



OFFICIAL SELECTION
ANNÉCY 2023
COMPETITION

SiRocCo

and the Kingdom
of air streams

a film by Benoît Chieux

Close your eyes and feed your head as you embark on this year's most marvelous voyage through the extravagant world of *Sirocco*, the latest creation from *Long Way North* and *Marona's Fantastic Tale* producer and penned by veteran screenwriter Alain Gagnol (*A Cat In Paris*, *Phantom Boy*). Building bridges between the poetry essence and spirit of Studio Ghibli's masterpieces and the psychedelic-dazzling visuals of The Beatles's *Yellow Submarine*, this epic, dreamlike adventure will surely get the whole family transported for an unforgettable journey!

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Synopsis

Two intrepid sisters, Juliette (4) and Carmen (8), discover a passage to the extraordinary world of their favorite book, the Kingdom of the Air Streams. Transformed into cats and separated from each other, the girls will have to be bold and daring to find their way back to each other and, with the help of the singer Selma, to their real world by confronting Sirocco, the master of winds and storms... But is he as terrifying as they're fearing?

2023 | FRANCE/BELGIUM | ANIMATION/KIDS | FRENCH | COLOUR | 80 MIN.



An interview with director Benoît Chieux

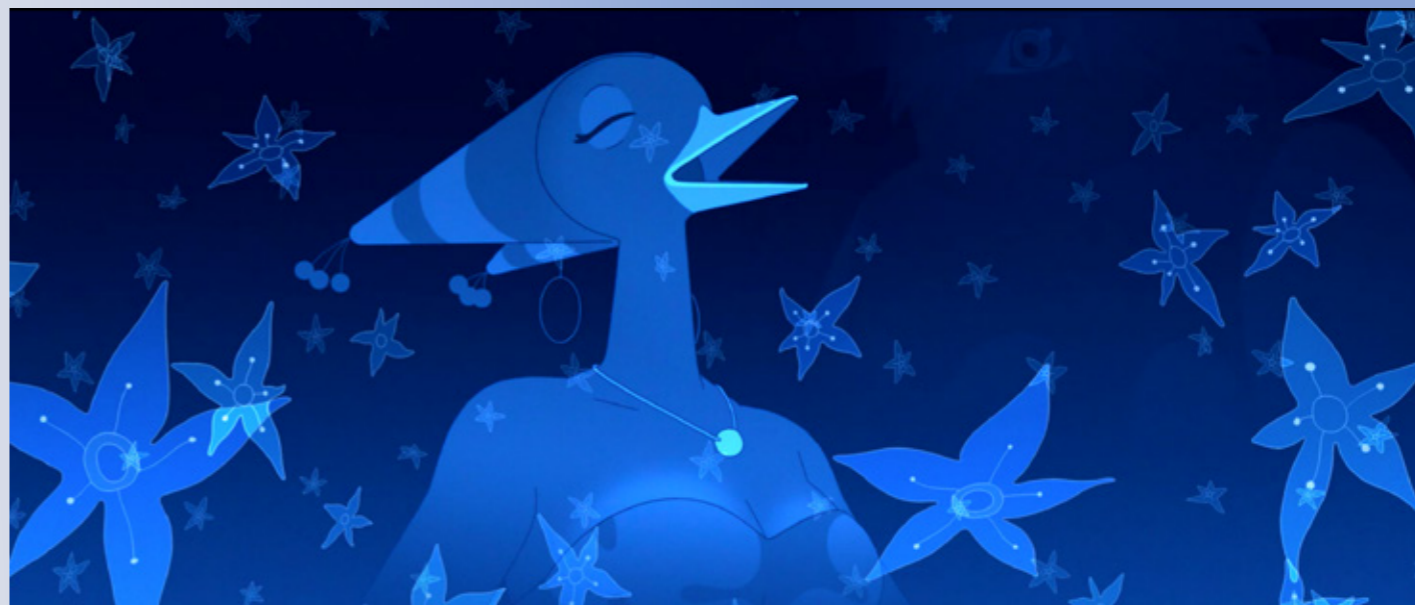
How did the Sirocco and the Kingdom of Air Streams project come about?

After *Aunt Hilda*, co-directed with Jacques-Rémy Girerd, I needed to work on a personal universe. The starting point for *Sirocco* was a series of drawings I did at the time: one depicted two children clinging to a windmill that was blowing away, torn from the ground by a violent wind. The graphic style was already that of the film: it responded to a constraint and an ambition I had set myself at the time: I thought it would be interesting to start with a concept where the backgrounds would be designed identically to the characters, so as to be able to animate them too. Other drawings followed, intuitively, with no apparent link other than the wind, around which the idea for the film quickly crystallized. Representing what doesn't exist is one of my obsessions as a director: showing the wind in animation is a formidable challenge! Around this twofold graphic and conceptual challenge, I produced around thirty drawings, already featuring two children's characters, a boy and a girl, and fantastic beings like the flying crocodile featured in the film. The universe appealed to producer Ron Dyens, who was quick to commit to the adventure. Then it was time to write a script. It took a long time before Alain Gagnol joined the project. It was really he who wrote the story, using the images as pieces of a puzzle. We exchanged a lot. As time went by, other drawings came along to 'add their bricks' to the script Alain had built.



Wind is more than just a theme. It gives the feeling of being the film's soul, its inspiration, its reason to be. It all begins with a stream that blows in through a window and scrolls across the pages of a book. The toy character, intercessor between the real and the imaginary, comes to life frame by frame. In this scene, the film subtly re-enacts the invention of the cartoon...

It's not just the wind itself that interests me, it's everything it represents. Wind is the air that surrounds us, the breath that enables us to speak and sing. It's the very condition of life, breathing. Finally, it's what we call "the Holy Spirit" in the Catholic religion, and which exists in all religions. This idea is echoed in one of the film's key scenes, when Sirocco, without touching her, transmits the breath of life to Selma to revive her. The wind is present in a variety of forms: the visual presence of clouds, the personification of the storm, sound, music... I knew I could count on Pablo Pico, the composer, to extend the evocation beyond the visual dimension. The way he approached Selma's singing is full of meaning. The song is like breathing, in two steps: in and out. It finds its emotional force in this ebb and flow. And then there's the part played by singer Celia Kameni's improvisation during the recording, which brings something new, free and totally unforeseen, in line with what I tried to preserve throughout the making of the film: a certain freshness, a certain inventiveness, a form of improvisation that also shines through in the way the story is told.



Indeed, we get the feeling that the story doesn't allow itself to be boxed in, that it doesn't conform to the conventions of the initiatory tale. Carmen and Juliette's imaginary adventure, which leads them to Sirocco, certainly enables them to approach the mystery of Selma's disappearance. But the mystery remains veiled, leaving the viewer free to interpret. Some may see in it the lingering shadow of violence against women. But this interpretation does not exhaust the meaning of the film, just as the depth of the two girls' inner journey remains unfathomable.

Indeed, I'm not interested in the classic initiatory storyline, with its trials and tribulations through which the hero reveals himself to himself. This kind of script strikes me as too well-crafted, too expected, with no surprises and, in the final analysis, completely lacking in truth. *Sirocco* is just a journey, with all that this term implies in terms of the unforeseen, the fortuitous and the seemingly pointless, like those little witches who appear in the film: they have no particular role. And yet, Juliette's complicity with them leaves a lasting impression. Viewers can imagine whatever they like about the nature of this complicity. I think that's what life is all about. Every day, we experience trivial encounters, and sometimes trials that build us up and tear us down, without us even realizing it at the time. The most striking events are not always the most important.



This intention is also evident in the characters of Juliette and Carmen, who are not heroines but just little girls, each with a different character and personality.

Indeed, it was very important to me that these two characters, immersed in a spectacular universe, remained above all children and acted as such, without "superpowers". In fact, in the script, without Selma's intervention, the two girls would be incapable of solving their own problems. They are never masters of their own destiny, but always dependent on adults and encounters. I had in mind films that I consider very accurate in their portrayal of childhood, such as Ebrahim Fourouzesh's *The Key*, Mohammad Ali Talebi's *Red Boots*, Morros Engel and Ruth Orkin's *The Little Fugitive*, and Vera Plivova-Simkova's *Katia and the Crocodile*, because they know how to put themselves at the level of children, their worries and their problems.

And let's give credit where credit is due: it's really Alain Gagnol who has chiseled Juliette and Carmen's respective personalities, with the idea that their behavior is dictated not only by their age, but also by their character. Thus, Carmen, despite being the older of the two, comes across as the more reserved of the two, barely daring to follow her younger sister, who is 'life' itself, totally uncontrollable. Juliette is the image of her mother as seen in the first sequence: sporty, strong-willed, going off to manage a soccer match... Well, I have to admit that I myself have two daughters: a tall one and a short one. Everyday life has given me ample opportunity to observe their lives together and draw inspiration from them.

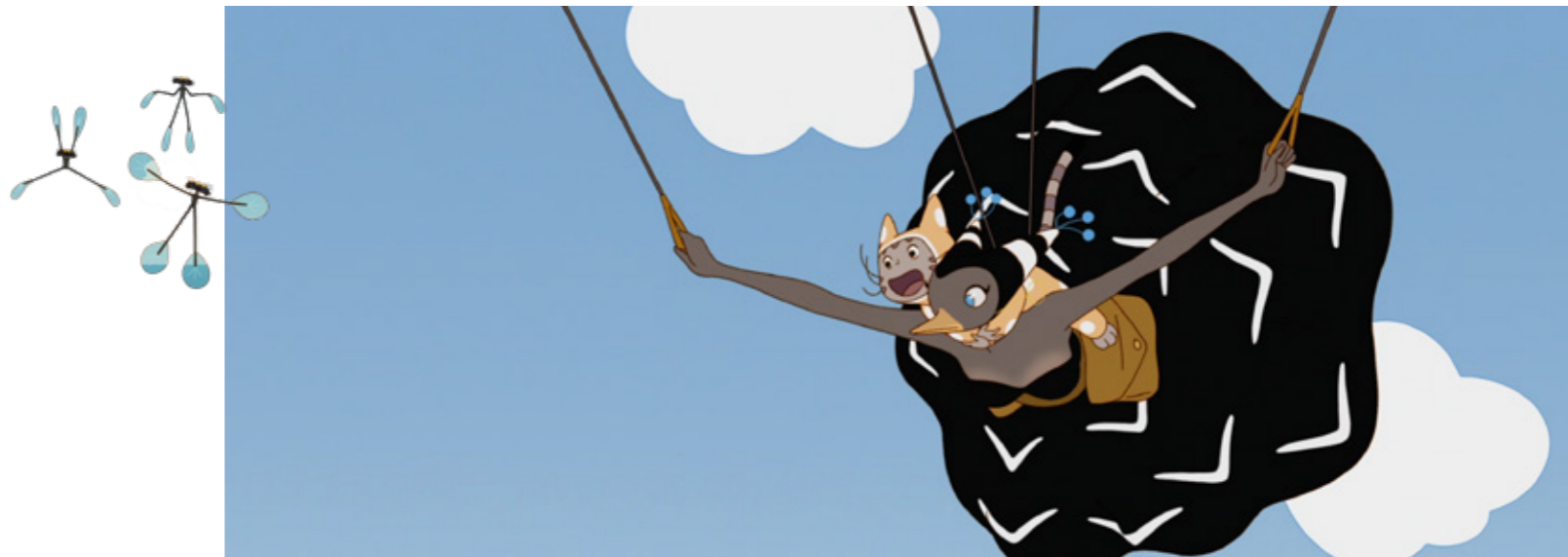


There's a clear division between the female characters, who take center stage, and the often caricatured male characters.

This difference in treatment is indeed striking, and to tell you the truth, it surprises even me. The psychology of the female characters is well developed, while that of the men is sketchy. But there's nothing premeditated about this approach. It just came to me naturally: it's the magic of cinema to be overtaken by what you create. Perhaps the origin of this is to be found in my personal history. I grew up in a large family where six boys and two girls were born, in a very masculine world. It's probably out of revenge that I gave life in *Sirocco* to an essentially female environment. In contrast, the characters of the mayor and his son owe their caricatured dimension to my brothers. That's why I'm so attached to them!

*In fact, *Sirocco and the Kingdom of Air Streams* is aimed at children.*

Like all my films. Maybe because I had a happy childhood, I've stayed connected with that age of life. But I also particularly appreciate this audience because it has no preconceptions. You can offer them anything and go very far with them, which is all the more interesting when you're drawing: you can open every possible door. Children are much more receptive to drawing than adults. The notion of realism isn't as important to them as the truth of their feelings. I'm particularly interested in this dimension because it's closely linked to drawing.



It's rather paradoxical to talk about «truth» in a cartoon where by nature everything is artifice...

To be more specific, I'm not a great believer in representational realism. Monet used to say that it wasn't the subject that interested him, but what happened between him and the object. Similarly, for me, the challenge of animation is to give the impression of truth, to make the viewer believe that what is being shown is real. There are different answers to this fundamental problem of cinema: the story we tell, the emotion of the characters, the interpretation of the voices... But for me, staging is the essential answer. In the «spatial staging» I'm experimenting with in the film, it's a question of moving the camera in a sufficiently mobile way - varying angles of view, shot values - so that the viewer has the sensation of being immersed in a 360° environment, so that his mind is invaded by what's behind him. For one of the major challenges of cinema is off-screen: the idea of bringing to life what we don't see on screen, what's outside the frame. This is relatively easy to do in a world that's considered real - like Selma's sister Agnès's house - where the viewer shares the same codes. It's more complicated in a fantasy world like Selma's concert hall. And this is where the resources of drawing come into play.



In Sirocco and the Kingdom of Air Streams, the choice was made for a clean, simple drawing, very «ligne claire» (clear line) with large flat tints of color that build up the space.

This was a radical graphic choice dictated by the desire to animate the scenery. I had the idea of eliminating shadows - clean shadows as well as cast shadows - to play solely with flat areas of color. The result of this decision was to give color all the space on the screen. To maintain an impression of space and depth, however, we had to play with subtle gradations and the intensity of the contour line: the closer the characters, the darker the line, and the more distant the characters, the lighter the line. It's a clear line, in effect, but with a twist.

The effect is sometimes astonishing, verging on the optical illusion, as in the depiction of the village, where the viewer's eye is lost, no longer quite sure whether the universe presented to him is two- or three-dimensional...

The notion of construction, i.e. the impression of volume that comes from the scenery, is inherent to perspective: you can't create an impression of spatial perspective if the scenery itself isn't totally credible in terms of camera placement. It's all about the precision of the line. I was fortunate enough to have studied drawing at a fairly advanced level and to have taken technical courses in construction perspective, which was a great help in correcting the work of draftsmen, animators and set designers. It's these details that really determine the spatial staging. It requires meticulous work, precise drawing and skilled teams.



There's also a sense of a search for simplicity, for purity, in the animation itself, which seems to focus on capturing movement in its essence rather than detail.

My team played a very big part in this, especially my assistant director Titouan Bordeau and Suzanne Seidel, the animation director, with whom I've been working for several years now. I share with them the same need to find ways of representing movement, not in a realistic way, but with precise intentions as to what is important to animate and how. One of the major challenges for me in this film was to limit the number of intentions per shot. Animators aren't always aware of the film's continuity, and the fear of emptiness can make them want to do too much. We sometimes calmed things down by inviting the animators to put their energy only where it was needed, as the Japanese know how to do.

It's the same intention behind lip-sync, isn't it?

Absolutely. We chose to trust the film and the narration, telling ourselves that if the intention was there, if the voice was there, it wasn't absolutely necessary to be perfectly accurate with lip expressions. Here again, in my opinion, the Japanese are right: they emphasize body expression, not mouth expression. Making a lip-sync that perfectly matches the dubbing actor's interpretation takes a lot of time and doesn't always pay off. This was my experience with *Charlie's Christmas (L'Enfant au Grelot)*, where, against all odds, the English version turned out to be more effective than the French one! This is the fruit of a long reflection: it's better to emphasize the «whole» than the detail.



Japanese animation is therefore an example in more ways than one. But are there any other important references that accompanied the genesis of Sirocco and the Kingdom of Air Streams?

Of course, I can't hide the decisive influence of directors like Takahata and Miyazaki on my approach to animation. Another major reference for my work in general and *Sirocco* in particular is the work of Paul Driessen, a great director and graphic artist, who regularly stages the invisible. Then, of course, there's Paul Grimault, whose vertiginous verticality directly inspired the first scene in the village. I saw *The King and the Mockingbird* with my family when I was eleven or twelve. I vividly remember the moment when we walked out of the theater and felt the melancholy inherent in the film, mainly due to the music, which I've never been able to listen to without crying. This was one of the important points we discussed with Pablo Pico at the very start of our collaboration. When I embarked on *Sirocco*, there was a desire in me from the outset to move towards a form of melancholy. I find melancholy a very interesting thing to manipulate, especially in the midst of a scene of action or joy: introducing this dimension, which doesn't exist much in cinema any more, really interested me.



It's true that the changes in tone are particularly striking in Sirocco. We can move seamlessly from burlesque to melancholy, from intimate introspection to action scenes, right up to the totally weightless moment of the whispering scene...

I wanted to make a film that was lively, sparkling, crazy and generous towards the viewer, with a constant need to avoid déjà-vu. The whispering scene is one of those beautiful surprises that surpass the expectations we'd placed on them. It really took shape at the mixing stage, when we assembled the various elements that make it up. It's an emotional sequence, and a very important one: it's in the middle of the film, where everything converges, where reality and fantasy, the world of adults and that of children, intersect. The absence of music gives way to the strangeness of the words and their power, thanks to the outstanding sound design by Gurwal Coïc-Gallas and the spatialization by sound mixer Régis Diebold.

Interview by Xavier Kawa-Topor on June 1, 2023

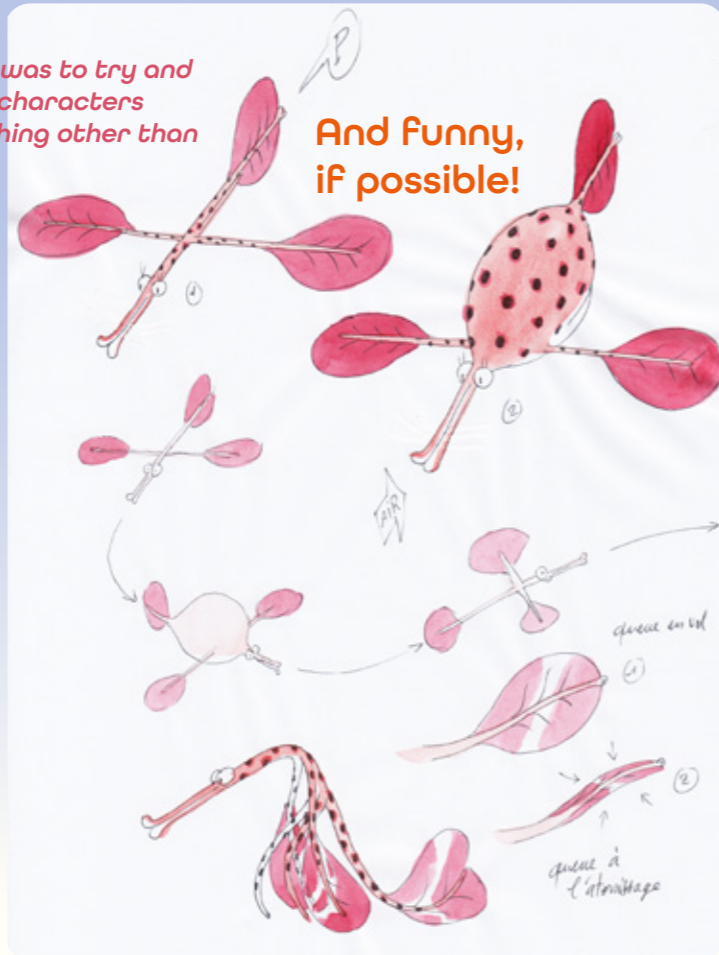
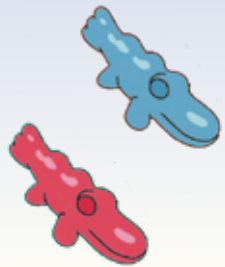




GRAPHIC RESEARCH

Benoît Chieux:

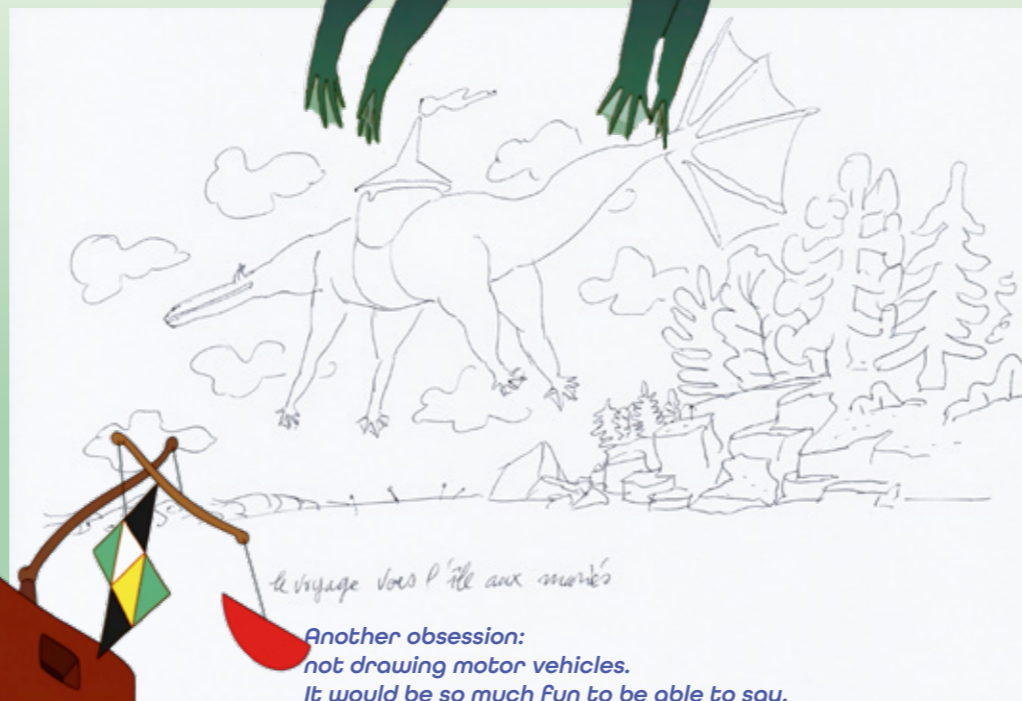
My obsession with Sirocco was to try and create never-before-seen characters capable of moving on anything other than two legs.



*Drawing that city was a real pleasure.
I relived strong childhood impressions of playing
with Lego and being able to give any shape or
color to a house.*



village de mer



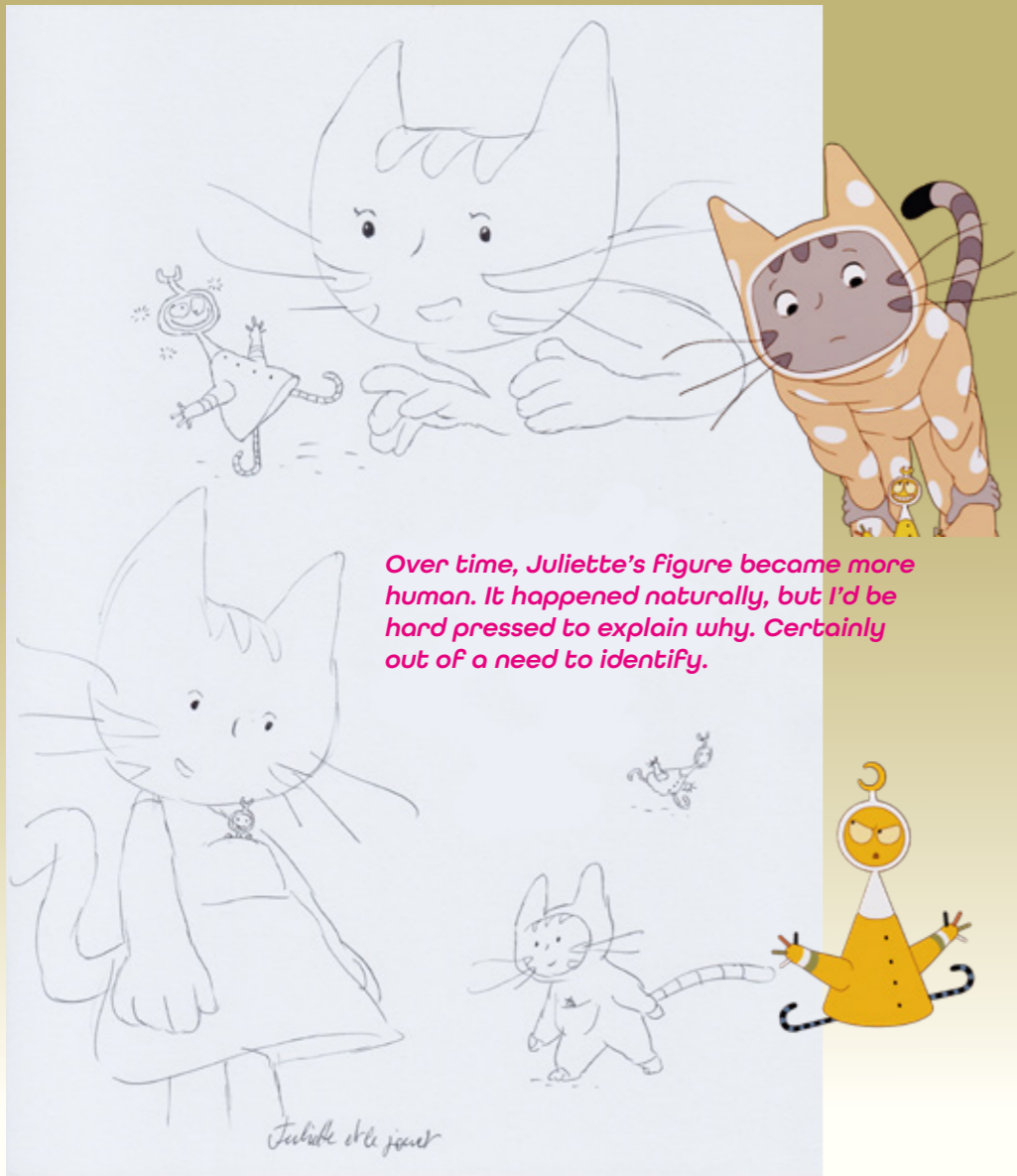
le voyage vers l'île aux meris

*Another obsession:
not drawing motor vehicles.
It would be so much fun to be able to say,*

"I'm going out for a little ride in a flying crocodile!"

*I liked the idea of keeping the crocodile on a leash, like
holding a balloon. But since they had to cross the sea, we
couldn't keep it.*





Over time, Juliette's figure became more human. It happened naturally, but I'd be hard pressed to explain why. Certainly out of a need to identify.



It was a fun game of shape to imagine how to rebuild a broken toy.



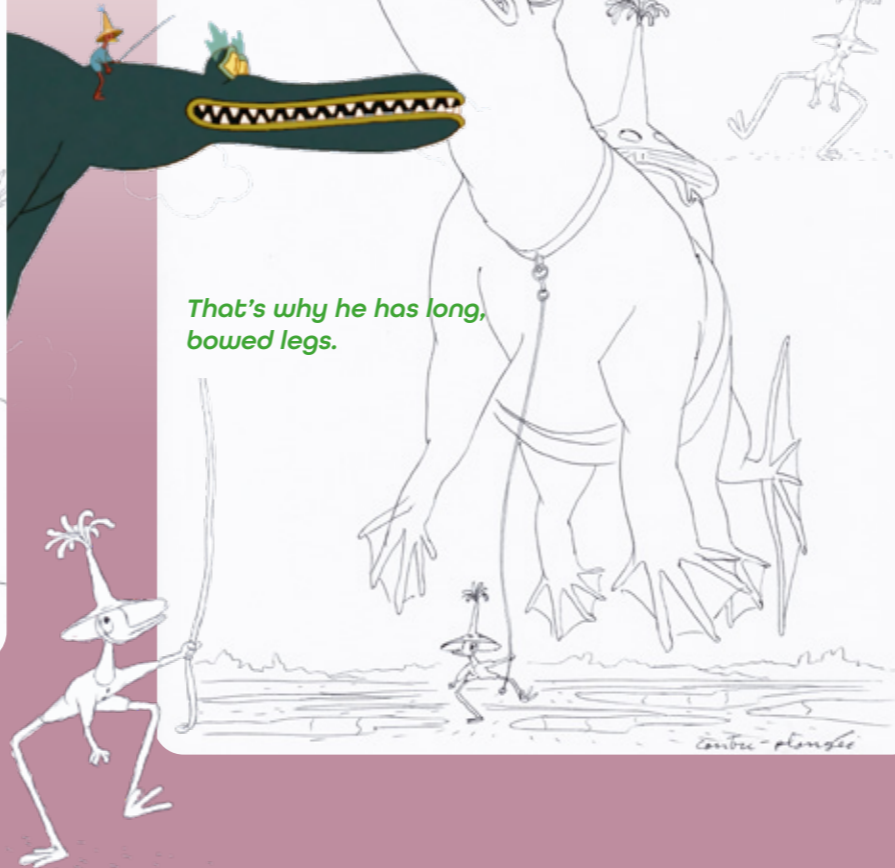
When I saw this drawing, I realized that I'd planned to change the color of the bubbles coming out of the music box. It was a good idea that got lost along the way... darn!





le maire à l'emprise de moines son fils avec comment

I'm pleased to see that we were able to retain the energy of this drawing in the final scenes. The mayor, with his big head and little legs, was a very difficult character to draw in motion.



It's a detail, but I'd imagined that the pilot under the crocodile regularly climbed onto his neck to guide him.

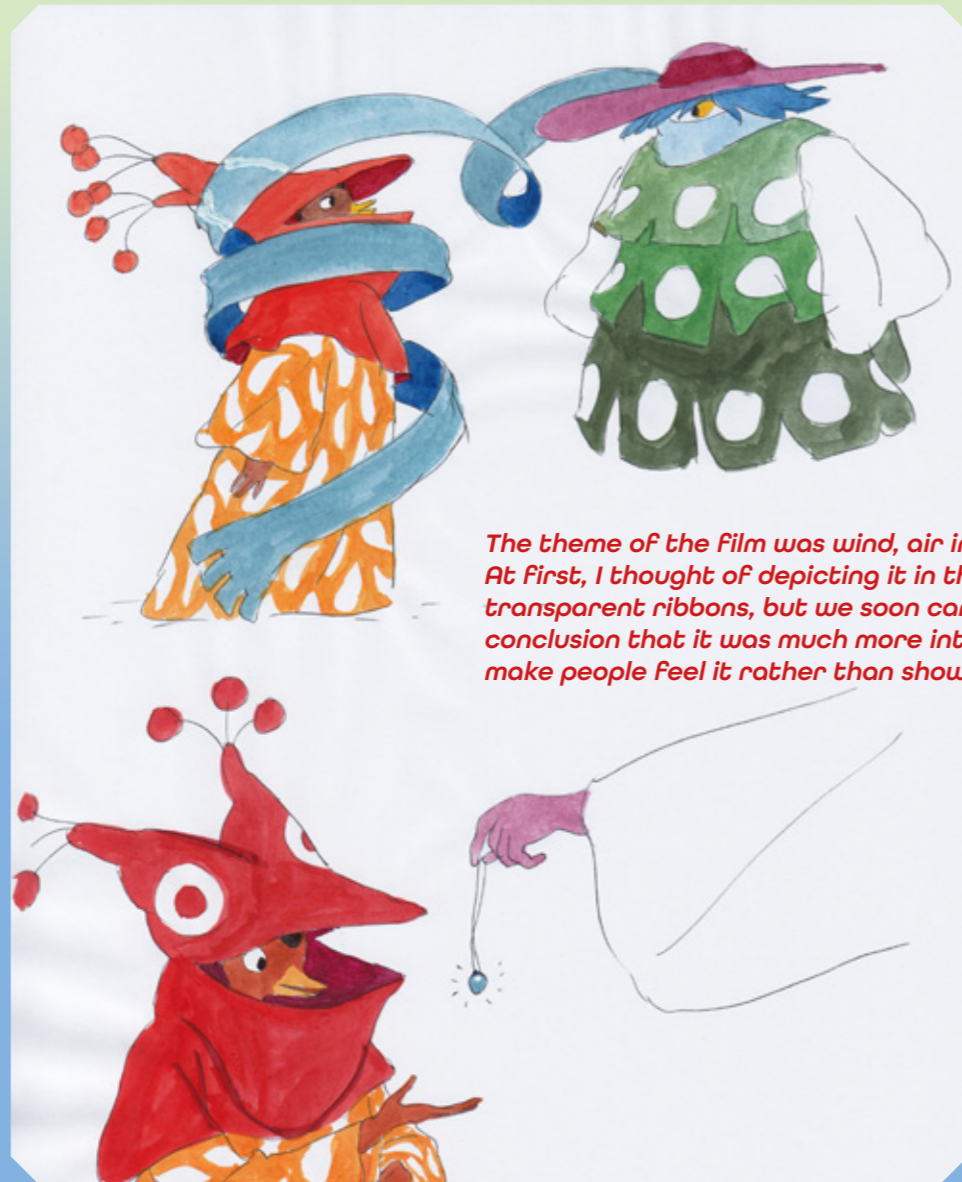
That's why he has long, bowed legs.

l'ombre-plongée

I'm very proud of Selma's travel costume. Half garment, half animal.



Selma dans le tempête de sable



The theme of the film was wind, air in all its forms. At first, I thought of depicting it in the form of transparent ribbons, but we soon came to the conclusion that it was much more interesting to make people feel it rather than show it.



*Who are we really
behind our masks of skin?*

Sirocco is a mysterious being.

*In the film I love the way his clothes disappear
into the distance, carried away by the wind.*

le vrai visage de Sirocco



Benoît Chieux

Director

Graphic designer of *My Little Planet* (UNICEF Award 1995, Prix fondation de France), graphic designer and scriptwriter of *Charlie's Christmas (L'Enfant au grelot)* (Jury Award Stuttgart 1997, Cartoon d'Or 1998) and co-director with Damien Louche-Pélissier of *Patate et le jardin potager* (Pulcinella d'Or 2001), Benoît Chieux contributed for several years to the success of the Folimage studio. He then became the author of the *Mica* series (Ricochets Productions), and in 2004 joined Jacques-Rémy Girerd's team for the feature film *Mia and the Migou*, for which he was graphic designer and art director (released at the end of 2008). In 2013, he co-directed the feature film *Aunt Hilda* with Jacques-Rémy Girerd. In 2014 he directed his first short film *Tigers Tied Up in One Rope (Tigres à la queue leu leu)*, produced by les Films de l'Arlequin (Jury Prize and Audience Award SICAF 2015). In 2016, he directed *Midnight's Garden (Le Jardin de Minuit)*, his first collaboration with Sacrebleu Productions, nominated at the 2016 César Awards in the Best Animated Short category.

Filmography

Shorts

Midnight's Garden (Le Jardin de Minuit) (2016)

Silhouettes (2014)

Tigers Tied Up in One Rope (Tigres à la queue leu leu) (2014)

Melting Heart Cake (Cœur Fondant) (2019)

Feature Films

Aunt Hilda (Tante Hilda) (2014)





Pablo Pico

Original Music Composer

Pablo Pico is a multi-instrumentalist composer (percussion, clarinet, saxophone, piano) well known in the animation world. Multi-awarded for his inspired, emotionally-charged compositions, he composes in a hybrid aesthetic, both orchestral and pop, with particular attention to rhythmic structure, and borrowing when necessary from world music.

His film credits include *Mum is Pouring Rain (Maman Pleut Des Cordes)* by Hugo De Faucompret, which won the award for Best Original Score at Holidays 365, *Adama* (2015) by Simon Rouby, nominated for a César and awarded at the Annecy Film Festival, *Saving Sally* by Avid Liongoren - Best Original Score at the Metro Manila Film Festival 2016 (Philippines), *A Man Is Dead (Un Homme Est Mort)* by Olivier Cossu - European Animation Award for Best Score in 2018; the drama *Jeunesse Sauvage* by Frédéric Carpentier and more recently *Marona's Fantastic Tale* by Anca Damian, which won an award at Annecy.

Sacrebleu Productions

Biography

Founded in 1999 by Ron Dyens, Sacrebleu Productions released its first feature animated Long Way North in 2016 (Public Prize at Annecy 2015 – 600k admissions in France, and sold in more than twenty countries).

Early 2020 is released the animated feature *Marona's Fantastic Tale* by Anca Damian and distributed by Cinema Public Films in France, in the wake of many festival selections (Annecy, European Film Awards...), awards (BIAF, Reanimania...) and outstanding reviews. It was sold in more than fifteen countries by Charades. It received the André Martin Prize in Annecy and was part of the School and Cinema program of the CNC.

My Sunny Maad by Michaela Pavlátová is theatrically released on April 27, 2022 in France, receiving the Jury Prize at Annecy, then participated to many festivals, including the Golden Globes, and won many awards around the world. In 2023, the film won the César for Best Animated Film. Diaphana released the film in France, with Totem Films handling international sales.

Sacrebleu Productions also produced more than 90 short films selected in over 2000 French and foreign festivals as prestigious as Cannes, Venice, Sundance, Clermont-Ferrand, as well as Stuttgart, Brest, Hiroshima, etc... Winner of many prestigious awards, including *Barking Island* (Palme d'Or 2010), *Sunday Lunch* and *And Then The Bear* (César for Best Animated Short Film in 2015 and 2021) but also *Madagascar, A Journey Diary* (Oscar nominated for Best Animated Short Film in 2011) or even *Tram* (Cristal for Best Short Film 2012).



Selected Filmography

Courts Métrages

The Flame – Ron Dyens (2001)
Imago – Cédric Babouche (2005)
Nuvole Mani – Simone Massi (2009)
Madagascar, A Journey Diary – Bastien Dubois (2009)
The Man Who Slept
Barking Island – Serge Avédikian (2010)
The Great Rabbit – Atsushi Wada (2012)
Tram – Michaela Pavlatova (2012)
Rhizome – Boris Labbé (2015)
Sunday Lunch – Céline Devaux (2015)
The Empty – Dahee Jeong (2016)
Midnight's Garden – Benoît Chieux (2016)
The Tasmanian Tiger – Vergine Keaton (2018)
The Fall – Boris Labbé (2018)
Mr Mare – Luca Toth (2019)
Melting Heartcake – Benoît Chieux (2019)
And Then The Bear – Agnès Patron (2019)
You Will Be Fine – Céline Devaux (2019)
Normal – Julie Caty (2020)
Friend of a Friend – Zachary Zezima (2020)
Freedom Swimmer – Olivia Martin-McGuire (2021)
Maurice's Bar – Tom Prezman, Tzor Ederly (2023)

Feature Films

Long Way North – Rémi Chayé (2016)
Marona's Fantastic Tale – Anca Damian (2020)
My Sunny Maad – Michaela Pavlatova (2021)



Voices

Juliette
Carmen
Selma
Sirocco
The Toy
The Mayor
The Mayor's son
Agnès

Loïse Charpentier
Maryne Bertieaux
Aurélié Konaté
Pierre Lognay
Laurent Morteau
Eric de Staercke
David Dos Santos
Géraldine Asselin

Song

Célia Kameni

Director
Written by
Graphic Creation
Original Score
Production
Coproduction
French Distribution
International Sales

Benoît Chieux
Alain Gagnol, Benoît Chieux
Benoît Chieux
Pablo Pico
Sacrebledu Productions (Ron Dyens)
Take Five (Grégory Zalczman), Ciel de Paris (Cilvy Aupin)
Haut et Court
Kinology





COMING SOON