

Ervin Rustemagić

A short story was all we needed, but...

André Leborgne was one of the most recognizable figures of the Belgian comics scene. In 1966 he gave birth to his legendary magazine 'Ran Tan Plan', which was initially planned to be a newsletter with most important information on Belgian comics and their authors, but after four issues it turned into a professional magazine, published quarterly, covering Belgian, French, Spanish and Italian comics, creators and publishers. The Prix St. Michel, which was founded by André Leborgne, still remains one of the most prestigious awards for comics creators in Belgium.

André, who passed away in 2012, was a very nice and kind guy. We met in the early days of my career, as we both were participating at the Lucca and Angoulême comics festivals... But why is André Leborgne im-



Hermann in his studio in Brussels, in 1983 (Photo by Ervin Rustemagić)

portant for our story about "The Towers of Bois-Maury"? Because, without his initiative, most probably this series would not have been created. But, let me tell you the whole story from its beginning...

In Sarajevo in 1971, I started to publish my comics magazine 'Strip Art' (I was 19 at that time), which was distributed in the entire territory of ex-Yugoslavia and sold 26,000 copies of each issue. The next year I was invited to Lucca Comics as the head of Yugoslav delegation. I was accommodated – together with many other guests – at Il Convento di San Cerbone, which has been just turned into a kind of 'albergo' (small hotel). Hermann was staying at the same place, and that is where we first met, and instantly became friends.

The next ten years Hermann, his wife and son were



International jury of the first Angoulême festival in 1974

From left to right:

- David Pascal (U.S.A.)
- Jean Pierre-Dionnet (France)
- Henri Filippini (France)
- Luis Gasca (Spain)
- Vasco Granja (Portugal)
- Rinaldo Traini (Italy)
- André Leborgne (Belgium)
- Ervin Rustemagić (Yugoslavia)
- and Pierre Pascal (France)

visiting me in Sarajevo, and I was visiting them in Brussels. We were also seeing each other in other places, mainly comics' festivals. But, other than publishing Hermann's comics in 'Strip Art', I did not want to propose to him that I could handle international sales of his work, although I knew that Belgian publishers were doing a very poor job with his works on the international level. But, I thought it would not be proper if I tell him so, because it could sound as if I was bad-mouthing my competitors.

Then, in 1982, Hermann asked me if I could handle one of his albums on the international level. He had three short horror stories that were only published in the 'Ran Tan Plan' magazine, in black and white, and he wanted me to put them together in an album. This was André Leborgne's idea, and since both Hermann and I were friends with him, we went to see André at his home in Brussels, to talk about it.

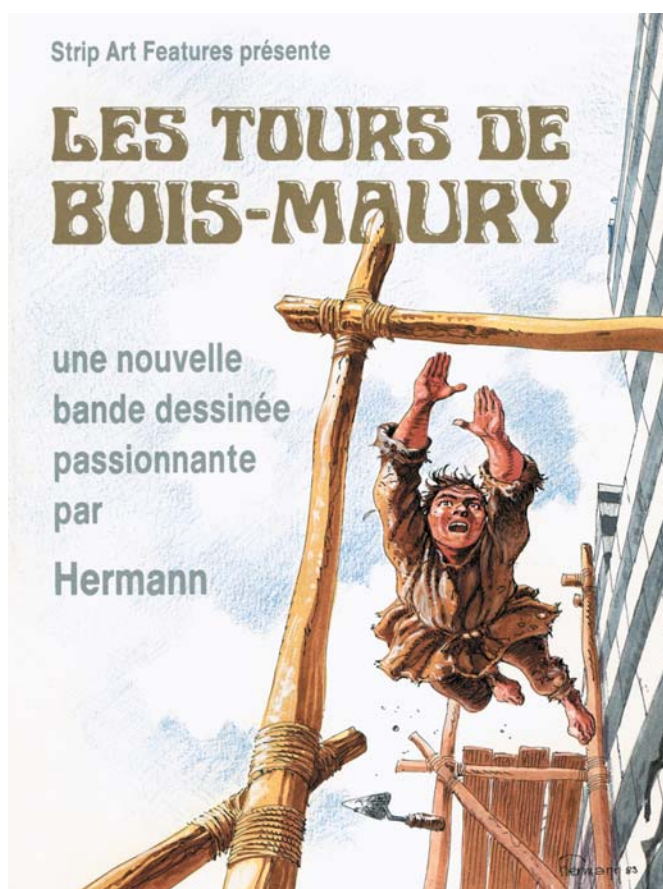
Hermann and André thought that we, at SAF, could just color these three stories and put them together in an album with some additional material. But, these three stories were totaling 30 pages, which was not enough for an album, and adding some independent material to fill in the remaining pages of the album wouldn't be so attractive for the readers. So, I told Hermann I will be happy to do it, but he still needs to produce a 12-page story, so that we have enough material for an album. Hermann agreed and after the summer he started to work on that extra short story. I asked him to produce at least four pages of that new story by the end of September, so that I can bring them to the Frankfurt Book Fair in October. He did it, and just before Frankfurt I received four pages of a beautifully drawn middle age story. In Frankfurt I made deals with publishers in 24 countries, who agreed to publish Hermann's new album only based on those four pages I presented to them. Hermann was all in shock when I reported this to him, and when I visited him in Brussels, he told me that he has decided to turn that short middle age story into a series. So, this is how "The Towers of Bois-Maury" series was born.

But, then I had a problem – a 'nice problem' I should say – because I had to go back to all the publishers I made deals with in Frankfurt, and tell them that four Hermann's pages which I presented to them in

Frankfurt were no longer going to be a part of an album consisted of short stories. Instead, it was going to be a new middle-age series of albums called "The Towers of Bois-Maury". So, I had to get them to agree again to publish this new series of albums, and not a single album consisted of short stories.

But, for me it was an overwhelming challenge, and I must say I enjoyed every second and every step of it. In 1983, before Hermann was in the middle of his work on the first album, we produced a beautiful 12-page catalogue with the first 8 pages of "Bois-Maury", which we printed in English, French and Italian, and sent it out to 500+ addresses of the publishers that we were working with at that time, including the ones I talked to in Frankfurt. Their reactions were better than I had expected, but still I had to do some extra work to convince some of them to publish "The Towers of Bois-Maury".

The French deal was easy as three publishers wanted it, but both Hermann and I decided to sign the contract with Editions Glénat, who – at that time – has



SAF's 'Bois-Maury' catalogue from 1983

been already planning to publish their new 'Vécu' magazine, where "Bois-Maury" would be a perfect fit. So, the combination of the publication in a magazine and album later on was very attractive to us. In 1984 we had the Winter Olympic Games in Sarajevo, and for some reason the brother of Jacques Glénat, who was a pilot, was frequently flying a small aircraft on the Grenoble - Sarajevo route. And it was him who personally brought Glénat's contract to my Sarajevo office for me to sign.

Rafael Martinez of Norma Editorial in Spain didn't have a brother pilot, but he told me flat that I have to sell him "Bois-Maury" for both magazine and album publications. And, so, the first installment of "Bois-Maury" appeared in the 39th issue of Norma's 'Cimoc' magazine in May 1984. And in Italy the first story of "Bois-Maury" has been published in the magazine 'L'Eternauta' in 1984 (issues no. 25 - 29).

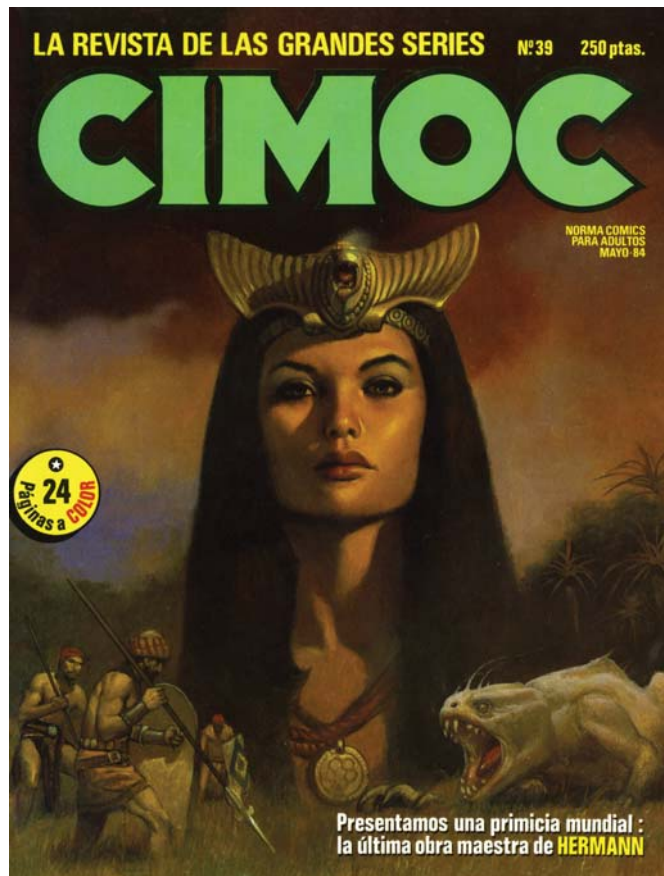
Still, I must say that I had reserved the privilege of premiering each of episodes of "Bois-Maury" in my 'Strip Art' magazine, so that the fans in ex-Yugo-



'Strip Art' issue no. 63, with third story of "The Towers of Bois-Maury" - Germain

slavia had the pleasure of reading these stories before everybody else. The first installment of the first story (Babette) has been published in the 43rd issue of "Strip Art" in March 1984.

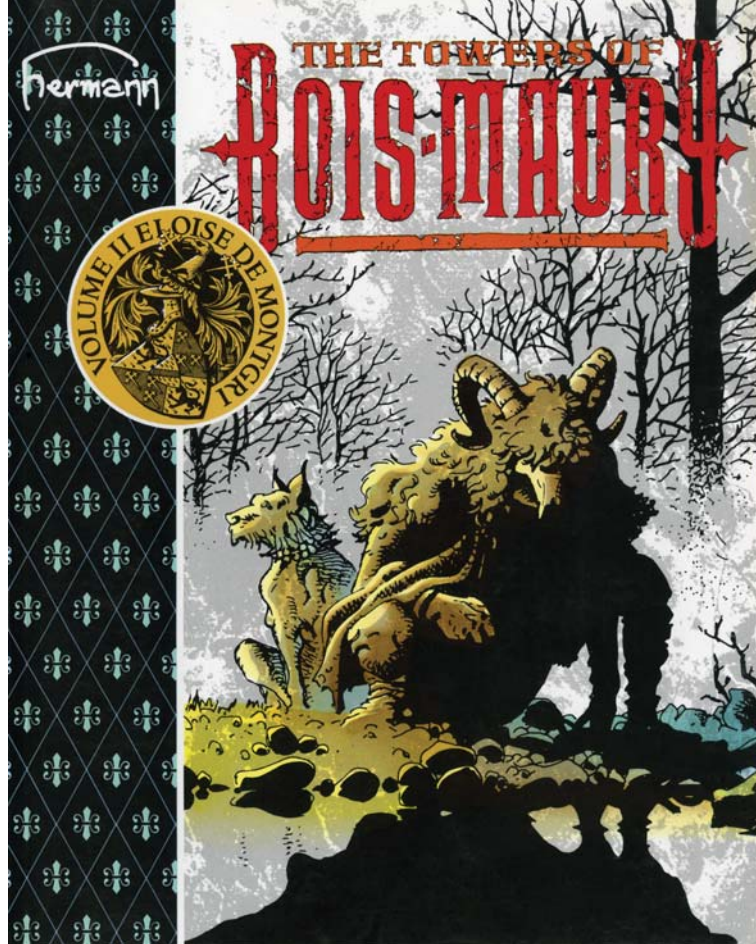
I remember that in those days the middle-age subject was a problem for some publishers, because they were not publishing any comics of historical genre. Such a publisher was Semic Press in Sweden, who was one of SAF's best clients, but only for detective, adventure, western and science-fiction comics, and only for black and white magazines. Ebbe Zetterstad was Semic's president and although he was 27 years older than me, Ebbe and I got along very well. I don't know if the reason for this was that we had the same birthday (April 25th), or I was just sympathetic to him as a young boy coming from non-Western world, who has been trying to sell rights to some comics. But, all in all, I ended up literally selling thousands of comic pages to Semic Press every year, and not only for Sweden, but also for Norway, where they were publishing the same magazines as in Sweden.



Spanish 'Cimoc' magazine from 1984

When I presented “Bois-Maury” to him, Ebbe said he liked it very much, but he just doesn’t see where they could publish it. Besides, he added, the colors are so beautiful that he doesn’t want to ruin it by publishing it in black and white. But, he suggested that Torgny Litzell, his assistant and later successor, and I try to work something out.

Torgny wanted badly to satisfy his boss, and as we also liked each other, he promised me that he will find a solution for “Bois-Maury” soon. And the solution came really soon with a new magazine called ‘Comet’ which they were preparing for 1985, with a young editor Peter Sparring. It would be a 100-page magazine and published in color. So, the first issue of ‘Comet’ came out in May 1985, with the complete first story of “Bois-Maury”. Unfortunately, Ebbe and Torgny passed away in the meantime, but my relationship with Peter Sparring still lasts, and we’re seeing each other every year at the Frankfurt and Bologna book fairs.



Titan Books' album edition of volume no. 2
(cover of reprinted edition)



The first issue of Swedish ‘Comet’

Titan Books, founded by Nick Landau in 1981, is now a publishing giant in the Great Britain, but in those days it was still a small British publisher, trying to break into the comics industry. In London I was staying at Nick’s flat, and he drove me on his motor-bike to St Giles High Street, where Titan had a comic shop with a basement where their editorial office was accommodated. I remember a lot of youngsters working in that tiny place. In the beginning Nick was a little reluctant about publishing a non-British and non-American artist, but finally he agreed and they did quite a good job with “Bois-Maury” albums at that time.

Later on the ‘Heavy Metal’ magazine, whose Editor-in-Chief Julie Simmons-Lynch was very fond of “Bois-Maury” and Hermann’s work in general, also published “Bois-Maury”, as well as Catalan Com-munations and Dark Horse Comics, who did several albums for the English speaking market.