

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 23. 12. 2015

From Pyšná princezna to Sedmero krkavců

Each era of origin has inevitably been reflected in fairy tale motifs, the personalities of main characters and even the types of conflicts. What has remained is the world of fantasy without an anchor in specific time or space, inhabited by both natural and supernatural creatures, with archetypes and situations comprehensible to the youngest viewers and the requirement that good eventually prevails over evil (or wisdom over folly). Another apparently indispensable component of Czech fairy tales is humour, present in the form of comic supporting characters, gags or word play. Absolute evil is often relativised by poking fun at it (clumsy devils, forgetful sorcerers, senile kings) and overcoming an evil character often does not even require an undaunted hero that introduces into the narrative a sense of heroism that does not sit very well with the Czech mentality.

In 1920, the period press advertised *Červená Karkulka* [*Red Riding Hood*], directed by Svatopluk Innemann, as the “first Czech film fairy tale”. Sadly, it shared the fate of becoming lost with another early fairy tale, *Kašpárek kouzelníkem* [*Clown Magician*], which was filmed seven years later and starred Theodor Pištěk as the protagonist. According to contemporaries it was just as well that two sound film fairy tales *Sněhurka* [*Snow White*, 1933] and *Perníková chaloupka* [*Gingerbread House* (aka *Hansel and Gretel*), 1933], made in rather austere conditions by Oldřich Kmínek, were all but forgotten. Those viewers who might believe product placement to be a rather modern invention would be surprised to find that the latter of the two, also described as a “sound fairy tale ballet”, doubled as an advertisement for dairy products.

The child audience was truly heeded and treated with a continuous stream of filmed fairy tales only after cinematography in the country became nationalised, in the 1950s to be precise. However, if only one of the fairy tale themes put forward in 1947 had

been approved then perhaps *Pyšná princezna* [*Proud Princess*] would not have been the film to set the tone and future direction of this most truly Czech genre as that accolade would have perhaps gone to *Sedm jednou ranou* [*Seven in a Single Blow*] or *Zlatý střepec* [*Golden Tasse*]. But fate and Barrandov Studio dramaturgy would have it that it was the 1952 film directed by Bořivoj Zeman which decreed that a film fairy tale produced in socialist Czechoslovakia should follow the example of its Soviet peers and reflect contemporary times while educating the young viewer through conflicts between characters clever and foolish or poor and rich.

Another unwritten rule laid down by the example of *Pyšná princezna* was the placing of emphasis on the sagacity of the working man and the lampooning of the gentry. The class conflict, though, another import from the Soviet Union, was not to obliterate the national particularity of the explored theme, manifested for example by accenting Czech landscapes. The majority of film fairy tale screenwriters also searched for inspiration in domestic literature. The legacy of Božena Němcová, celebrating in her writings honest labour and folksiness, was brought to life by the adaptation not only of her *Potrestaná pýcha* [*Pride Punished*] in *Pyšná princezna* but also of *Sůl nad zlato* [*Salt Over Gold*] in *Byl jednou jeden král* [*Once Upon a Time, There Was a King*]. Other authors whose literary works were popular with filmmakers included Karel Jaromír Erben (*Obušku, z pytle ven!* [*Stick, Stick, Start Beating!*]) and Jan Drda (*Hrátky s čertem* [*Playing with the Devil*], *Dařbuján a Pandrhola*).

The qualities expected of a satisfactory fairy tale firmly based in the national artistic tradition yet “agreeing with contemporary ideals” were described to some extent in a period review of *Hrátky s čertem*, the visual side of which mimicked the style of painter and illustrator Josef Lada:

“Although tested by no more than a dozen years [since the film’s creation], they are a dozen years brimming with social turmoil and changes, and the characters of *Hrátky s čertem* have firmly remained just as contemporary and up to date, just as alive, as they were when originally filmed. It clearly shows that the roots of Drda’s characters are much deeper than what they might reveal at first sight. As a true artist, Drda did anchor his work in the era and the moment of creation but he did not limit his creative efforts to the era and moment. His legacy, essentially Czech and fundamentally folksy, has and will last.” [2]

***Pyšná princezna* established a tradition**

The direction in which Czechoslovak cinematography progressed following the communist takeover of power in February 1948 was determined by guidelines of socialist realism and with it film fairy tales joined socialist propaganda pieces and biographies concerned with the history of the working-class movement as the favoured genres.

Despite its rather poor critical reviews – in stark contrast with the subsequent uncritical adoration – *Pyšná princezna* was seen by more than 10 million pairs of eyes and it proved equally popular abroad.[3] The story of a conceited royal beauty and a prince disguised as a gardener differs from its literary counterpart not only in placing emphasis on the positive influence of labour on any group of people but also in a considerable shift in the role of the royal father. In the original story, the king is an aged man commanding respect and reverence, while his film counterpart is a grotesque man plagued by age and vanity who instead of respect and reverence provokes mockery. True power thus rests firmly with the people and not royalty. The monarch merely looks down upon his subjects with forbearance. The fairy tale qualities of films like *Pyšná princezna* thus also stemmed from the fulfilled communist ideal of a classless society in which birth, unlike honest industriousness, is of no consequence.

The figure of a misled king, surrounded by calculating schemers, became a model for virtually all fairy tale monarchs up until productions of today.[4] One of the most memorable comical kings was depicted in *Byl jednou jeden král* by Jan Werich (who also joined Jiří Brdečka and Bořivoj Zeman in developing Oldřich Kautský's script). The king had his very own and equally comical and memorable chamberlain-schemer at his side, played by Vlasta Burian. The casting of popular comedians and the direction of established comedy directors such as Bořivoj Zeman and Václav Vorlíček provide another piece in the mosaic of reasons for the predominantly comic nature of Czech film fairy tales.

Publicists were not always fond of the tweaking of traditional narratives to fit the acting styles of the main protagonists. Jiří Hrbas, for one, saw causes of disunity within *Byl jednou jeden král*'s emphasis on comedy, reinforced by the choice of the

main protagonist:

“There is no point in blaming Jan Werich for adjusting the storyline to his needs. This sort of interference has been a condition of success ever since the days of Osvobozené divadlo [the Liberated Theatre] where Jan Werich was a co-author among other things. The blame, instead, falls squarely on the heads of those in the dramaturgy department who are unable to identify materials befitting actors like Jan Werich, Vlasta Burian or Oldřich Nový, to name just the most typical examples.”[5]

The exceptional domestic and foreign success of *Pyšná princezna* contributed significantly to the increased production of costly fairy tales and most of those filmed after *Pyšná princezna* were shot in colour, demanding on the one hand greater investment by the state-controlled film producers but on the other proving more attractive for audiences. *Pyšná princezna* together with Werich’s markedly comic *Byl jednou jeden král* actually set the tone for the production of Czechoslovak socialist fairy tales for several decades to come.

Given the untouchable status of *Pyšná princezna*, combined with the potential costs of attempting a similar undertaking, it is highly unlikely that Czech filmmakers could succumb to the global trend of sequels and remakes. Nevertheless, it is still worth noting how screenwriter Ota Hofman once envisioned a sequel to the greatly popular fairy tale:

“We would like to film *Pyšná Princezna Twenty Years Later*. It means that Vladimír Ráž (playing King Miroslav) would now be married to Alena Vránová (vain Princess Krasomila) and they would be attempting to raise their daughter facing issues similar to their own when they were at that age. The early stages of the new film would reuse some 600 metres of the original footage, additionally coloured, to provide retrospect. New footage would of course be shot in colour from the off.”[6]

Despite years of reigning over the popularity charts, these films, seen today as core components of the treasure fund of the country’s cinematography and obligatory items on Christmastime TV schedules, did not have it easy in the 1950s. The seriousness with which the regime approached educational productions targeting children meant that film fairy tales were subject to merciless scrutiny on the pages of the period press. As an example, the following is a period review of moral values

carried by the film fairy tale *Obušku, z pytle ven!* that contains animated bits created by Břetislav Pojar as well as the legendary song *Já s písničkou jdu jako ptáček*. The markedly scathing critique was published on the pages of *Film a doba* [*Film and the Times*]:

“The creators of *Obušku, z pytle ven!* have completely disregarded the educational aspect that should have been their guiding principle (not to mention the artistic aspect). Having watched the film, children may come away amused but it will have been a fallow, detrimental entertainment. They will certainly not go away with any lasting, positive experience while illusionist-style and slapstick tricks do not make it worth visiting a cinema – a circus is a better place for these.”[7]

Several issues of *Film a doba* later, script co-author Jiří Brdečka responded:

“This magazine’s 10th issue printed a review of *Obušku, z pytle ven!* The review was quite negative, or dare I say, crushing. I am a co-creator of the criticised film, or more accurately the sole author of the script’s initial version. I do not intend to argue with the reviewer with whom I rather tend to agree. My intention is of a more general nature and touches on a current topic recently discussed on the pages of *Literární noviny* under the title of *Spisovatel a film* [*Writer and Film*]. One of the substantial causes of the artistic failure of *Obušku z pytle ven!* is the exemplarily dysfunctional collaboration between the screenwriter and the director, a collaboration of the admonitory type.”[8]

When it comes to *Obušku z pytle ven!* the dismissive stance of film publicists changed very little with the passing of several decades and the nature of the criticism remained largely the same:

“The film fairy tale *Obušku z pytle ven!* uncovered a negative relationship: the stylised setting demands that acting be adjusted accordingly, resulting in excessive styling that turns the characters into caricatures.”[9]

Films demonstrating a liberal approach to cultural policies and being more or less at odds with the applied standards of socialist culture began appearing through the latter 1950s. The development coincided with an increased incidence of co-productions, such as in the case of *Labakan* (1956) and *Legenda o lásce* [*Legend*

about Love, 1956], filmed in collaboration with filmmakers from Bulgaria. After filmmakers were reined in again following a conference in Banská Bystrica in 1959, which among other things tore up modern fairy tale *Tři přání* [*Three Wishes*, 1958], the next thaw arrived with the early 1960s.

What the post-1968 era of “normalisation” then declared to be a period rife with ideological “errors, mistakes and deformations” and a period of revisionist, anti-socialist and anti-party tendencies was – viewed through today’s optics – also the best ever period in Czech cinema. Within the confines of the fairy tale genre, the legacy is unfortunately limited to balladic *Zlaté kapradí* [*Golden Fern*, 1963] aimed at a more mature audience, theatrically rigid *Tři zlaté vlasy děda Vševěda* [*Three Golden Hairs of Know-All Grandpa*, 1963] and modern fairy tale musical *Šíleně smutná princezna* [*Incredibly Sad Princess*, 1968]. The world depicted in the last of the three bore the unmistakable characteristics of the period of its origin. It was intended – along with contemporary vocabulary and popular songs by a duo of pop music idols of the time, Helena Vondráčková a Václav Neckář – to make the fairy tale genre more attractive to the socialist youth. *Šíleně smutná princezna* was a harbinger of even more profound tendencies manifest in normalisation-era fairy tales. These tendencies brought the genre up to date by means of their young protagonists often mimicking teenagers in the real world at the time of making.

The fall in the number of fairy tales filmed in the 1960s stands witness to the changing tastes of audiences and the favouring among filmmakers of genres saddled to a lesser degree with the ruling party’s demands on ideological compliance, thus offering more room for immediate responses to present-day events. When it comes to films allowing for the existence of magical beings and objects, the period’s increased interest in greater formal playfulness is best reflected in fairy tale satire *Až přijde kocour* [*That Cat...*, 1963], which however very clearly takes place at the time of its making. Thanks to works by Jan Werich (*Fimfárum*), Ota Hofman (*Pan Tau*), Václav Čtvrtek and Ludvík Aškenazy the expression the “Golden Sixties” can at least be extended to written fairy tales.

Fairy tale renaissance

What seemed like justified misgivings regarding the exhaustion of traditional themes and an impending twilight for film fairy tales was resolutely shattered in the following decade. The 1970s ushered in a fairy tale renaissance. In addition to *Tři oříšky pro Popelku* [*Three Nuts for Cinderella*, 1974] featuring a modern and emancipated lass at the centre of the action, the decade produced *Princ Bajaja* (1971), *Honza málem králem* [*How Honza Almost Became a King*, 1976], *Jak se budí princezny* [*The Best Way of Waking Up Princesses*, 1977], *Princ a Večernice* [*Prince and the Evening Star*, 1978] or the horror-like fairy tales *Deváté srdce* [*Ninth Heart*, 1978] and *Panna a netvor* [*Virgin and the Monster*, 1978]. The weakening links with traditional festivities were reflected in increased efforts at making fairy tales more accessible to young audiences though the introduction of a humorous side and contemporary issues.

The 1980s, when the management of Československý film saw some more liberal dramaturgs have it their way and a greater emphasis put on viewing numbers, were the time when comedy directors Oldřich Lipský (*Tři veteráni* [*Three Veterans*], 1983) and Zdeněk Troška (*O princezně Jasněnce a létajícím ševci* [*Princess Brightness and the Flying Shoemaker*], 1987) filmed their first fairy tales. Another fairy tale debut, and a highly successful one too, was that of Hynek Bočan (*S čerty nejsou žerty* [*Don't Play Around with Devils*], 1984) while Václav Vorlíček followed up on the popularity of TV series *Arabela* with a film spin-off *Rumburak* (1984). The post-1968 era of “normalisation” also gave birth to a still existing tradition of releasing a new film fairy tale on Christmas Day while foreign television broadcasters also became an important market for fairy tales produced in the country. As a result, cinemas and television saw a growing number of co-produced (mostly with West Germany) fairy tales coming their way, bringing along more spectacular décor and international casts.

The success of youth films produced during the normalisation era was presented as proof of the crisis being overcome, opposition forces being defeated and the consolidation of the film industry being successfully completed. However, the restoration of the socialist nature of the country's cinematography was not so profound in the fairy tale genre that it could lead to the cultural and political qualities of the films overshadowing their function as “escape” entertainment. With regular TV reruns, especially during various national holidays, this function is relied upon to this day. Compared to normalisation-era fairy tales, counterparts filmed in the 1990s, when costly productions were made more difficult by the privatisation of

Barrandov Studio, have demonstrated a much reduced shelf life. With the influx of film production from the West and the consequent abundance of action and special effects, it became increasingly apparent that domestic fairy tales, such as *Nesmrtelná teta* [*Immortal Aunt*, 1993],[10] *Jak si zasloužit princeznu* [*How to Earn a Princess*, 1994], *Princezna ze mlejna* [*Princess from the Mill*, 1994], *Kouzelný měšec* [*Magic Purse*, 1996] or *Z pekla štěstí* [*Helluva Good Luck*, 1999], were in terms of their production values, not really in a position to compete with fantasies made in Hollywood. Not much relief came from co-productions with Germany (*Kouzelný měšec*, *Pták ohnivák* [*Firebird*], *Jezerní královna* [*Queen of the Lake*]) that were intended, with poor results, by director Václav Vorlíček to follow up on the success of the co-production in the making of *Tři oříšky pro Popelku*.

Given the persisting reliance on tried and tested authors such as Drda, Erben or Němcová it is no wonder that post-1989 fairy tales invariably recycled plots and characters first seen in the 1950s (dull aristocrats, passive princesses, laughable devils). However, in spite of that, insufficient budgets and the inability to shed the “plebeian” heritage of domestic fairy tale production, some releases actually became fixtures on TV screens. Sometimes it was down to intelligent word play (*Lotrando a Zubejda*, 1997) and at other times it was thanks to a highly attractive cast and courage shown in dismantling archetypes (*Anděl Páně* [*Angel of the Lord*], 2005).

Only time will tell how often and with what enthusiasm we will return to song-filled *Tři bratři* [*Three Brothers*, 2014] or gently feminist *Sedmero krkavců* [*Seven Ravens*, 2015]. It would still be somewhat premature to consider the critical acclaim heaped on *Sedmero krkavců* and high footfall attracted by *Tři bratři* (seen in cinemas by audiences amounting to more than 600,000) as a sign of the genre’s revival. Slovak director Marta Ferencová is soon to discover the extent of the genre’s ability or otherwise in standing its ground against more complex fantasy worlds with psychologically more sophisticated characters and a somewhat sarcastic view of fairy tale archetypes. The director’s recent release *Řachanda* [*Crazy Kingdom*], offering an attractive cast, lessons of life, entertainment and love is set to hit Czech and Slovak cinemas in late February 2016.

Film fairy tales, generally considered a fundamental component of the country’s “family silver”, have become an endangered species in recent years. Although the

genre that previously allowed Czech filmmakers to enjoy the respect of audiences both at home and abroad still maintains a level of popularity thanks to TV reruns, it has all but disappeared from cinemas. In the past, fairy tales (and films for children in general) ranked together with comedies among the most numerous and most popular genres. These days, regular production has been replaced with random releases that face an uphill struggle in multiplexes against much more exquisitely staged Hollywood fantasies, computer-animated films and comic book adaptations. Nevertheless, the few courageous attempts at going against the current tide of cinema trends and in dedicating time and resources to fairy tales should be seen as strong enough evidence of the vitality of the seemingly anachronistic genre. Yet without a true willingness to modernise, provide adequate care in dramaturgy and the necessary funding, Czech children may soon equate the film fairy tale with the likes of Harry Potter, The Hobbit or animations by Pixar. And that would still be one of the more desirable of the bad outcomes.

Notes:

[1] Bernard, Jan, Frýdlová, Pavla, *Malý labyrint filmu*. Praha: Albatros, 1988.

[2] Jaroslav Boček, *Hrátky s čertem*. Kultura 1, 1957, issue No. 17 (25 Apr.), p. 5.

[3] The holder of the post-1989 record, *Tankový prapor* [*Tank Battalion*], was by contrast seen by a “mere” two million viewers.

[4] An exception to the rule is the unusually merciless king played by Radovan Lukavský in *Tři zlaté vlasy děda Vševěda* [*Three Golden Hairs of Know-All Grandpa*, 1963].

[5] Jiří Hrbas, *Nad našimi novými filmy*. Film a doba 1, 1955, No. 3–4, p. 161.

[6] Olga Hrivňáková, *Zlatý poklad pohádek*. Lidová demokracie 29, 1973, No. 136 (9 June), p. 5.

[7] Ivan Dvořák, *Obušku, z pytle ven!* Film a doba 2, No. 10, 1956, p. 694.

[8] Jiří Brdečka, *O čtyřech chybách a jiných věcech*. Film a doba 3, No. 1, 1957, p. 28.

[9] Pavel Taussig, *Jak se rodila tradice (o genezi české filmové pohádky)*. Film a doba 29, No. 10, 1983, p. 587.

[10] The most popular post-1989 fairy tale in cinemas until the release of *Tři bratři* [*Three Brothers*].