

the Black Pharaoh the Savage and the Princess

a film by
Michel Ocelot

ANNÉCY 2022
FESTIVAL
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Synopsis

Three tales, three ages, three worlds. At the time of Ancient Egypt, a young king becomes the first black pharaoh to deserve the hand of his loved one. During the French Middle Ages, a mysterious wild boy steals from the rich to give to the poor. In the 18th century Turkey, a prince of pastries and a princess of roses escape the palace to live their love.



INTERVIEW WITH Michel Ocelot



How did you choose these three tales that create a film that is both varied and harmonious?

It took me six years to make *Dilili in Paris* (it was the same for my other feature films). Once the animators' work was completed, it was as if suddenly my brain had permission to think about something else; something else meaning a new film. After making a movie that was heavy in many respects, I wanted to move on to something that was more lighthearted, much like after having heard an opera, listening to a lovely little ditty (which often lives in peoples' minds longer than an opera). I had already

taken note several years ago of a tale retold by Henri Pourrat, *The Tale of the Handsome Savage*. And I followed this beautiful tale's original story more closely than I usually do.

Then I leafed through another collection of tales from Morocco. Within a story that spoke of something completely different, there was mention of a young girl who expressed her keen interest in a handsome fritter-monger, which recalls stories from *A Thousand and One Nights*. That made me want to make a "Turkish" fantasia, like Moliere or Mozart. A "comédie-ballet" having exotic costumes without trying to be historically accurate. I located the story in Istanbul to take advantage of the extraordinary scenery and costumes there. But the prince, princess and her ladies in waiting are more from Trianon than Topkapi. All the same, I took into account the nations that crossed paths with each other in this extraordinary part of the world, Anatolia, with the calling and shouting of the market sellers peddling their fare and wares.

The third tale comes from one of those surprises that life sometimes reserves for you. The director of the Louvre museum invited me to meet him to speak about collaborating on a project. It was with great pleasure that I met Jean-Luc Martinez. I started by telling him I had absolutely no idea what I could possibly have to do with the Louvre. During our conversation, he spoke to me about a special exhibition that was being prepared called "Pharaoh of the Two Lands, the African Story of the Kings of Napata." My synapses were on fire as on the one hand, Egyptian civilization has fascinated

me since 6th grade, and on the other, there was Sub-Saharan Africa where I spent the greater part of my childhood (a connection reinforced by the story of *Kirikou and the Sorceress*). I suggested making an animated film and asked him for all the documentation available concerning the exhibition. That also gave me a behind the scenes look at how such a museum exhibit is prepared.

I read the translation of *The Dream Stele*. It's the story of a Kushite king (Northern Sudan) who dreams that he conquers all of Egypt. When he awakes, he decides to undertake this challenge and succeeds. I quite closely followed his journey in my script, emphasizing a lovely element of this dynasty: the Kushites were not a cruel people, and further, they had a culture of forgiveness. The story was approved by the Louvre museum, which produced part of the film. I developed the narrative with the help of Vincent Rondot, who heads the Louvre's Egyptian department, and specializes in this African dynasty. It was a true pleasure to collaborate with him. As a result, this tale is the most historically accurate of the three. And I already had a very good base thanks to my lifelong passion for this subject.

Did you fill up notebooks with ideas for tales or sketches of characters to return to at some point later?

No, and I'm probably wrong not to do so. Moliere had a little notebook, Bruno Bozetto, the great Italian author and animator uses a recording device, and me, nothing at all! I only start jotting things down from the moment when I decide to make a film. Well, not exactly. When I read, I use

sheets of paper as a bookmark to have something in hand if I want to note down a possible idea that comes to me, right off the page, instead of waiting and perhaps forgetting about it later. Some of these ideas do indeed end up in my films, either as details here and there, or as the main subject.

Did you have three different animation teams for the three stories so that they could progress on the same timeline?

There were indeed three teams, but the reasons for this organization had more to do with financing. The first tale came out remarkably well thanks to McGuff Belgium – Belgium once again helped me to finance my film. I am in fact a French-Belgian author – of which I am proud. Other financing came from the Grand Est region of France. We planned on having two teams for the two other tales, one working remotely, the other in the EJT-Laboratory studio at Saint Quirin in Lorraine, France. The remote working didn't turn out very well between Covid, a lack of contact and software that wasn't up to par. The team that moved to the Lorraine forest had the biggest chunk of work, a very young and enthusiastic team. I was there all the time, of course. It also allowed me to finally discover this fascinating part of France, the Alsace and Moselle regions, while in very good company.

The Black Pharaoh

In the first tale, you use the esthetic of Ancient Egyptian frescos. How did you tackle the animation of these characters that have always been represented in profile? The audience only sees their full faces after several minutes, in the chess-playing scene with Nasalsa and her mother, the Queen regent, who turns to the camera.

We replicated the very specific posture seen in Egyptian bas-relief paintings, which is impossible to physically reproduce, as the head and the legs are placed in profile while the torso is facing frontwards. However, this position works well in painting, and we were able to transpose it into animation. During the process, we took certain liberties to better tell the story. We used full face and three-quarter views, necessary for recounting the story (you can find examples of frontal depictions in Egyptian frescos if you search for them). We used flat elements, articulated puppets, as well as digital technology, of course.

What did you change in drawing the characters with respect to Ancient Egypt's esthetic canons?

Practically nothing. A great many artists went to a great deal of trouble during three thousand years to create what became the film's characters – we took advantage of their hard work! And in my bookcases at home, I have at least 20 books entirely devoted to Ancient Egypt. I regularly consult them just for the pleasure of spending time with these images. In fact, I'm one of the artists who depicted Ramses II. I was elated to work with these images and transmit them to the animators.

For the audience, there is great pleasure in discovering the beauty of your images, characters and scenery. Part of this pleasure has to do with the pared-down visuals, notably in the first tale. There are no superfluous details. The characters don't have outlines, instead they are made up of shapes and colors. Can you describe this artistic choice, and the process of transposing historical documents into images for this story?

If we had exactly imitated Egyptian painting, we would have had to keep the outlines. I removed them for technical reasons. When breaking down elements intended for movement, if a stretched out arm bends, a part of the outline goes into the flesh on one side and is missing on the other. But without the contoured lines, the elements naturally blend in regardless of the position, and the problem is solved. I was happy with this esthetic choice for many reasons, it allowed for pure bodies, and having jewels that kept their contour lines made them appear even more decorative and precious.

Tell us about your collaboration with Vincent Rondot, the curator for Egyptian Antiquities at the Louvre. When you were thinking about the graphic design, did he point out certain elements and symbols that were important to keep in reference to gods and goddesses, or for the depiction of objects, such as Tanwetamani's great oar ship?

I first created the figures on my own, with the knowledge I had gleaned from my passion for Ancient Egypt, which allowed me to create designs that were mostly on target. But something detestable happened. Over the years, from *Kirikou* to *Dilili*, I have received endless criticism for depicting women's breasts. For *Azur and Asmar*, I was even asked by American journalists if I would accept cutting the opening sequence for distribution in the USA. This scene simply showed a wet nurse breastfeeding a small child.



As a result, for this new film, I instinctively covered the princesses' and goddesses' breasts. But today I am aghast that I could ever do that. Fortunately, Vincent Rondot said to me: "You can't do that! Everybody in Egypt was bare-chested!!" (he laughs). Freed from this curse, I happily redrew their dresses to be accurate – starting under the breasts, and for the regent I draped her dresses diagonally across her chest, following the Kushite style, letting her generous left breast appear uncovered. She is magnificent. All the rest was checked and approved by Vincent Rondot and his team. But concealing breasts was the only crime I committed. I'll be forever annoyed with myself for that.

So you received a good grade for this quiz on Ancient Egypt!

Yes! (laughter) After a screening of the film, Vincent Rondot said that what we saw was not a simple representation but a knowledgeable, indeed intimate and loving vision of Egypt.

The Savage

Did you choose to work with black silhouettes for the second tale because it is well suited to the castle's dimly lit rooms and the surrounding woods where the handsome savage lives, or was it for budgetary reasons?

For both these reasons. Finances always come into question, but I also very much like the elegant style of black silhouette as an artistic approach. And it fits in beautifully with the dismal side of the story and the atmosphere of the Middle Ages. It's a win-win situation.



What did you most appreciate during your journey in Auvergne, France, when you were scouting for “locations” for this tale?

I first have to point out that this journey almost never happened. I was getting ready to make an “international” film about the Middle Ages like so many other films representing that era. But then suddenly I had a great idea. I thought: “I have depicted so many places with care, precision and respect such as Japan, Persia, Tibet, North Africa, Pre-Columbian America, the Caribbean and other places. What if I depicted Auvergne with the same accuracy and reverence!” So I started my research. I attempted to make a list of everything that epitomizes Auvergne. People who love this part of France, which is very seldom depicted, will be able to pick up on references that they will certainly appreciate.

I made two trips. One in autumn and another in spring, camera in hand. I of course noticed the gray volcanic rock, which is sometimes a very dark gray, like the Clermont-Ferrand Cathedral, which befits the tale’s austerity. The lauze stone rooftops as well. I appreciated the city of Salers in particular, as well as Besse en Chandesse. I took pictures of the arches in Riom, and several other things found in Clermont-Ferrand. I was very impressed with the number of castles and how different they were from one another. I used the outline of the Chateau de Val for the exterior of my fortress and elements from the Chateau de Murol for the interiors. I admired the nature from near and far. From afar, I was struck by the sheer scale of the horizons you discover there, whereas we tend to think of the area as being more compact.

The gently sloping mountains that allow you to be continually elevated, just at the right level, resulting in multiple extraordinary panoramas, and grandiose landscapes. I walked away with an impression of this part of France being about great open spaces and

air. Up close, I admired the trees, which I sprinkled throughout the film, even inside rooms. I capped my heroes’ heads with leaves, like the young, elegant characters illustrated in *The Duke of Berry’s Book of Hours*. I duly filmed the Salers cattle with their mahogany colored coats and long horns, and I even recorded their bells. All of the marvelous things I found couldn’t be included in the film, which mainly takes place inside the castle’s great hall. It’s frustrating. I have enough material to make several films about Auvergne.

In this tale, as in all of your films, we appreciate the straightforward, concise dialogue. Your characters express thoughts and feelings that can be very complex in a way that is understandable by everyone, even the youngest moviegoers. Can you speak to us about the way you write dialogue so that everything is crystal-clear without it being overly simplistic for adults?

Beaumarchais said: “*I can’t be credited with writing dialogue, because it’s my characters who dictate it to me.*” I feel the same way. I’ve had a taste for theater since I was a teenager. I liked Alfred De Musset’s plays. He was never lucky when it came to his plays being performed. They were interrupted by various incidences such as a revolution. He ended up giving up on theater, but not on dialogue, writing *Theater in an Armchair*, with much more freedom than he would have if he’d had to take the constraints of a stage production into account (*Lorenzaccio* is an example of the liberty afforded by this approach).

Moreover, my parents subscribed to the magazine *L’Avant-Scene [Downstage]*, which published the texts of plays that were currently being performed. I thus continued to literally read plays in an armchair, modern and old plays alike, and to live with dialogue on a daily basis. The dialogue is the part that comes to me quickest. I then do a great deal of rereading; that goes for everything I write. I am careful to only

use useful words without any flourishes. I’m also partial to being succinct. When one of my first films was subtitled, I was uncomfortable with the fact that the image was partially spoiled by the subtitles, for words that really didn’t add much to the story. Since then, I’ve always asked myself with reference to certain words: “does the word justify spoiling the image?” If the answer is “we can do without,” then I take it out. When I reread myself, I become a ruthless professor, hunting down any slip-ups, things that sound falsely sincere, anything that has cracks or sounds empty. I try to be comprehensible to everyone. Another way I reread myself is at the animatic stage, where I voice all of the roles out loud, which is recorded. This allows me to check the dialogue in its spoken form.

When directing the actors, we can tell that you want the dialogue to be enunciated very distinctly, that things should be said so that everyone can hear them completely and understand them fully.

To me it’s obvious. We need to understand every single syllable! I’m surprised when at times people criticize me for my characters’ diction, as if they were speaking a foreign language. I have a sweet anecdote. For *Dilili in Paris*, I chose a young kid from the streets who dubs series to play the role of a young man who helps the heroine. He spent everyday with the team of actors who all worked together for a week recording the dialogue. And one day, the parents of this young actor, Enzo Ratsito, asked him: “*How is it that you are suddenly speaking so well?*”

“GOOD” rubs off on people just as much as “BAD.” Enzo had spent all of his days surrounded by excellent actors, some from the Comédie Française, and by the end of the week, he could have played in a piece by Moliere. It was a disaster for me (laughter)! I know that when you surround children with good diction, they will follow suit and speak well.



The Princess

The charm of the third tale comes from an abundance of beautiful details: luxuriant gardens, embroidered costumes inlaid with gems, interiors overflowing with mosaics and the decorations on the Grand Vizier's shimmering carriage. This story is like opening a treasure chest. We are filled with wonder, and left terribly hungry for a taste of those fritters!

And perhaps also to try the rose jam? (laughter) At the bazaar we see all sorts of edible delights. Sensuality is one of life's pleasures. This tale is a story of love and gastronomy! I had the advantage of an excellent source of information: Eminé Seker, a godsend who was assisting me with direction, happens to be Turkish and also provided guidance in this respect. For instance, she is the one who suggested that using zucchini fritters, although less "poetic" than rose jam, was more accurate, for Turkish fritters are more savory than sweet. I also very much liked the idea of zucchini in the middle of a love story.

This opulent visual approach is diametrically opposed to the pared-down style of the first tale.

Indeed, I like both styles; but for this story of luxury I kept adding things. We made full use of the Topkapi Palace and other more recent palaces, but added to the decoration which was already over-the-top. In particular I'm referring to the ceremonial room where the princess spies on the fritter-monger.

You approached this tale like an Oriental fantasy from the 18th century without worrying about being historically accurate. But what were your sources of inspiration? Travels? Coffee table books of the palaces and period costumes? Illustrations from the time period?

I wanted to create something that was visually beautiful, entertaining, colorful, and funny without ethnographic pretensions. Türkiye inspired me for the costumes and scenery, and more broadly Anatolia, as is seen in the outdoor market sequence, which evokes every ethnicity that has passed through this extraordinary region. I conducted a great deal of research – it's one of the things I particularly enjoy when preparing for a film. A precious source for costumes was Octavien Dalvimart's *The Costume of Turkey*, published at the end of the 18th century, after having been brought back from Istanbul. We see these surprising costumes sprinkled here and there in the film.

How did the idea for the storyteller come to you, with the scaffolding and construction site as a background?

I wasn't looking to link these independent films, and I had considered having credits after each story, because the audience absolutely needs a moment to regroup before entering the next world. However, it didn't look nice. But as my art is that of telling stories, I thought, let's bring in a storyteller, man or woman, to allow the audience to take a step back in between each story. This image marks an historic era in our lives, the Covid pandemic that came as if out of nowhere, and the first lockdown, which was extreme and alarming, when the country was immobilized, and everyone was living in standby mode. This was my very first drawing during the first week of that silence, that unimaginable emptiness. A woman in work clothes, because everyone is going to have to roll up their sleeves; with a chic scarf, because there is no question of letting ourselves

go; exuding a young, energetic, whimsical, universal vibe, because more energy than ever will be needed when the "war" is over. The scenery became obvious: a worksite of Reconstruction. And people are there, because it is lunchbreak: they play their part in an open civilization, which continues.

The theme connecting the three stories is rebellion – justified – against parental authority. Is this on your part a desire to tell children: believe in yourselves, express yourselves, be yourself because the adults who believe they know everything are often wrong?

Would you believe that I didn't do it on purpose?! I wanted to depict three tales that were completely different from one another, without trying to find something that links them. And I didn't intend to turn against parents! I should make it clear here (for whatever purpose it may serve) that I had a very good father and a very good mother, and so I have no scores to settle in that respect. My heroes simply revolt against undue authority! I encourage people to be free, to refuse to bow down before or obey toxic rules. When I prepare a film, I glean things from here and there, without preconceived ideas. Children and adults expect me to surprise and convince them, and to do that, I aim for truth and sincerity. Today, I meet young adults who saw my films during their childhood and thank me. It's extraordinary. Moreover, most of the animators who joined our team told me: "We grew up with your films and you are the reason we are here." I often go to meet the public, and audience members of all age groups speak to me. It's tremendous for a filmmaker to see what their work has inspired over the years. I'm a happy man; I feel blessed.

Crew

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