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A TOWN CALLED PANIC

a film by Stéphane Aubier & Vincent Patar

Hilarious and frequently surreal, the stop-motion extravaganza *A Town Called Panic* has endless charms and raucous laughs for children from eight to eighty. Based on the Belgian animated cult TV series (which was released by *Wallace & Gromit's* Aardman Studios), *Panic* stars three plastic toys named Cowboy, Indian and Horse who share a rambling house in a rural town that never fails to attract the weirdest events.

Cowboy and Indian's plan to gift Horse with a homemade barbecue backfires when they accidentally buy 50 million bricks. Whoops! This sets off a perilously wacky chain of events as the trio travel to the center of the earth, trek across frozen tundra and discover a parallel underwater universe of pointy-headed (and dishonest!) creatures. Each speedy character is voiced—and animated—as if they are filled with laughing gas. With panic a permanent feature of life in this papier-mâché burg, will Horse and his equine paramour—flame-tressed music teacher Madame Longray (Jeanne Balibar)—ever find a quiet moment alone? A sort of Gallic *Monty Python* crossed with Art Clokey on acid, *A Town Called Panic* is zany, brainy and altogether insane-y!



INTRODUCTION

A Town Called Panic is one of the rare full-length animated films ever to secure the honor of a coveted slot in the Official Selection (in this case, Out of Competition) at Cannes. After René Laloux's *La Planete sauvage* (*Fantastic Planet*) won a Cannes prize in 1973, it was three decades until a French-language animated feature made a splash: *The Triplets of Belleville*. Hollywood animation has found favor with the Festival in the 21st century, with *Shrek* and its sequel, as well as *Over the Hedge* and *Kung Fu Panda* receiving Cannes invitations. Innovative French animated feature *Persepolis* (2007) and acclaimed Israeli animated feature *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) were accepted into the Competition and the 2009 Festival opened with the 3-D computer animated *Up! A Town Called Panic* holds the unique distinction of being the only stop-motion animated feature film ever chosen by the world's most important international film festival.

It's a frenetic comedy through and through, with an arrestingly original visual style and memorably silly voices to match. The inseparable Belgian duo of directors Stéphane Aubier and Vincent Patar—known as Pic Pic André in honor of the central characters in their first popular hand-drawn cartoon—are the film's hands-on animators. In their studio on the outskirts of Brussels they put 1500 plastic toy figures through their mile-a-minute paces over the course of 260 days of production. The improbable but irresistible adventures of the film's plastic protagonists required as many as 200 "clones" per character, painstakingly animated to make a complex technique look as casual and spontaneous as children playing with their toys.

Famed in Belgium and internationally for the brand of absurd humor they've been purveying for over 15 years, Pic Pic André enjoy creating in an informal, family-style setting. For "Panic" is also a state of mind—some would say a state of being pleasantly out of one's mind—shared by the members of La Parti (a production company created by Vincent Tavier, who produced and co-wrote the notorious *Man Bites Dog*.)

Panic, whose cast first appeared in acclaimed short films, follows the offbeat adventures of a dozen characters who happen to be generic plastic toys. Cowboy, Indian and Horse all live together across from their neighbors, Steven the farmer and his wife Jeanine. The directors were able to enlist a brand new character for the feature film: Madame Longray, a very sexy and patient mare who teaches at the local music conservatory. Adding to the customary antics are a band of underwater creatures, up to no good whenever they drop in from their parallel universe.

Aubier and Patar were first inspired to animate Horse in an unsophisticated village setting when they were both students at the Belgian art academy in the Eighties.

The pair worked with eclectic paper cut-outs as well as hand-drawn animation when they hit on the idea of moving stiff plastic toys through a stretch of countryside made out of cardboard. The Panic sensibility was born. Cowboy and Indian—perpetual specialists in creating havoc out of the most mundane occurrences—joined the cast and the village became the epicenter of frantic, relatively short episodes in which the gifted animators piled on dark, offbeat humor while imparting human emotions to cheap plastic toys.

Panic boasts a distinctive, easily recognized approach only its creators can provide: A cast comprised exclusively of ultra-basic but nostalgically evocative children's toys, pleasingly bucolic settings disrupted by a rock 'n' roll sensibility, absurd dialogue and voice talents with such proudly silly delivery that there's no mistaking this cartoon universe for anywhere else.

A Town Called Panic is also a cult TV series whose 20 memorably outrageous animated episodes were telecast in 2003 by Canal+ (in France and Belgium) prior to making their way around the world to festival acclaim and TV popularity (Nickelodeon, WDR, Canal+ Spain, etc.), eventually landing in the excellent hands of the folks at Aardman Studios, who handled the English dubbing.

AN INTERVIEW WITH STÉPHANE AUBIER & VINCENT PATAR

As co-directors, how do you go about deciding which of your four hands will do what?

Vincent Patar: It's hard to say. When we're absorbed in making a film, it's difficult to step back and analyze precisely who did what. Obviously, we complement each other. If Stéphane brings a lot to the script then maybe I'll step up and arrange things a little more in front of the camera, for the more hands-on "directing" portion of a given project. We talk all the time, we're constantly bouncing ideas off each other and somehow a finished project emerges. It's like a permanent game of high-energy ping pong.

In A Town Called Panic the characters and the objects around them aren't all on the same scale. That's not something you see all that often in movies!

Stéphane Aubier: There are two reasons for the discrepancy in sizes. First of all, we happen to think it's funny! And second of all, we wanted to be as spontaneous as possible without having to pay strict attention to perspective and proportions. For example, when the characters go into the house, the building looks tiny, but once they're inside, it's spacious. We like the fact that the characters are a mix of different sizes—it's more interesting for us than having to respect the rules that reproduce a strict sense of reality.

It's as if you're determined to avoid a look that's too "slick" and smooth.

S.A.: Well, for the episodes in the TV series, it was also due to a lack of time—we had to crank them out. But, yes, it's also an aesthetic choice—we like the slightly rough look, even though we put much more time and attention to detail into the feature film.

V.P.: To make sure the result would look good on the big screen, we had to refine our approach and pay special attention to the lighting. That said, we stayed spontaneous in the actual animating and in the way we go about telling the story. Everything has to look natural and effortless, despite the fact that achieving the appearance of spontaneity via stop-motion animation is incredibly painstaking and time-consuming work.

Your sense of humor is way out there on the edge of absurdity, with strong hints of the kind of nonsense that's a British speciality.

S.A.: Not long ago I saw the earliest episodes of the TV show *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. Those guys were incredibly inventive. They'd take ideas that were actually quite simple but brilliant and I love the tone they bring to the results. That said, we've never thought of them as a direct inspiration. Our series has been compared to the atmosphere typical of Jacques Tati or Buster Keaton. But we demand the right to claim our own unique realms where everything has its own logic and the psychological motivations are as unpredictable, personal and wacky as can be.

In that case, where does your inspiration come from?

V.P.: From any and everything around us that we find amusing! Something we see walking down the street, a photo in the newspaper, etc. It's the little details of daily life that nourish our work. Throughout your careers as animators you've used different techniques: paper cut-outs, objects animated frame-by-frame, modeling clay. Is there one method you prefer?

S.A.: What you see in *A Town Called Panic* is a good indication of what we've always set out to do. By using a relatively simple setting and a standard but versatile technique, we have the total freedom to create a world of our own.

What made you decide to take the artistic leap toward a feature-length film?

V.P.: We wanted to tell a fleshed-out story that had more of a sustained structure than a mere collection of free-standing episodes strung together. The other challenge was to maintain the animation style of the TV series—which is fairly “jumpy”—while imparting a somewhat calmer overall rhythm, at the same time using rigid plastic characters. It was tricky to pull off.

S.A.: We wanted to further explore the various settings we'd created for the short films by taking the time to show them off in greater detail.

What was your starting point for A Town Called Panic?

V.P.: We took our initial inspiration from the short film we'd made called *Card Thieves*. That was the episode that went over the best at festivals and seemed to please both critics and the general public. It's the one where the central characters from *Panic* discover an alternate world parallel to their own: Atlantide.

S.A.: These two co-existing but diametrically opposed worlds that neither side suspects is there lend themselves to all sorts of ideas that have enough “oomph” to sustain a feature. Sending our characters off on a mission to explore a completely foreign neighboring universe gave us the “adventure” element we needed to move

beyond our compact screenplays for the TV series and find fresh inspiration.

And how did your characters handle the transition from short performances in 5-minute films to the demands of a 75-minute-long feature?

S.A.: In order to negotiate the trip from one format to the other we knew we absolutely had to beef up the characters' psychological motivations and reinforce their connections to each other. It's one thing to watch Indian or Steven lose patience with Cowboy for five minutes if that's the extent of the gag but quite another if you're going to stay interested in what these characters are doing for over an hour! So we filled in more of the love-hate relationship between Cowboy and Indian, worked on giving Horse a more human side (via his romance with Madame Longray) and took a stab at explaining why Jeanine and Policeman go through the moods they do. We hope the "expansion program" works out—we're sure audiences will let us know either way!

Are there other animators whose work can be compared to yours or who influenced you?

V.P.: There's no escaping influences—we find inspiration in work by people who came before us as well as that of our contemporaries. In animation, for example, Mark Baker has been an important figure for us. More recently, we've found the animation work of "PES" (aka Adam Pesapane) very stimulating. Then there are people whose creative universes really speak to us: Trey Parker and Matt Stone's *South Park* or Matt Groening's *Futurama*. Looking further back, on both a technical and conceptual level, the animation Terry Gilliam created for *Monty Python's Flying Circus* stands out for its sheer fearless outrageousness, along with the stop-action animation perfected by George Pal. Pal, for example, animated thousands of wooden figures in incredibly elaborate settings. That level of technical mastery in the service of a highly poetic visual universe really impresses us.

Belgium is famous for its long tradition of comic book artists and graphic novels. Where does Belgian animation fit in?

S.A.: It's true that Belgium has been steeped in comic strips and comic books for a long time. Going back to the weekly magazine *Spirou* and the advent of *Tintin* in the 1940s, comics have been a major shared component of pop culture in Belgium. When we were kids we spent hours devouring the classic hardcover comic adventures written and illustrated by such major names as Hergé, Franquin, Morris, Peyo and Tillieux. But then, in the 1980s, the relative innocence of those classic tales was "contaminated" when we let a new generation of more aggressive comic book artists into our brains. Most of these new talents were associated with the seminal and irreverent

magazines *Métal Hurlant* (*Heavy Metal*) and *L'Echo des Savanes*. Tramber (who originated the adventures of William Vaurien and Pypo l'Intello), Kamagurka & Herr Seele (who drew Cowboy Henk), Charlie Schlingo and others infused the form with a more rock 'n' roll tone. *Heavy Metal* excelled at mashing up a wide range of genres and categories: It was the spirit of B-movies, the essence of the counterculture and a dose of music all rolled into one.

V.P.: Another character who had a profound influence on us was Petzi ("Rasmus Klump" in Danish) created by a Scandinavian couple, Vil and Carla Hansen, in the early 1950s. Their freewheeling, ultra-poetic approach in the Petzi, Pingo and Riki series (about a bear cub, a penguin and a pelican) was a fundamental revelation for us. Last but not least, we should mention the singular universe of cartoonist Gary Larson and the recent *Pinocchio* by Winschluss. There's a give and take between comics and animation in Belgium that goes way, way back. Morris, Franquin and Peyo got their starts working in the country's film studios. And, going in the other direction, their work in comics was quickly spotted and adapted for the screen as animation by Belgian studios. So, any way you look at it, in Belgium there's a strong connection between animated cartoons and comics illustrated on paper.

Are you in close contact with prominent figures in the comic book world?

S.A.: Belgium is a small country. That may make it easier for artists to meet each other and collaborate on each other's projects. For example, Fred Jannin—who, in *A Town Called Panic* provides the voices for Policeman and for one of the sea-dwelling creatures we call Atlantes—is a very well known comic book author in Belgium. Sergio Honorez, with whom we've worked quite often on advertising campaigns, is currently in charge of the line-up at the venerable specialty publishing house Dupuis. He asked us to adapt *A Town Called Panic* in comic book form. The first volume will be released at the same time as the film. But, unlike what's usually done, the book won't be an identical retelling of the film as a hardcover comic. We decided to come up with new situations for our characters that we think are better adapted to the comics format.

Tell us how you came to create Indian, Cowboy and Horse.

V.P.: We hit on the idea while visiting flea markets and garage sales on Sundays! Because dinosaurs and the figurines from Manga comics were all the rage, kids had lost interest in older, basic toys like cowboys and Indians and farm animals. So we decided to rescue these poor orphans—and there sure were a lot of them. The origins are as silly as that!

As a general rule, cowboys and Indians are enemies. How did these two become friends?

S.A.: Cowboy and Indian pretty much *had* to get along since they were stuck together in the same toy chest.

When you're working on the script, what's the ratio of bad ideas to good ideas?

V.P.: We make a point of having only good ideas. And any ideas that couldn't be used in this feature film will be used some other time. We never discard anything, understand? Our company recycles and frowns upon waste of any kind! (laughter)

Do you ever end up animating an entire sequence only to decide to omit it from the finished film?

S.A.: That's happened quite a few times. At least 15 minutes worth of completed sequences didn't make it into the final edit of this film. That's perfectly normal when you're filming human actors. But in the field of animation it represents a huge loss. But don't worry, nothing was created in vain. That material will show up as bonus footage on the DVD, as "never before seen" outtakes, etc.

If something happened to the earth and only Belgian films survived, what would an alien civilization think humans were like?

V.P.: We can't possibly speak on behalf of all Belgians. Only our King has the authority to do that! But as far as we're concerned, if these aliens found *our* films, we think they'd assume we're slightly retarded or else absolute geniuses. Obviously, their interpretation would depend on how intelligent and sophisticated they are. On the other hand, we can say with absolute certainty that if those same aliens came across this interview—and no matter what their level of intelligence—they'd conclude that this is the stupidest question they've ever heard.

THE CHARACTERS

Horse (Vincent Patar)

As Zen as they come from his mane to his hooves—and quite handsome by the standards of his species—Horse is secretly in love with Madame Longray, who teaches at the Music Conservatory.

Madame Longray (Jeanne Balibar)

A welcome new addition to the *Panic* stable, Madame Longray's sweetly sexy voice and doe-like eyes make her the most fetching filly in town. She's good with children and is secretly in love with Horse.

Indian (Bruce Ellison)

One day Indian shot his arrow into a particularly stubborn fish who dragged him all the way to Europe. Indian's archery skills are mediocre and yet his arrows always land somewhere interesting.

Cowboy (Stéphane Aubier)

Cowboy may look tough but he's actually quite shy—although not too shy to create havoc with Indian.

Steven (Benoît Poelvoorde)

Steven is the gruff, impatient farmer who raises cows, pigs and hens that he never kills, never eats and never sells. He's married to Jeanine but his three primary interests are his red Zector tractor, his red Zector tractor and his red Zector tractor.

Jeanine (Véronique Dumont)

Jeanine doesn't say much but she's a devoted farm wife who would do absolutely anything for her husband Steven and his beloved tractor. She's got a great system for making giant pieces of toast for Steven's breakfast.

Policeman (Frédéric Jannin)

Molded so that his billy club is always raised and ready to hit somebody, Policeman is a terrible detective and even worse at directing traffic. He is a great dancer though.

The Atlantes (Nicolas Buisse, David Ricci and Frédéric Jannin)

Jean-Paul, Michel and Gérard—humanoid mutants and skilled thieves—live in a parallel underwater universe connected to the “real” world by the pond on Steven's farm.

THE FILMMAKERS

Stéphane Aubier and Vincent Patar met in 1986 while they were both students at La Cambre, Belgium's School of Visual Arts. It was there that they created the characters Pic Pic the magic pig and André the evil horse, the hand-drawn stars of the first *Pic Pic André Shoow* (1988), a student film programmed at the world class animation festival held in Annecy, France. The short went on to win an award at the 1989 Anima Festival in Brussels. Two years later, in 1991, the pair graduated with highest honors.

It wasn't until 1995 that Pic Pic the magic pic and André the evil horse were revived for their official debut. Pic Pic enjoys being sliced up into pieces of ham and reassembled while André's favorite activity—when he's not being mean and obnoxious—is to enjoy a nice cool beer. Audiences loved *Pic Pic André Shoow – The First* and its popularity led to sequels. *Pic Pic André – The Second* followed in 1997 and *Pic Pic André – 4 minus 1* in 1999.

These three darkly outrageous comic tales won countless prizes at animation festivals the world over and figure prominently on a 2002 DVD compilation called *Pic Pic André et leurs amis (Pic Pic André and Friends)*. The disc featured Aubier and Patar's best animation work to date, including *Les Baltus au cirque* (1988) which was fashioned from paper cut-outs and *Babyroussa, the Babiroussa* (1994). Being Pic Pic fans, the band Dionysos asked the pair to create the music video for one of their first hit songs, "Coccinelle" in 1999.

After their hand-drawn work on the Pic Pic André shorts, the animation partners decided to re-visit *A Town Called Panic* which was Aubier's 1991 graduation film at La Cambre. The animators set out to create a series set in a papier mâché and cardboard village where small plastic toys would be the protagonists of absurd adventures.

In 2000, the pilot episode *The Cake* was a big hit with audiences and critics as it made the rounds of film festivals. After it won the Grand Prix at the Anima Festival in Brussels and the Grand Prix in the TV category at the Annecy Animation Festival in 2001, the animators enjoyed sufficient recognition to launch the series, produced and co-written by Vincent Tavier.

Cowboy, Indian and Horse invaded cable television channel Canal+ in France and Belgium in 2003, establishing an indelible style: The co-creators reached into the toy chest of collective childhood memories to breathe life into an assortment of stiff plastic toys. The pastoral setting was undermined by a kamikaze spirit boosted by absurd dialogue voiced with silly conviction by Aubier and Patar themselves, with help from their soon-to-be famous fellow Belgians, Poelvoorde, Lanners and Jannin.

The series' cult status grew and all the episodes were issued on a DVD in 2005. The shorts were shown at festivals and on TV the world over, eventually landing in the capable hands of Aardman Animation where the silly French voices were competently dubbed into silly English. Their reputation made, the Pic Pic crew's work in various media is eagerly consumed all over the world.

Since 2003, they've drawn a comic strip for the Belgian magazine *Tele Moustique* that was subsequently picked up by the French weekly newsmagazine *L'Express*. Between 2004 and 2006 they were commissioned to create the music videos for prominent musicians, including Gisli's *How About That* (2004), Louise Attaque's *Si On Marchait Jusqu'à Demain* (2005) and Saule's *Si* (2006).

In 2007 and 2009 the British milk brand Cravendale hired them to do five commercials modeled on the *Panic* approach. Inspired by the success of the *Town Called Panic* shorts, in 2007 they embarked on a feature film of the same name. Two years of work culminated in a 75-minute long widescreen movie programmed in the Official Selection at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival. Having lived with their characters so long, they decided to immortalize their surreal world in comic book form. The heroes of *A Town Called Panic* will inflict new adventures on their otherwise peaceful surroundings in *Volume One, Theft of a Tractor*, to be published in autumn 2009 by Dupuis, Europe's leading publishing house in the field of comics.

Last but not least, a children's book based on the characters in the film is also scheduled for an autumn release, to be published by Hélium and distributed by Flammarion, in a combination of new and old entirely in keeping with the *Panic* philosophy. A relatively new publishing firm, Hélium specializes in books designed to incorporate toys and props for the aesthetic delight of young readers and their parents. And venerable Flammarion, founded in 1876, is part of the fourth largest publishing group in France. Cowboy, Indian and Horse will be living on bookshelves and in toy chests for years to come.

A TOWN CALLED PANIC

a film by **Stéphane Aubier & Vincent Patar**

VOICES

Stéphane Aubier (Cowboy, Max Briquenet, Mr Ernotte)

Jeanne Balibar (Madame Longray)

Nicolas Buisse (Sheep, Jean-Paul)

François De Brigode (Sportscaster)

Véronique Dumont (Janine)

Bruce Ellison (Indian)

Christine Grulois (Cow, Student)

Frédéric Jannin (Policeman, Gérard, Brick Delivery Man)

Bouli Lanners (Postman, Simon, Cow)

Christelle Mahy (Chicken)

Éric Muller (Rocky Gaufres, Music Student 1)

François Neyken (Pig)

Vincent Patar (Horse, Mother Atlante)

Pipou (Michel's laugh)

Franco Piscopo (Bear)

Benoît Poelvoorde (Steven)

David Ricci (Donkey, Michel)

Ben Tesseur (Scientist 1)

Alexandre Von Sivers (Scientist 2)

CREW

Directors **Stéphane Aubier, Vincent Patar**

Assistant Director & Production Manager **Ben Tesseur**

First Assistant Director **Marianne Chazelas**

Director of Photography **Jan Vandebussche**

Story-board **Jean-Philippe Dugand**

Animation Manager **Steven De Beul**

Animation **Stéphane Aubier, Marion Charrier,**

Zoé Goetgheluck, Florence Henrard, Vincent Patar

Creation of plastic and resin figures **Marion Charrier, Zoé Goetgheluck**

Production Designer **Gilles Cuvelier**

Set Design Technicians **Eric Blesin, Marion Charrier,**
Pascal Gerard, Zoé Goetgheluck, Marc Nis, Olivier Pesch
Props and Accesories **Geoffrey Druard, Laurence Gavroy, Laure Marganne,**
Andre Odwa, Christine Polis, Laurent Talbot, Manu Talbot, Pierre Wilock
Post-production Director **Adriana Piasek-Wanski**
Editor **Anne-Laure Guégan**
Sound Editor **Fred Piet**
Sound Design **Valène Leroy Bruiteur**
Sound Effects Engineer **Bertrand Boudaud**
Sound Mix **Franco Piscopo, Benoit Biral**
Music **Dionysos, French Cowboy**
Producers **Philippe Kaufmann, Vincent Tavier**
Co-producers **Marc Bonny, Xavier Diskeuve, Vincent Eches, Stephan Roelants,**
Pilar Torres Villodre, Arlette Zylberberg
Line Producer **Morgane Eches**
Production Administrator **Christophe Vandeneede**

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