

# Azur & Asmar THE PRINCES' QUEST

## **Interview with Michel Ocelot**

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

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 16<sup>th</sup> century due to religious bans. I prepare the whole film in the form of a comic strip or storyboard, which background 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.