

Azur & Asmar  
THE PRINCES'  
QUEST

**Fabulist of filmmaking**

By: By Nigel Andrews, FT.com site

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If Michel Ocelot ever wants a second career, he should consider that of fire officer. He can bring people to their feet in theatres faster than almost anyone living. Standing ovations at this year's Cannes and Annecy film festivals for his new feature *Azur & Azmar* show that the French animator's previous, acclaimed film – the dazzling *Kiriku and the Sorceress* – was not a lucky accident. This man just makes beautiful cinema: cinema whose every frame could be hung on an art gallery wall. Sitting beside a Cannes swimming-pool early this summer, Ocelot looked wide-eyed, happy and a little shell-shocked. "They were innocent, like children," he says of the audience who had cheered the premiere of *Azur & Azmar* the night before. "They applauded before the end. They applauded a lot."

They did. I was there. And whatever Buddhists say about the beauty of one hand clapping, it doesn't match that of 2,000. *Azur* – to give the title a propitious abbreviation (for as well as having his film feted on the Côte d'Azur, Ocelot was born here 42 years ago) – is an *Arabian Nights*-style story about two re-united half-brothers, one white, one black, and their genie-seeking adventures in a far-off land. The fairy tale, conceived and written by Ocelot, addresses themes of racism, nationhood, inheritance and idealism. The pictorial style, jewelled and incandescent, has no peer or comparison in modern cinema

except with other Ocelot films. Non-initiates must go outside moviedom and think of illuminated manuscripts, quattrocento art, Douanier Rousseau or Carl Fabergé – or, if possible, all at once.

Ocelot, who went to art schools in Rouen, Paris and Los Angeles before becoming a filmmaker, and who for six years (1994 to 2000) was president of the International Animated Film Association, admits to being influenced by everything. "In my first year in high school I discovered ancient Egyptian art and felt I was Egyptian. Then I discovered Greek vases and thought I was Greek. Hokusai made me think: 'I'm Japanese'. And I love the minor art of late-19th-century England, illustrators like Arthur Rackham and the Heath Robinson brothers and Aubrey Beardsley. Eventually I will make a Beardsley film!" *Azur* came out of Persian miniatures and Renaissance paintings: art in which "everything is minutely done, each leaf on each tree. Every flower in *Kiriku* and *Azur* was separately imagined and worked on. "I surround myself with picture books and the internet. Over the first year I create a storyboard of the whole film, all 1,300 frames. Then I choose the actors and record the voices. So the film is almost finished as a demonstration of what I want before it goes to the animation team." The "team" consists of six decorators and two chief decorators. Forget the 100-strong armies employed by Disney or DreamWorks. Add a year or three to this and the labour of love is complete. But it isn't just the pictures that delight. The story too is imaginatively conceived and themed. "If I'm going to work on something for six years I have to believe in it. I'm interested in the state of the planet, in relations between the west and the Muslim world. I wanted to talk, too, about immigrants in society, but in the Middle Ages with a changing of roles. So in my fairy tale the 'dirty immigrant' is white, blond and with blue eyes."

The film asks: is racial prejudice acquired or innate? Ocelot believes it's acquired. He cites his own childhood in Guinea, west Africa, to which his parents moved from France. "At school it was totally peaceful, there was no bigotry. We were mixed whites and blacks, there were protestants, Catholics, Muslims, there was even an Anglican church. I had no idea people could be prejudiced about these things. Children can be very selfish and violent, but not for special reasons such as racism."

*Azur* is also a critique of sexist stereotyping. There's an enchanting portrait of a little

princess, sister to the two heroes, who behaves like a wild tomboy as soon as she is out of the palace. "She's a poor little rich girl discovering life. She's full of rebellious energy. Yes, I'm being political; these princesses, shut for life in their palaces, are oppressed women everywhere." Not surprisingly, Ocelot endorses the official French view of the Muslim veil. "I think women should fight against it. It's not religion, it's slavery".

None of these themes would have power to persuade if the movie didn't have power to charm. We come back to the sheer dazzlement of *Azur and Azmar*. I ask Ocelot how he

made the surfaces glow and sparkle. "It's an artist's trick; it's graded colours from dark to light. But it comes also from the contrast we got by using three different styles of drawing. The costumes are deliberately flat – I thought about advertising designs in the 1920s and 1930s – while the hands and faces are delicately modelled and the jewels and ornamentation are hyper-real. For these, we aimed at the effect of light shining directly on the surfaces. I couldn't have done that without computer animation. And [at Cannes] digital projection helped too. It added some 'diamond' to the film."

He doesn't believe, though, that computer graphics are a short cut to works of genius. "You must still be mad to make animation. And you must still have flair and talent and judgment while doing it."

He nearly shrieks when I mention the title *Shrek*. "Oh no, not that! I cannot watch it!" He laughs in token mitigation of his reaction. "I suffer because of the ugliness. I want to have something nice on my retina. I'm not attracted to these sorts of American films, because very often they're not by filmmakers, they're films of bosses and boards of directors. They have to please their shareholders. I have less money but more freedom. I have only to please myself."

In the process he pleases tens of thousands. He will probably end up pleasing millions. But he suspects he won't ever please audiences in hard-line Muslim countries. "I don't see how it could work there. Because if you 'read' the film with a Muslim mind there will be several things you won't like, even though I'm celebrating the civilisation that Islam came from."

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