



## A FILM-MAKER WHO DANCES WITH BEES

**Inspired by nature film-maker David Attenborough and fascinated by bees,  
Robbie l'Anson Price is a biologist, film-maker, and member of the Swiss Young Academy.**

Text by Astrid Tomczak

Sometimes he takes a long pause to think before answering a question, so long that his interviewer is afraid she might have touched on a taboo topic. Or maybe he misunderstood her question because her English wasn't clear? But his pauses mean nothing of the sort: Robbie l'Anson Price is simply not the type of person to blurt out trivial or unreflected ideas. He cares deeply about the state of our planet and thinks about how we can safeguard its future. He also reflects on the root causes of human displacement and misery. His solution in a nutshell: less consumption and greed along with better education for everyone. The 33-year-old provides a more nuanced statement in his CV: "In my work I aim to be honest, accurate, and good. With each project I do, I have, at the very least, the ambition to create something that has value to the world, whether it is educational, inspirational, or brings joy." Okay. So is he just a zealous do-gooder with big ambitions?

The lanky guy at his laptop in the fifth-floor café of a department store in Lausanne doesn't seem at all like a zealot who is here to win over the world with his ideas for a better future. Instead, he seems more like an inquisitive, wide-eyed kid - curious about what's yet to come.

Robbie l'Anson Price grew up in Blackpool, a city in the north of England that became a popular holiday destination for the northern English working class in the 19th century. "There weren't any particularly good schools in Blackpool," he says. "I went to one of those mediocre schools, but was lucky to have a supportive environment outside of school." When he was young, l'Anson Price's parents took him and his two siblings on many trips out into nature, and he would observe insects in the family garden for hours on end. He went on to study zoology in Manchester, but after getting his bachelor's degree, he was unsure what to do next. That is until one day, when his mother, a teacher, told him about a colleague who was earning good money teaching in South Korea. It sounded like a possible way for him to finance his further studies, so l'Anson Price accepted a temporary job there as an English teacher. "Sometimes it's just things like that that steer your life in a particular direction," he says. "If I hadn't gone to South Korea, I might never have done my master's programme." After two years abroad, he returned to England to pursue his master's degree in ecology and evolution at Imperial College London - and discovered his love of bees. "One lazy Sunday afternoon, I was hanging around in a friend's room. She's an entomologist and had a book about the sociology of honeybees. After I started reading it, I realised I wanted to work with bees." So he looked everywhere for a suitable PhD position and found one in Lausanne. "It was a dream," he says and talks about "shopping trips" to France. "We'd drive there to buy honeybees, sitting in the car in our beekeeping suits - it was an exciting start."

l'Anson Price was excited about his PhD work, and yet sometimes he experienced mood swings and could barely make it out of bed. It was during that time that he discovered film-making. "To make films, I had to get out of bed," he says. It was another one of those circumstances that propelled his life in a new direction. In one of his first films, he wove his scientific knowledge of bee dancing into a playful, romantic Cinderella story and even played the leading role. And imaginary worlds are just his thing. "I love musicals - they're works of art," he says and recounts how he was recently talking to a friend about how he would never be able to create one himself. His friend answered, "You've got to collaborate more." Since then, l'Anson Price has often thought about that advice. "I tend to work by myself mostly out of convenience. I can spend a weekend working alone on a film and get it done." The Swiss Young Academy (SYA), however, gives him the opportunity to become a team player. l'Anson Price would like to work with other SYA members on a

project focused on education and innovation. "Everything starts with a good education for everyone. Inequality is causing so many environmental problems and is resulting in people becoming refugees," he says, warming to the subject. Then he abruptly breaks off. "But that's beyond this conversation ..." He still wants to deliver one key message, though, as summarised in the UN's twelfth Sustainable Development Goal: responsible consumption and production. "If we'd loosen our grip on profit, this goal would be attainable."

It soon became clear to l'Anson Price that making films could be more than just a hobby. In 2018, he and a friend won the grand prize at the Eco-Comedy Video Competition. Their video, which they produced in a mere 24 hours, is a sobering spin on a popular American comedy show segment (Mean Tweets), in which a tweeter with the handle @humanity is confronted with tweets from planet earth, ocean life, endangered animals, and others, causing him to rethink his actions and attitudes.

## «It's not just about conveying knowledge - it's about getting people to action»

Thanks to an Agora grant from the Swiss National Science Foundation, l'Anson Price was able to organise ten Exposure Science Film Hackathons over the past few years. During these three-day events, scientists created films that were then shown in cinemas throughout Switzerland. He emphasises that "it's not just about conveying knowledge - it's about getting people to take action". l'Anson Price now heads the entire SciFilmIt project at the University of Geneva. "I really miss my bees. But I was quite happy to move beyond purely academic work."

His current position ends next summer. After that, he has lofty plans: to go "around the world in 80 days" like BBC contributor Michael Palin did, following the route in Jules Verne's classic novel. If the coronavirus thwarts these plans, l'Anson Price has another goal: "I want to tell science stories. And I'd love to find a job that allows me to do that." His role model for this is David Attenborough, the famous English wildlife film-maker and naturalist. "Actually, I still feel like a bit of an imposter when I'm making films," admits l'Anson Price. And yet he knows that his calling is to build bridges between the complex worlds of science and society - and that the Swiss Young Academy can help in this pursuit.

### In short:

Robbie l'Anson Price was born in 1987 in Blackpool, UK. He studied zoology at the University of Manchester, taught English for two years in South Korea, and then completed his master's degree in ecology, evolution, and conservation at Imperial College London. Although his PhD thesis was on honeybees, he also researched stingless bees and did field research on them in Brazil. l'Anson Price has considerable experience conveying knowledge to others, including children. Over the past few years, he has increasingly dedicated himself to storytelling and making films. He currently heads the SciFilmIt project at the University of Geneva, a project that brings together scientists and film-makers.