

His cartoons and associated merchandise generate hundreds of millions of euros every year, but he shuns the business model of the big studios. Giovanna Dunmall meets Iginio Straffi, the Italian cartoonist who remembers a golden age of animation.

By the time I get through to Iginio Straffi, CEO of Italian animation company Rainbow, it is late on a Friday night. I've been fended off for at least a week by his press officer, and after trying to put me through twice, she says she'll write an email asking him to call. When I express concern at this arrangement she tells me to "have faith". I lost mine days ago but then, several hours later and out of nowhere, Straffi does indeed call. "Sorry it's so late," he begins, and I realise that Straffi doesn't like giving people the run-around. He is just incredibly—make that impossibly—busy.

He may be pulling 16-hour days almost seven days a week, but he is still enjoying himself, he says. He started out as a cartoonist only 15 years ago, but as founder (in 1995) and CEO of Rainbow, now one of the best-known animation studios in Europe, he made the transition from jobbing artist to entrepreneur almost overnight. "As the owner you have to take care of so many different things at the same time, it's different from just being an artist," he says. "But, following the business part," he muses, "is also a creative job. You have to find the right angle to sell a [TV] show, work out what elements are suitable for the audience and understand when the market is ready to receive it."

Straffi has made his way in the US-dominated animation market largely by ignoring conventional business and animation wisdom. He believes part of his company's success lies in the fact that it is modelled on the "golden age" of studios like Disney, Warner Brothers and Hanna-Barbera. At first they were managed by artists, he explains, but now they "are run by lawyers and businesspeople". He recognises that in the US it is "much more about going after the numbers", but says he doesn't always find this easy to do. "I don't always go after the best deal," he says, a little sheepishly. "Relationships with clients are important to me. I'll stay with partners that have supported us; in many cases I don't even consider going with someone else."

This loyal approach goes some way to explaining why, when the company found itself at a low ebb in the late '90s, the experience was particularly excruciating for Straffi. Halfway through production of their first TV series, a co-producer went bankrupt, he explains in a quiet voice. Suddenly, "We were missing one million US dollars," and Straffi and his team had to get very creative, very quickly. Some money was found through a bank loan but the rest had to be cobbled together from pre-sales agreements negotiated in various countries. "We went all over, from Latin America to Asia. We were putting together \$20,000 here, \$40,000 there, just to finance the show." To make matters worse, a close collaborator, who had been given a break by Straffi years earlier, decided to give up and walk out on the project at that very moment. "The pain was very great for me," admits Straffi. "He left me at the worst possible moment, we were really struggling."

Eventually the toil and labour, the years of traipsing around the world, pitching show ideas and coming up with business proposals overnight, paid off. Rainbow's first tv series, Tommy & Oscar, came out in 1999 and won audiences in 30 countries in Europe and Asia. It was then that the company "started to be profitable", Straffi says. More recently, Straffi's Winx Club characters, a group of five trendy apprentice fairies who battle against evil, have become a television and licensing success all over the world. Winx Club was the first Italian cartoon to be sold in the difficult US market and is currently being aired on more than 100 TV networks including Fox USA, Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network. Products ranging from dolls to a recent clothing line featuring the Winx Club characters generated ≈200m worldwide for licensees in 2004, and Straffi's latest cartoon, Monster Allergy, about a ten-year-old boy who can see

monsters, has already been bought by the likes of Cartoon Network and the Disney Channel and is due to come out next year.

"We are in a constant state of expansion," agrees Straffi, who says that aside from their headquarters and another office in Singapore, Rainbow has also just opened an office in Holland and plans to do the same in New York and Los Angeles next year. In 2004 the company's turnover was €8.5m (including licensing royalties), in 2005 it will be around €15m, and in 2006, Straffi expects it to be at least €30m. Meanwhile, his Singaporean wife Joanne, a marketing graduate, is head of licensing and has helped open up the Far East.

For all of this rapid expansion, Rainbow still has an air of being the "small guy" in the industry, an atmosphere Straffi seems keen to keep. The company's HQ is in the picturesque valleys of the Marches region in central Italy, in the small town of Loreto. The beach is only 5km away and staff sometimes go for a swim during their lunch break. "I like to be based here because you can find harmony and peace and recuperate." He warms to his theme: "The surrounding hills are filled with sunflowers and olive trees, the food is good, the people are kind, it's a safe place. And... I was born only 25km away," he laughs.

With all the management worries and constant travelling, when does Straffi find the time to nurture his obvious creative instincts, get out a pen and draw? "I still have my nights," he says. And with that he breaks into another infectious chuckle.

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