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Cannes
Edition 2022



SLOVAK FILM INSTITUTE AND SLOVAK FILM COMMISSION JOIN FORCES TO PROMOTE SLOVAKIA AT INTERNATIONAL FILM MARKETS.

EUROPEAN FILM MARKET,
BERLINALE



MARCHÉ DU FILM,
FESTIVAL DE CANNES



editorial



Cannes Edition 2022 is this year's second special festival edition of *Film.sk* prepared for you by the National Cinematographic Centre together with the *Film.sk* editorial board.

Finally, it looks like the pandemic is on the decline, and we are very happy that this year's 75th edition of the Festival de Cannes will happen in its usual format.

On the very first pages, in the *What's Slovak in Cannes?* section, you will find information about the Slovak films that will be screened at the festival and the Slovak professionals that will be attending. We are very proud to announce that the short student film *Liquid Bread* by Alica Bednáriková was selected by Cinéfondation for the La Cinef Selection. Just as importantly, Slovak producer Jakub Viktorín was selected for the prestigious Producers on the Move programme.

In this section, you may also read about the Slovak project participating in the ScripTeast programme and find out how our animation is doing.

Yet another hit has shocked the world – the sovereign state of Ukraine has been invaded by the Russian army. *Film.sk* reflected how the Slovak film industry reacted to these events and what initiatives there are to follow.

Furthermore, this edition also includes interviews with the first lady of Slovak cinema, actress Emília Vášáryová, Polish director Jan P. Matuszynski who attended Visegrad Film Forum in Bratislava this year, and Czech director Diana Cam Van Nguyen whose animated short *Love, Dad* won countless awards.

In the news section, you will find notices about 6 upcoming Slovak films.

What are they up to? is a platform where a number of filmmakers briefly talk about their current projects, as well as their future plans.

An overview of new releases (DVD and Blu-ray) which were successfully restored by the SFI and a complex preview of 2021 in Slovak documentary, fiction and animated film concludes this number.

We will be looking forward to the Cannes results and starting to prepare for the *Karlovy Vary* festival! ◀

— Veronika Krejčová / editor-in-chief —

HISTORY AND THE PRESENT OF THE SLOVAK FILM INSTITUTE

The Slovak Film Institute (SFI) is the sole state-funded memory and archive institution operating in the area of audiovision in Slovakia. The National Film Archive and the National Cinematographic Centre are the SFI's basic organisational units. The SFI is a member of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF), European Film Promotion (since 2006); it operates as a service workplace for the European Audiovisual Observatory (EAO) and the Council of Europe cinema support fund – Eurimages. Creative Europe Desk Slovensko is also part of the Slovak Film Institute.

The Film Institute in Bratislava was established on 1st April 1963. The film archive, which was established in 1958, also became part of the Institute. In 1970, the SFI was presented with a copy of the first Slovak feature film *Jánošík* (dir. Jaroslav Siakeľ, 1921) which was later restored and provided with a soundtrack.

By the end of 1976, the Film Club of the Central Office of Slovak Film was opened in Bratislava. Cinema Lumière, opened in 2011 and operated by the SFI, is located on its premises at the present day.

In January 1991, the National Cinematographic Centre was established as an independent public contributory organisation managed by the Ministry of Culture. By delimitation, the SFI acquired producer rights to the archived Slovak films made before 1991.

The Institute played a part in the preparation of the extensive publication entitled *History of Slovak Cinema* (*Dejiny slovenskej kinematografie*, 1997; updated issue 2016). In 2002, the SFI published its first DVD; since then, it has published dozens of other DVDs, which are now available with everything else related to films at the SFI's online shop *Klapka.sk*, opened in 2008. In 2002, the SFI started to implement the long-term integrated audiovisual information system project SK CINEMA.

In 2006, the Government adopted the draft Project of the Systematic Restoration of Audiovisual Cultural Heritage with the objective of rescuing cinematographic and audiovisual works and gradually making them accessible to the public. This is the SFI's long-term priority project.

In the years 2011 to 2015, the SFI, in cooperation with Radio and Television Slovakia, implemented the national project Digital Audiovision. During the project, 61,650 cultural objects were digitised. The project is sustainable over a long period and continues to reach its goal – digitisation of the audiovisual heritage of the Slovak Republic. The SFI's digitisation workplace has become a permanent part of its professional workplaces.

Film.sk, the only printed film monthly in Slovakia, has been published by the SFI since 2000. During the 21 years of its existence, it has undergone other format and conceptual changes, but the goals remain to provide a wide range of information and opinions from the domestic audiovisual environment, capable of appealing to film experts and the wider public alike. The website www.filmsk.sk has supported its printed version since 2001. ◀



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Liquid Bread – FTF VŠMU

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Veronika Krejčová

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Lea Pagáčová

Lea works for the Audiovisual Information Center of the SFI. Together with the NCC team, she prepares Slovak film catalogues and other materials that help promote Slovak film at festivals abroad. Her focus is on animated and short film.

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Editor of **Film.sk**. Former lecturer at the Film and Television Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts (VŠMU), where she also worked as a vice-rector (2004 – 2007). Author of the scientific monograph **Odložený čas** (Time Delayed), co-author and editor of two more books on film.

Matúš Kvasnička

Editor-in-chief of **Film.sk** and publicist. In 2003, he joined and later managed (2012 – 2019) the culture desk of nationwide daily newspaper **Pravda**.

Martin Ciel

Film theoretician and critic. He worked at the Art Research Centre of the Slovak Academy of Sciences and at the SFI, he has been teaching at VŠMU since 1998. He focuses on film semiotics and contemporary film theories. His texts have been published in various professional journals and collections, including foreign ones. Author and co-author of numerous books.

Eva Šošková

Eva works at the Department of Audio-visual Studies at VŠMU, focusing on animated film. She participated in the preparation of the retrospective of Czechoslovak animated films for the Film-museum in Vienna. Every year, she reviews the past year's Slovak animated films on various platforms.

Miro Nôta

He photographed for multiple daily newspapers and also did photography and picture supervision of numerous books. Currently, he works as a freelancer and collaborates with monthly magazines **Forbes, Film.sk**, and many other periodicals. He focuses on portraits and documentary photography. He has had a few group and individual exhibitions of his works.

— text: Lea Pagáčová —
 — photo: FTF VŠMU —

Festival de Cannes — LA CINEF Selection

The director Alica Bednáriková got on the radar of foreign festivals rather early – with her student film *Boredom* (2020) about Greta, a compulsive liar whose manipulative behaviour sets off an absurd chain of events. The typically playful narration is also characteristic of her bachelor's graduation film *Liquid Bread* (2021) which premieres at the 75th edition of the Festival de Cannes, in La Cinef selection.

Not many Slovak films can pride themselves on being presented at Cannes. How do you feel about it?

It is a great honour for me and the whole crew to attend the festival. I believe the amount of hard work we did on the film had something to do with it. Personally, I still can't believe it, I think it'll only dawn on me once we get there. For now, I am very happy about it and I hope everything goes smoothly at the projection.

Not unlike *Boredom*, your previous film, *Liquid Bread* is a playful take on film narration. Zoja, the protagonist, visits her family in Southern Slovakia and presents her family members to us one by one. She's recording her

commentary on a voice recorder and only at the end, we learn that the purpose of the visit was to find inspiration for her upcoming film. Could it be so that we have actually been following you, seeking inspiration for *Liquid Bread* this whole time?

I always strive to put a little bit of truth into my films, to have them reflect something we know, to document the lives and feelings of our generation. I base them on situations I've seen or experienced and create a story around them. I wanted *Liquid Bread* to function as a memory – I'd swear some segments happened exactly that way, verbatim. The rest was enhanced by my memory.



Becoming Ema Selected for Cannes Docs

with only 3 other projects in the Docs-in-Progress Showcase CIRCLE Women Doc Accelerator, an exclusive training programme for female-identifying documentary filmmakers. The feature debut directed by Particia Drati that examines motherhood is co-produced by Marcel Pazman from Frame Film production company.

In your film, you bring three generations together under the same roof. The differences start to emerge almost immediately. Nearly everyone knows these situations, why did they speak to you?

I find it interesting to take a closer look at how generations influence one another. Directing the sequences of the late 80's/early 90's was very entertaining, especially because of the costumes and make up. We could really have fun with it, me and make-up artist Danka Tábořská plus costume designer Evka Miklisová. Also, many of the costumes belonged to my parents or my friends' parents, which created a certain familiar authenticity. To me, the first generation is the strongest one. The grandparents watch their tiny innocent actions snowball into the consequences, but they are mere observers, as if it didn't concern them anymore. They keep on swimming, without looking back.

Alcohol plays a vital role in the microcosm of your film.

Yes, and so does the presence of God and memories of the past. Alcohol is a means of forgetting, or coming to terms with what happened. Although alcoholism is often associated with Slovakia in a negative way or used as an attribute of the "typical Slovak nature", that's not its purpose in my film. It's an authentic element of the story.

Ironically, the absurd situations also feel authentic.

I like absurdity in film, theatre, or literature. I don't think I'm creating it intentionally, it just sort of naturally happens to appear in the script. I like it when people don't take themselves too seriously, and I'm searching for such characters in my films, too. Or the ones who take themselves a little too seriously, too. My co-script writer Diana Dzurillová and I knew what kind of humour we both like and what we find funny or absurd in a film. We discussed it a lot and gradually managed to identify what could work in a script. Or at least we tried to.

Apart from the majority of contemporary student films, your works employ numerous elements you're breaking the fourth wall with, keeping viewers on their toes. I'll mention the commentary of the protagonist contradict-

ing what we see, or wigs and costumes that don't look believable and don't deceive viewers by trying to pass off everything they see as real. What is your approach to selecting stylistic means?

I see *Liquid Bread* as an anecdote, which allows me to use these formal eccentricities. If a character has boyfriends, she has to be passionately making out with them all in front of her house. If characters drink, they have to drink all together in one room with musical accompaniment. If someone gets injured, they have to have a cast, crutches, and be limping... I'm simply trying to make best use of the means of fiction film. I want the memory I'm exploring in the film to deceive me. It should be interesting, and at the same time, question my memory – to what extent is it really authentic? Because film is fiction and no matter how hard we try to create an authentic portrait of reality, we'll never succeed in it fully, we can only come close to it. Personally, I find it a lot more interesting to admit that fiction is fiction, search for the fragments of truth somewhere in between and find the "life" we know (in dialogues, reactions, emotions, in acting).

***Liquid Bread* is your bachelor's graduation film. What other topics or what direction do you plan on exploring in your works?**

I feel as if I'm still recovering from making my graduation film. I'm trying to gather some inspiration and talk to friends about topics I am curious about as a filmmaker, for example maturing and nostalgia – and how quickly the present becomes nostalgia. Can we now look at the year 2013 and summarise its characteristic attributes? It seems to me that today, we grow out of things a lot sooner, we see things in perspective, observe them from a distance. Present-day stories also intrigue me. I'd like to see more of what I know in films – more themes and allusions we normally use in conversation. I want to hear the Slovak language spoken the way we really use it. I want to see complex female characters, and above all, female friendships. ◀

▶ *Liquid Bread* will be screened on 25 May at 2:30 PM at Buñuel Theatre.



Market Screening of Beanie

is planned for 22 May at 1:45 PM at Palais F. *Beanie* is a feature fiction film for children directed by Slobodan Maksimović from Slovenia and co-produced by Vanda Raýmanová from production company objectif.

— text: Veronika Krejčová —
photo: archive of Tomáš Weinreb & Petr Kazda —



The Forest – Tomáš Weinreb & Petr Kazda —

L'Atelier

is part of the Festival de Cannes programme hosting sixteen directors whose projects have been considered particularly promising. The programme provides them and their producers access to international co-productions, a necessary step in order to finish their projects and start making their films.

Our producer Jakub Viktorín is already more than familiar with the L'Atelier experience.

Various of the projects you have worked or still work on were selected for the L'Atelier programme. Three years ago, Michal Blaško's debut *Victim* was selected and we can't wait for it to premiere. When is it scheduled?

— The film is in an advanced state of post-production. We hope we manage to premiere it by the end of this year. (More information about this film on p. 25.)

Another project that participated in the programme is *Caravan*, which you're making in collaboration with director Zuzana Kirchnerová. What aspect of the project was helped by L'Atelier the most?

— Attending such an event helps with the project's prestige. To potential partners and funds, it's a stamp of quality, so having been selected has certainly helped us with securing funding across the entire international co-production.

This year, *The Forest* (dir. Tomáš Weinreb, Petr Kazda) which you co-produce will participate in L'Atelier. What are your expectations?

— Our expectation is to be able to soundly construct the entire structure of an international co-production, to provide for the individual creative units of the crew, to secure funding and look appealing to international distributors. L'Atelier is a great stepping stone for us to make the film and succeed in delivering it to the viewers. ◀

L'Atelier was created in 2005 to stimulate creative filmmaking and encourage the emergence of a new generation of filmmakers. So far, more than 200 projects have participated. For L'Atelier's 18th edition, 15 projects from 15 countries have been selected and meetings will take place from 22 to 27 of May 2022.

— text: Veronika Krejčová —
photo: archive of Jakub Viktorín —



Jakub Viktorín Producer on the Move

This year, twenty promising film producers from different European countries have been brought together by the Producers on the Move initiative once again. The challenging programme will take place in a hybrid form, as a combination of online sessions prior to the festival and live events at the Festival de Cannes from 19 to 23 of May. In the prestigious selection, Slovakia is being represented by Jakub Viktorín who produced successful films such as *By a Sharp Knife* (dir. Teodor Kuhn, 2019).

Do you have any specific expectations regarding your participation in the Producer on the Move programme?

— I see it as an opportunity to learn something new about the working methods and the international film industry. Personally, I would like to gain some new experience in the field of international co-production, film project development, education, and fundraising. And last but not least, it's an opportunity to meet new potential partners for international co-productions.

Aside from the drama *Victim* you are making with Michal Blaško, you also work on *Guilt* and *Cowgirl*. As of now, where do these projects stand?

— Both are currently in development. *Cowgirl* was brought by the scriptwriter Jakub Medvecký, who is now working on a version of the script for the purpose of securing finances. *Guilt* is Michal's project, he is now writing the first version of the script for the purpose of finding international partners for finishing development and setting up co-production. I would like to introduce both at the Producer on the Move.

You really are an all-round filmmaker. There are several other projects of yours in production right now – the feature kids' film *Tony, Shelly and The Spirit*, the biographic creative documentary *I'm Not Everything I Want To Be*, and the drama *Mr. and Mrs. Stodola*. Which one of them do you consider to be the most appealing to foreign audiences?

— Each of these projects is an international co-production, but also represents a different genre and offers something else to audiences in other countries, so I cannot provide a definite answer to that. Personally, I hope that the kids' film *Tony, Shelly and The Spirit*, which employs classic puppet animation in a modern context,

will be able to withstand the competition of today's CGI and 3D animation.

You also have the creative documentary *Velvet Generation* in development.

— It's directed by Ivana Hucíková and takes a closer look at the lives of today's young queer Eastern Europeans against the background of the local Czech-Slovak ballroom scene. The film is in its late stages of development; the protagonists are booked already and we are awaiting the decision of the Slovak Audiovisual Fund regarding providing financial support for the production, among other things.

What were some of the biggest challenges you had to face as a producer lately?

— I am very happy to work on the projects with our great team of colleagues that can always make even the biggest problems manageable. Thanks to coordination and cooperation, we were able to overcome the pandemic-related challenges without any major setbacks. ◀

The Producers on the Move initiative was established in 2000, and almost 450 producers from all over Europe have since participated in the programme which aims to publicise producers, expand their professional network, and present their projects. Slovakia was represented by Marko Škop, Silvia Panáková, Michal Kollár, Katarína Krnáčová, Marek Urban, Peter Badač, and Katarína Tomková, for instance. The programme, sponsored by the international organisation European Film Promotion, is connected with the Festival de Cannes as well as the film market Marché du Film.



— text: Veronika Krejčová —
photo: archive of Ján Kooš —

ScriptTeast

is a project-based training programme organised by the Independent Film Foundation and designed for professional scriptwriters from Central and Eastern Europe. With knowledge of the CEE market and many barriers that talented writers from the region face, ScriptTeast takes participants to the Berlinale and the Festival in Cannes – so that with a little help from friends, they might overcome those barriers. ScriptTeast will not teach them how to write a script. The programme is built specifically to help writers perfect their scripts and take them to the international market, while also helping them develop skills that allow for navigating that market more freely.

Ján Kooš is a scriptwriter and script editor. He began his studies at the Academy of Arts in Banská Bystrica and completed his master's degree at the Janáček Academy of Music and Performing Arts in Brno (JAMU) with the script for *Ferryman*, which is now in the works and will be directed by Juraj Nvota. Jan is currently living in Bratislava where he works as a scriptwriter, cinema projectionist, and script editor at Radio and Television Slovakia. In addition to films, he writes poetry and short stories.

You participate in ScriptTeast with *Ferryman*. What is the project about?

It's about getting old and dying. But in a sensitive way, with a smile on one's face, at least I hope so. It's a road movie interspersed with elements of humour and surrealism, following three retired siblings that embark on a non-conventional journey across the south of Slovakia in order to obtain evidence of their father's death. What do they get out of it in the end? You'll find out once we finish the film.

How can programmes such as ScriptTeast help a scriptwriter? What are your expectations?

ScriptTeast gave me a unique opportunity to refine my script with the support of advisors from all around the world. They are professionals with rich experience in film and very diverse points of view. The programme starts with week workshop in Poland. That was really intense, but the hard work was balanced out by the warm, friendly atmosphere. Over the course of nine months, participants create three new, better versions of their scripts. Primarily, my expectations of the programme concentrate around

feedback from the Cannes film festival which might help us answer the question of whether the resulting film work has the potential to attract an international audience.

What have you been working on lately? Which of your ongoing projects do you consider the most appealing to foreign audiences?

There are several works in varying degrees of development, proceeding with the speed typical for Slovak cinema – very slow. One of them is an anthology film mapping out the history of Slovakia in four segments concentrated around the traditional act of a rural pig slaughter. These stories will be as absurd as only life itself can be. Countries of the former Eastern Bloc may relate to the film because of the similarities in our lifestyles and a shared historical experience, but I'd love it if the universal topic of human nature in historical context appealed to a broader audience. The animated comedy series I'm currently developing should also be completely universal – in terms of both the themes and means of expression. ◀

— text: Lea Pagáčová — photo: nutprodukcia —

Slovak Animation Is Doing Well

Animated production still represents the tiniest segment of Slovak cinema, but the recent years have seen a dynamic development. The Slovak Audiovisual Fund's systematic financial support of development and making of animated films as well as the jumpstart of television production certainly contributed to it. Besides, a couple of feature projects in Slovak co-production started to be made in the last years. The selection of currently distributed motion pictures also proves that animated film is alive and kicking in Slovakia.

The first wave of the pandemic might have put a stop to the majority of film projects, but the production and post-production of animated films went on, which was a contributing factor in having two animated feature films premiered at the renowned film festival in Annecy the year after that. Both were made in Slovak minority co-production. Michaela Pavlátová's *My Sunny Maad* tells the story of a Czech woman named Herra who falls in love with Nazir from Afghanistan and decides to follow him to his homeland. She has no idea what kind of life awaits her in Afghanistan, what kind of family she is about to integrate into. The film won the Jury Award at Annecy. The second film was more technically demanding; the puppet feature film *Even Mice Belong in Heaven* by the directing duo Denisa Grimmová and Jan Bubeníček is primarily addressed to children. The film adaptation of the eponymous book narrates the story of two sworn animal enemies. The mouse and the fox only make peace in animal heaven where they are rid of their natural instincts.

Aside from the new and fresh motion pictures, some other projects in development were also introduced at Annecy (as part of the Meet the... Producers – Gap Financing programme). These are currently on their way to the viewers. The first one is *Journey to Yourland* (formerly known as *Heart of a Tower*). This film's journey was full of hardship and its making took ten long years. It is Peter Budinský's feature debut made in Slovak majority co-production (BFILM). Riki, the protagonist, is a young boy whose fantasy world far exceeds the limits of an adult's imagination and of the grey neighbourhood, the kids' playground, and everyday life. In *Yourland*, robots walk the desert, apes are army generals, ravenmen are mysterious spies, and a tiny shiny rock is the single most important energy source worth fighting for with all of the strength one can muster. (More information about this film on p. 28.)

The second new addition, *The Websters Movie* directed by Katarína Kerekesová (produced by Fool Moon), will also speak to younger viewers. It is a follow-up to the first animated Slovak 3D series *The Websters*, the successful series concentrating around the life of a spider family. While the series combined computer-modelled 3D characters with real environments, the film sees the spider protagonist, the young animated Lili, become friends with a real human girl. The live-action sequences tie the



Love, Dad —

series' episodes into a feature film. In addition, both *The Websters* and *Journey to Yourland* reach out to their viewers through multiple media platforms such as books, apps, games, or VR, all with the aim of enhancing the basic storyline and deepening the connection between the world of fiction film and the audience via diverse forms of experiences. (More information about this film on p. 29.)

Naturally, Slovak short film production still offers more quantity and technical diversity than the features. There is the apparent trend of acknowledging the overlaps between animation and documentary films. Two short Slovak co-production films bearing the ever-more-present "animated documentary" label have been reaping success at international festivals for a few months already. The short film *Love, Dad* is an intimate statement of the director Diana Cam Van Nguyen, zooming in on the distance between parents and their children. The film addresses Diana's relationship with her father, she tries to understand why they grew estranged. (See the interview with the director on p. 36.)

The second title, *Once There Was a Sea...* by Joanna Kožuch, introduces a mosaic of stories from the glistening bottom of the dying Aral sea. The last Moynaq inhabitants who remember where the water once used to reach reminisce about the grandiose past of the former fishing power and dream of the high water making a comeback. However, the present constitutes a cemetery of boats that will never set sail again. The film will be presented at Annecy, in the competitive section Perspectives Short Films. (More information about this film on p. 27.) ◀

Our Profession Brings More Losses Than Wins

Last year, on the occasion of *The Cassandra Cat* (dir. Vojtěch Jasný) being screened in Cannes, Emília Vášáryová, the first lady of Slovak cinema, attended the festival. The film premiered there in 1963 and won the Special Jury Prize. Back then, Emília was celebrating her 21st birthday at the festival.

The film was presented in its restored version at last year's Cannes Classics selection and Emília Vášáryová gave the festival an interview. This year, she celebrated her 80th birthday and received the national Sun in a Net film award for lifetime achievement.

It's been five years since your last interview for *Film.sk* and this time has not been particularly favourable for neither art nor culture. Much has been laid bare and sadly, we learnt how people see the presence of art in their life, how they perceive artists as such.

— I am not plugged into social media or negative news, so I haven't seen these invectives and statements regarding artists. I identify with the thought that culture and education should be (I'd even say have to be) national assets, as an uneducated and uncultured nation has no entitlement to survive. Obtuseness and lack of education demoralise us.

The recurring question is: can art change things?

— I don't think someone leaves the cinema and decides to become a better person. I don't think we can convince someone to behave differently, to behave better during the three hours in the theatre. But during that while we spend in theatres or cinemas, we may feel wiser and more cheerful, and maybe the audience members adopt some good ideas. I am a bit too old to believe that art can save the world. But I will say that we certainly cannot do without it. Art can make human souls more noble. Hopefully they'll realise, at least for an instant, that they need it in their lives. I am under no illusion though – especially now after Covid when I hear people say: "Please, just some comedy." When people are going through something unpleasant in their lives, they visit cinemas or theatres to forget. We are living in tough times and I am still surprised that my generation, which was

born during a war and lived their first years in it, has lived to see another one. Also by the fact that nothing changes and the East is still a quagmire, in a way. Maybe it was no coincidence that communism caught on in this area, because people still yearn for a leader. I hear all of this and I never cease to be astonished.

Speaking of comedies, intellectual comedies, these have the gift of identifying serious issues possibly even more accurately than tragedies. I'll mention the popular *Cosy Dens*, which accomplished just that. In the light of current events, the scene where a convinced communist wants to commit suicide after the troops of the Warsaw Pact invade Czechoslovakia is even more charged. Such tradition is lacking in Slovak cinema.

— It is the most demanding genre, which is why I admire people who can do it in a refined manner, whose humour can make audiences laugh without the use of profanities or being plainly shallow. It is real hard work. I was lucky to have collaborated with the most prominent generation of those who could do it. The last of the Mohicans I deeply admire is Bolek Polívka. I truly bow down before his art. When I was starting out at the Slovak National Theatre, I used to come and watch his performances, learning how to work it, how to use punchlines and humour. It all comes down to being able to make fun of oneself. Then, audience members can identify with you and say: "Yes, sometimes I do this too." Putting yourself out there in comedy is hard, but the audience will appreciate it all the more so.



As is the case with *The Cassandra Cat*. It's interesting to see it screened in Cannes again, in the same year when *Titane*, expressing the present-day feelings in a very brutal manner, won the main award. Have you seen it?

Yes, I was invited to the screening. Regarding the actors' performance and technology, it was great, but apart from that, every ten minutes I repeatedly thought to myself: "I have to endure this till the end somehow." Everything that has to be put into today's films was there, which is so terribly superficial. I thought the screening would end with the infamous booing, but everybody was excited. When it won, I thought: "I really do not understand anything anymore." But I will never forget that beautiful week in Cannes.

Have you performed *The Bookshop* since the war in Ukraine broke out? Will these events affect the dynamics of the play?

Yes, we've performed it. In the Slovak National Theatre, we also perform *The Kindly Ones*. We all realised the audience now reacts very differently, that these plays feel contemporary now, so yes, I see the change. But we all wish to see other people come to the plays, not just the ones whose opinions align with ours. We wish the topics reached people who never go to the theatre. That won't happen though. Even commercial TV stations only show excerpts from plays that use foul language, for instance. Lamentably, it is purposefully made extremely superficial. It is not easy to convince people that alcohol is not our national treasure. *Valaška* (a specific type of an axe) and *bryndza* (traditional sheep cheese) also exist elsewhere. Culture, on the other hand, that's something different. Not too long ago, we performed *Before Sunset* and people were laughing at tragic moments. It is strange to see women laughing their heads off when someone's losing his sanity and becoming a lunatic. And they laugh at him. A man marches towards death and they laugh. As if they desperately wanted to avoid feeling emotion by anything. I don't know, I am no sociologist or psychologist, I am unable to understand it. I'm just making a personal collection, searching for good reasons to wake up the following day. Before Covid hit, I was thinking about giving up acting. I have a written note saying that nothing is more important than knowing when to start and when to stop. I would love to stick to it. But for now, work has really helped me, I am among people. And I realised I was missing the audience, the mutual connection. Theatre, that's live people in front of live people, which is why I think it will persist.

„...culture and education have to be national assets, as an uneducated and uncultured nation has no entitlement to survive. Obtuseness and lack of education demoralise us.“

The return of the audience is a question both cinemas and theatres are dealing with right now.

Bratislava has few theatres performing every night, so the audience will probably show up. If you think about the theatres that perform in Prague of which there are about 160 and we don't even know about any of it... There are also many theatres for kids. But let's be honest, each Friday, people leave Bratislava en masse and the city immediately changes to Horná Štubňa, a small village I was born in (which I'm mentioning because I would not want to insult anyone else's hometown). But we probably can't put that in the interview? (laughter)

Do you travel to visit theatres?

No, but I do travel to see opera. I usually go to La Scala or Prague. I attended Edita Grubero-ová's last performance, she was singing Norma. It was an honour for me to be invited to the performance. I could spend the rest of the evening in her company, which was an unforgettable experience. And I would love to go to all the rock concerts. I love music as such. I could listen to music all day and all night long and I'd never get tired of it.

The pandemic changed the meaning of the term "couch potato". Let's not talk about the fluctuation in quality of the programmes TVs offer. Rather, let's focus on the positive side: streaming services made miniseries trendy. Czech Television responded to it with such zeal that film awards organisers had to make a new separate category for this kind of production. You also played in Peter Bebjak's miniseries *The Actor*. Older Slovak television films were also winning prominent international awards





„I grew up in the theatre, so I am a theatre actress first and foremost. It was mostly directors who taught me how to act on camera.”

and belong to the best of our production, the canon of our cinema. I'll mention *The Ballad on the Seven Hanged*, *A Gentle Creature*, *Mario and the Magician*, and, of course, *The Sweet Games of Past Summer*.

— We were adapting world literature and fortunately, the people whose job was to give us the green light did not realise that every good author is always very relevant to the present. And all the authors did far more than just scratch the surface. One time, we were visited by Galina Volchek, director from the Russian opposition theatre Sovremennik. I guest-performed in Moscow, in a play about women transported by train during wartime. It was at the time of perestroika, everyone was hating Gorbachov back then. Surprisingly, the people there knew who I was. I couldn't understand how that was possible, but it turned out that they had seen *The Ballad on the Seven Hanged*. It got there in secret, as a clandestine dissident film. I have no idea who smuggled it in, as Andreyev was a banned author at that time. Despite the fact that cops were everywhere, television was making good films. When *Red Wine* was screened at a film festival, I went there and saw myself on a panel next to my sister. I broke out in tears. I wish our parents could have seen it, as they were the ones that got me into acting, even though I was stubbornly resistant at first.

I am happy to see films speak in image again, which is true for *FREM*, *White on White*, *Lines*, *Servants*, or *107 Mothers*, among other new Slovak films. Looking back into the past, one cannot fail to mention *Dragon's Return*.

— One has to train and educate their viewers. I've seen the restored film and really enjoyed Mr. Rosinec's photography. And regarding Chrobák, the author of the novel the film was based upon, I used to come and help my father at the big library he was administering at a chemistry school in Banská Štiavnica. I knew Dobroslav Chrobák was a banned author. Of course, we had his works at home and I started reading him when I was ten. At the age of 14, I read professor's Pražák's book of letters sent to him by Pavol Hviezdoslav Országh when he was 20, writing about how life at Choč was driving him crazy. I grew up on this forbidden literature. So when I was offered a role in *Dragon's Return*, I didn't hesitate. Although my understanding of the novel was a bit different. Besides, it happened at a time when I was thinking of quitting the acting profession. The job was keeping me here, otherwise I would have left for another country. My whole family was abroad and we were here, suffering the consequences of their migration.

At the turn of the millenium, you were proclaimed to be the actress of the century. You are titled the first lady of Slovak acting, even though you never had the ambition to be an actress in the first place. Is your relationship towards acting still ambivalent today?

— There were times where I strongly disliked the profession. Finding a man who would respect that kind of lifestyle and even wanted to start a family... Had I not met Milan, I don't know what I'd have done. When we met, I had already decided to pack my stuff and try to leave,

at any cost. To simply disappear. My life has been much more complicated and more dramatic than all of my film roles combined.

Experience is of importance to actors, though. Being, not acting.

— Playing a role? I've never thought of acting that way. If somebody told me my acting was good, I don't think I'd like it. I always strived to draw from my inside, by which I do not mean addressing my personal problems through a role, or feeling sorry for myself. I was lucky enough to collaborate with directors that were capable of stimulating my interest in a role and made me willing to tap into the story, the theme I wanted to communicate. It was about more than just looking pretty in every scene, from every angle. I grew up in the theatre, so I am a theatre actress first and foremost. It was mostly directors who taught me how to act on camera, Mr. Krejčík was the first one. You know, when I started my university studies, the timbre of my voice was the same it is today. Only back then, a fine Slovak gal could not talk in an alto voice, so I adapted. And then came Krajčík and asked: "Emília, why are you howling?"

Your husband Milan Čorba very much enjoyed conversing about his profession, but also about any type of art. Talking to him was always a great experience. Did you two talk about your work at home?

— When collaborating, we would never bring our work-related problems home, which gave us a lot of freedom. If we had, it would also have impacted our family life. But Milan's opinions were the most valuable to me. He was my first critic. When he went to see a play or a film I performed in and kept quiet, I knew I hadn't done a good job. Our profession brings more losses than wins. When something works out well and has many reruns, when people remember it, that's special. Anyhow, every role is a clean slate. I never wanted to feel the need to be ashamed of something, that was important to me. In our household, we were always frank with each other and one time, my mom sighed and said that I was lucky to be biting off more than I could chew. I thought long and hard about what she meant by it. That I should quit acting? I couldn't, I was the breadwinner of the family. A few times, people at discussions asked me why I'm an actress and what aspect of my job I attribute the most importance to. Money, I said. (laughter) I take my work seriously, but not that seriously. HUMOUR is what's most important. It's what keeps me alive.

— I highly treasure the Sun in a Net Award I recently received. But to be honest, I have to say I'm sad to see that Milan never received one, as he did so much more for Slovak cinema than I have. To conclude, I'd like to thank you for this pleasant interview and for the opportunity to have a laugh together. Thank you – and don't let anyone edit this part out!

I thank you. ◀



— text: Jaroslav Hocheľ —
photo: Babylon'13, Febiofest, Punkchart films —

War Note —

About Ukraine, for Ukraine

24 February of this year went down in (at least European) history as a grim day. In the early morning hours, Putin's Russia launched a "special military operation" against the neighbouring Ukraine – it was, in fact, an aggressive war that has no parallel on the European continent since World War II. Reactions to this tragic event were swift and the film professionals were no exception.

— The media were the first to react, as they operate practically live. Not each of them has done so at the same pace, though. While the commercial Markíza TV station changed the script of its morning show *Teleráno* completely and switched to broadcasting its monothematic version with topical information and interviews since 6 AM, the television news of the public Radio and Television Slovakia (RTVS) had fallen behind the times, so to speak, for which it received fitting criticism. "A war had just broken out, but that morning on RTVS was full of laughter, cooking, and exercise," Miroslava Kernová commented on the internet portal omediach.com. RTVS acknowledged the mistake and Vahram Chuguryan, the director of news and reporting, handed in his notice to the director general Jaroslav Rezník who accepted it. The position is now temporarily substituted by Attila Lovász, director of minority broadcasting.

— The public service television then followed with

a series of steps that covered the war in Ukraine properly, with due attention. Starting on 28 February, the usually mostly archival channel Three changed its name to :24 and switched to around-the-clock broadcasting of news coverage of topical events combined with talk shows and journalistic, documentary, or other shows. It promised "the :24 broadcast will feature live transmission of noteworthy statements of state representatives relating to the current political and security situation. 30-minute-long live programmes bringing information about current events in Ukraine as well as Slovakia will also be part of the picture." On 3 March, :24 added the evening minority news in Ukrainian to its programme with the aim of helping speakers of the Ukrainian language to better navigate life in Slovakia. (The news channel TA3 started broadcasting *Ukrajinski novyny* /Ukrainian News/ the day before.) RTVS also made adjustments to topics of several of its talk shows, so that they reflect the current state of affairs.

Film institutions did not let grass grow under their feet

— The Slovak Film Institute (SFI) published a statement regarding the situation in Ukraine on 28 February, four days after the war broke out. In the statement, it strongly condemned Russian interference in the sovereignty of Ukraine and expressed its solidarity and full support to the people of Ukraine. "The Slovak Film Institute shares the values of freedom, democracy, and humanism, and deems it necessary to express its stance in these times of difficulty for Ukraine. By its very nature, art is synonymous with pacifism, it connects people with no regard to their ethnicity or nationality. We want all of our Ukrainian colleagues and all Ukrainian citizens to be free, to have the right to self-determination, safety, and existence without the fear for one's own life and the lives of their loved ones," the statement says. It is also an appeal to support the National Centre of Oleksander Dovzhenko in Kyiv, a partner institution of the SFI. (The entire statement was published in the last edition of *Film.sk* that featured the colours of the Ukrainian flag

ments, emphasising that Ukraine is a close co-production partner to Slovakia and it forms an inseparable part of the European audiovisual space. "For these reasons, the Slovak Audiovisual Fund stands by our Ukrainian colleagues in the fight for their freedom and will offer them specific means of support such as residencies for Ukrainian filmmakers or other forms of help. In conversation with our Slovak and Ukrainian partners, we will strive to find effective mechanisms that will aid in keeping up our mutual cooperation and developing it," the statement reads.

— On March 6, a fundraising screening of Ukrainian director Roman Liubiyi's documentary film *War Note* (2020) took place at the Kino Lumière cinema. Together with other Slovak cinemas and films clubs, it joined the initiative of Film Club Iskra Kežmarok, partnered by the Association of Slovak Film Clubs. The young director put his compilation film together from amateur footage shot by Ukrainian soldiers and other armed people on their phones and other devices of similar nature during the



Reflection —

on its cover page.) On 7 March, the SFI followed with a statement regarding the military conflict in Ukraine; in solidarity with Ukrainian colleagues, the SFI, as a member of the International Federation of Film Archives and European Film Promotion, stopped all activities where Slovak cinema would be presented in Russia and Belarus and vice versa, all activities where Russian and Belarussian cinema would be presented in Slovakia. It also stopped granting licences for public distribution of audiovisual works (or their parts where the SFI exerts the rights of producers) on territories of the said countries, withdrew the participation of its representatives at events/in juries of film festivals taking place in said countries, and stopped presenting Russian and Belarussian films in the programme of the Kino Lumière cinema. At the same time, the SFI suggested that relevant subjects adopt similar measures concerning their activities.

— On 1 March, the Slovak Audiovisual Fund and the Slovak Film Commission also published their state-

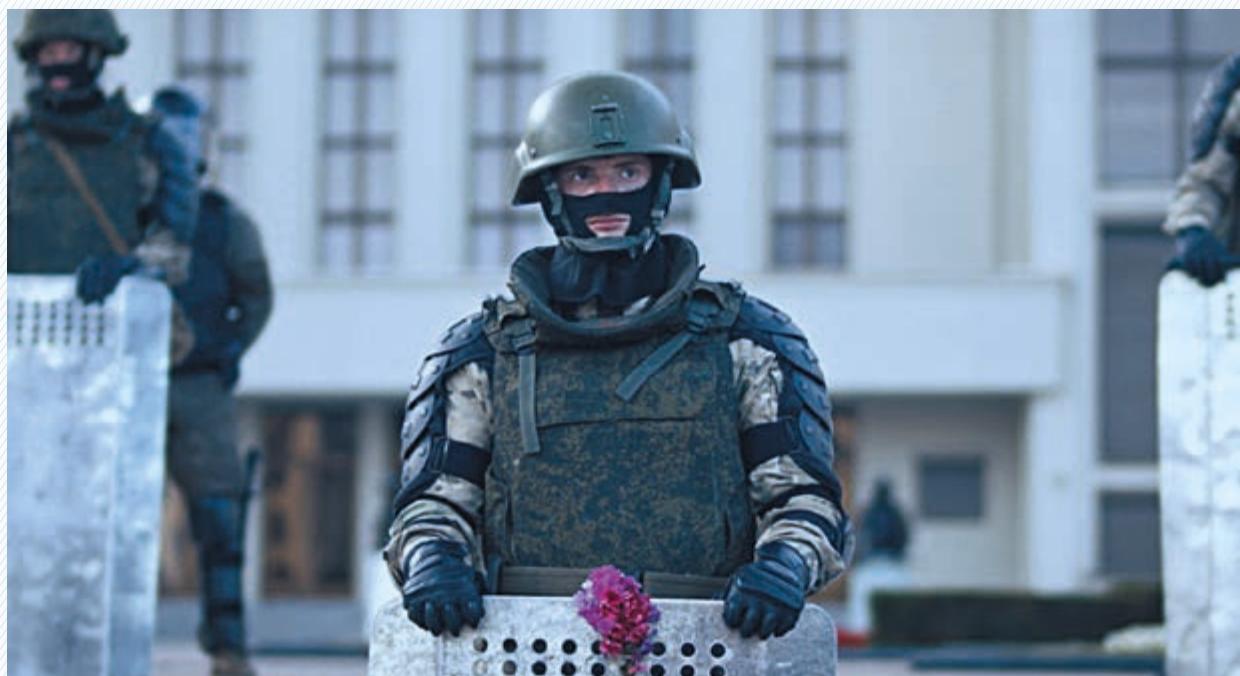
battles in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, creating a certain mosaic of the backstage of war, so to say. The suffering war brings is interspersed with little joys and humour; individual human destinies are formed. The ending sequence does send a chill down one's spine, though – when the end credits roll, the (until then) anonymous protagonists that were repeatedly popping up in the scenes are given names and with some of them, we learn the date of their birth and death, as they died defending their country... The proceeds of the screenings were sent to the fundraising campaign titled Who Will Help Ukraine (Kto pomôže Ukrajině) organised by the NGO People in Need.

Febiofest pulled an extraordinary stunt

— The organisers of Febiofest International Film Festival managed to pull a truly extraordinary stunt – only seven days after the war broke out, they announced a new programme section, a tribute to Ukraine, comprising eight works. Despite the rush, the selection was well

thought-out, as each of the films was a great fit, both individually and collectively. The documentary *Gorbachev. Heaven* (2020) made by Vitaly Mansky, a director born in Ukraine, today a Russian citizen, is a portrait of the former Soviet statesman. The initiator of *perestroika* and *glasnost* recalls his time in politics and the events it triggered, but also cautiously, in subtexts, criticises Putin's Russia. On another note, the expressively titled documentary *F@ck this job* (2021) is Vera Krichevskaya's contribution on the topic of media freedom in today's Russia. It tells the story of Natasha who established an independent TV channel Dozhd (meaning "rain") in 2010, employing opposing reporters and members of minorities, including LGBTI+ people. Over the whole course of its existence, she had been facing repression from the state authorities and in August last year, she was labelled a "foreign agent". (After consulting with the staff, Natalia Sindeeva decided to stop

battles in the East of Ukraine, the film's protagonist, Ukrainian surgeon named Serhiy, is taken prisoner by the Russians and witnesses inhumane acts of humiliation and violence. After a prisoner exchange, he returns to civilian life and starts to laboriously build his personal and family life anew. Jan Šikl's *Reconstruction of the Occupation* (2021) returns to the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the troops of the Warsaw Pact in August 1968. Certain parallels to the current Russian invasion of Ukraine could definitely be drawn. And to conclude, the documentary *The First 54 Years: An Abbreviated Manual for Military Occupation* (2021) by Israeli director Avi Mograbi describes how occupation works and what logic it is based upon via testimonies of soldiers that participated in the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. The organisers of Febiofest donated the proceeds from the tickets to screenings of these films to funds helping Ukraine.



Courage —

the channel's broadcast on 3 March.) Belarus is aiding Russia with its aggressive invasion; Aliaksei Paluyan's film *Courage* (2021) portrays the mass demonstrations against dictatorial practices and demanding the freedom of expression that took place in the summer of 2020, in relation to the Belarussian presidential election. Vitaly Mansky's documentary *Close Relations* (2016) inspects the effects the Maidan events had on his Ukrainian family and the society as a whole and searches for the cause of the conflict that left citizens of a country on opposite sides of a divide. In his fiction film *Donbass* (2018), Sergey Loznitsa returns to the events surrounding the self-proclamation of the Donetsk People's Republic, backed by Russia in terms of propaganda and material support. The course of 13 episodes where real-life stories and anecdotes are played out shows the moral decay of society. Valentyn Vasyanovych's *Reflection* (2021) presents the consequences of war with a smaller scope. During the

Distributors and festivals rise to the occasion

Filmtopia distribution company organised a fundraising screening of the document *Putin's Witnesses* (2018) on 2 March at Nová Cvernovka. The director Vitaly Mansky brings an insider testimony about the beginnings of the era of Putin. The proceeds from the tickets were donated to funds helping Ukraine, too. Due to high demand, the film was also made available online two days after the screening. Filmtopia's portfolio also features the already mentioned motion picture *Gorbachev. Heaven* and the novelty *Stop-Zemlia* (dir. Kateryna Gornostai, 2021) that locally premiered at Febiofest and entered distribution on 21 April. "I selected the film about the Ukrainian youth for the programme almost a year ago. Due to the ongoing pandemic, we were only planning to present it in cinemas now, without any clues whatsoever about what was about to happen. The film offers a portrayal of the Ukrainian youth of today, their worries, their love... not knowing that real, big problems were

waiting ahead," Filmtopia's director Silvia Učňová Kapustová said.

Organisers of One World Film Festival also rose to the occasion and reacted to the events unfolding in Ukraine by screening the feature documentary *The Earth Is Blue as an Orange* (dir. Iryna Tsilyk, 2020) as part of the One World on Demand format. The film observes a family living in the so-called red zone of Donbass. The evening continued with a live transmission from FIFDH festival in Geneva, presenting its programme dedicated to Ukraine. Organisers of Docudays UA International Human Rights Documentary Film Festival also participated in it. Together with the Docudays NGO, they are trying to get direct help for Ukrainian filmmakers who are recording the current events in Ukraine, including war crimes, and filming footage for international media and future films.

The universal support of Ukraine on part of individuals, film, culture, and other institutions is still ongoing. For the opening and closing film, even the organisers of the Slovak Film Week chose *Forebodings* (dir. Vyacheslav Krystofovich, 2020) and *107 Mothers* (dir. Peter Kerekes, 2021), shot in Slovak-Ukrainian co-production. As of now, no one can give any estimates as to when and how the war in Ukraine will end. As the Docudays UA's statement suggests, this tragic event will undoubtedly produce authentic documentary films which, in the future, will probably be followed by fiction works of Ukrainian makers, keen and attentive Russian makers, or maybe even Slovak makers. There will be strong testimonies and big stories, although we would much, much prefer if they never even existed in the first place. ◀



107 Mothers —

Olga charmed audiences

The showcase of French films *Crème de la Crème*, organised by Film Europe Media Company in collaboration with the French Institute, started on the same day. Due to the current developments, the organisers altered their opening film choice twice. The originally considered *Lost Illusions* (dir. Xavier Giannoli, 2021) and *France* (dir. Bruno Dumont, 2021) both work with the topic of media. Anyhow, *Lost Illusions* eventually moved to the second film slot and made way for *Olga* (dir. Elie Grappe, 2021) to open the festival. The film is set in 2013 and 2014, when the Maidan events were happening in the East of Ukraine, and it follows a young Ukrainian gymnast who is training in Switzerland. Before the start of the event, staff were handing out ribbons in the colours of the Ukrainian flag and the figure eight in the festival's visual (representing the festival's 8th edition) also adopted the colours yellow and blue.

Filmmakers unite to help Ukraine

The **Filmmakers for Ukraine** initiative was established in order to help Ukrainian filmmakers and their families as well as other vulnerable groups of people from Ukraine such as LGBTI+ people, Roma people, people with disabilities, children, and the elderly.

The website filmmakers-for-ukraine.com collects and updates information about the opportunities for help and support in every European country. The initiative was founded by Crew United, a networking platform that decided to use their experience with connecting people in the audiovisual sphere to help the people of Ukraine.

For more information, contact mail@filmmakers-for-ukraine.com.

— text: Zuzana Sotáková —
 photo: Febiofest / Robert Tappert —

When Entering the Set, Have All the Answers Ready.

In 1983, Poland was shaken by the case of Grzegorz Przemyk, brutally beaten by the Polish militia. The incident had a witness – Jurek, who quickly became the number one enemy of the state. These events intrigued Polish director Jan P. Matuszyński so much he decided to make them into a film titled Leave No Traces. It was an absolute success at Polish film awards and was nominated for the Golden Lion of Venice. The film premiered in Slovakia in March at the International Film Festival Febiofest and Visegrad Film Forum, and will enter distribution in November. The director met with the public and students in Bratislava to tell them about his approach as an author.

Your new film *Leave No Traces* about the brutality of a totalitarian regime is based on true events. Our region offers several stories of such nature. What caught your attention about this one especially?

— As you have said, it was not an isolated incident, yet there was something different about it. This case was documented, there was an eyewitness who testified, and soon the information reached the public. There are documents in the archives that were made publicly available after 1989. Journalist Cezary Łazarewicz delved into them and wrote a book about the case – I based my film on his book. Once I got my hands on a copy of it, I really got into the book and immediately knew it should be made into a film. Honestly, I was quite surprised it had not been done already. Anyhow, I made the film because of a certain fear the story was inducing in me from the beginning. I realised it happened all the way back in 1983, before I was born, but the distance separating me from the tragedy is not that big at all. Everything was based off of that essential feeling.

There are quite many characters in the film. Was it difficult to make them work both individually and in relation to others?

— Yes, I think it was hard and we worked on it for a really long time. Actually, we worked on every phase of the film for a long time. In the book, there are about seventeen prosecutors on the case. The number had to be reduced for the film. We decided to focus our attention on the events of 1983 and 1984. At first, the mother of the victim was a key character because I grew a certain kind of attachment to her. She was a poet, she had an unusual way of expressing herself, an unusual philosophy that formed her opinions. She sympathised with the Solidarity movement, but at the same time, she did not feel to be a part of it, did not identify with it completely. A fascinating personality. But making her the protagonist would mean narrowing the story down to

the topic of grieving the loss of a loved one – a son, in this case. What I wanted to do was to show the whole system, to create a film that would help us better understand that time period and understand the motivations of people in positions of power back then. In order to meet this objective, I had to build the story on the witness. He allowed me to change perspectives, point out this or that, digress from him at a certain moment and shift the focus elsewhere. The result may seem a bit disruptive to some viewers, but we were aware of that from the beginning. In any case, I wanted the film's structure to be similar to Robert Altman's – I wanted to avoid the whole story being carried by one central character.

Both of your fiction films – *Leave No Traces* and the debut *The Last Family* – exhibit a rather complex and layered composition. Were there many rewrites of the script?

— Well, I am not the type of director who also writes scripts. Back in my student years, I told myself that except when absolutely necessary, I would not write scripts to my own films. In my opinion, directing is a whole another type of work and besides, it is great to have a good scriptwriter as a partner. I think film creation is more like football, not tennis. It is teamwork and I like that. It enables you to converse with interesting people – with the DoP, actors, people from production.

How important is the development phase of a project to you? You also focused on this topic especially during your studies.

— Yes, my master's thesis addressed how and what a film director does, or should do, during the preparation phase of a fiction film. I wrote it because I had to, I wanted to graduate. At the same time, however, it was an opportunity for me to summarise the information I gathered inside and outside of school. This stage precisely is one of the most crucial, I reckon. It comprises two thirds of all the work there is on a film. When entering the set, you





„I was drawing from events of the distant past, and now we find ourselves facing something similar.“

should have all the answers ready. Or at least have the right questions. Shooting often brings many changes and surprises. It happens. Not always, but it happens. I worked hard and meticulously in *The Last Family's* preparation phase. It was my first film. It was based on true events, of which we had tons of archival footage. Actors were brought in on the project one year before we started shooting. The whole time, we were rehearsing and talking a lot about the characters. I believe that the effort we all put in is manifested in the result. With *Leave No Traces*, it was even more complicated – starting with the number of characters. I realised I might be in need of a different kind of preparation, which is why I decided to make an eight-part series in between my two films. *The King of Warsaw* depicts the city's gangsters from the 1930s, so it was a very extensive project with a completely different theme. When it came to shooting *Leave No Traces*, the previous experience with the series made everything seem easier, despite its challenging nature. Each character had a multitude of small stories related to them and these had to be arranged so that the film's storytelling produced the right rhythm and mood, which is always time-consuming. But there is no way around that. You have to be dutifully prepared for it and put in the work.

The film is a period piece. There are exterior scenes, old cars, costumes, historical settings... It all looks authentic, was it financially demanding?

————— I knew right away it would not be a cheap one. When you start working on a project for VOD platforms, you know exactly what to concentrate on, what is expected of you. The same applies to the budget. I try to communicate all of my creative intentions to the production as far in advance as possible, especially the more costly ones. In *Leave No Traces*, one of the biggest expenses was the scene of arrest, which I wanted to film in one long shot. It takes place on the main square, a popular tourist spot. We had to close it off and put a big green screen there, which is not an easy task at all. We knew about this for two, two and a half years before the shooting, we had enough time to prepare. We must have visited the place about thirty times, going through the scene over and over to ensure everything went well during the shooting. However, financially speaking, the market is constantly changing. Today, there are many more streaming services, so there's more competition. It would be much harder for them to get a film for the same amount of money nowadays.

How was your shooting impacted by the pandemic?

————— We were supposed to film on 17 March. I remember we were having a costume fitting when everything closed down. About four days before the shooting was scheduled to start, a lockdown was announced. We had to leave everything be.

How did you cope with it, what were you feeling?

————— To me, it seemed everything was over. I gave up the hope of ever recovering from it. Luckily, we were expecting our second baby at that time, and HBO asked me (among other authors) to make a short film about the pandemic. I was given full artistic freedom, but it had to be shot in compliance with the covid measures and the end result should not exceed ten minutes. To be frank, I do not enjoy creating works set in the present, but I thought to myself: if my family agrees, this might produce something nice. I went into it at full throttle and in the end, the job helped me overcome these tough times. After about three months of lockdown, we could return to shooting as planned. At first, I was worried the relaxed measures might not last long, but my producers were optimistic. I think everyone learned something from the situation. We started being more appreciative of being able to work, and put much more emphasis on quality. There were no vaccines back then, so in a sense, it was quite a dangerous game we were playing. On the other hand, at least we were made to really focus on our work and do the best we can. I think all of it helped the film in the long run.

Today, we see *Leave No Trace* through the lens of the recent developments in Ukraine and Russia where people are put behind bars for opinions opposing the regime. What parallels did you mentally draw to the present during the making of your film?

————— The story may be forty years old, but there is something universal in it. During the course of the last weeks, it seems to suddenly have changed, even as nothing about it really changed. When I started working on the film, I was convinced that a historical drama could be a warning for us to prevent past situations from happening again. I was drawing from events of the distant past, and now we find ourselves facing something similar. When it comes to interpreting a work of art, the viewers have total freedom. It is completely up to them to decide what is their takeaway from the events unfolding onscreen. It was not my intention to unambiguously point out the good and the bad. I did not want to judge, lecture viewers on morality, or force them into anything. To put it simply, this is a story that caught my attention, it may also catch yours. Hopefully, you will leave the cinema with some takeaway from it, but if not, that's also fine. ◀

Zenith Seeks a New Film Language in Dance

Dance fights instead of dialogues, movement and gestures instead of words. In his second feature film, the director György Kristóf explores the possibilities of film language without words. The dystopian dance thriller Zenith is a story of building a common system and a power struggle, carrying a universal message.

— text: Zuzana Sotáková —
photo: Dynamo Productions —

A group of prisoners lives somewhere deep underground. Each day, they produce energy for a system they know nothing about. Their known reality does not extend past the walls of their cells. When an unexpected system error occurs, some seize the opportunity and escape. The newly discovered underground space represents a glimmer of hope. Up over their heads, there is an opening that lets sun rays shine into the cave. Their common goal is clear. Together, they all dream of escape and start building a society but over time, it degenerates into a fight for power. The individual characters and their intentions change under the pressure of various circumstances. "I am part of the generation that experienced the Velvet Revolution in 1989 as kids. We did not actively participate in building the new system, but our parents were. Now that we are adults, we live in the system configuration we inherited from our parents and have a basic understanding of how things work in Central Europe 30 years after the revolution. Today, we can reflect on their work or the absence thereof," György Kristóf explains. The director is also producing the film and co-wrote the script. "The film can, however, also be perceived from the perspective of values – in borderline situations, our priorities, intentions, and our character are exposed. The pattern is timeless. In the end, we can see it in Europe and in the world, even today, in times of war."

Zenith is Kristóf's second film. His debut, motion picture *Out* premiered in Cannes as part of the official selection in the section *Un Certain Regard*. The film whose roots go back to Kristóf's studies at FAMU was in the making for a very long time, as the creators had to find a way of grasping narration through dance and movement exclusively. "Of course, we do not know what the audience's reaction will be like just yet, but we hope it will be digestible and enjoyable for them," the director says. According to him, the film presents a universal story told in a timeless manner, so anyone might be able to relate to it. The film was made in creative collaboration with Brussels-based Slo-

vak choreographer Anton Lachký. "The hardest part about this project was finding the aesthetic qualities or meaningful expressions capable of replacing words. We are not talking just about the dance moves' choreography, but rather about the choreography of the overall atmosphere," Lachký admits. Striking the perfect balance between these two elements was fundamental to the filmmakers. "This whole project is very interesting. It's a narration film intertwined with dance and choreography. We are constantly trying to sustain both – to display a broader scope of dance and tell a story at the same time, which is why we have to compromise between storytelling and dancing," affirms Gergely Pálos, the DoP who also shot some of Roy Andersson's films.

The film was shot in a special underground complex near Budapest, but the shooting was preceded by months of daily rehearsals with all the dancers/actors. The script itself was also revised during this process, so the plot was rebuilt, new gestures and means of expression were explored, and characters were developed, so naturally, the scriptwriter Michaela Sabo was present at the rehearsals. Together with Kristóf and the dancers, they were going through the story, scene after scene, and Lachký was translating it into choreography right on the spot.

The rehearsals also brought on a situation where the protagonist had to be recast. The role of the power-hungry despot was eventually portrayed by Linus Jansner from Sweden. The main female character who stands up to the despot is played by Judith State from Romania which also plays the protagonist in Cristian Mungiu's new film. "The international casting process took a rather long time. We concluded that it would be easier and quicker to work with dancers, but only ones that have a strong camera presence and acting skills," György Kristóf explains. Among others, the international cast comprises dancers from Hungary, Slovakia, Russia, Germany, Great Britain, and France. *Zenith* was made in Slovak-Czech-Hungarian co-production. ◀

— text: Jaroslava Jelchová —
photo: nutprodukcia —

Revelations of a Seemingly Innocent Lie

Michal Blaško's feature fiction debut Victim demonstrates the consequences of a seemingly innocent lie that fuels the fire of xenophobia, while also addressing the personal responsibility of individuals towards society.

"A Ukrainian woman named Irina Zyrchenko, the film's protagonist, is at the hospital where they keep her severely injured son Igor when she learns that he was probably assaulted and pushed from a set of stairs. They both live in a somewhat troublesome part of town, so Irina urges the police as well as the public to inspect the case, to not let it get swept under the rug, and she eventually succeeds," says the producer Jakub Viktorín from nutprodukcia to Film.sk.

"The film *Victim* is inspired by a true event that happened back in 2012 in the town of Břeclav, Czech Republic. A 13-year-old boy named Peter was showing off in front of his friends when he accidentally fell down a set of stairs. He ended up in the hospital with a damaged kidney and other internal injuries. Fearing his mother's reaction, he makes up a story about how he was attacked by some Roma people and ends up lying to his mother as well as the general public for six months, until he is forced to come clean. This case brought up a lot of anti-Roma sentiment not only in Břeclav, but across the whole republic," Viktorín describes in the film's explication for the Slovak Audiovisual Fund.

"Although the film is heavily inspired by real life, its purpose isn't a reconstruction of the events that unfolded in Břeclav. We wanted to build a reality-based story that works on two levels – the intimate story of a mom and her son, demonstrating how one white lie can affect the lives of individuals but also the society as a whole; and at the same time, a universal story about how fragile the pillars our society stands upon are, and how easily it can be influenced," the producer explains. "As if a portion of the society was waiting for an impulse that would enable and rationalise the expression of their frustrations," adds Michal Blaško, the film's director whose miniseries *Suspicion* was presented at this year's Berlinale.

"Having many of the people from the team that made *Suspicion* work with us again was a great advantage. We only finished shooting the miniseries a month before we started filming *Victim*, so everyone knew each other well and the atmos-

phere was amicable. We were able to set up the cooperation and tune into the same wavelength quickly, right from the get-go, which is very important to me. Several of the actors spoke Ukrainian without ever using Czech or Slovak, half of the film is in Ukrainian, which was a new situation for me in certain aspects. We had a very handy consultant on set – Raul can speak Russian, Ukrainian, and Slovak very well, he helped as a liaison between me and the actors, which worked out well, I think," Blaško details.

"We were filming in times of the Covid-19 pandemic, worried about whether we'd manage to finish the film. It was most stressful for the production, which was, by the way, absolutely amazing during the whole shooting as well as the development phase. I really wanted to avoid any forced stops to the shooting, because we cast a few non-actors. In their case especially, it is important for the filming to continue without any interruptions, to get the most out of it once they get into character and start acting "organically" on screen, so to speak. Interruptions might cause distraction and losing focus, which would have made things more difficult. Fortunately, that has not happened and the shooting was done in about two months," the director clarifies.

The film captivated the interest of film professionals even back in development. In 2018, it won two awards at the international Connecting Cottbus forum in Germany. In 2019, it participated in *When East Meets West* in Trieste, where it secured its funding for the post-production. At the Budapest Debut Film Forum, it won the Award for the Most Promising Project. That same year, it was also selected for the prestigious Cinéfondation L'Atelier in Cannes. In 2021, the project was awarded at the Works in Progress in Karlovy Vary. The film also received support from the MEDIA programme, the Eurimages fund, the Slovak Audiovisual Fund, and public funding from the Czech Republic and Germany. ◀

— text: Mária Ferenčuhová —
photo: Filmpark production —

The Last Film of Ivan Palúch Swims Against the Current of Time

In 1969, Slovak actor Ivan Palúch made three appearances in the programme of the Festival de Cannes, two of them in the competition – alongside Annie Girardot in *I Even Met Happy Gypsies* directed by Aleksandar Petrović and *Man on Horseback* by Volker Schlöndorff – and one in the non-competitive section, in the film *Marketa Lazarová* directed by František Vlácil. Martin Palúch, his son, made a compilation film *d'auteur* depicting the story of his life, titled *Countdown – The Last Film of Ivan Palúch*.

As a film theoretician, Martin Palúch has been doing academic research of Slovak non-fiction cinema for a long time. In the last years, he has been specialising in research of compilation films, documentary essays, and experimental films made from archival/found footage. In his feature debut *Countdown – The Last Film of Ivan Palúch*, this interest was joined by a strongly personal plane that motivated the film and yet, thematically, did not play any part in it. “Unfortunately, the decision to process the life story of my father into a film only came after his death in 2015,” says Martin Palúch for *Film.sk*. “The compilation film form seemed to me the best fitting for portraying the whole story. I have realised that my father’s filmography is so connected to his personal life that the characters and situations he depicted in films corresponded with what he was going through. The compilation form was the most effective for narrating the events of his life via snippets from fiction films he appeared in.”

Countdown does not have a classic chronological structure typical for many compilation films, as Martin Palúch is literally composing the story against the current of time. “The idea to narrate the story backwards surfaced right at the beginning. I wanted to break the conventions of biographical portraits by making my father become younger as the film progressed from the start to the end. I inverted the point of view, showing consequences first and uncovering the causes only later.” Due to the political pressure of normalisation, Ivan Palúch only played minor characters in films, fairy tales, or television production of the 1970s and ’80s. The film captures this in a refined way, because it anticipates his stellar years of 1962 – 1969 when Palúch acted primarily abroad, portraying characters that are less known to the local viewer.

Even Martin Palúch only discovered and got hold of some of the foreign materials during the film’s preparation. He intensely collaborated on it with the editor, Peter Harum. “I assembled the film’s skeleton, made a selection of the scenes and then, for the longest time, together we searched for the final form that would be understandable and make it appealing,” says Palúch. “It was a demanding process, partly because we first had to edit the film from previews, and only then we could start dealing with their quality and licensing.” The editing phase was preceded by a long research period with the help of numerous foreign investigators. “They went through old press, institutions, archives. We reached out to production companies, searched for heirs of copyrights – we called, we sent emails, we communicated via our friends. Acquiring copies and obtaining rights to use them took us about two years and spanned Europe, as well as the USA. The material needed to be digitalised, occasionally even cleaned, which certainly left its mark on the budget,” said the producer Peter Nevedal to *Film.sk*.

The painstaking preparations were fruitful, though. Television film *Ivan Palúch: An Actor’s Life* is a by-product of the abundantly documented compilation film *d'auteur*. It differs from the cinematic film: “*Ivan Palúch: An Actor’s Life* is a classic television portrait we made in a short time, while the cinematic film took no less than four years. Given its atypical narration form, it could not be shortened to the standard television format, which is why we made two films that have absolutely nothing in common in terms of the narrative style, as well as the extent of foreign footage used,” concludes Martin Palúch. ◀

— text: Jaroslava Jelchová —
photo: BFILM —

Only Sea of Sand and Tears Remain

Director, visual artist and animator Joanna Kozuch made a short animated documentary *Once There Was a Sea... It offers the author’s view of one of the world’s greatest ecological catastrophes – the drying up of the Aral Sea. The film was created in a Polish and Slovak co-production and premiered in Clermont-Ferrand this year.*

Joanna Kozuch made her debut in 2014 with *Fongopolis*, the film won the category of Best Animated Film at the Sun in a Net National Film Awards. As her other works, it is a proof that the author can combine different animation techniques, but she also bears the message in mind. Her new film *Once There Was a Sea...* is a collage of cartoon animation and actual photographed and filmed material, being both visual and sound.

“The idea for the film *Once There Was a Sea...* occurred to me during my train trips to the Central Asian region, as I first stopped in the wonderful, surreal city of Muynak – a port without the sea,” says director Joanna Kozuch in the author’s explication for the Slovak Audiovisual Fund. “I was standing on a high cliff and watching the dead, desert terrain and the wrecks of huge ships in the sand, imagining a busy port that was situated at the same spot just a few years ago,” Kozuch adds, and she would like to evoke the feeling of responsibility that we have for the world we are living in and contribute to the social debate about the harmfulness of man’s artificial interventions in nature and the importance of wise ecological measures as well.

The Aral Sea, being more of a lake, was once the fourth largest in the world. After cotton plantations with a system of irrigation canals were built in close proximity, the surrounding rivers, which flow into it, gradually began to lose strength. The lake began to dry up. And it is still drying out. Only the graveyard of ships at its bottom and the memories of the elderly inhabitants, whose lives were marked by this tragedy, refer to the once busy port. The film brings a mosaic of stories of real people from the Uzbek city, a former port, with whom the director spent a lot of time – conducting interviews, photographing, filming, making sketches, getting to know them while writing a diary as well. “I want to believe that

their stories will help us make better decisions in the future,” she clarifies.

“All the characters that appear in the film were created based on the authentic people I met. However, I changed their names and appearance (I drew them new, different faces). For the purposes of the script, I also changed some events from the lives of my protagonists and the circumstances of our meetings, I combined the situations that happened during my first and second visit to Muynak several times. In this manner, I want to protect the privacy of the people I have spoken to. Therefore, I decided that all the characters in the film will be drawn,” director elaborates in the explication and adds that “the animation will also help to depict a world that no longer really exists, only in the dreams, memories and desires of the people of Muynak.”

Scriptwriter Katarína Moláková and dramaturges Phil Parker and Barbora Budinská also collaborated on the film, at a later stage, editor Marek Šulík, master musician Dušan Kozák and composer Martin Hasák put their shoulder to the wheel. The Slovak producer of the film is Peter Badač from the company BFILM, and he already collaborated with the director on her film *39 Weeks, 6 Days*. Other co-producers of *Once There Was a Sea...* are the Slovak company plackartnyj, Radio and Television Slovakia, the Polish company Anima-Pol and the Polish Public Television. The filmmakers consulted and presented the project on forums, such as Pitching du Réel in Nyon, Cartoon 360 in Lille or Euro Connection in Clermont-Ferrand. “*Once there was a sea... was awarded at the presentation Animated in Poland on Krakow FF 2021.*”

An interactive educational project is also being created to support the film and its topic, and its outcomes will be added to oncetherewasasea.com. ◀

— text: Jaroslava Jelchová —
photo: BFILM —

Enter the World of Fantasy

Peter Budinský's feature animated debut *Journey to Yourland* has been in the works for ten years and will now premiere at the Zlín Film Festival. The main character is a little boy whose imagination takes him to a magical land of fantasy.

— “Our film tells the story of a boy named Ricky whose mother moves the two of them to a new neighborhood. There, he finds a mysterious glowing rock that takes him to an unknown world called Yourland. Not only is it a world filled with the most marvelous things a child can imagine, but also countless dangers that Ricky must face,” says the film's producer Barbora Budinská, who represents the platoon animation studio and has been involved with Budinský's project since the beginning. Budinská recollects that “it was back in 2011 when the first sketches, versions of the script, and visions for the movie started to come together.” Later, Peter Badač's production company BFILM entered the project and became the film's main producer.

— “Yourland represents Ricky's inner world,” describes director Peter Budinský in his author's note for the Slovak Audiovisual Fund. In his view, the film is about exploring our own feelings, our strong and weak points, and our ability to come to terms with them. This inner world contrasts reality that “starts out bleak and burdened by an onerous problem. Still, the film shows that all problems can be overcome. All it takes is to find the right path,” reveals the author who is new to animation for children and welcomes the possibilities it offers to animators and artists.

— “*Journey to Yourland* is a 3D animated film that children can see in cinemas. In our case, however, the artistic concept and partly the animation technology were inspired by the visuals of stop-motion puppet animation, which has a strong tradition in our country. It was also technologically exceptional to use software traditionally used in the production of video games in the process of filmmaking,” describe the authors who, in the different phases of the project, per-

sistently looked for a combination of suitable technologies in order to create the desired visual. Budinský specifies that “cooperating with our colleagues in Belgium brought a new perspective into this search and together we found a fitting solution to connecting traditional animation technologies and visuals with the modern 3D CGI world,” and adds that “utilising the Unity gaming engine in the production of an animated film is not at all common, as ours is the first full-length film in the world to be made this way.”

— Several renowned studios, such as the Belgian company Stacka, the post-production studio The Fringe, and Czech studios Kredenc and Alkay, were involved in this Slovak-Belgian-Czech co-production. Since the project has always been planned to include overlaps into other media, the technological process used in its making can facilitate the production of a video game or a mobile app.

— The author of the original idea and the first draft of the script is Patrik Pašš Jr., the English dialogues were written by Phil Parker. Several artists from Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Ireland collaborated on the art concept.

— “The most invaluable experience was going through all the stages of development, production, and post-production, communicating with team members, sharing visions and ideas with them, and in some cases, coming to terms with some things being impossible,” concludes Budinský. ◀

— text: Jaroslava Jelchová —
photo: Fool Moon —

The Fibres That Connect

The stories of the Webster family of spiders from the elevator machine room continue in the form of an animated series, as well as an anthology film titled *The Websters Movie*, where they encounter a human being. Katarína Kerekesová is its creator, scriptwriter, director, and producer and the film will also premiere at the Zlín Film Festival.

— “Webs, typical for spiders, are not only an image of the communication technologies of today, but also a metaphor for relationships, processes, families, friends...” says Katarína Kerekesová, the project's author, in one of the author's notes for the Slovak Audiovisual Fund. She started working on *The Websters* in 2013, first episodes aired in 2017. Since then, the spider family has expanded, they have their own school, supermarket, even their history. “Their world grows not only in the chronometry of the present, it spreads over into the past and even into metaphysical worlds,” Kerekesová clarifies. The new episodes reflect societal issues which the creators want to explain in a kid-friendly manner, while also keeping the adult viewers in mind.

— The main protagonist, a little spider girl named Lili, meets a human girl in the new episodes. “We built all of the episodes on the parallels between the world of humans and that of spiders, but we have not connected them yet. The story of a giant human gal which resembles Lili very much, despite their disproportionality, brings in the necessary slowdown of rhythm. She is the window to the microworld of spiders. When we focus on a detail, when we quieten down and observe, all of a sudden, we can uncover the fear of little Lili which gradually transforms into interest and understanding, and then into friendship,” Kerekesová describes. “The relationship between the small and the big, the repulsive and the acceptable, the unknown and the known feels familiar, because it is the story of tolerance and acceptance of otherness, and there will never be enough of those,” the author adds.

— *The Websters* combine 3D animation of spider characters with real environments. The new episodes

also contain live-action scenes. “Combining reality with puppets or other animated elements always tempted me as a director. I have been employing it since my bachelor graduation film *Lovers Without Clothes*,” Kerekesová remarks. Her company Fool Moon is the film's main producer. It is co-produced by Radio and Television Slovakia, plus Czech companies PFX, the Czech Television, and 13ka which was also a contributing author to the film. “We have been collaborating with Anna Vášová since the beginning of the project. She provides us valuable dramaturgical feedback, and currently, she also co-authors the script of the new episodes,” Kerekesová declares. A couple of scriptwriters work on the project, just like the visual concept is the result of a team of animators and their work. The company PFX takes care of animation and post-production of the live-action bits of the feature film. “This partnership meant a professionalisation of our production team, mostly in terms of project management,” mentions Kerekesová, adding that the collaboration is a promising start for future projects and the development of animation production in the Central European region. Aside from the content itself, she sees the stable production process, the growing team and its professionalisation as the project's benefits. At the same time, she claims *The Websters* are her family: “As an author, I have put love into the stories, my love of my own kids, parents, brothers. All with the utmost sincerity a fairy tale for kids can handle,” Kerekesová concludes. ◀

What are they up to?



Matúš Krajňák

[director]

I'm currently working on several projects, all focusing on queer topics. Last year, I wrote, directed, and acted in a romantic comedy series **Sexfluencing** which will premiere in the USA at the SeriesFest in Colorado, and in Canada at the Image+Nation Film Festival in Montréal, the oldest LGBTQIA+ film festival in the country. Sexfluencing is an original auteur series consisting of 5 standalone mini-episodes about the dating experience of a London-based queer vlogger. This year, I started working on another auteur series called **Other White** about a young Eastern European community living and struggling in post-Brexit London. The comedy-drama series was selected for further development by the renowned Midpoint Institute. And finally, my Berlinale Talents participation brought me an opportunity to co-create a collective feature documentary **Ensemble** which was shot remotely in 32 countries during the pandemic and which is a unique piece of experimental filmmaking.



Kristína Saganová

[animator, visual artist]

I have multiple projects going on right now. First of all, I continue developing my animated film **Alma** which reflects on the topic of suppressed emotions. Among other things, I continue in my research of Creativity that I started during my studies at MOME. It will result in another interactive exhibition later this year. As for current collaborations, I'll mention the Biennial of Animation Bratislava festival on creating its visual identity for the 2022 edition.



Nazarij Klujev

[producer]

I'm currently working on the distribution of my latest documentary film **The Sailor**, directed by Lucia Kašová. Last year, it enjoyed success at festivals and these weeks, it's entering television and internet VOD distribution. In order to bring the film closer to a global audience, I am extensively communicating with various international platforms. Speaking of future projects, I am part of a small creative team making preparations for a new feature fiction project and I also provide services to commercial advertising production.



Lucia Kašová

[documentarist]

I am currently working on my second feature documentary **World of Walls**. We have just secured funding for development from the Slovak Audiovisual Fund. **World of Walls** is a documentary sci-fi set in the near future, in the environment of extreme social disparities and an escalating state of climate crisis. The rich hide into their strictly protected luxury resorts, while others are starving behind the wall. An unspecified country is ravaged by an environmental catastrophe the world knew about for years, but ignored it. The film is built upon a double portrait of children from both sides of the barricade.



Tomáš Gič

[producer]

As of now, we are focusing on the international funding for director Martin Gonda's project **Flood**. We're developing the project together with producer Katarína Krnáčová from the Silverart production company. The fiction debut draws inspiration from the displacement of Ruthenians during the construction of Stariná water reservoir. As part of my work, as line producer at Silverart, I also provide services to a foreign production that resumes shooting in the beginning of 2022. At the same time, I'm also in my final year of my bachelor study at the Faculty of Law of Comenius University in Bratislava.



Katarína Krnáčová

[producer]

Recently, we released Václav Kadrnka's drama **Saving One Who Was Dead** in Slovak and Czech cinemas, after premiering in Karlovy Vary last summer. Another cinema release I am currently preparing are the Slovak-English dramedy film **Stand Up** and the co-production children's film **How I Learned to Fly** which has won the Best European Film Award at BUFF and enjoyed a huge box-office success in its home country, Serbia. We are in post-production of the co-production film **Calm in the Canopy**, in financing of Martin Gonda's debut film **Flood** and in development of a TV mini-series **The Last Baroness**. I sincerely hope that viewers will be able to reconnect with the culture and the cinema, even though I'm convinced that there are much greater challenges awaiting humanity as we emerge from the pandemic into the war zone reality.



Tomáš Krupa

[documentarist, producer]

In my production company HAILSTONE, I am currently working on two full-length projects. **We Have to Survive**, a documentary in the early stage of production, takes us on a journey to the four corners of the planet to meet people who, due to the impact of climate change, are already forced to adapt their lifestyles, customs, and habitats in order to survive and continue to live where they were born and raised. **Tiso**, a historical feature drama based on true events, is also in the development stage. It uncovers the personal tragedy of a loyal ally of Adolf Hitler - Jozef Tiso, the Catholic priest and the president of the fascist Slovak State who refuses to change and assume responsibility for crimes committed by his political regime. ◀

— text: Matúš Kvasnička —
photo: archive of the SFI/Václav Polák,
archive of the SFI —

The Fates of Heroes

Last August marked the 90th anniversary of the birth of director Martin Hollý. The Slovak Film Institute has released his film *Night Riders* (1981) on Blu-ray and DVD.

— Hollý began his career as a documentarist and considered making documentaries his biggest source of knowledge on filmmaking. His fiction debut *The Crows Fly Over* (1962) was released during the advent of the Czechoslovak New Wave. “In my films, be it in a more traditional or modern way, I wanted to tell the story of my times as a sort of chronicler. I have never been an auteur filmmaker. I would not even know how to make my own script into a film. It would bore me, and I would not be able to bring anything new to the process. I enjoy getting inspired by somebody else’s ideas and then interpret them through my own lens,” he told Richard Blech in an interview from 1994, an excerpt of which you can find in the *Night Riders* booklet.

A Film Appealing to the Audiences and a Thought-Provoking Piece of Art

— In their review of *Night Riders*, the Czech magazine *Scéna* noted that “this picture combines the strengths of a film appealing to broad audiences and a thought-provoking piece of art” and applauded the cooperation between

the Czech film studios at Barrandov and Slovak studios at Koliba which, “when supported by a mature choice of the subject matter, keeps delivering distinctive works.” This was Hollý’s second such cooperation in a short period of time. The contemporary reviews with a more critical subtext were mostly motivated by the comparison of the film with Hollý’s former project at Barrandov, a war film named *Signum Laudis* (1980), and its success. *Night Riders* was awarded the Special Jury Prize at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival.

— Its story is set in the period shortly after World War I and the formation of Czechoslovakia. It takes place on the Slovak-Polish border where two men are pitted against each other by the times they live in. A border guard commander Edo Halva, portrayed by Radoslav Brzobohatý, is faced by a worthy adversary Marek Orban, the leader of horse smugglers played by Michal Dočolomanský. Orban does not break the law for his own personal gain but to help the poverty-stricken village and earn some money for a collective emigration in search of a better life in

America. The creators decided to set the story inspired by westerns in the environment of the High Tatras with horses playing a significant role in the film. “A horse is perhaps the most beautiful creature on Earth. It fits perfectly into the frame, but problems arise when there is a rider on its back. The camera has to zoom out to fit in the rider which creates a blank space behind and in front of the horse. When, however, there is a synergy between the two of them, it is a joy to capture such a scene,” said the film’s DoP František Uldrich in an interview with the Czech magazine *Květy*. The reviewers commended the fact that the camerawork “adheres to the director’s vision and perfectly captures the grim quaintness of the region, which seems to influence even the attitudes of the film’s protagonists.”

— The casting choices were also the subject of praise. Despite Hollý’s works being diverse in genre and subject matter, one of their common characteristics is the precision with which he casts the actors and the way he works with them. He describes it as “the most potent tool for captivating the audience.” With *Night Riders*, his goal for the two main characters who stood against each other was to portray them as equals. “In *Dočolomanský* and *Brzobohatý*, I was definitely able to find equal opponents. They both had to be men oozing with manliness and willing to adhere to certain rules in their rivalry,” said the director in a contemporary interview with the *Mladá Fronta* magazine. “The story of my characters is supposed to show the first small steps towards the coexistence of our two nations. (...) I pay close attention to giving both sides the same fair treatment. That is why I was so careful with choosing the main protagonists. Neither of them was supposed to have a single handicap, be fatter, or uglier. And they had to be manly men. I went as far as to skew the uniforms. In those times, customs officers would wear footwraps around their lower legs. We adjusted the uniform so that the actors would not appear ridiculous next to the smugglers. I paid close attention to all that,” added Hollý when commenting on the main characters of his eleventh feature film.

Tibor Vichta – The Ideal Kind of Scriptwriter

— Hollý had received the first draft of the script ten years before the film was made and its authors Vít Olmer and Marta Kadlečíková offered a predominantly adventure-driven story. “Tibor Vichta adjusted the script to make it more historically and ethnographically accurate,” mentions Hollý in his monograph. He specifically mentions the scriptwriter Tibor Vichta and the composer Zdeňek Liška as two co-creators he was fortunate to have found and who significantly contributed to the success of his films. At the end of the 70s, Liška (who passed in 1983) began to refuse new projects due to his health issues. He managed to compose the music for *Signum Laudis* but *Night Riders* features music by Svetozár Stračina.

— Tibor Vichta, together with Albert Marenčin, was one of the key personalities of Slovak scriptwriting and dramaturgy that, according to Pavel Branko, “at the beginning of the 1960s overcame the barriers of dogmatism and dull pathos” and “allowed Slovak fiction film to become part of a movement that later grew to be an international wave known as the Czechoslovak film miracle.” Besides writing for Hollý’s

films, Vichta also wrote many of Peter Solan’s films, including *The Boxer and Death* (1962), worked with Dušan Trančík, and cooperated with other directors as a dramaturge. As stated by Renáta Šmatláková in Solan’s profile in the SK Cinema’s database, Solan considered Vichta “the ideal kind of a scriptwriter who does not create scripts rigidly, only draws from a basic situation, outlines the basic descriptions of the characters, writes the dialogues, and gives the director a freer hand in the process of filmmaking.” It is possible that this also suited Hollý, who on one hand, according to his own words, would opt for dramas with firmly established essence of the story; on the other hand, he maintained that although the script was a “holy scripture” for him, it was his prerogative, as the director, to be its interpreter.

— The contemporary reviews of *Night Riders* had noted that Radoslav Brzobohatý owed Vichta for the biggest and best role to date (naturally, they have not considered the films from the 60s banned by the communist regime, such as *All My Compatriots* by Vojtěch Jasný or *The Ear* by Karel Kachyňa). They also praised the script itself and Vichta’s dialogs that, according to the *Zemědělské noviny* newspaper, belong, together with the music composed by Svetozár Stračina and the performances given by the actors, to the collection of qualities that make the film “worth every piece of attention it can get from the audiences.” When it came to captivating Hollý’s attention, the stories he would choose featured human tragedies motivated by the surroundings and circumstances of the character whose fate they brought about. “I am drawn by the situation or the time period, doesn’t matter if present or past, and the people that live in it, the good ones and the bad ones, and what leads them to amorality or, on the contrary, what keeps them on the righteous path, even when it might not be easy,” said Hollý for the *Mladá Fronta* magazine in 1981. ◀



Tibor Vichta and Martin Hollý —

— text: Matúš Kvasnička —
 photo: archive of the SFI/Margita Skoumalová —

Hidden Gems of Peter Solan

A basic outline with a few drafted scenes, dialogues invented on the spot, right in front of the camera at a luxurious night bar in the Tatra mountains. A handful of characters, one night full of jazz, dreams, and disappointments. The British publishing company Second Run released the film *Before Tonight Is Over* (1965) by Peter Solan, part of the collection of the Slovak Film Institute, on Blu-ray. Along with other motion pictures, it is also available online at DAFilms.com.

“The great trump card of the film is Vichta’s script, a kind of libretto, the main framework facilitating maximal involvement of the director, cinematographer and actors, even enabling improvisation, which in and of itself is very remarkable in the context of Slovak cinema,” wrote Milan Polák in a review of *Before Tonight Is Over* published in *Pravda* daily newspaper back then. In the communist Czechoslovakia, it was customary that before a film went into production, the script had to undergo the torment of approval. It was full of pitfalls that could have taken it off the table completely, which happened to the first version of Tibor Vichta’s script from 1957. He had to wait for the making of the film well into the more liberal 1960s. The original script was also intended to be directed by Peter Solan – it was supposed to be his individual feature debut. By the time it finally reached production, Solan had already made the first Slovak detective film *The Man Who Never Returned* (1959), and another collaboration with Tibor Vichta – a concentration camp drama *The Boxer and Death* (1962), which gained international success and was awarded in San Francisco.

“What Solan has to say here about life in 1960s Czechoslovakia is just as important and insightful as that of Miloš Forman, Jiří Menzel, Vojtěch Jasný, Věra Chytilová and any other of his peers you’d care to name and who are now rightly regarded as giants of the Czech New Wave movement,” writes Mark Cunliffe in an extensive review of the *Before Tonight Is Over* Blu-ray at thegeekshow.co.uk. He states that having the film set in a night bar enables him to inspect a sample of society up close, showing people whose lives “are unmistakably affected by the regime they live under, brush-

ing up against its stifling restraints with the tantalising allure of life in the West and all that Capitalism seems to offer.” Solan made the film with the DoP Vincent Rosinec.

In her text titled *Senses of Cinema*, Cerise Howard says the film was a “joyous discovery and essential catch-up viewing for anyone already bitten by the Czechoslovak New Wave bug.”

The Blu-ray edition includes special features. Two short films *Operation BL* (1959) and *High Tatras* (1966) reflect the locale and milieu of the film. A new filmed appreciation of the film *A Conversation About Peter Solan and His Film ‘Before Tonight Is Over’* (2020) talks about the socio-political situation in Czechoslovakia, the beginnings and other work of Peter Solan and, last but not least, the specific approach of shooting the film *Before Tonight Is Over*. “While it emerged at the same time as the early New Wave films of Miloš Forman, it doesn’t replicate his ‘documentary’ style and concern for a ‘working class’ environment. Solan uses actors who are consciously ‘acting’ yet placed in situations in which they are required to respond to unexpected developments and situations,” writes Peter Hames in the booklet of the Blu-ray version.

Since the beginning of this year, *Before Tonight Is Over* is available online on DAFilms.sk, along with the drama *The Boxer and Death*, the satirical anthology film *The Devil Never Sleeps* (1956), the satirical tragicomedy *The Barnabáš Kos Case* (1964), and numerous short films by Solan. This is the first online release of Solan’s works. All of the films of the retrospective come from the collection of the Slovak Film Institute and were digitally restored. ◀

— text: Mariana Jaremková —
 photo: archive of the SFI/Dušan Dukát —

Seven Faces of Dušan Trančík

The Slovak Film Institute has released a selection of seven short films by Dušan Trančík on Blu-ray.

Dušan Trančík caught everyone’s interest with his two graduation films that marked the end of his editing studies at FAMU in Prague. *Photographing the House Dwellers* (1968), in which he introduces the members of a rural family via the construction of their house, won the category of fiction and experimental films at the Days of Short Film in Karlovy Vary. The *History of Slovak Cinema*, a book published by the Slovak Film Institute, documents that back then, in the general discussion about local documentary and popular-science production, this film was considered to be one of the most substantial short films of those years, even at the European level. Trančík built the film on a simple principle and using an equally simple shortcut, he aptly expressed the paradoxes and contradictions of that era.

Trančík’s second graduation film is the fiction mid-length *The Gallows* (1969). The brutal parable from a Ruthenian hamlet in the mountains was awarded at the 18th Mannheim International Film Week. *The Gallows* reflects the spirit of the era of hopelessness that followed after August 1968.

Peter Mihálik was the dramaturge of both of these films. Together with Mihálik and Vladimír Kubenko, Trančík also made *Commemoration* (1969), recording the days after Jan Palach burned himself to death. It was shot in Prague, Brno, and Bratislava. “I came back to Prague, Mihálik was in Brno, and Kubenko in Bratislava. I mostly esteem the film’s news value, it is not a documentary we would want to express our artistic ambitions in. We were mapping events. Now that I have seen it after all those years, it is ac-

tually very factual – it did not fabricate any big imaginary enemies, and it did not pretend to be mapping the events that followed after Palach’s death subjectively, poetically,” says Trančík. According to him, *The Gallows* should also be perceived in this context, as an allegory of the occupation and violation of a nation. “The film has to be perceived via its context, otherwise, people will more or less not understand it anymore.” Another film from the collection is titled *Tree tops* (1972), and Trančík managed to make an original motion picture even about cement production. It is followed by *Breathe Out* (1970), a documentary profile of the poet Ján Smrek, awarded at ARSfilm in Kroměříž. The fiction featurette *Amulet* (1975), made to commemorate the 30th anniversary of liberating Czechoslovakia, features music by Marián Varga and introduces Milan Kňažko as an actor about to portray the death of an insurrectionist. The collection is completed by a promotional film dedicated to Bohemian glass and Dutch tulips, *The Story of the Seven Masters Guild* (1973). ◀



— text: Zuzana Sotáková —
photo: nutprodukcia/Oliver Staša —

Animated Films Help Each Other Out

She took years-old letters from her father and responded with a short animated film titled *Love, Dad* (2021). The Czech director Diana Cam Van Nguyen won countless awards for the film, including trophies from the London Film Festival and AFI Fest in Los Angeles which qualified the film to be shortlisted for the Oscars in the category of short animated films.

The visuals and theme of *Love, Dad* stem from letters, which is probably why you chose paper collage as the animation method.

Yes. I draw from real letters my father used to write me from prison. I was searching for an appropriate technique and visual imagery that would be fitting, which brought me to collage. The element I use to express emotions is the “performing” of paper that occupies the entire space of the film. During the exposition, the paper is clean, smooth, in mint condition. But as the film progresses, papers get crumpled and torn until pieces break off completely – this represents the change in the relationship between the father and his daughter. By the end, the papers are put back together, but one can see they were once damaged – the white edges of the tears are visible scars.

What do you think is behind the recent global successes of Czech and Slovak animation?

I think that short animated films made in the last few years do not fall behind the international student production. Also, I really see how the success of one animated film helps another one of the same nature.

Do you plan to continue making short animated and experimental films after graduation? Is that an option in the local environment?

I want to take a break from short animated films. For now, I feel I’ve given it all I have in terms of themes and visual imagery. Now, I am writing a script for a fiction feature film with Slovak scriptwriter Veronika Vozárová. ◀

— text: Mária Ferenčuhová —
photo: Guča, Toxpro, Arsy-Versy, Hitchiker Cinema, sarkany —



Worldwide Ambitions of Slovak Documentaries

Despite the second year of the pandemic not being favorable to film distribution for cinemas, twelve documentaries by Slovak filmmakers managed to get into cinemas, at least for a short while. This time, the number of documentaries made by women was double the amount of those made by men. Five of the films are debuts, which is even rarer.

The reasons for why so many quality auteur documents shot by female filmmakers belonging to the young or the middle generation met in the cinema in 2021, and to what extent it was precisely because of the scanty production of live action films (made mostly by men) that let them shine, would certainly deserve a separate analysis. But at the same time, one cannot fail to notice that these women have a strong and credible voice, and some of the topics they brought up were not the usual for Slovak documentary films. Numerous films of theirs stepped out of the small Slovak or Central European territory with confidence and became global, at least in geographical terms, which I also find notewor-

personal, introverted film. Viera Čákanyová approached it as an audiovisual journal of her own Antarctic loneliness, interrupted only by semi-fictional chats with AI *ann_w* and track-ins of parasitic (mental) images of people swarming in China. With her second feature film, Čákanyová proves to be the most original Slovak documentary filmmaker, not only because of her choice of topics, but primarily because of her take on them where she specifically aims to deconstruct the anthropocentric perspective.

Lucia Kašová's debut, *The Sailor*, also indirectly ruminates on climate change. It's a portrait of Paul Erling Johnson, a freedom-loving sailor and yacht designer

neglected health care services, is systematically hurting many women in labour. For these, giving birth becomes a grievous experience that often affects not just the relationships with their children, but also their future sex lives. Unlike Zuzana Límová's *Before I Met You*, Maia Martiniak did not frame *Unseen* as an indictment. Instead, she tries to show how to deal with the trauma. And primarily, she brings examples of good practice, mostly from Denmark. These demonstrate that obstetrics in Slovakia does not stand or fall on individuals, as these usually have the will, willingness, and empathy, but rather on the desperately inadequate spatial conditions of Slovak hospitals and the lack of qualified staff,

and yet with no memory. Sliepková avoids social issues such as inequality among citizens, the frequent problem of financially unaffordable housing, but she does not develop the potential of lines as barriers in the lives of the citizens. Black-and-white shots are seeping with topics of the incoming climate crisis, the automobile hegemony, or the difficulty of enforcing a positive change. And the two protagonists' stories insinuate loneliness and the troubled building of relationships in the anonymity of urban space. Conceptually, these lines do not cross, but montage and sound dramaturgy blend them in a well-functioning poetic unit.



The Sailor —



Lines —

thy. This applies especially to *White on White* by Viera Čákanyová and *The Sailor* by Lucia Kašová, but to some extent also to *Unseen* by Maia Martiniak.

Care for the Planet and Sympathy for Others

Viera Čákanyová shot her second film in Antarctica as part two of an (un)planned triptych about the future of the world, mainly human civilization in the times of the climate crisis. In the radical preceding *FREM* (2019), she simulated an (autistic, dare I say) perspective of artificial intelligence on the planet Earth, and humans as an active element were, at least seemingly, pushed out of focus of the camera and the story right to the periphery. Now, *White on White* is a purely

spending the rest of his life on a small Caribbean island. The everyday rhythm of the octogenarian with slow careful moves who's looking back upon his life sets the tempo of the film and strengthens its meditative character, helping Kašová to achieve a pure cinematographic style. At the same time, the film is narrated in a very traditional way (mostly via voiceover of the protagonist complemented by interactions at a shop, or with boat repairmen). Intentionally – maybe with an excessive amount of respect for the old man – areas of potential conflict or personal trauma are avoided.

Contrarily, Maia Martiniak's *Unseen* moves the problem of traumatised to the forefront, pointing out that obstetrics in Slovakia, part of underfunded and

be that nurses or doulas that may keep women company throughout the entire labour. The film *Unseen* might not be bringing a new breakthrough in style or concept, but its directness and sensitivity are captivating. Capturing well-managed labours (and I find the unfortunately oh-so-common Slovak induced labour that ends up in a C-section, however with the baby then being put on the mother's chest, to be one of them) can be truly therapeutic and healing for some female viewers.

Barbora Sliepková's debut *Lines* is also radiating tenderness and care. Aesthetically, her film is a convincing tribute to urban symphonies from one hundred years ago, it displays Bratislava as a city with a changing skyline, permanently redrawing, rebuilding, reminiscing,

History, Tradition, and Silenced Voices Too

Reflection of the past has long been one of the substantial sources of inspiration to Slovak documentary films. To some extent, this point of view applies to two out of five documentary debuts of the female directors plus the feature debut of Jakub Julény who already has a mid-length television film under his belt. Mária Pinčíková's *On Your Marks!* is probably most defiant of such characterisation, as it focuses primarily on the preparations for the complex coordinated mass gymnastic performance of the Sokol movement gathering at a stadium. Archival footage at the beginning gives more importance to the topics of tradition and historical memory which the film also touches on, including the

questions of group discipline in a democracy and individualism, sometimes of extreme dimensions.

— In Vera Lacková's debut *How I Became a Partisan*, on the other hand, the topic of history is fundamental. The author is not only searching for non-existent historiography of the Roma antifascist resistance movement, but also for a method to communicate this history. Her film combines references to the oral tradition of passing down memories with positivistic backtracking of historical sources and metaphorical/metonymic substitution of missing visuals with real ones, albeit borrowed from a different context. Lacková is examining, setting the tone of the aesthetic form while also showing sys-

persecution, while also touching on betrayal, compromise, and forgiveness.

— Films *Architect of Brutal Poetry* by Ladislav Kaboš and *Everest, the Hard Way* by Pavol Barabáš also remember and revive the voices of those that cannot speak for themselves anymore. Both present a rather conservative line among the subset of last year's documentaries – the more or less television-film-like qualities in the case of Barabáš, and in the other, the acting stylisation with the old fashioned voiceover portraying the remarkable architect Hans Broos, a Carpathian German from Slovakia who gained notoriety in Brazil.

onymised characters of the mansion's female residents (orphans, or the court ladies that are going through re-education) that remain speechless for the entire length of the film.

— Miro Remo also captures the present in *At Full Throttle*, bringing a highly dynamic portrayal of life, although a bit more bitter one. The protagonist Jaroslav has just been through a traumatic divorce, he hasn't reached full independence from his mother, and his biggest passion is racing cars of his girlfriend, Jitka. The most chilling part of the story of an ordinary human is the ending: in the closing minutes of the film, Miro Remo insinuates how failure and frustration, balanced

the film manages to spark up conversation. The way its creators transferred the distribution from closing cinemas to their own online platform Kino 363, where it was accompanied by numerous debates with guests who have a lot to say about the topic, is a proof of it.

A Small Step for Cinemas, a Giant Leap for Documentary Film

— In a way, the pandemic has filtered the number of documentary films that reached cinemas: some premiered just online, others went directly for television broadcast. As a result, the vast majority of pictures that made their way to the cinema were really worthy of



King Bee —



At Full Throttle —

temic racism with its roots running deep in Slovak society.

— Silence and long-term quietness partly define *The Commune*, the film where Jakub Julény presents the dissidents of Košice as the secret police keeps a close eye on them and deliberately erodes their bunch. It concentrates particularly on the NACE group centered around Marcel Strýko, an amateur philosopher, poet, visual artist, and musician broken only by the post-revolutionary politics. *The Commune* reopens old wounds, but Julény does not pressure the protagonists into confrontation, nor does he question the sentiment or the conciliatory pathos some of them recall the past with. In the first place, *The Commune* is a portrait of friendships that resist or perish under the pressure of the police and

The Present, Bright or Bitter

— *King Bee* by Vladislava Sárkány, a fairytale-like comedic portrait of the model municipality Spišský Hrhov and its mayor/monarch Vladimír Ledecký, portrays complex reality in a refined but functional way. The director went for the creative “make-believe” approach (a pretended kingdom, film, self-presentation) which helped her easily, yet thoroughly uncover the ways of the local royalty, but also the community work, its transformations and even its darker aspects, shortcomings, and flaws. Apart from the solid protagonists, the director used metaphors and comparisons to paint a credible picture of the municipality: a diligent, highly organised beehive and the disconcertingly wistful an-

only by tiny, insufficient glimmers of joy, can result in a radicalized society, all in the spirit of uneasy gregariousness.

— Zuzana Piussi's *Ordeal* is the one leaving the most bitter impression. The director picked up the threads of her earlier film *Disease of the Third Power* (2011) and is pointing out the problems of the Slovak judicial system, the persisting unenforceability of law, procedural delays, and even blatant miscarriages of justice that make all the hope for rehabilitating judicial reforms disappear. Piussi based the film on two cases of evident injustice and the attitudes of members of the judicial council, primarily the female ones. *Ordeal* might not be bringing any new or unfragmented information, but

the silver screen; these not only have the ambition, but also the right topics, the format, the visual conception, the creative rendering. This is also the reason why I did not cover films made by non-Slovak directors (even if they were made in co-production with Slovak companies), and dedicated a few more lines to the ambitious female Slovak authors. Last year's production of documentary films was exceptional and numerous of the films are worthy to come back to in the future. ◀

— text: Martin Ciel — photo: Punkchart films,
Garfield film, Wandal production —

Possibilities of Depicting Reality and the Limits of Fiction Films

Currently, Slovakia has around 5 450 000 inhabitants, the well-functioning Slovak Audiovisual Fund, truly many production companies, about 150 cinemas and 50 film clubs, circa 40 film festivals and showcases, more or less 10 film magazines and portals of varying quality, one separate film and television faculty, and 100 years of cinematic tradition. In 2021, all of that generated four cinema premieres of Slovak feature fiction films.

107 Mothers —

As far as I know, there are no quantitative models examining the direct relation and proportionality between the stated facts, so I cannot say whether four films are a lot or not enough in this country, and in this situation. But speaking of quality, it was a successful year for the Slovak cinema. All of the films differ from each other to a great extent, it is therefore impossible to spot any dominating trends or tendencies in this small sample. Even though all of the four films have some things in common: an interest in reality, more stylised in some cases and more realistic in others, the intention to capture its correlations. They all identify and represent the boundaries of the understanding of the possible ways to interpret reality. That is, the idea of commenting on reality with fiction films. (One remark: Unfortunately, this year, just as any other year, in fact, experimental fiction film is absent, but, among other factors, it is the result of the 100-year-long realistic tradition. There weren't many Andalusian dogs running around.)

Playing with the Viewer

Martin Šulík made *The Man with Hare Ears*. It is certainly not his worst film, but also not his best. The film à thèse is a calculated intellectual game, a riddle, essentially. As if it counted on the viewer to discover all the hidden connections and this revelation would bring them the pleasant satisfaction of having become a worthy partner to the creators. It's not only the film affecting the viewer – the viewer also affects the film. Balancing this seesaw is not easy, but the authors of *The Man with Hare Ears* accomplished it. Not even the use of surreal elements in a strictly realistic rendition can disturb the unifying poetics of the artwork, as it is sufficiently motivated by the world of dreams or imagination, let's say. However, it is all made in a somewhat boring, literal way without any major innovations or formal embellishments Šulík so brilliantly exhibited in his earlier films. In the end, the interesting intellectual construct commenting on reality without any strong emotions feels cold, which would not be a problem in and of itself, but the film is not philosophically striking enough to gain significance in epitomising the state of affairs.

The Higher Populares

Peter Bebjak's *The Auschwitz Report* is a different kind of puzzle. It is the only historical film of this year's collection, inspired by actual events. Unlike Bebjak's previous film *The Line* (let's be merciful and not even mention *The Rift*), this one actually works. *The Line* crumbled to pieces that were dramatic, attractive to the viewer, and at times, cliché. These pieces did not aid cohesion and the whole film seemed to be adhering to some fictional wishes of a mainstream viewer. But *The Auschwitz Report* is solid. Sure, it is a mainstream film with a relatively big budget, but it is virtually unique. A long long time ago, there was a Czechoslovak Army Art Ensemble – the excellent term “higher populares” originated there. It is a

fitting description of *The Auschwitz Report*, as this motion picture stands out from the rest of commercially oriented genre films about concentration camps and escaping them. The traditionally made film reaches the standard professional quality, but what is it that makes it so special? Well, the fact that the makers absolutely succeeded in avoiding any pathos whatsoever. For instance, they took all the drama out of the ending, which has proved to be a good solution. The film is shot in an attractive, thrilling, and realistically convincing manner; it works with emotions but does not succumb to the average viewer's taste. Only the closing montage sequence with its appeal relating to current-day reality feels a bit off.

Time for a More Flexible Terminology

Peter Kerekes' *107 Mothers* is the cherry on top of the 2021 premieres. I consider Kerekes' *66 Seasons* to be one of the best documentaries made after 1989, and to me, it seems that *107 Mothers* is a natural progression of his authorial journey. The central motif is the fate of



The Man with Hare Ears —

a female prison guard officer, and real stories of the inmates are the side motif. The dramaturgically flawless story with a noteworthy formal depiction is only decipherable in hints. The filmmakers narrate it uncompromisingly, clearly have it all fully under control and fulfill their authorial vision with non-actresses (well, alright, there are two actresses) and the para-documentary point of view with an incredible use of details. The images (DoP Martin Kollar) of situations saturated with semiotic structures are often so beautifully plain they reach an interesting symbolism due to the montage. This is one of those authentic civilist films that broaden the conscience of correlations. Via camera, it can show the viewer things they could never see or feel. Paradoxically, it is seemingly simple precisely because of its intricate inner complexity.

In the post-revolutionary period, this para-documentary poetics was first used by Iveta Grófová in her

fiction film *Made in Ash*. In a sense, it was an innovative and original follow up on the 1960s on her part. Zuzana Liová, Mátýás Prikler, Jaroslav Vojtek, Juraj Lehotský, Mira Fornay with her *My Dog Killer*, and Ivan Ostrochovský and his *Koza* continued with it. Once and for all, *107 Mothers* proves that Slovak cinema can walk that walk. Although, if a documentary is a record (or a reconstruction) of an event that really happened, a creative transformation of reality, does it mean that *107 Mothers* is a fiction film? Or, isn't it about time to substitute the traditional terminology with something a bit more flexible?

model intended to present an engaging portrait of the social relations of today within the genre's framework. In the case of *Perfect Strangers*, it is a purely commercially oriented variation that has abandoned any effort to interpret reality in an interesting way, but is at least playing with it towards the end. In one apartment, seven people play a dishonest game of pretending honesty. Cell phones play an important role and it is even funny, occasionally. There is no use in comparing this film to the original. The ambition of *Perfect Strangers* was to become popular among viewers in our region, and according to the box office, it accomplished just that.



Perfect Strangers —

The Viewer's Populares

I completely understand that at this point, our readers may sigh at the fact that the dissected sample contains no blockbusters of mass popularity among viewers (ideally genre films, undemanding action films, or comedies) to balance out the autumn spleen of films *d'auteur* oriented towards the depressing everyday reality. The answer to that may be: let Hollywood produce such films. It is partially wrong, though, as every healthy cinema should have the potential to produce popular genres, too. And here we have Zuzana Marianková's debut *Perfect Strangers*, a recycled version of the fool-proof model of the Italian tragicomedy from 2016. The

What we have here is a number of approaches. *The Man with Hare Ears* – a constructive principle that creates a model of reality in order to comment on it. *The Auschwitz Report* – a direct, typically descriptive approach to reality. *107 Mothers* – observational approach. As for *Perfect Strangers*, it is an intertextual variation, an intermediated testimony about something which tries to pass off as reality.

All in all, nothing to be ashamed about. No forgering, just one case of plagiarism, but properly admitted. Not bad. ◀

The Pandemic — Second Round

In 2021, we could see two Slovak majority animated short films and two Slovak minority co-production films in the cinemas – one full-length and one short. Fest Anča and Áčko Student Film Festival presented 11 short local films made in 2021, and a new series of animated bedtime stories was broadcast on television, so we can assume that animated films in Slovakia have remained at their traditional pre-pandemic levels of quantity and diversity in production platforms.

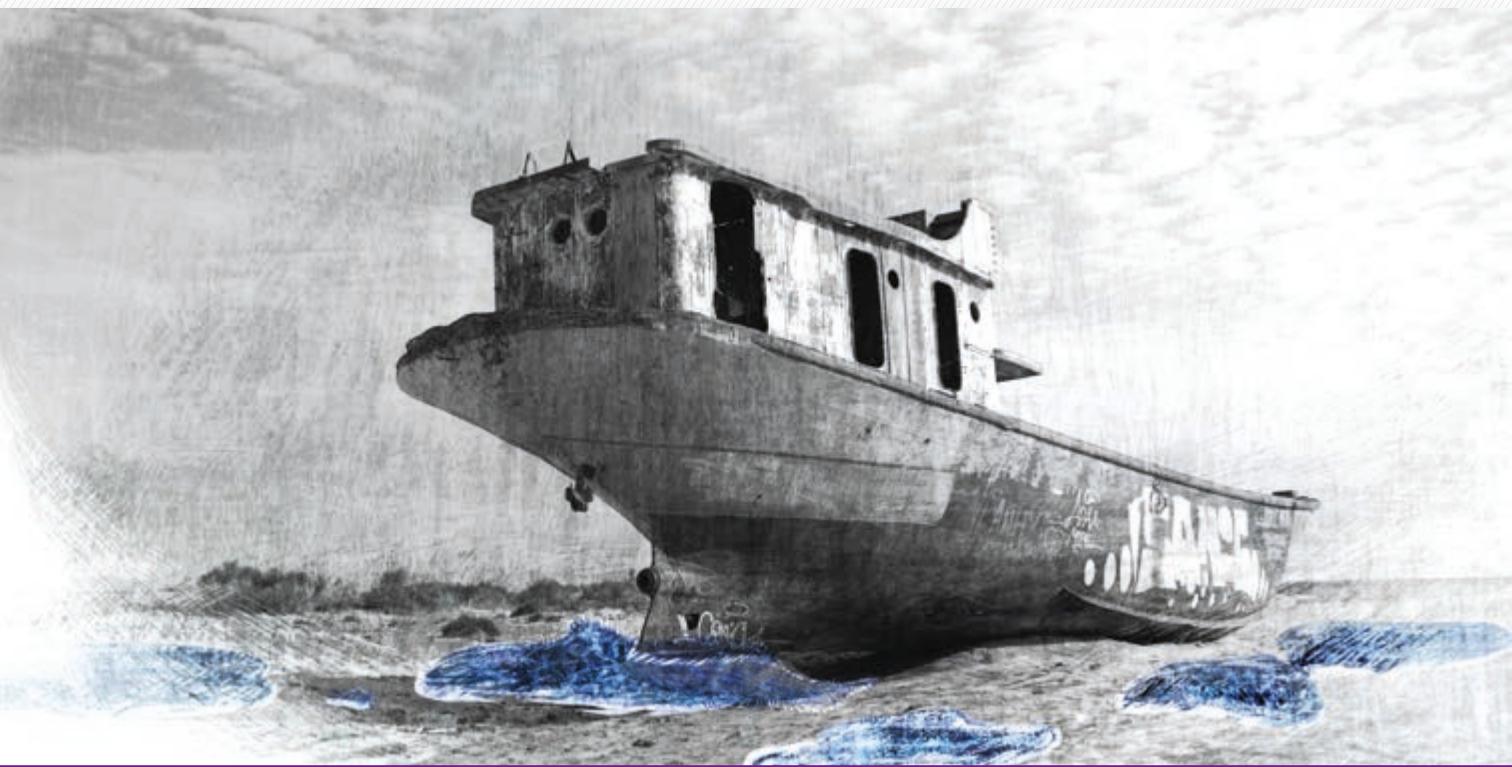
— Mixing student and professional production in a reflective appraisal piece or at Slovak film festivals and showcases is not the local norm, and the situation abroad is very much alike. Short format is financially affordable for schools and their students (and isn't too time-consuming). At the same time, the students can seek support from various funds and find professional co-producers. This results in many original films, such as the Oscar-nominated *Daughter* (2019) from the Czech Republic. The door to the world of the best animated films is wide open for student creations, although their quality varies significantly. Nonetheless, it's an indicator of trends and the evolution of Slovak animation, which is why it must be included in the appraising review.

— The biggest local animated film project of last year is arguably the minority co-production *My Sunny*

divide in her own nuclear family of Vietnamese migrants. In her animated documentary film, the author, born into the Western world, tries to understand the traditional values of her father that caused their family breakup.

— Our third film in the cinemas last year was also made by a woman, but the animated documentary film about identity is not bound to gender roles. The film *Once There Was a Sea...*, directed by Joanna Kožuch and made in a Slovak majority production of Peter Badač's company BFILM, uses the environmental catastrophe at the Aral Sea to illustrate how the physical space a person lives in shapes the formation of one's sense of self.

The fourth cinema film tries to explain the topic of the Roma and non-Roma identity and the cultural gap in a kid-friendly way – *My Heart* by Dávid and Ivan Popovič does so via a typically Popovič-like play of imagination



Once There Was a Sea... —

Maad by Czech animator Michaela Pavlátová. The film won multiple awards (Annecy, Guadalajara, Bucheon Film Festival, and a Golden Globe nomination) and its Slovak co-producer, BFILM, is already renowned in the world of animated film. For the first time, the post-revolutionary wave of animated films made by women has crossed the full length boundary. But primarily, the topic of relationships between partners and among family members presented from a woman's perspective raises the issues of culture gaps and building personal bridges in relation to the search for one's own identity. The second successful minority project of last year, *Love, Dad* co-produced by the Slovak nutprodukcia, deals with the same themes. The short film by Diana Cam Van Nguyen, a student at FAMU (the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague), tackles the cultural

and associations that accompanies a simple story of two classmates. The local premiere of *Even Mice Belong in Heaven* (2021), a big international production with Slovak participation, was postponed to this year.

— Due to the pandemic measures, Fest Anča International Animation Festival in Žilina took place also online for the first time. Its main theme, Traditions, is also connected to identities that are formed by following or renouncing traditions. The festival's visuals went hand in hand with the theme, alluding to TV bedtime stories, or famous animated characters Filmárik and Filmuška. Several generations of Czechs and Slovaks had their national identity shaped by television animation, while kids today do not feel as connected to it, partly because of the access to foreign animation production, but the format of TV bedtime stories has been revitalised and

contemporary Slovak animation has entered the international mosaic of what kids are watching nowadays. The third season of *The Websters*, a series following the adventures of 3D animated spiders, directed by Katariána Kerekesová, premiered at the end of 2021.

— Fest Anča presented two sections of Slovak films, one of them competitive. Only student films represented Slovak animation in Žilina, including films from primary art schools and high schools. Eva Matejovičová, the winning Slovak student at FAMU, decided to follow the international trend of animated documentaries and made *Sanctuary* (2021), a motion picture about animal adoption. The Slovak music video to Prezident Lourajder's song *Destiny*, directed by Matej Mihályi, won the international competition of music videos. The theme of traditions is also present in it. The film frames join visual artwork and pieces of technology from different eras, but all of the famous portraits and statues feature the face (or rather, the mask) of a young man from the present. The music and his clothes represent hip hop culture, so tradition is confronted with a contemporary point of view that was initiated by the pandemic-caused isolation and wandering around one's own house (physically and mentally). The song's lyrics speak of the hopelessness of today that stems from the development of the modern Western civilisation with all of its environmental, psychological, and social consequences. The director Matej Mihályi collaborated on the music video with Michaela Mihályi and David Štumpf, the Slovak student duo at FAMU that made the winning film of Fest Anča's previous edition, *Sh_t Happens*. Štumpf's new film *Home Sweet Home* received a special mention in Žilina.

— Other competitive and non-competitive Slovak films dealt with topics of ecology, humanism (in the relation to animals, too), ageing, domestic violence, alternative history, gender stereotypes, quarantine, craft, gratitude, or the inability to communicate. The films varied greatly in quality. In most cases, films were either lacking in animation (amateurly economical and mechanical movement) and their visual rendition was unoriginal, or the animation was interesting but the themes and narration were banal or incomprehensible.

— Áčko Student Film Festival took place in October, and therefore, presented some films that did not make it in time for Fest Anča. Animated motion pictures heavily influenced by film genres dominated the festival. The title and the shot composition of *Za hrst' omrvíniek* (meaning A Fistful of Crumbs, directed by Juraj Mucha) allude to the tradition of westerns, but aside from the title and a few conventionalities, it has nothing in common with Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964). The award for visual effects went to *The Gods* (directed by Lukáš Jankovčín and Tomáš Hotový), a motion capture trailer to a non-existent fantasy film. The *mise-en-scène* is truly spectacular, the movement of the figures reveals the artificiality of the fictive world. The mystery film genre is the blueprint for *Mathias* (directed by Imrich Kútik), an animation about the need for forgiveness in a family. The effort to make the narration more special by using chapter structure and a mosaic-like storyline deserves praise. The hor-

ror film *The Knife* (directed by Timotej Lukovič) became the best animated film of Áčko. By adherence to the basic narrative conventions of the horror genre, it cultivates suspense and curiosity, but a more expressive style would be needed in order for the film to evoke fear. But the multitude of *The Knife's* layers presents an added value – apart from the baseline level designed to evoke fear and repulsion, the intention is to also develop the relationships and the nature of the mutual love between the mother and the daughter. With her love, the mother gives her daughter the power to flood the world with life, and the daughter gives her mother the courage and strength to face evil.

— After the second pandemic year, it seems reasonable to wonder whether animation reflects this new way of life. It was mostly professional projects which started before the pandemic that got into the cinemas, so student



Love, Dad —

creations became a litmus test of the situation, as these are conformed to a shorter rhythm of terms and years. We see almost no explicit manifestations of the pandemic, but on an emotional level, feelings of disillusion, fear, a sense of a threat, or an unavoidable change are noticeable. However, this might also be related to the environmental crisis that has been going on for a longer time, as well as the crisis of democracy. Many young people of today have incorporated these into their general feeling of life. The traditions that we look back on through the prism of today's catastrophic state of affairs appear to be blind. But the rejection or absence of traditions robs us of a firm ground beneath our feet, a sense of existence. That is why building new traditions is fitting, although it may be an unbearable load for young people.

— However, the pandemic has also had some positive impact; for instance, the Slovak National Gallery's digital education project titled *Art Warm-Up* animated by Ové Pictures and Kriss Sagan, or the Fest Anča Cinema distribution model that brings predominantly European films straight to kindergartens and schools in order to cultivate kids into competent viewers, all with the use of educational guides that complement screening sections and explain the film language to kids, but mostly, teach them to critically think and understand the complex world that surrounds us. ◀



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