

CULTURAL CONNECTIONS TO JAPAN – Part 3: Mr Stéphane Roelants

In this article series by the Cultural Section of the Embassy of Japan in Luxembourg, we present many different important personalities who have shaped the cultural connections between Japan and Luxembourg over the years. Thank you for reading and please enjoy!

The Life and Work of Mr Stéphane Roelants

In an industrial zone in Contern, tucked away in a large blue glass-fronted building, is the Mélusine Productions, with its sister studio, Studio 352. Upon entering, one is greeted with a comfortable atmosphere, many offices where people draw digitally on their screens, or sketch and scan their paper. The main hallway leads to a big room, with many awards from all over the world: Oscar nominations and César awards, a Tokyo anime award, several Luxembourgish film awards, and an Annecy animation award – many more adorn the shelves and walls. One of the newest film releases is “Summit of the Gods”, a French-Luxembourgish movie based on a Japanese manga by Jiro Taniguchi.

Today, we speak to Mr Stéphane Roelants, the CEO and founder of Mélusine Productions and Studio 352, his story and his way into animation, the beauty of Jiro Taniguchi’s works and how a Luxembourgish studio adapted a Japanese manga into an award-winning film. Mr Roelants is a tall 57-year old man with a heartwarming aura around him, sitting merrily in his office – surrounded by many framed artworks, novels and comics.

The Early Days and the Start of two Studios

Mr Stéphane Roelants’ curriculum vitae is an interesting one. Born in Mons, Belgium, in 1965 and raised by his grandmother, he soon found a love for the arts.

“Despite me loving everything that was culture and media, I didn’t want to study it, not to spoil my view on the things I loved. So, instead of literature or art, I studied law and applied economics. And I *hated* it.” He remarks with a big laugh. “But it would pay off afterwards, especially as someone who is a producer – you generate budget, take care of planning, bring a team together, do all the paperwork. Having a degree in economics was a huge benefit for that.”

At first, Mr Stéphane Roelants started out as a “service provider”, someone who puts a team together for a production or a commission, based on projects, in Belgium, for movies and documentaries. Reaching outwards then to London and Los Angeles, he got more experience in distribution and production management, even working for Disney for their TV shows. But he soon noticed that he wanted a proper team, a solid group of people that would work together for many years, not project



Mr Roelants explains his life story and philosophy

by project. That is why he founded Studio 352, an animation studio, in 1996, and then Mélusine Productions in 1998, which produces documentaries and animation, in Luxembourg.

“And all of the 45 people who joined me back then are still with me today.” He announces with pride. “Building a proper studio is important. You want talented people who can all work together and grow together, animators, artists, concept designers, all of them. Back then, other producers were screaming: ‘No, don’t do that, you will just lose money by building a whole studio!’ I didn’t listen, and that was the right decision.” This was also the time where Mélusine Productions and Studio 352 jumped from TV animation to film animation.

An opportunity for a Japanese adaptation presents itself

Several years later in the early 2010s, when Mr Stéphan Roelants was approached by French producer Mr Jean-Charles Ostorero for an adaptation of “Summit of the Gods”, he could not believe it, and immediately considered saying: “No.”

A 90-minute adaptation of a 5-volume manga with over 3000 pages, by such a beloved author who has a worldwide reputation? It seemed impossible to do, with a big responsibility and a huge risk. It would require a gigantic challenge in script-writing, trimming down and omitting a lot of content from a work considered by many to be a masterpiece.

However, he couldn’t simply resist, the temptation of a chance to be involved with a film adaptation of one of his favourite authors. Mr Roelants had to agree. He said: “Yes.”

Over the next 10 years that the film took in production, Mr Roelants met Jiro Taniguchi in Paris several times, and was immediately fascinated. He presented his film script and pre-production of “Summit of the Gods” to Jiro Taniguchi, and the mangaka liked it very much. He agreed with the decision to reduce the film to its main core of two mountaineers, Joji Habu and Makoto Fukamachi, and how their lives interlock. Having the blessing of the original author was everything Mr Roelants needed.

“The hardest thing about ‘Summit of the Gods’ for me was that for the first time I made a movie where I was the target audience. I always produced and made films where I was not the audience – children’s movies, teenage movies, family films – and that gave me a mindset to work with: Understand and respect your target audience, and make what they will love, with challenging yet appropriate subjects and positive messages that will support them. It gives a professional distance between me and my work, and I love my works. ... But with “Summit of the Gods”, I was suddenly the one sitting in the audience. I am a Taniguchi fan, I am the one who would go to the cinema to watch it!” Mr Roelants remarks, with a laugh.

But what initially seemed like a downside, turned into a big positive. Together with his studio, artists, animators, other producers and the director Mr Partick Imbert, they got to work, to meet Taniguchi’s high standard of storytelling and art.

“All the backgrounds for the movie were done at Studio 352 for example, to have a close look and control on the beauty of nature, and the complexity of the cities.” He explains, “We did a lot of research, to make sure all the mountaineering gear is real, the techniques used in mountain climbing are accurate, the



Mr Roelants merrily recalls his early days, happy to tell his story

clothing, the typewriters, the city scape, down to the cars and trains of the 1990s Japan, where the story takes place. ... We only made up some coffee brands in a vending machine in the film, but the rest is all accurate to life, just as Taniguchi did himself in his manga!" Mr Roelants declares with a big laugh. There is a high focus on details in Taniguchi's work, that feels not overwhelming, but calming instead – a key aspect of his style.

Jiro Taniguchi and the Culture of the World

The art of Jiro Taniguchi is something that deeply resonates with people, and that is essentially a transcultural phenomenon, in many directions: Taniguchi's work is very much influenced by the French/Belgian *bande-dessinée* style, used by classics like "The Adventures of Tintin" or "Moebius". Combined with a sense of serenity and Japanese aesthetic of beauty and stillness, his works create a unique visual poetry specific to him. In return, Jiro Taniguchi influenced European comics, even collaborate with the Louvre in Paris for a comic project called "The Guardians of the Louvre" (2014). Unfortunately, Taniguchi passed away in 2017, not being able to see the finished film. But his work continues to speak to people.



On the wall and shelves: Many film awards, such as the Luxembourg Film Award, Cannes Film Festival nominations, Annecy International Animation Film Festival, Tokyo Anime Film Festival, etc.

"Culture goes in all directions, it has influences and effects on each other, and here it goes in a perfect loop: a Japanese mangaka influenced by European comics, who in return incorporated it into his own style, then for the Europeans to make a movie adaptation of his work and release it in Japan to great acclaim." Mr Roelants remarks. "Isn't it beautiful? Culture and its influence on all of humanity cannot be understated – it is the driving motor of us all. Art, film, music, drawing, animation, fiction, people influencing each other's cultures, learning about them, then understanding your own, back and forth with appreciation... It bridges people together, it forms understanding and empathy, and most of all, educates us on the world. It is important to combat racism, xenophobia and everything else that splits humans apart."

He becomes more pensive, as he continues: "The world is in a precarious state right now, we all don't know what could happen in the future, in five years even, where will we be? ... Culture is a shield, a supportive structure, to dream and to understand – essentially, the good side of humanity."

A love for Japan, staying true to oneself and an outlook into the future

"Summit of the Gods" is the pinnacle of Mr Stéphan Roelants' love for Japan. He initially fell in love with Japanese literature, then visited the country for many times, every year for the last 12 years – the pandemic having put an end to that record, for now.

"I visited Japan very often, privately and for work, and I am always fascinated by the culture: The calmness and the idea of becoming a master in something, as well as enjoying the poetry of life, there are so many aspects to love." Professionally, Mr Roelants visited Tokyo very often, to meet with animation industry contemporaries and for award shows. On the wall is an award for "Song of the Sea", "Feature Film Competition Grand Prize" from the Tokyo Anime Award festival 2015, a movie Mr Stéphan Roelants produced with Mélusine Productions. Animation truly crosses borders and connects people. "I like the Japanese idea of taking a lot of time to become a master. Decades of work, until one day, maybe you can become someone who knows his craft. Never stop learning in your field of work and in life, and always

improve. ... I sometimes wonder, can I call myself a producer? Am I already one, or am I still on my way to become one?" He wonders, sitting in his office full of memories, where more memories are added every day.

When asked what his greatest achievement is, he ponders for a moment, and then remarks: "That I could stay true to myself." A sentimental, yet proud tone is in his voice. "I always wanted to work in the arts, with culture, and I could do that. I do what I love – and I'm 100% sure that if I didn't like what I do anymore, I would stop immediately. If I were to produce films that are only there to make money, I could not live with myself – use a different studio to do that for you, there are many. Movies are not just entertainment, they are there to educate people, young and old, to show them a different perspective, and give positive messages, sometimes about difficult topics too."

He gestures while talking, hands weaving the thoughts he expresses: "I think that's why it's important that I didn't give up on my own projects, next to my professional work: I give seminars at the Haute Ecole Albert Jacquard in Belgium about scriptwriting and transmedia, I still write scripts and books, and I direct documentaries – a series about the history of fantasy will be released on the culture TV channel "arte" next month, "Aux sources de la fantasy". If I was only a producer who looks at spreadsheets, budget and money, with no sense of art and what it means to create art, I would not be good at my job."



*The proud producer and his movie:
"Summit of the Gods"*

He thinks for a bit. "When I was a teenager, I fell in with a wrong crowd for a while. I started lying to impress the other boys, 'I played in this football club' or 'I totally did that'. Thankfully, my grandma told me to stop, that I should always stay true to myself, don't lie and force yourself to be a different person – it will only destroy you in the long run, the dishonesty and the lies come back to you from the inside and from the outside. ... And that's how I still want to be, just be a good person overall. Time is short, mastery takes more than a lifetime, and it is vital to me to make the world just a little bit better with the films I produce. I am at peace with myself, and that is what counts." He looks up: "I didn't expect the interview to take such a turn, I think I never told anyone that, haha!"

Mr Stéphan Roelants will continue to produce movies, the next one also has a Japanese connection, and is set to release in 2023: "Kensuke's Kingdom". The animated film is based on the eponymous novel by Michael Morpurgo, an English author, and world-renowned Japanese actor Ken Watanabe is set to voice Kensuke, a ship-wrecked wise man. In the office next to his, one can already see the animators hard at work, drawing the fauna and flora of the jungle.

Is there anything he wants to give as a piece of advice to the next generation? "Explore the world and explore literature!" he says with enthusiasm. "There is a reason I always let my scriptwriting students read Homer's Odyssey as their first assignment: Learn the roots and grow from there! Of course they will groan and say that the book is as big as a brick, wanting to just read the Wikipedia summary. But it is important to immerse yourself in the world, do not stay just on the surface, dive deep into the matter you want to explore, with a lot of research! Always stay curious about the world!"