



Azur & Asmar

A FILM BY MICHEL OCELOT

NORD-OUEST
PRESENTS

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SYNOPSIS

Once upon a time, two children were nursed by the same woman: Azur, the blonde, blue-eyed son of a nobleman, and dark-haired, dark-eyed Asmar, the nurse's child. The boys grew up together like brothers, until fate separated them brutally.

But Azur, haunted by his nurse's tales of the legendary Fairy of the Djins, will not rest until he finds her. He backgrounds sail...

Now grown, and now rivals, the blood brothers embark on a quest for the Fairy. They background out in search of magical lands, rich with dangers and wonders.



INTERVIEW WITH MICHEL OCELOT

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.

How did the idea of Azur & Asmar come to you?

Michel Ocelot: Making an animated feature film means devoting six years of your life to a subject. So it has to be worth it. The subject which was closest to my heart? On the one hand, all those people who hate one another – since that is how they were raised – who wage war on one another, and on the other hand, the individuals on both sides who do not toe the line, who respect and love one another despite the barbed wire fence which keeps them apart. That's what touches me most deeply. I initially thought of France and Germany, but it has been done so often, and we are now at peace, so I didn't want to revisit on such an awful period which is behind us now anyway. Then, I considered inventing an enemy country, with a fake language. What a sad idea to invent an enemy country! What a bad idea to invent an artificial language – you can spot it, and a real language is so much more interesting! And I thought about everyday life in France and around the world. I no longer wanted to treat a real war that had been declared, but ordinary animosity between indigenous and immigrant citizens, and to push it further, at



the same time, between the West and the Middle East. I had found my subject matter! A highly topical issue to be treated like a marvelous fairy tale. I am saddened and irritated to observe the current climate of disharmony, which is artificial. I know the subject well – I myself was stupidly hostile instead of being happy. After spending my childhood in a small school in a small African town, I found myself in a big town in a huge high school, under grey skies. I wasn't familiar with the codes, so I often got punished, although I was the most innocent kid in the school.

Why were you punished?

Michel Ocelot: I can't remember! I do remember being punished a few times for insolence. I probably gave answers that were too blunt. Without couching them in the terms that were expected of me. So, I rejected Angers and the Anjou region for ten years, saying to myself that it was better elsewhere – which was wrong. It was true that Angers was grey and wet compared to what I'd been used to! But it was also a rich, beautiful place which easily stood the comparison to what I had known before and which should have thrilled and interested me. I only realized that a lifetime later. In the film, obviously I am the handsome, pure, magnificent hero with clear blue eyes, but I'm also Crapoux, who does everything wrong and spits on what is actually his country.

So, it is this idea which led you to develop the film's aesthetics, and not the other way around...

Michel Ocelot: Yes, I started with a moral, contemporary desire. Images of a foreign country. North Africa and Muslim civilization came later. But I have long been interested in the incredible medieval Islamic civilization which spread over an immense territory. As a French person, I felt I had to deal with North Africa first. It is the biggest in terms of background and costumes, but I played around with all kinds of things which appealed to me, from Andalusia to Turkey, not to mention a detour via Persia.

Before we go back to these inspirations, I would like you to explain the various stages of the six years' work you mentioned...

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.

Let's go back to the narrative. Are you inspired by certain 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*.

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. Nothing seems to have changed. Today, women's traditional

clothes resemble clothing from Roman times: draped material held in place by a fibula. I used these clothes with an abundance of Berber jewelry. The costumes of the two heroes, however, had to look like something out of a fairy tale. I took them from Persian civilization, or more precisely from the Sefevide period in the 16th century (Damascus, Baghdad, and Iran had continued to practice graphic art). I cheated with the period since the story is background in the Middle Ages. There is less cheating on the place, and I justify it by the power of Jenane, who becomes a great merchant. Her ships and caravans traveled all over the globe, and she can give her son the latest fashion from Ispahan. The main thing is that it is visually appealing!

That's all for the Orient. I also used a lot of big European picture sources: those which are absurdly known as the Flemish «primitives». There is nothing less primitive than those ultra-civilized, fiendishly skilful artists. Van Eyck («The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb») figured alongside the Sefevide miniaturists, Nicolas Fouquet and the Limbourg brothers («The Very Rich Hours of the Duc de Berry»). I then changed to a completely different period and borrowed graphic techniques from the poster artists from the interwar years whom I really appreciate.

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.

Writing a story about respect for other people, the discovery of other cultures, and prejudice, were you concerned about making the adventure a useful one?

Michel Ocelot: Yes. I want to do people good with this film, to ease tensions in both communities. I depict fine, worthy people and I hope I can give people dignity. If people felt more sure of themselves and noble, they wouldn't feel the need to destroy everything around them.



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.



Oriental architecture, with its mosaics, stained-glass windows, and arcades, uses the repetition of motifs and symmetry to startling effect. You also use symmetry in certain scenes, such as the one which is background in the courtyard of the mother's palace or the one at the start when the nurse is holding Azur and Asmar on her knees...

Michel Ocelot: The symmetry at the start of the film is necessary, because the two children are equals. They absolutely must be treated in the same way. The nurse knows that full well, and it comes through: if a piece of cake is a millimeter bigger than the other, they protest vigorously! But it is also true that I like symmetry, a certain balance, a certain harmony. However, I did not only use symmetrical shots in the film...

How did you start working with Nord-Ouest on this project?

Michel Ocelot: I tried out new processes with this film. A new technique, a new language, a new story with contemporary resonances, and a new production approach, with a live action producer. After a certain amount of hesitation, I took this film to Christophe Rossignon as I had seen and appreciated several of his past productions. Above all, he had been recommended to me by Jacques Bled, one of the encounters that proved providential for this film: He heads MacGuff Ligne, the exemplary digital animation company I had chosen and with which I was completely satisfied. So, I thought I could communicate with this man from the film world. My relationship with Christophe Rossignon exceeded all my hopes. He is an uncompromising, generous, passionate person who is surrounded by an exceptional team.

Can you tell me about the choice of the actors who lent their voices to your characters?

Michel Ocelot: That's where I particularly appreciated the organization of a major production company which is used to preparing live-action feature films and which is prepared to go to any lengths to ensure that the film is a success. I had a casting director who knew where to find the right characters, an assistant for the Arab-speaking part, the actress Hiam Abbas (who lent her great personality and her voice to the key character, the nurse), and an impressive number of actors, with all the time I needed. My instruction had been that «We're not looking for stars – we're looking for voices who fit the story». I didn't know if they were famous, because I did a first blind selection from recordings so as not to be influenced by anything other than the voices. I then chose Patrick Timsit without knowing his name. I selected three other people for each key role, then I met the people to work with them, and made my final selection.

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. On the other hand, when a line of dialogue is particularly

important, it is preferable to have silence. I feel two things about the music which Gabriel wrote for my fairy tale: sometimes you are carried along irresistibly by a piece of popular music composed by a professional who is familiar with every aspect of putting on a great spectacle, and sometimes you are touched by the sensitivity of a gifted, sincere artist.

Each film is a new adventure. What have you learned over the course of this last adventure?

Michel Ocelot: «French» animation is the third biggest in the world in terms of quantity, but it is made outside France, because it is cheaper. But if you really count everything, is the difference really that great? All those ancillary expenses, re-shoots, and energy wasted all over the world! And it's silly to have so much talent, both young and old, at home and not use them! Financially speaking, doesn't it make more sense to have a quality product to sell? With *Azur & Asmar*, I attained a formal quality I couldn't obtain any other way. We managed it – I made the whole film in the town where I live. All the people working on the film were together, understood one another, got along, and devoted themselves to this creation, from start to finish. The film was completed enjoyably and on time. I think it comes through on the screen.



INTERVIEW WITH ERIC SERRE

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR AND LAYOUT SUPERVISOR

What first attracted you to this project?

Eric Serre: The subject matter. As a 30-year-old with an ethnically diverse cultural background, I was pleased to contribute to this message of hope and brotherhood. We did the first drawings in September 2001. When 9/11 happened, we were stunned, just like everybody else, and we were unable to work for two or three days. Once the initial emotion had subsided, we soon said to ourselves: «We must make this film», because the importance of this message of brotherhood had become even more urgent. There was a lot of research into Islamic culture, the richness of which is little-known. It was an opportunity to really get to know it through books.

Which characters did you yourself work on, at the start of the preparation stage?

Eric Serre: At the time, it was the wet nurse breastfeeding the two children. Preparation took two and a half years, during which Michel had already sketched out the main characters. The initial skeleton crew was made up of 6 to 8 experienced artists, which is very little for an animation film. I worked on the secondary characters: the riding teacher, the dance teacher, the private tutor, the coach driver, the characters in the crowd scenes in North Africa, the 'baddies', the merchants, and the soldiers. But most of my work consisted in developing the layout of the 1,280 shots in the film and supervising the team of artists. In all, the layout team made approximately 13,000 preparatory drawings of the background and characters. The storyboard was entirely drawn by Michel. Anne-Lise, who is also a famous animal sculptor, drew the animals on top of her job as head of background design.



You have been working with Michel for a long time. Did the change to 3D force you to change your methods?

Eric Serre: A little. But we are producing the same basic materials for the computer graphics artists as we give the 2D animators: drawings which show the characters from all angles. It is when it is all being transposed into 3D that you have to watch the way the character is adapted. MacGuff Ligne has a very professional team, and we didn't have to restrict ourselves in the character design to make things easier for them. The graphics were designed to simplify the making of the 3D and the animation. The clothes, for example, are portrayed flat, without apparent shadows or folds. What's more, each character is made according to his or her role in the film to ensure that the production time is used wisely. A main character has a great range of movements whereas the «mechanics» of an extra are simplified.

Which scenes were the most difficult to prepare and complete?

Eric Serre: Michel Ocelot's animation is stylized and different from the usual 3D standards. Each shot has to be retouched several times to arrive at the precise emotion. The artists' talent and perseverance enabled the animation team to rise to the challenge. As I was saying before, the animation of the clothes is a delicate, tricky stage, because a fabric's folds and weight are very hard to render with a 3D skeleton. I would say that, strangely enough, the action scenes aren't the hardest to create, because the very rapid shot changes don't leave much time to analyze the composition of the shot. The hardest scenes to create are mainly the ones with dialogue and realistic human emotions. I'm thinking particularly of the scene in which the mother welcomes Azur to her palace gardens. As it is not an ordinary cartoon, sometimes the animation of a character's mouth may not be as attractive as it should be. That's when you have to step in and correct it. In that scene, we had an average of three to four corrections of characters' expressions to do per shot. We also had to take care that the positions of the hands looked right.

How are the characters animated? Did the animators have a pre-prepared stock of expressions that they could use for the main phases of their animation, and then work on them by modifying them?

Eric Serre: The animators had models with fixed expressions. Then, they could refer to this guide, but they had to animate the faces themselves to obtain the exact expression.



What are some of the subtle things in the film you are most proud of?

Eric Serre: I really like the multitude of details and the refinement of the jewelry. The aesthetics of the film work very well, evoking the 15th-century Persian miniatures thanks to 21st-century state-of-the-art technology! But the best thing we achieved is that you forget the technical side and get carried along by the story. We don't play up the «big 3D muscles» aspect! That was one of the gambles with the film, which went against the usual norms, and which we managed to pull it off.

How did you handle the character's movements within the backgrounds? Did you make parts of the backgrounds more uncluttered so that they would stand out better as they walked in front of them?

Eric Serre: Yes. All the backgrounds were planned out in the form of drawings, with the layout of the backgrounds, trees and architecture which took into account the characters' positions. We knew how many different levels the background had been designed for, the colors, motifs, and so on. You soon see when you should keep things simple and only make provisions for, say, a cob wall and a shadow. On the other hand, flat characters stand out much more against a very detailed background. That is how the painters of those Persian miniatures worked. Generally speaking, the aesthetic choice was to place a light silhouette against a dark background.

Could you explain in detail how you carried out the layout of a complex scene?

Eric Serre: With 3D, the process of carrying out the layout is the same as with that of a cartoon. The animation is prepared in the form of several of the characters' key poses drawn on punched sheets of paper. We then define the directing approach, the framing of the shot, and its running time. The backgrounds are also drawn on punched sheets. We then break down the background into several layers to be able to simulate the multi-level effects (several «depths» of props in the background), the lighting, and the character's movements. Then, the backgrounds are colored with graphics palettes. The 3D animation is then adjusted to match this set up. Lastly, we bring together the final background and the animation to check that everything works perfectly. This work is repeated for every shot in the film. To give you a precise example, let's imagine a sideways tracking shot in which we see palm trees in the foreground, characters in the middle ground, and more palm trees in the background, on several levels. We find the exact description of the shot's action in the little sketch in Michel's storyboard. That way, we know that the character is walking and that the camera follows him in a sideways tracking shot. Then, I isolate the different levels on different punched sheets of very fine white paper. We can superimpose several sheets on an illuminated table to see through all the drawings. So, to return to the elements in the foreground, each element which will move separately from the others during the traveling shot is drawn on a separate sheet of paper. For example, there may be one level of palm tree trunks, then one level of foliage, then other tree trunks. Then, there will be a blank sheet to represent the level on which the characters will move, then the various sheets which correspond to the trees in the background.

How were the 2D backgrounds created?

Eric Serre: First, they were drawn with pencil and paper, then scanned, painted and finalized with Photoshop. We also produced 3D props to represent the objects that the characters touch and hold, such as glasses, food, and weapons. But we made them look identical to the way the 2D painted backgrounds looked. It was very important that there not be any break in the film's visuals.

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

with Photoshop software. I drew quick sketches for the main backgrounds or for the more complex ones. This involves a rapid coloring of the backgrounds and characters. This first stage allows us to define the moods and assess the difficulties in store for the color artist. The background must serve the film's narrative and intentions, rather like an actor. It should be accurate, not do too much... nor too little! The color and details in the image define the mood, the moment in which the action takes place, the real or magical place in which it is background.

How did you transpose North African architecture into drawn backgrounds?

Anne-Lise Koehler: We were inspired by existing architecture which we then reworked. The structure of Jenane's garden, for example, is reminiscent of that of the gardens and courtyard in Alhambra. But the shape of the arches and the color of the roof are different.

How did you modify the basic materials, i.e. the references drawn from Persian miniatures and photos of real buildings, to adapt them to the graphic design that Michel Ocelot wanted?

Anne-Lise Koehler: We tried to avoid «verist» perspectives, close to live-action photography, so we almost never used high - and low - angle shots. This decision is a logical consequence of Michel's writing and of the desire to serve the narrative. No effect is ever gratuitous! The space of the backgrounds is based on strong vertical and horizontal structural lines. Generally, we start by creating the main background for a scene, then we redefine it by specifying the details which are useful to the narrative.



INTERVIEW WITH HIAM ABBAS

ACTRESS (VOICE OF JENANE) AND COACH FOR THE ARAB-SPEAKING ACTORS

How did you meet Michel Ocelot?

Hiam Abbas: Gigi Akoka, the casting director, called me to say that Michel was looking for voices for his new project. At first, she didn't tell me anything about a part, but she explained to me that she was looking for someone who could judge whether the actors could speak good Arabic or not. During our first meeting, Michel was quite withdrawn and distant, which surprised me, because people in our business tend to be relaxed and casual. He first asked me to record a text in classical Arabic onto CD, which he played to people he trusted who confirmed that I was capable of doing the job of coach that was expected of me. When I read the screenplay, I really liked the role of Jenane. When we first met, I said to Michel: «I want the part of Jenane!» but he remained stony-faced! He did not react at all. I realized he was hesitant, but I didn't know why. So, I began this task which consisted in meeting the actors and testing their knowledge of Arabic to see if we could go further with them. In certain cases, right from the start, it was obvious that they didn't have a sufficiently high level of language. Also, some of the actors could reproduce the sounds of classical Arabic, but couldn't read it. I had prepared for them some texts written phonetically to enable them to do the voice tests. Many of them worked on their own, then came back to do new tests. We did a second selection, then conducted a series of recordings during which I prompted the actors by reading out Jenane's lines. Michel listened to these tapes to choose the actors. At one point, Gigi said to me: «You should record a tape of you doing Jenane's voice so that Michel can get an idea of what you sound like». To which I replied: «He's already heard me doing the part on all the casting tapes! He already knows my voice, so he should know if he likes it or not! But I hadn't given up the idea that the role would be mine one day!»



How did you react when you discovered the project?

Hiam Abbas: My elder daughter and I had watched *Kirikou and the Sorceress* dozens and dozens of times. So, right from the start of this project, I already knew Michel's world. I loved the story of *Azur & Asmar*, which shows, in a universal way, how you can bring two shores closer together. I have roots in two cultures, so I recognized my own world. The mixture of two languages affected me as I have also used this combination of French and classical Arabic in the short film *La Danse Eternelle* that I had directed a year before.

As an actress, which scenes in Azur & Asmar particularly affected you?

Hiam Abbas: I was overwhelmed when the father sends Jenane away. The scene of the separation with Azur, who she considers as her own son, is also very moving. And I love the ending, which is beautiful, open and which encourages people to keep their eyes and their hearts open, too. I really like the Crapoux character who has every prejudice going, who denigrates everything he sees in the country he has come to live in. I like the characters' universality, which we perceive intellectually, but also with our feelings thanks to the highly emotional scenes which enable us to identify with them.



CAST

WITH VOICES OF



CREW

naïve



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 Vœux* (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



HIAM ABBAS

ACTRESS (VOICE OF JENANE) AND COACH FOR THE ARAB-SPEAKING ACTORS

Hiam Abbas was born in 1960 in Nazareth, Palestine and has been living in France since 1989. After studying photography, she trained in the Al-Hakawati Theater in Jerusalem and began her acting career in 1983, then joined the Beit El Kharma Children's Theater in Haifa. In 1986, she was given her first movie part in Michel Khleifi's film, *Wedding in Galilee*. Since then, she has acted in about twenty short and feature films including *Haifa* by Rashid Masharawi in 1995, *The Kid* from Chaaba by Christophe Ruggia in 1996, *Raddem* by Danièle Arbid in 1997, *Living in Paradise* by Bourlem Guerdjou in 1998, *Ali Rabiaa et les Autres* by Ahmed Boulane, *Red Satin* by Raja Amari and *Munich* by Steven Spielberg in 2005. Hiam Abbas has also written and directed two short films: *Le Pain* (2001) and *La Danse Eternelle* (2004).

ACTRESS



GABRIEL YARED

MUSIC COMPOSER
OSCAR, GOLDEN GLOBE AND CÉSAR WINNERSELECTED

FILMOGRAPHY



CHRISTOPHE ROSSIGNON

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

NORD-OUEST PRODUCTION

LAZENNEC PRODUCTION

