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ENVELOPE ENTERTAINMENT

Peanuts comic will come to life in French TV series

By CHRIS O'BRIEN
DEC 25, 2014 |



Normaal Studios in Paris will be producing a series of computer-animated television shorts based on the classic Peanuts comic strip for French audiences. (Normaal Studios)

Lucy van Pelt sits, as she has for decades, with her arms folded at a desk under a sign that reads "Psychiatrist Help 5¢." Snoopy, the enigmatic beagle owned by Charlie Brown, sits on a small wooden stool.

Lucy's frustration grows as Snoopy remains unimpressed by her hapless attempts to diagnose the source of his anxiety. Finally, Lucy delivers one of her classic, comic broadsides:

"On va construire une bonne relation patient-thérapeute, sinon j'te ratatine le museau!" she screams. *"Tu comprends ca?"*

Welcome to the new television Peanuts series, *en francais*. (Translation: "We're going to have a good doctor-patient relationship, or I'm going to slug you! Do you understand?") Debuting last month, these 500 cartoon shorts featuring the iconic American characters are being scripted, animated and broadcast only in France.

While that might seem like a puzzling choice to American audiences, the move is part of an ambitious business strategy to bring Peanuts to new generations of children around the world. Those plans also include a computer-animated feature film scheduled to open in 2015.

However, the choice of France and its booming animation industry to produce the TV project is also an emotional one. It reflects the decades' long love affair between Peanuts creator Charles Schulz, a proud Francophile, and the country that deemed his work worthy of its greatest compliment:

That Peanuts seems ... French.

"It's a very important project for us," said Julien Borde, head of new series for France Television, the national public broadcaster. "It's a very clever universe. It's full of intelligence. It's full of psychology. It's full of humor. So, of course, the French love that kind of comic."

In the U.S., much of the current Peanuts-related buzz comes from the new feature film, "Snoopy and Charlie Brown," which will be released some time next year. From 20th Century Fox, and animated by Blue Sky Studios, the 3-D film marks the first time that computer-generated animation will be used for the Peanuts, giving them a modern look.

The French production tacks in almost exactly the opposite direction. The concept is to re-create the experience of reading a Peanuts comic strip in the daily newspaper.

The stories are taken from Schulz's original comic strips. And the animation style takes the classic watercolor look of Peanuts holiday specials a step further by adding a textured feeling to make them appear as though they're on paper. Frames shift across the screen — like a newspaper strip — as the action unfolds.

These one- to two-minute shorts are bundled into groups of five or six and shown on France 3, one of the country's public broadcast stations.

Kim Towner is senior vice president of business development for Charles M. Schulz Creative Associates, which represents the family's interest in the Peanuts Worldwide joint venture with Iconix Brand Group. While Towner is excited about the new feature film, she said the French production offered a chance to do something distinct.

"It just feels like so much of the animation now looks the same, and looks like it's done in a factory," she said. "We're looking to the future with the Peanuts in a big and exciting way. And we want to do things that are forward looking and artful."

It was Borde, a big Peanuts fan, who brought the idea to Towner and Peanuts Worldwide almost five years ago.

Borde showed them the work of Paris-based Normaal Studios, which had produced another animated series based on a French comic book character from the 1950s named Gaston Lagaffe ("gaffe," as in screw-up).

They also lobbied Schulz's widow, Jean, when she traveled to France for an annual comics convention in the town of Angoulême, near Bordeaux. She came away convinced: "It just seemed to me that they had a sensibility that was right for this project."

Schulz said she loved the idea that the new works would draw directly from classic comic strips, something rarely done, and was impressed by Normaal founder Alexis Lavillat's genuine reverence for Peanuts.

Lavillat, in an interview, echoed a belief by many cultural critics here: Peanuts is "one of the great works of literature of the 20th century."

"We really try to stay as close as we can to what the author said," Lavillat said. "But we also want to touch a new generation."

That kind of admiration reflects the high regard in which the French hold comics — or graphic novels, as they are more commonly called. New graphic novels are dissected the way new films, novels or music are critiqued in the U.S. Cities of all sizes have ample comic book stores and public libraries have large sections devoted to graphic novels. Even so, French culture has found a special place for Schulz and Peanuts. In France, Snoopy is considered to be the real star, rather than Charlie Brown.

"Snoopy loves life," said Jean-Pierre Mercier, a researcher at the International Comics Museum in Angoulême. "He's happy to be alive. He dances with falling leaves in autumn. He likes good food. When he's happy, he kisses people on the nose. He has a very playful quality. Snoopy is French."

That kind of compliment would have made Schulz smile.

As a soldier in World War II, he fell in love with France after being stationed at the Château du Malvoisine (translation: house of the bad neighbor) near the small village of Le Héron in the north. Over the years, he would weave French culture, ideas and language into Peanuts stories.

Most famously, Snoopy imagined himself as a World War I flying ace battling the German Red Baron, while taking time to quaff root beers in a village cafe and woo the French waitress.

In the 1980 feature film, "Bon Voyage, Charlie Brown," Peanuts characters travel to France for an exchange program where they stay in a strange home called, "Château du Mal Voisin."

Schulz himself continued to visit France, including in the late 1970s and early '80s to do research for a PBS documentary about his time in the war, as well as for "Bon Voyage" and a short sequel, "What Have We Learned, Charlie Brown?" in which the characters visit war monuments in France.

"He really felt a connection with France," Jean Schulz said. "He loved the people and he appreciated the way they enjoyed life."

And it would be of special significance if the French helped launched these new Peanuts cartoons into homes around the world. Currently, the producers are in discussions to strike broadcasting deals around the globe, including in the U.S., while working on various translations.

Schulz said that while the movie may garner a lot of attention when it opens, the series could make a more lasting impression.

"One of the things we liked about it is that Peanuts have no presence on TV in most of the world," she said. "It still seems to me this is going to reach a different audience on a different level, and on a more sustained level. Peanuts will come into your life for just a little bit each day, just like they did with newspapers."

Chris O'Brien



Chris O'Brien is a technology reporter who covers Apple and Silicon Valley. He joined the Los Angeles Times in 2012 and has covered Silicon Valley since 1999, both as a reporter and a columnist. He's lived through the dot-com boom and bust, and still has a talking Sock Puppet to prove it. He's a native of Kansas and a graduate of Duke University who scoffs at Pac-10 "basketball." He's also a better bowler than you are.

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