

Rob interviewing Simon Coss, film-maker, on his documentary “Pour deux centimes de plus”, which is about the Coop des Masques

Simon:

Yerr well, the Coop des Masques is a factory that was set up by, just local people in Guingamp, and the reason why the factory got set up was because in 2018 near to Guingamp, just on the outskirts of St Brieuc, another factory shut down and it was a factory that made surgical masks and that factory got shut down in 2018 essentially because it was owned by a big multinational company called Honeywell and Honeywell decided that they could produce masks more cheaply abroad, so they offshored it and shutdown the factory, and everyone got fired,.. classic story and so no more masks.... and then fast forward 2 years and we are in the middle of a pandemic and there is a global shortage of masks and I was sitting at home watching the TV, it was during the first lockdown, when we were all at home and I just saw this story, it was talking about this plan to reopen a mask factory.. .and the idea was to reopen the mask factory as a cooperative, so that it would be owned by the workers in the factory, plus different people who got involved, with the idea behind all of that it wouldn't be possible to offshore it again. So there would be a vital supply of protective equipment for our doctors and nurses, who at the point when they opened the factory, people were actually dying because they didn't have appropriate face masks. So this immediately interested me and what particularly interested me about this factory and why I decided to follow this particular story up was because they'd decided to try and do things a little bit different,... and they were saying, you know, we've got think about how we live in the world, once the pandemic is over...if it ever ends, let's hope it does and they said well rather than setting up a factory in a classic way where you get a big investor , who would put in money and then sell shares in the company to shareholders, which means the company is immediately obliged to make maximum profits but it is at risk of being moved offshore where labour costs are lower and taxes are lower, and all that sort of thing, they said we want to do this differently, which is why they decided to set it up as a cooperative.

What I wanted to look at with this particular company, beyond the fact that they were doing something that I just thought was an amazing thing to do at that time. Which was really to try and do what they could to help at a time when, you know, a lot of us were sitting at home just thinking, well what can we do, what can we do, they had actually got off their butts and decided to do something... and I found that

incredibly inspiring. And I was very proud that they let me follow them while they were doing that.

The other thing that interested me as a film-maker, was that I had a story here that was happening at a very local level, but that was talking about something that was happening all around the world.

I always prefer when I'm trying to make a film to try to tell a story that's as near to people's everyday lives as possible. It wasn't abstract at all but it was actually talking about something much bigger than the mask factory.

So the first time I met them they had nothing except the dream and the idea and then I followed them all the way through for a year, until they got to the point where they actually had actually opened the factory with French built machines, all of the raw materials that they used to make the masks were either from France, or other countries in Europe. They had hired people, they'd set it up as a social enterprise as well, so they had 30 percent of the work force who had some kind of recognised disability and they'd done all of this and started producing...and they had managed to do all of this in the middle of a pandemic. It was incredible for me to be able to be involved in something that was energised by so much hope at a time when things were pretty grim.

Rob:

The other thing that's rather unusual is the financing... you mentioned it's a cooperative, the money raised is from people who want to be involved in it, I mean they are not just ordinary share holders.

Simon:

This cooperative, you can buy, what I guess, the nearest thing I could find, the definition is what they call a membership share in the co-operative and what that means is that you can buy a share in the co-operative but it's not an investment. So a share in this, in the Cooperative des Masques costs fifty euros and so you can buy one or two or 100, or as many you want but what you won't do is get a return on your investment on them.

Rob:

So it's like a gift then.

Simon:

Yeh, or you could sell them back for the same price, but it's not an investment, so part of the funding came in that way and then they also have money coming in from the city government in Guingamp, Côtes-d'Armor government, the Brittany regional government invested and then they had investments from companies who will buy their masks and use them, so that's a lot of hospital groups, mutuelles, so health insurance groups and other big companies that use surgical masks, for example in Brittany there's a lot of companies who work in the food processing industry, that use masks or the building industry.

Rob:

Do they sell their masks to the general public?

Simon:

They do a bit but the business model is mainly aimed at big business partners. The reasoning they had when they set the factory up was that they needed to work with customers who would always be there and that the market for private individuals who buy masks will, we hope overtime reduce so we don't have to wear masks in public any more.

But there was a big issue obviously, one of the things you can see in the film is they quickly came up against the question of the citizens who had invested in the company wanted to buy the masks, which is understandable and they actually realised that they didn't have a business model that allowed them to sell them because of the logistics basically. It would cost more to post a box of masks one single box of masks to an individual than the box of masks cost. So they had quite a lot of

Rob:

So they had to change their ideas...

Simon:

Well yeh, there was quite a lot of internal hoo ha about how they were going to work that one out. Well what was interesting for me, with that particular discussion that they had, which at times was a discussion that got quite heated was because they are a cooperative they had to work that one out together and it wasn't just the boss who could say 'right, well I'm sorry but we're going to do it this way'..end of discussion. That was one of the interesting things about the way they decided to



run the company, was that they obliged themselves to make decisions collectively rather than vertically which would happen in a normal company..and they succeeded. That was really what I wanted to look at in the film, beyond the question of the masks was is this a way we can think about organising companies in the future, that's interesting, that could work and I think they proved from their side that it is. The problem they'd got is that their model only works if the customers buy their masks and are prepared to pay a little bit more .. which is why the film is called 'For Two Centimes More' ... for masks that are produced by a cooperative, in a more socially responsible way, locally..so that we don't have this risk of shortages, which led to people dying, you know at the beginning of the pandemic because there weren't enough masks. Again you see in the film.. is they were saying..well we did all of this because you know, we were told this is we need to do...but then when they start trying to sell their masks all of the public services that they are working with are still saying ...yeh but the important thing for us is the price. It comes down just to the price and all of the rest of the other criteria is all very nice, it's all very lovely but it's just about the bottom line. So they are up against hospital groups and ministries, and what ever who are still buying their masks in China because they are 2 centimes cheaper.

Rob:

So your film was completed in the summer of 2021 and what's been going on since then?

Simon:

As always happens with these things the minute you stop filming, it's like when you interview somebody, the minute you turn the thing off they say interesting stuff. So I stopped filming in June, but what happened while we were editing the film, so that was in September, October, was that the factory found that a lot of the people who'd promised to buy masks from them went back on their promises and didn't follow through, so they found themselves with a warehouse full of about a million euros worth of unsold masks, which brought them at one point to within a week, ten days of going under, I mean it was that bad... They managed to start selling again and they're now, they're now doing ok. I mean it's always going to be touch and go . My take on the whole thing was if you honestly want to think about organising our lives, and our economies in a different way perhaps sometimes, yeah we need to be prepared to put a little bit more effort in, a little investment in .. sometimes it's financial investment like 2 centimes, and sometimes it's something else, or perhaps we need to give up a little bit. We need to be clear about the



choices we want. If we want to live in societies where we're a bit less dependent on these big global trade flows that don't seem to be under anybody's control anymore we have to give ourselves the means of doing that and sometimes that might mean, yes, things cost a little bit more.

Rob:

Your film was shown on French regional television.

Simon:

Regional... Yeh

Rob:

...once in

Simon:

So far

Rob:

Once, so far in what November I think it was?

Simon:

Yeh, in November, yeh

Rob:

Any chance it being shown in cinemas around Brittany?

Simon:

I'd very much like that to happen. We're always open for organising screenings where ever people want. There's a website that we've set up now called Deux Centimes de plus where you can send us a message and ask us to organise a screening. The one thing we are planning to do for the people who work in the factory is to organise a screening there. I mean I'll let you know once I've got a bit more info on that and then we'd like to take it around and get it seen as much as possible.

Rob:

Well maybe we can get to organise a showing here in Gouarec.



Simon:

Love to, it's always a nice to come back here.

Rob:

Well, Simon Coss, thanks ever so much for telling us about that. Good luck with your future plans.

Simon:

Alright, thanks a lot.