



Asterix and his Creators

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Anthea Bell talks about **Translating Goscinny** and **Tony Bradman** meets **Uderzo**.

Asterix made his first appearance in 1959. He is now an international institution, beloved and collected by adults and children alike. He's been translated into thirty languages and over 140 million copies of the books have been sold throughout the world.

Goscinny and **Uderzo**, his creators, seemed an eternal combination but, sadly, Rene Goscinny died last year. Asterix fans mourned and wondered if that was the end. It wasn't. Who better to take on the writing than Albert Uderzo, the man whose drawings first gave such distinctive and definitive shape to Asterix, and the characters we know as Getafix, Obelix and Vitalstatix. This month his first solo title, **Asterix and the Great Divide**, is published.

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It is translated, as are all the other Asterix titles by Anthea Bell and Derek Hockridge. To mark the occasion and in modest commemoration of Rene Goscinny -

Anthea Bell tells us about

Translating Goscinny (and Uderzo)

Of all the tricky assignments that may come a translators way, I think a funny book is the most perilous. Humour is so elusive anyway, so hard to define. Can it be transplanted from its native soil? A dozen years or so ago, when Derek Hockridge and I were beginning the translation of **Asterix the Gaul**, we certainly wondered.

That was the first book in the **Asterix saga**. Twenty-five albums later, we're too close to Asterix, Obelix and the other Ancient Gauls to know how far we personally have succeeded, but at least we've heard English children laugh at the stories. And you can't force a child's spontaneous laughter.

Asterix works on several levels, and for the first you don't need any language at all, which gives a translator a good start. Before any of the titles in the series were translated into English, I saw and shall always remember a group of English children, aged about four to eight, totally absorbed in a pile of French **Asterix** books. Most of them could hardly read their own language yet, let alone French, but the detailed, action-packed drawing was enough to engage their attention and give them the gist of the stories.

But, we've been asked as translators, when we get to the words isn't Asterix too Gallic for his flavour to come across? I think not: after all, the basic theme of cunning and good humour outwitting brute force is fairly universal. (Surely Odysseus is everyone's favourite Greek hero, leaving Hector and Achilles and the rest of the muscle-men nowhere in

the ratings.) Goscinny and Uderzo set that theme in a totally coherent world of its own; such a coherence of atmosphere seems to me a pre-requisite for making humour work (look at P G. Wodehouse). Ancient Gaul, as inhabited by Asterix and his friends, has its own rules and sticks to them. For instance, there's never any blood: you can safely laugh at the biffing and the bashing because it is quite plain that the Romans, comically battered as they are, will live to fight another day - though preferably not to fight Gauls.

Then, however, there is the more complicated verbal level of the Asterix stories, the level involving topical references, literary quotation, cheerful puns and extended wordplay. This is the difficult bit for the translator. As explaining a joke obviously kills it stone dead, it's necessary to think of parallel English jokes here.

There are the intricately comic French names. The Gaulish village chief, in French, is Abraracourcix. If you attack someone **a bras raccourcis**, you are attacking him violently. The chief was renamed Vitalstatistix for English consumption: a stroke of luck, as it turned out, since later on there came a French title (**Asterix and the Chieftain's Shield** in English) in which the character goes off to slim at a health farm, making our English name apter than we had known.

Topicality has its hazards. We named a Briton Selectivemploymentax, and where is S.E.T. now? On the other hand, Ekonomikrisis (a Phoenician merchant) is still with us. There are a few names like Stratocumulus which will do as well in English as French, but not many: such is the ingenuity of Goscinny and Uderzo. Ironically, there's a perfectly good Anglo-American word used as a name in the French original of **Asterix and the Great Divide**, and we can't use it in English. It belongs to half of a Romeo and Juliet set-up: Fanzine, who incidentally is an answer to those who claim that Asterix is anti-feminist, since she's clever and sensible as well as pretty. We can't use her name because it is our now well-established convention to have all the women's mock-classical and Gaulish names ending in -a. So she becomes Melodrama, paired with her young man Histrionix (Comix in French).

By now, the number of proper names we have had to invent for the English versions of **Asterix** is close on three hundred. We've got a little list. And another list of songs, since characters are inclined to break into parodies of French popular ditties. And another of Latin words and phrases in everyday use, since even they may be different in English; you can't absolutely count on an English reader's recognizing the Latin motto of the city of Paris.

Some of the French historical or literary allusions would be lost on most English readers, and again we look for English parallels. It's lucky that we share with the French the distinction of having been invaded by Julius Caesar, so we know about him all right. Admittedly, I shall never, never be able to take the historical Caesar seriously again, but then there always *was* something faintly ridiculous about him in the irreverent English schoolchild's mind. 'Julius Caesar the Roman geezer, caught his nose in a lemon squeezer,' didn't he?

In the end, however, it all depends on the wholeness of Goscinny and Uderzo's imaginary world. The soil of that world is rich enough to cling to the roots of the joke and keep it alive even when it's transplanted to another language. Or so it seems, on the evidence of the children who write us letters about Asterix. I felt sure Asterix was a very good joke when I first read him in French; I think you just can't keep a good joke down.

and

Tony Bradman describes

Meeting Uderzo

Albert Uderzo and Rene Goscinny were born only six months apart, Goscinny in 1926 and Uderzo in 1927. But it wasn't until 1953 that they met each other in the Paris office of a Belgian Press agency, where they were both working independently as author-illustrators of comic strips for various newspapers and magazines.

That meeting sparked off a working relationship which was to lead six years later to the creation of one of the most popular cartoon characters ever - Asterix the Gaul. Uderzo himself thinks that it was the cosmopolitan aspects of their

respective backgrounds, and Goscinny's especially, which formed the basis of their joint creation and his runaway success.

"Many of my generation were heavily influenced before the war by American cartoon characters. We almost took in Walt Disney with our mothers' milk."

Uderzo's mother and father were (ironically enough for the man who was to spend most of his working life making fun of the Romans) Italian, as his name indicates, and only arrived in France in 1922. He was born in the beautiful Cathedral city of Rheims, and his family moved to Paris when he was two, where he spent most of his childhood. At about the same time, Goscinny's father - a chemical engineer -- was moving his family and the two-year-old Rene to Argentina, from where they moved on to spend seven years in the United States. It was there that he too came under the influence of the ubiquitous Walt Disney.

Independently, both Goscinny and Uderzo had decided that they wanted to create cartoon characters and comic strips. ("It was a disease I caught very young.") They had both gravitated to the Belgian press agency because "at that time Belgium was the home of comic strips on the continent, with characters like Tintin." Their partnership began as "a marriage of convenience."

"Goscinny felt happier just writing scripts than with drawing, and I felt happier just doing the drawings, so we decided to work together. We did several other things before Asterix, like a series on Oumpah Pah the Indian. But it did develop into a real friendship, and I miss him terribly."

Uderzo showed how deeply he had felt the tragedy of Goscinny's unexpected death by going on to talk about him at great length. Interestingly enough, even when talking about trying to find the idea which was to become *Asterix and the Great Divide*, his first completely solo effort, he still constantly used the first person plural - "we found an idea in the end".

"Goscinny was an extraordinary man, and it would take me days to explain him properly. He was a man for whom words were a religion, and he was always as funny in life as he could be in his Asterix stories. He always loved to tell jokes and have people around him to whom he could tell funny stories. Humour was a way of life for him.

"As far as I'm concerned, he brought to France a completely new form of humour which, because of the American influence on him, was more Anglo-Saxon than Latin. It's difficult to explain, but it comes down to the fact that the Anglo-Saxon way of cracking a joke is different from the Latin way, and his sense of humour had a dash of roguishness. It's influenced two generations of comic strips already."

Where did they get the idea for Asterix? "It was very simple, really. In France the first thing children learn about history is 'our ancestors the Gauls' and particularly Vercingetorix, the leader whom Caesar defeated at the battle of Alesia. It's a national obsession. We simply thought it would be funny to do it.

"When I was doing some preliminary sketches for a character, I thought at first of someone big, strong and ugly. That's the way Vercingetorix is always depicted, anyway. But Goscinny said, no, that wasn't his idea. At that time, all the editors we were working for wanted characters just like that, like the American characters and particularly Superman - all big and strong. They were always going on at us to make heroes who were real heroes, and we were so fed up with that sort of pressure that we wanted to do something completely different. It was Goscinny's idea to create an anti-hero."

Success came quickly. Asterix first saw the light of day in the magazine *Pilote* in 1959, and the first book - Asterix the Gaul - appeared in an edition of 15,000 which quickly sold out. From then on, it was like Topsy, and each edition just grew and grew, from 30,000 copies to 300,000 and more. In France many people thought it was successful because it "symbolised" the French national spirit, and particularly the age of De Gaulle, even drawing parallels between the latter's name and the first title - **Asterix the Gaul**. Uderzo denies this strongly.

"We never wanted it to be nationalistic, and we were even very pleased when it was successful in other countries,

because we thought that proved it had more than just a nationalistic sentiment. Why was it so successful? If only I knew! I think it's impossible to say for definite. Success usually comes if you arrive at the right time, at the right place with the right idea, and I think that's what happened. People have said that it was because it's about the 'indomitable minority' fighting back against the 'great machine of state'.

"There's an element of that, of course, and it's based on the contrast which we tried to emphasise between the rigid, rectilinear Romans with their roads and laws, and the anarchy of the Celts. But it's a lot of other things too, and the fact that its appeal is so wide means to me that there must be more than just that in it.

"We wrote it originally for children, but we never aimed it at a specific age or audience. We realised at the beginning that adults would probably like it too. The spirit in which we started was very simple. We wanted to amuse ourselves, and we weren't surprised when adults liked it as much as they did - we liked it, and we're adults, after all.

"I think humour is universal, anyway. It doesn't need to be too intellectual or too simple, it's just got to be good. In the end, either it's funny or it isn't. There are no other rules. Our sole aim at the beginning - and it hasn't changed - was very simple. We wanted to give people enjoyment."

Uderzo says that actually working with Goscinny on a new title was "marvellous. We used to spend ages trying to think of a new idea - which was always the hardest part - and once we had one, we used to get together and bounce ideas off each other. It was almost like playing verbal tennis. Neither of us knew any Latin, but we did plenty of research, and in France there's a marvellous dictionary of Latin phrases which we used to consult whenever we needed one.

"Then Goscinny would go off and write the script. He always used to write it out completely, with all the gags and puns. Goscinny loved puns. In fact once the translations started to appear, he had to restrain himself for the sake of the poor translators."

Once Goscinny had completed his script, he sent it to Uderzo so that he could actually start drawing. This made Uderzo, as he says, "the first reader of each new title", which, he admitted, "always had me in fits. I used to laugh a lot less when it actually came to drawing the strips, though." Then the two of them used to get back together to discuss what Uderzo had drawn, and Uderzo says Goscinny was always kind enough to say that he thought the strips were "exactly what he had had in mind when he had written the script."

Asterix really took off in 1966 and 1967 in France, when the whole "Asterix industry" began to boom, with all sorts of spin-offs, from hats and scarves to socks and bags. "At that time, nearly every region of France was claiming that the village of the Gauls had been in their particular area, and one village in the Pas du Calais was very definite about it. But if you look on the map at the beginning of each book, you'll see that it's sited very firmly in Brittany. I didn't have the heart to disillusion them." Uderzo says he put the village in Brittany because he had spent some time there in the war, and the people there - some of whom were real Breton-speaking Celts - "were extraordinary."

When Goscinny died, Uderzo was shattered. He says that he thought "with Goscinny gone, Asterix too is finished." But under the pressure of letters from fans all over the world, he began to ask himself whether he shouldn't try to carry on. "The letters all said, 'What has happened to Asterix? You must carry on! They said that Asterix didn't just belong to me, he belonged to everybody and he hadn't got the right to die. So I thought about it, and talked to Goscinny's wife, and I decided to try and carry on in the same spirit."

Uderzo in fact works very hard at what he calls his "profession". He's totally dedicated to Asterix, and spends 8 or 9 hours a day, seven days a week, working on a new title for up to 8 months. He draws the strips in pencil, then inks them in, and he now has someone to fill in the colours. He's working on the 26th title now, and working so hard that when I met him his drawing hand was swollen and painful. He says that finding a new idea gets harder and harder, but he intends to carry on.

Unlike Goscinny, who spoke fluent English, he's at a disadvantage when it comes to checking the translations of Asterix titles - which now include Japanese and Icelandic. He says that there was even a possibility of a translation into

Romansch, which is an ancient language spoken only by 10,000 people in an inaccessible part of the Swiss Alps. But the three Romansch speakers who got together to talk it over couldn't agree on which dialect to translate it into, and so gave up.

But Uderzo has had all the translations re-translated into French literally so that he can check them, and he's full of praise for Anthea Bell and Derek Hockridge, Asterix's English translators. *"They really have a lot of talent. Translating Asterix is a thankless task, and they do it really creatively. You can't translate most of the puns and gags literally, but they manage to convey exactly the same spirit as we intended without losing any of the flavour."*

Albert Uderzo has the air of a man who is completely happy in what he does, and he says that there is only one thing he would like to do apart from producing one new Asterix a year. He wants some day to set up one company to control the "Asterix empire" as a whole, both publishing and merchandising. "I can't try on every new pair of Asterix socks to see that they're all right, but I'd like to have more control over it."

And what about the future of Asterix in book form? "I just want to keep the continuity and the spirit in which we started going. Do I like Asterix? Of course I do - I'd be very ungrateful if I didn't, after all, he feeds me and my family. But in the end, it's difficult to explain just how attached to him I am. I do like Asterix. And I hope he likes me."

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