

Le Vivant la Bonne Vie... in Canberra

Christophe sautées Nicolas Vadot

Christophe Granet tracks down British/French/Australian cartoonist, **Nicholas Vadot**, before he returns to Brussels after five years living and working in Australia

Q: Nicolas, you grew up in France then moved to Belgium, but what made you come to Australia?

Love! I met a Canberra girl in Sydney in 2002, and then we got married. We had the choice between Europe and Australia, and I needed some sun, so we went to Australia. But we are moving back to Brussels in July, after five years spent here.

Q: You published your first cartoon at 22. Can you tell us how hard/easy it was to get that first cartoon published?

Pretty hard, of course. Actually, my first cartoons were published when I was 19, in smaller publications, in Belgium and France. My first cartoon for *Le Vif/L'Express*, the main magazine for which I've been working 17 years now, was published in 1993, when I was 22. I graduated from an art school in Brussels six months before that.

So during those six months, I would do about ten cartoons a week, leave them at the paper's reception desk, then wait until the magazine came out the next Friday, hoping for good news... to find out that none of my work was getting published! But I didn't give up. There was no internet at the time, so I had to physically leave the cartoons at the reception desk.

Then they published the first one, but waited another three months to publish the second! I never gave up. Perseverance is at least as important as talent, in this sort of business. The key is to convince a newspaper that you actually work for them before they even figure it out themselves.

But I needed some bread and butter at the time, so I worked in a cinema in Brussels, selling tickets and ice cream, then drawing at night, after my shift. I did this for three years. It took me five to actually start making a living with it.

Q: Did growing up in France and Belgium, surrounded by "Bandes Dessinées", inspire

you to become a cartoonist?

In a way, yes, since my style owes a lot to my childhood "Bandes Dessinées" readings, such as *Astérix*, *Lucky Luke*, *Gaston Lagaffe* and, of course, *Tintin*. But I also come from a family who's always been interested in current affairs, discussing them and debating on all kinds of issues. And there were a lot of newspapers and magazines at home, so I started reading newspapers when I was 12. Then I also liked drawing. The most natural way to mix the two was to become a political cartoonist.

Q: Did you have any formal art training or are you self-taught?

Not self-taught at all! I studied in an art school in Brussels called L'Ecole de Recherches Graphiques, where I specialised in illustration and graphic novelling. Belgium is the only place in the world where graphic novelling is considered a normal professional activity, which can therefore be taught in school.

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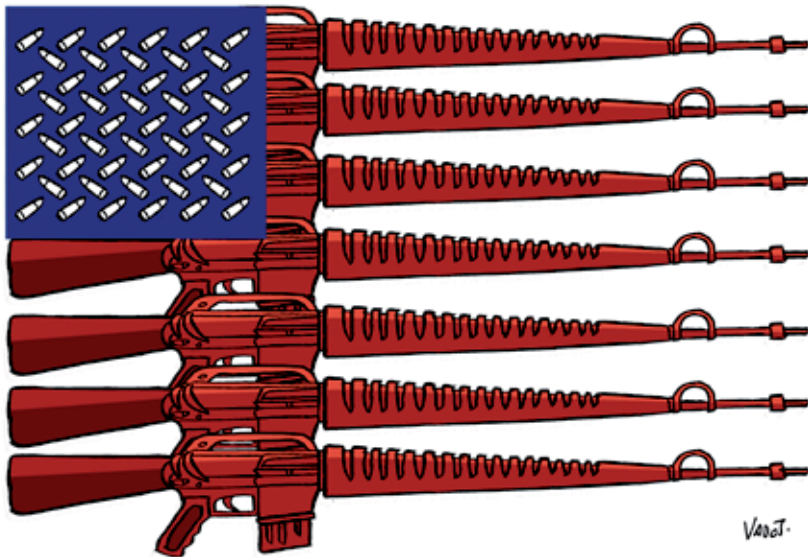
It was a four-year degree and they forced us to experiment in many fields: painting, drawing, filming, sculpture, etc. Political cartooning didn't exist as such but I knew what I wanted to do. Actually, the first workshop we did when I arrived was "illustrating the news". That was in October 1989, just when the Berlin Wall collapsed and the whole world was about to change. The workshop was supposed to go on for a week. It did for other students. I'm still doing it...

Q: Who are the cartoonists you look up to and why?

My major influence was **Plantu**, France's most famous cartoonist. He was actually the first to be really considered seriously as a true political analyst, using cartooning instead of writing. And his drawings were not just ordinary sketches, but really well crafted and elaborate compositions. To me, that was the way to go. Then I discovered other French cartoonists, such as **Willem**, **Cabu**, **Wiaz**, **Loup**, etc.

And the English ones: **Searle**, **Steadman**, **Gary** and many more. But I sort of stuck to the "Clear Line" French ones. Being brought up with the *Bandes Dessinées*, we learnt very early on about the graphical efficiency of the "Clear Line", a term invented by **Hergé** to define his work on *Tintin*.

Happy Anniversary, Columbine



To me, political cartoons are graphic metaphors that speak directly to the subconscious. Therefore, the more beautiful they are to watch, the more efficient they'll be to hit the target, which isn't the intellect, but the subconscious.

It's a usual statement to say that political cartoons are only about the idea and that they don't have to be well done artistically speaking. I couldn't disagree more.

Q: You are mostly published in Europe, but live in Australia. Since there is a large time-zone difference, how do you deal with talking to editors and deadlines? How often do you have to travel to France to meet with editors?

I travel about once a year. As for the day-to-day work, it isn't that difficult, because I'm ahead of them, so when they arrive at work, I've already been working, drawing and reading for 10 hours. The only thing is I work until 2:00 or 3:00am every night. But I have a nap in the morning, since it's the middle of the night in Brussels!!

Then I go running or swimming, then I have lunch with my wife and kids, and after all that I start working, usually at about 1:00pm.

As for talking to editors, I almost never do. Journalists, especially editors, don't have time to chat around, and neither do I. So we do it via e-mail mostly. But I've known these people for many years now, so I don't have to fuss around with them. They've agreed to the fact I'm a virtual person. I will have to adjust when I get back home, because for me, Brussels has also become virtual over the years.

"I do political cartoons to connect with the world, and graphic novelling to disconnect from it"

So it's a bit like returning to "second life", finding out it is real.

It's a bit different with my daily finance newspaper, *L'Echo*: they hired me in 2008, when I was already in Australia. I only met them ten months later. So for ten months, I worked on a daily basis with people I had never met.

Q: Also, on that subject, how do you keep up to date with French and European politics to be able to draw your political cartoons?

That is thanks to a recent invention called the internet. I haven't read a single daily printed newspaper in five years.

Q: Can you describe your involvement in "Cartooning for Peace" to us?

Well, Plantu called me once to join in, since they were putting together a big event in Wellington, and I lived close-by. My international pedigree helps too, since I speak two languages. And *Cartooning for Peace* is about crossing borders, which is the cornerstone of my work, as well as the fight against nationalism.

Q: Your latest "Bande Dessinee" (Graphic Novel), Maudit Mardi! (Cursed Tuesday!) is lined-up to be published by Sandwawe. Can you describe the Sandwawe publishing formula?

It's a crowd-funding publisher, the first ever in the business. People actually invest on a project to finance it. Once it has reached its objective (€55,000), it goes into production. "Investors" will get a free copy prior to the release, will have access to the production process, and will eventually make money from their investment if the book proves successful. If the project doesn't reach the €55,000, it is binned.

It is still unfortunately restricted to the French-speaking world, because the penny hasn't dropped yet that graphic novelling needs to conquer the world, outside its French-speaking borders. I've only done five pages out of eighty. If investors finance it, it will come out in 2012.

Q: I believe Maudit Mardi! is your first "Bande Dessinee" where you had full control of both the text and the drawings. Was finalizing the idea and script harder than the drawings?

No. I also had full control on my previous book, *Neuf Mois*, which was about fatherhood.

Actually, writing is as fun as drawing, even sometimes more interesting. Usually, an idea brews and stirs in my mind for a couple of years, a bit like wine in the cellar. Then it pops out one day and I write the first draft in about a week or so, working on it almost 24/7, only interrupted by my 15 cartoons a week, a bit of sleep and my wife and two young children...(!) Then I put it aside for a couple of weeks and write the second version. After that, I start drawing. But by the time I've actually finished the book (18 months), I'll only keep 30 % of the original script, since images bring ideas, with those bringing new images, and so on. It's a constant work-in-progress thing, and I love it. It usually starts with a pitch. In that case, it's about a man who finds out which day of the week he's going to die: a Tuesday. But which one? The next? The one after? Or in 50 years? He doesn't know. Therefore, six days a week, he knows he's invincible.

I'm totally schizophrenic, artistically speaking, if you compare my work as a political cartoonist with the graphic novelling: techniques used are different



“When you say you’re a graphic novelist, people ask you, ‘What sort of graphic novel do you do?’ In Australia, their first question is, ‘What are graphic novels?’”

It needs to be taught in schools. Had I stayed in Australia, I was very close to set a course with COFA, but who knows? I have Australian citizenship now (well, I will officially in two months), so I might come back, this time to Sydney, in a couple of years...

In Belgium, it’s an art form, which is considered as important as cinema, music or literature. We get invited to all the major media shows. When you say you’re a graphic novelist, people ask you, “What sort of graphic novel do you do?” In Australia, their first question is, “What are graphic novels?”

People in French-Speaking Europe take for granted the fact that the *Bandes Dessinées* are part of the cultural background. They should live in an English-speaking country for a few years to actually understand what a real cultural gap is. I’ve been preaching that for years, but they still don’t get it. But they are overproducing in their own market and are all struggling. If they keep on ignoring the rest of the world, they’ll be dead meat in ten years, especially with the rise of self-publication, thanks to the Web.

What happened to music editors with the iPod will happen to graphic novel publishers for sure, once **Steve Jobs** invents a device that will enable each one of us to buy a book online and print it like a real book at home. The technology already ex-

ists in a way, on iPhoto for instance, but it is still complicated and expensive. But it’s only a matter of years, I’m sure. That is why I wanted to be part of *Les éditions Sandawe*, which is the first step toward self-publication.

Q: You have a website in both French and English. Do you maintain it yourself?

Yes, but with the help of my wife and mother-in-law for translations, since French is my main language. I apologise for not updating the English version enough, but 95 % of the people who log on to the website are either Belgian or French. The French version is updated every Thursday. As for technical maintenance, I don’t do it. I have a webmaster, who lives in Belgium, who does it for me. I send him the content, then he puts it on the website!

Q: Finally, would you be willing to meet with ACA Members when/if you travel interstate, knowing that there are ACA Chapters in every capital city in Australia?

With pleasure, but that’s going to be difficult since I’m moving soon, and there are lots of things to get ready for the move! But if there’s something happening in the ACT, go for it!

<http://www.nicolasvadot.com>

in every aspect. But, as I usually say, I do political cartoons to connect with the world, and graphic novelling to disconnect from it.

Q: Have you published cartoons in Australia?

No. That was my goal when I moved here, but I never had the time to read enough about Australian politics to be relevant, and then to knock on doors for publication. I publish 600 cartoons a year in Belgium, I couldn’t fit any more.

Q: Are you still drawing in a “traditional” way or have you switched to digital?

Both. Since I was artistically brought up in the Hergé tradition, half of my work is done like in the old days: the pencil drawing is done on paper, very precisely, then I ink it on another piece of paper, using a light table. After that, I scan the inked cartoon. The rest - colouring, lettering, visual effects (and sending!) - is done on the computer.

I’m really keen on technology and computers, but they’re only tools. A great one, but a tool anyhow, just like a brush or a pencil.

Q: Having lived in Australia for 5 years now, do you see graphic novels having a future in Australia?

Like I said before, it could, but it needs a lot of work; first to make the public accept that it isn’t a debilitating nerdy thing for underground dropouts or teenage dummies.



Life is a Beach: A sample page from Maudit Mardi!