

MARCELA PITTERMANNOVÁ, MARIE BAREŠOVÁ / 11. 6. 2020

A remake that didn't happen. Interview with Václav Vorlíček about *Who Wants to Kill Jessie?*

Václav Vorlíček (1930–2019) fell for filmmaking at a scout camp when he was asked to shoot the adventure film *On the Right Track* (Na dobré stopě). He took the entrance exams at the Film and TV School of Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU) right after passing his secondary school-leaving exam in 1950, but was not successful. He then got to the Barrandov Studio directing department at an intercession. A year later, he passed the FAMU entrance exams and went on to study directing there from 1952 to 1956. In 1960, he started directing films and TV shows. Specializing in comedies, and films and TV shows for children and youth, he was often involved in devising the subjects. He had a long-term scriptwriting partner, Miloš Macourek. Their first film together was the comedy *Who Wants to Kill Jessie?* (Kdo chce zabít Jessii?).

After graduating from FAMU, you returned to Barrandov. What did you work on during the first years there?

After about a year, I became an assistant director, and assistant directors are often considered candidates for “independent” directors. Before Eduard Hofman’s times, there was no way the team of directors could be joined by new members. There were about forty directors in the team for thirty films made every year, so they were fully occupied and there was no need for a new one. Eduard Hofman broke the taboo, allowing young directors to apply. One of the first new “members” was Ladislav Helge, shooting his *School for Fathers* (Škola otců), and other directors followed. I was the

assistant director collaborating on Vladislav Delong's *A Suburban Villa* (Dům na Ořechovce) that year, trying to start working on my own projects. Since it was hard to break through, I wondered which "way" to go. The film plan included a certain number of films for children and youth, and that is how I found a "slot" I could penetrate. During the last film I helped with as the assistant director, I simultaneously worked on a script of my own for a children's film. We decided to write a story for children together with Josef Brukner, my former classmate studying dramatics, and a poet, since we both had small children at the time. Ota Hofman, already a script editor for the studio, joined us as well. The final script was approved by the artistic board, and I could not accept it to be shot by anyone else. That is how *The Lupinek Case* (Případ Lupínek), a detective story for children about stolen puppets, came to life. Right after that, I got an offer to shoot yet another film for children and youth: *Chicken on Travels* (Kuřata na cestách) with child protagonists. Then I decided to experiment. Looking back, I can tell it was not successful. Back then, there was this popular novella, *Marie* by Alexandr Kliment. I contacted him and we shot a film of the same name. It was not good, but it still allowed me to start making films for adults, so to speak.

And your next film was *Who Wants to Kill Jessie?* (Kdo chce zabít Jessii?), right?

Let me go back in time, to 1961, to my travelling to the Zlín Festival by a two-carriage train packed with filmmakers, with no dining car. The journey to the then town of Gottwaldov took several very long hours. I'm not sure how many, but I'd say it was about six hours. And all those near-sighted people had thought there'd be a dining car and had nothing on them to eat. At one moment, I was smoking in the corridor next to a man who was taking these small packages out of his bag and eating them. I watched him so hungrily that he offered me one of those packages. It contained some salty crackers with butter, cheese and ham, packed in an extremely neat way so that they reminded me of somewhat bigger post stamps. We started talking and it turned how he was Miloš Macourek, the script editor of the Šmída-Fikar group. He basically saved me from dying of hunger, which is how we met. We saw each other many times during the Festival, we talked, and because we liked each other, we decided to make a film together one day.

But that only came several years later...

Macourek was busy writing scripts for Oldřich Lipský until 1963, so he only had time for me in the beginning of 1964. We agreed we would like to bring to life some comic book characters. We went to the countryside and “scribbled down the script”, as we said back then. The artistic board immediately approved it. There were many things they didn’t like, though, so we had to make another two or three versions before we could start shooting. When the film was ready, people were hugely disconcerted. There was a deathly hush among members of the Kubala-Novotný group, the group producing the film, when they watched the final product. A truly funeral-like atmosphere. They asked us whether it is supposed to be a comedy or meant seriously. Gosh, those were some dismal moments!

What were the main objections?

The ideological side was not mentioned at all. They objected that it was an “American” topic. And that people would not understand it. I argued with them that I myself had loved the *Rapid Arrows* (Rychlé šípy) comic books as a young boy. And I believed the phenomenon was widely known. I also kept some comic books from the American soldiers. I went to stay with my grandmother in the South Bohemian town of Blatná one summer, and the American soldiers had been present in the town till October or maybe even the beginning of November 1945. And they left heaps of magazines there, they threw them out of the distillery windows where they were accommodated. Škvorecký also had some comic books hidden and lent them to us.

How did the approval process go, then?

Somebody, I don’t remember who exactly, but I think it was Bedřich Kubala, came up with the idea to show the film to some members of the public. We arranged with the town of Kralupy nad Vltavou, where a new community centre with a new cinema had just opened, to have two “experimental premieres” there, starting at 5pm and 8pm. The manager asked for some pictures from the film and prepared a handmade poster informing about a non-scheduled screening of a new Czech film starring Jiří Sovák, Dana Medřická, Olga Schoberová, etc. The screening was attended by about eight people from the group, and of course by Macourek and me and our wives. The cinema was packed, the screening started, and the people couldn’t stop laughing. So, without any trace of pride, I must say the reception was great. During both those

screenings. Then we went to a restaurant next door, and the crew from the group were patting each other on the backs for what a nice film they had made.

Saudek's contribution was essential for the film as well. Can you tell us something about it?

It was a huge problem since there are two Saudeks, twin brothers. Jan, a photographer, and Kája, an amateurish or semi-amateurish comic cartoonist with a perfect style. For example, Schoberová – he could paint her with his eyes closed, he knew her by heart and enjoyed painting her. We wanted to make use of that, but he was in jail at the time. I don't remember what he had done; it was some conflict with the laws of the era. So, I asked his brother Jan, who also liked painting, to make some sketches for me. He obliged, but it was not what we were looking for. It was not so skilful, even though he copied his brother. Fortunately, Kája was released before we finished the film. He called me, and I prepared some "comic book templates" of the film for him. And he painted exactly what we wanted, following my instructions and requests. The film was already finished at the time; we only shot details of the comic book parts, parts of the story that initiate the dreams of Mr. Beránek, played by Jiří Sovák.

There was also an American producer interested in the film.

One day, Macourek and I got summoned to Filmexport, where we met William from America, later known as Bill Snyder, and he announced that he had just bought the rights to our film and were expected to shoot a remake for him. Unless we were against it. Well, having received the cheques, we had nothing against it at all. Moreover, we already had some ideas about what could have been improved in the film.

Did you speak English?

With Snyder, I had my first experience with English. There was no need for it at the time since the international language, and even sort of an official diplomatic one, was French. Six weeks before leaving Prague, we hired a retired high school teacher to teach us the basics of English. We had lessons two or three times a week in the Hlavovka café. His idea of America was influenced by the Wild West; he would say:

“The first thing you need to master is boxing, gentlemen!” Because he thought somebody would attack us in America and we would have to protect ourselves. He was very old but managed to teach us something, so we were able to find our way around some restaurants and galleries – the first places we visited in America since we had nothing to do for the first three days. We wandered around New York and went to Guggenheim and so on.

And then you started working?

Snyder had this condition that we had to join Stuart Hample, a scriptwriter whose name we later used in *You Are a Widow, Sir* (Pane, vy jste vdova!). We met in our New York apartment and worked on the American version of *Who Wants to Kill Jessie?*. We were there for quite a long time, about two and a half, maybe three months. We wrote the script, and it was also the first time we experienced a producer with requests of his own.

What was it like?

We were used to cooperating with script editors, but here it was the producer who would come and would – well, not dictate but ask for what he wanted. I can't say all his wishes were comprehensible, though. We also learned what this “Americanisation” can do to a film. The script was almost ready, or maybe even finished, and suddenly Snyder brought us news at a most unexpected time. He had just found out that there is a perfectly trained hippo in Hamburg, and he wanted it to be part of the film! Well, the film did not work with hippos or any other animals for that matter, so it was a problem to find a place for the hippo, of course. Still, we managed to do it. We even situated the hippo on Charles Bridge in Prague; it was supposed to be part of some situations. Everything was logical, and the hippo got its part. We finished our job and returned to Europe. The year was 1967, so we first flew to Expo in Montreal and then stopped in London for about three days. Snyder spent the next year looking for money. He had the basic capital from his extensive trade in films. He was known in Prague for buying Jiří Trnka's films and screening them in America.

But the American remake did not happen in the end, right?

Snyder came to Barrandov with his cheques to talk about the conditions in 1968. Unfortunately, the day he arrived, martial law was declared in Prague for one night, and he didn't know about it. He went to the Alcron hotel as he was used to, and then came out in the evening to dine at the Jalta on Wenceslas Square. After a few steps, he was hit with a baton. When we saw him the next day, he showed us a huge purple bruise across his back. He picked up his cheques and never returned.

What a pity!

Well, Czech film is one of a kind. When someone forces you into things like that – moreover, during terribly detailed and fierce discussions with Stuart Hample, that American scriptwriter – you come to the conclusion that it might have been for the better.

And did they pay for all the work?

Of course they did. Snyder was the one who talked us into visiting Montreal after leaving the US. He paid for everything, found us accommodation, took great care of us. He had our tickets booked for another flight – I think he even had to pay extra for that. He was a wonderful host. He really took perfect care of us.

***Who Wants to Kill Jessie?* was the first film of many you made with Miloš Macourek...**

People were queueing for the film, which was nice. It attracted mainly a young audience, and there were no signs of them not understanding the topic or the comic book-inspired parts. They loved everything about the film. And because it was this successful, the Barrandov group made me another offer. I was to shoot an adaptation of Oldřich Daněk's short story based on a more-or-less ready script that Miloš Macourek and I slightly adjusted. The film called *The End of Agent W4C* (Konec agenta W4C) was also well received. There was another offer for a remake, this time from France. But once again, they did not go through with it. I am not even sure why. On the other hand, I wasn't keen on doing it because we already had an idea for a new film. The very first title read *Mrs Steiner's Kidneys*, but it was changed many times, until we arrived at *You Are a Two-Time Widow, Sir*. Ludvík Toman, a then new chief script editor, made a brilliant cut, and thus the title *You Are a Widow, Sir* was born.

Have the two of you ever thought about making a sequel to *Jessie*?

We tried to go back to the roots, both to *Jessie* and to Saxana (from *The Girl on the Broomstick* /*Dívka na koštěti*/). Since a potential producer asked us, we came up with a story called *Blackman contra Saxana* (Blackman kontra Saxana). The film has remained a script; it was supposed to be a comic book comedy. At the time, we knew much more about comics than when working on *Jessie*. Nowadays, we know comics is a special genre of cartoon literature and full of true gems. Those beautiful books published with lacquered covers, very expensive, bought by intellectuals. And created by intellectuals. So, to sum it up, this new film was supposed to be a crazy comedy made with better knowledge of the genre. But to this day, we have not managed to find enough money for it.

—

This abridged interview was prepared by Marie Barešová based on interviews recorded for the National Film Archive (NFA) by Marcela Pittermannová in 2000. The sound recordings and their transcripts are available in the NFA Collection of Sound Recordings.