarters front profile, in profile, three-quarters back profile, from the back, plus a few key expressions and attitudes. I have help with the secondary characters. We strive to be historically and geographically accurate. That doesn't mean you can't take liberties, especially as there are no images of North Africa between antiquity and the 16th century due to religious bans. I prepare the whole film in the form of a comic strip or storyboard, which backgrounds out everything that will occur on the screen. That takes me a year. As early as possible, I invite my co-workers to help background out the animation. The 1,300 shots in the film are each defined in a file in which we also keep the framing of the shot, the characters' principal positions in the shot, the sketches of the background, dialogue indications, and camera movements. This work, carried out with a reduced crew, took two years. Then came the creation of the background, then the actual animation, which took a year and a half. And we end with a few months of post-production.

Did you like the Tales of the Thousand and One Nights when you were a child?

Michel Ocelot: I only vaguely knew it. I had a children's book based on Aladdin and His Magic Lamp. It was only later that I read the whole of the first and best-known translation of this monument of literature, by Antoine Galland. It was stunningly successful in France under Louis XIV, and its success then spread all over the world thanks to this French adaptation, the refined style of which – it was written to please the court of Versailles – did not convey the liveliness of the original, but it had its own charm. Its global popularity spread to the Arab world which had never shown much interest in this collection of popular stories and they started to write original versions subsequent to Galland's publication. I then read the modern translation by Roger Khawam which was closer to the original. I was enchanted by both versions.

Are you inspired by other fairy tales when you bring in characters such as the Djinn Fairy, the Scarlet Lion or the giant bird, which reminded me of the roc bird in the Voyages of Sinbad?

Michel Ocelot: *Azur & Asmar* is not based on anyone tale. I invented the Djinn Fairy as well as the Scarlet Lion with blue claws. For the djinns, the inventive part for me is to represent them precisely, although they are not shown in traditional images. The Saimourh is a mythical bird from Persian tales. He can have other names, such as roc bird, as you said. The theme of the huge bird which can carry people as well as eat them, is a recurring theme in tales. The one we show comes directly from Persian miniatures. It was

developed by Anne-Lise Koehler, the great artist who directed the background making process. The other person who has been there from the start, helping me with the characters and the layouts, is Eric Serre. He became my assistant director and was a joy to work with. Those two exceptional people already had a decisive role in the success of *Kirikou & the Sorceress*.

Did you decide from the start not to subtitle the passages of the film in Arabic to put the audience in the same position as your hero?

Michel Ocelot: Right from the background, I considered the obstacle of languages, because I wanted to show the condition of the immigrant for whom the language barrier is a major difficulty. So, in certain passages, I do not try to make people understand so that they feel a little lost. But most of the time, I alternate between the two languages in the dialogues, and a reply provides unequivocal information about the question. I also find this absence of subtitles rather elegant... It is also a gift I am giving to children, the possibility of hearing several languages. I think it is an appealing event in sound.

How did you collect all the information on North Africa's architecture, plants, and culture which you used to create most of the film's background?

Michel Ocelot: Books, books, and more books! I enjoy it. It's a real pleasure for me to immerse myself in fine art books, even if I don't need to do it for professional reasons. But the Internet is now another precious source of information.

Were you also inspired by certain monuments to create the backgrounds?

Michel Ocelot: Yes, I make use of the great mosques in Istanbul for the finale. Their architecture is actually inspired by Sainte-Sophie, a Christian place of worship. Everything is connected, and that fits the message of the film. You will also recognize monuments from Andalusia, various North African countries, and the whole southern Mediterranean coast. I wanted people to realize that the backgrounds came from real life. I wanted to say to people: These wonderful places exist – go and see them!

So, did you go and see them for yourself?

Michel Ocelot: I've never been to Andalusia unfortunately! But I deliberately visited Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria before I developed the story.

Did you go there with sketchbook in hand?

Michel Ocelot: Yes, and above all, a camera! And I found ideas there, sometimes by making mistakes. For example, I took photos of prickly pear trees from every angle as I thought they looked magnificent and that they'd make perfect backdrops. But I later discovered that they come from America and had not been

introduced to the Old World in the Middle Ages! So, regretfully I had to remove all the prickly pear trees I had imagined in the backgrounds! I also studied the costumes of the whole Middle East.

So, how did you find picture sources since this region has upheld the traditional ban on portraying God's creatures?

Michel Ocelot: It's true that there is no material in North Africa and Andalusia apart from a few exceptions that you count on the fingers of one hand. You can see sultans wearing the familiar traditional costumes, burnous and turban.

How did you come to work with Gabriel Yared? How did you choose the passages in which you felt that music was necessary?

Michel Ocelot: I immediately thought of Gabriel Yared, a great film musician, and a great musician period. He had the ideal background since he belongs to both sides of the Mediterranean, France and the Lebanon. I asked him to write the music, he accepted at once, because I think he identified with the story. Besides the musical talent I already knew he had, I discovered a man of quality with whom it is a privilege to work. I had chosen the scenes for which I felt music was necessary, and he agreed. He added a few passages which came naturally to him. When Gabriel's music was played over the top of my film, it was like a miracle: everything matched up, adding a force it had not had before that. For example, the Scarlet Lion scene at the start was only an episode on the heroes' journey, but the music brings out a value and dignity which deeply touch me

Do you think that these well-made tales can be told to both adult viewers by appealing to their sense of wonder and children to whom you talk about the important things in life?

Michel Ocelot: You know the answer before you ask the question! People have often asked me how I make children's films. My secret is that I never make children's films, because children are not interested in films designed purely for them! Children need to learn about the world and discover new things. They don't need to stay in familiar territory or understand everything instantly. My films are made for the whole family, and I'm delighted to bring everyone together. There are things, which I do not say crudely, because there are children in the audience, but I still say everything. I cannot make a film which wouldn't interest me today. I'm the first viewer of my work, both as an adult and a child, because I have all ages inside me!

Did you consider CGI animation right away for this project?

Michel Ocelot: 3D animation was just one of the various techniques I'd considered. I could see the innocent Child in innocent cut - out paper - or its digital version. But as for the rest? People urged me to cross the Rubicon: If you use 3D, go all the way! I ended up thinking that it was a good idea, on the one

hand, to try something I'd never done before, to have different tools and images, and on the other hand, to learn a technique which speeds up the animation process. I'm extremely pleased with this choice (even if the speeding-up of the production process is debatable...)

You often show plants with a geometrical structure in profile. Do you like this layout which is reminiscent of botanical drawings?

Michel Ocelot: We strive to be simple and precise. We choose the most evocative point of view, whether we are dealing with flowers or people. If I want to show someone fencing, I show him in profile as it looks good and is immediately understandable. When he is seen from the front, his arm and foil disappear. Clarity and a certain precision are part of the pleasure. We freely stylize the flowers, but botanists and people who have ever had a nap in the grass will recognize them.

Interview with Anne-Lise Koehler

Head of background design

When you first read the screenplay of Azur & Asmar, did it immediately conjure up images in your head?

Anne-Lise Koehler: Yes. What I most liked was the power of the screenplay and the ideas in the film. I was particularly delighted as I spent part of my childhood in Morocco. I have vivid memories of those days, in addition to the things my parents and grandparents have told me. By working on this film, I realized how much I owe to North African culture which has helped to shape my taste and interests. I am also very interested in the 15th century. During this period of Western art history, artists distanced themselves from religion. They began to observe the world around them with interest and to portray it. The discovery of this screenplay was a joy in every way.

What changes did you make to the look of the mythical bird, the Saimourh?

Anne-Lise Koehler: I made its outline slender so that its flight would look more spectacular. I accentuated the contrast between the head and the body. I liked the idea of a marvelous bird with a disturbing head. I made its feathers and wings longer. The Saimourh has the head of a serpent-eater, the neck and train of a peacock, the wings of a swallow, and the legs of a sparrowhawk. I drew my dream bird!

You are also an animal sculptor...

Anne-Lise Koehler: Yes. There are certain similarities between sculpture and animated movies. Take the example of a bird: when you animate it, you draw all the attitudes which make up its movements, then you show them in the right order to create the illusion of movement. To make a sculpture, you portray a bird which is frozen in a particular attitude, but which you can move around. Your view of the sculpture enables

you to imagine and 'feel' the movement. You see the bird moving. With sculpture, you move in space and you imagine time whereas with animation, you move in time and you imagine the space!

What are the main backgrounds you worked on?

Anne-Lise Koehler: First of all, I painted the nurse's house and the inside of Azur's mansion in France, to define the image of the French part. I also prepared the background of the palm grove in North Africa, then I sketched the film's principal color moods. During the background coloring stage, I divided the work up between us all, taking into account everyone's particular desires and talents.

Can you explain the process of creating a background from A to Z?

Anne-Lise Koehler: Each background is a special case. Sometimes I finalized backgrounds which had been sketched by other artists, or I only did a rough draft. Some were revised several times and by several people, with each stage bringing useful improvements. As a general rule, the backgrounds are line drawings to start with, then they are scanned. Then, the colors are added using a graphics palette.

Michel Ocelot

Biography

Michel Ocelot was born on the French Riviera and spent his childhood in Guinea and his adolescence in the Anjou region of France. After studying art, he learned about animated films by directing short films during his vacations with a group of friends who each used different techniques (cartoons, puppets, etc.). Michel Ocelot also enjoyed animating paper cut-out characters. He kept a taste for varied creations and pared-down techniques. He directed the animated series, *Les Aventures de Gédéon* (1976, based on Benjamin Rabier's work), then used characters and backgrounds made with lacy paper in his first professional short film, *Les Trois Inventeurs* (1979). This highly original film was rewarded with a BAFTA in London. Since this film, Michel Ocelot has written the screenplays and done the artwork of all his creations. After this, came the following short films: *Les Filles de l'égalité* (1981) which won the Special Jury Prize at the Albi Festival, *Beyond Oil* (1982) and *La Légende du Pauvre Bossu* (1982 – César for Best Animated Film). Michel Ocelot returned to the TV series format with *La Princesse Insensible* (1986) comprising 13 x 4-minute episodes, and directed the short film *Les Quatre Voeux* (1987). His third series, *Ciné Si*, (1989 – 8 x 12-minute episodes) was animated with the shadow theater technique: carefully cut-out black paper silhouettes. Several of these sequences later appeared in *Princes & Princesses* (2000).

He wrote the 26-minute film, *Les Contes de la nuit* (1992), made up of three sequences, then embarked upon the adventure of his first feature film. In 1998, the general public became aware of Michel Ocelot, thanks to the huge box-office and critical success of *Kirikou and the Sorceress*. The film's popularity was so great that it led Michel Ocelot to relate more of his little hero's adventures in *Kirikou and the Wild Beasts* (2005) which he co-directed with Bénédicte Galup.

Azur & Asmar, minutely prepared from 2001 on, is a project full of new experiences: Michel Ocelot worked with a live-action producer (Christophe Rossignon, of Nord Ouest), chose to combine 3D and 2D, and brought together his production and animation team in Paris, the town where he lives. Unlike most other French animation productions, *Azur & Asmar* was made entirely in Paris.

Michel Ocelot was also President of the ASIFA (International Animated Film Association) from 1994 to 2000.

Michel Ocelot

Screenwriter, Director, Animator, and Graphic Designer.

Selected Filmography

2006 AZUR & ASMAR

Production: Nord Ovest Production, MacGuff Ligne.

90 mins.

2005 KIRIKOU & THE WILD BEASTS

Production: Les Armateurs, Gebeka Films, France 3 cinéma, and Studio O.

75 mins.

2000 PRINCES & PRINCESSES

Production: La Fabrique, Les Armateurs.

70 mins..

Awards Include:

Cinema Prize of the SACD (Société des Auteurs Compositeurs Dramatiques), (France).

Children's and Adults' Jury Prizes, Chicago Festival (USA).

Special Jury Prize, OCIC, Mar Del Plata Festival (Argentina).

1998 KIRIKOU & THE SORCERESS

Production: Les Armateurs.

71 mins.

23 international awards including:

Grand Prix, Annecy Animation Film Festival (France).

British Animation Award for Best Feature Film, London (UK).

Children's and Adults' Jury Prizes, Chicago Festival (USA).

Gabriel Yared

Music Composer

Oscar, Golden Globe and César Winner Selected

Filmography

2006 BREAKING AND ENTERING by Anthony Minghella

AZUR & ASMAR by Michel Ocelot

2005 L'AVION by Cédric Kahn

2003 COLD MOUNTAIN by Anthony Minghella

SYLVIA by Christine Jeffs

SHALL WE DANCE ? by Peter Chelsom

2002 BON VOYAGE by Jean-Paul Rappeneau

2001 POSSESSION by Neil LaBute

THE IDOL by Samantha Lang

1999 THE TALENTED MR. RIPLEY by Anthony Minghella

1996 THE ENGLISH PATIENT by Anthony Minghella

1991 THE LOVER by Jean-Jacques Annaud

1988 CLEAN AND SOBER by Glenn Gordon Caron

1987 BEYOND THERAPY by Robert Altman

AGENT TROUBLE by Jean-Pierre Mocky

1986 DÉSDORDRE by Olivier Assayas

1985 ADIEU BONAPARTE by Youssef Chahine

BETTY BLUE by Jean-Jacques Beineix

1983 HANNA K. by Costa-Gavras

THE MOON IN THE GUTTER by Jean-Jacques Beineix

1979 SAUVE QUI PEUT (LA VIE) by Jean-Luc Godard

Credits

A FILM BY MICHEL OCELOT

Story, dialogue, storyboards, characters, drawings, direction

Produced by CHRISTOPHE ROSSIGNON

With the voices of

AZUR

ASMAR

JENANE

CRAPOUX

AZUR AS A CHILD

ASMAR AS A CHILD

PRINCESS CHAMSOUS SABAH

THE DJINN FAIRY

THE ELF FAIRY

WISE MAN YADOA

THE FATHER

STEVEN KYNMAN

NIGEL PILKINGTON

SUZANNA NOUR

NIGEL LAMBERT

LEOPOLD BENEDICT

FREDERICK BENEDICT

IMOGEN BAILEY

EMMA TATE

SUZANNE DAVID

SEAN BARRETT

KEITH WICKHAM

English Language Version recorded at
MAYFLOWER STUDIOS, LONDON

Mixed By Jim Betteridge
at
STATIONHOUSE, LONDON

English Version written and directed by
MICHEL OCELOT & GEORGE ROUBICEK