

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 7. 12. 2023

# Hana Smékalová alias Florence Marly

“Princess Wilhelmina at Barrandov”, reads a headline from *Informační zprávy* in June 1947, when international star Florence Marly came to Czechoslovakia to make a film. Shortly before, she had starred in René Clément’s acclaimed drama *The Damned* (*Les Maudits*, 1947). When a reporter asked her how she felt in the Barrandov Studio, she laughed and said, “Feels like home.”<sup>[1]</sup> Her response wasn’t a mere figure of speech and courtesy. Marly, born Hana Smékalová, was a Moravian native. But her only Czech role was as Princess Wilhelmina in Otakar Vávra’s adaptation of Karel Čapek’s *Krakatit* (1948). The actress, whose life was affected by Nazism and Communism, spent most of her life and career abroad.

Hana Smékalová, daughter of a teacher from Olomouc, was born in the summer, but sources differ whether it was in June 1918, a few months before Czechoslovakia was formed, or in July of the following year.<sup>[2]</sup> In any case, her birthplace was the village of Obrnice in the Ústí nad Labem region (but some sources say Olomouc). Ever since she was a little girl, she showed a penchant for music and singing, but because of a vocal cord defect, she couldn’t fully pursue her dream and become a professional opera diva. She used her linguistic talent and went to Paris to study at the Sorbonne, where she focused on literature, philosophy, and art history. When she was eighteen, she caught the attention of renowned director Pier Chenal at a party. A few days later, he cast her in his film *The Alibi* (*L’Alibi*, 1937).

In this atmospheric drama, often listed as a predecessor to film noir, Marly portrayed the love interest of a gangster who is murdered. In 1938, the film was screened also in Czech cinemas. For Smékalová, already performing under the stage name Florence Marly, the shooting was a turning point. She decided to become an actress. At first, she appeared mainly in films by the very productive Chenal, who became her husband

in 1940. But the war put a stop to her career. Chenal was of Jewish origin and participated in the French resistance, which put them both in a very vulnerable position. In the early 1940s (various sources once again list various years), upon the recommendation of her colleague Marie Bell, she left Paris. The decision proved to be very fortunate as, shortly after her departure, the city was invaded by the Germans.

Marly obtained an Argentinian visa, but when she arrived at Buenos Aires was refused entry to the country and ended up in Bolivia. After Chenal arrived later, without any money or contacts, he looked in vain for his wife. He took refuge with the director Luis Saslavsky, who was familiar with his films. With the help of Argentine authorities, Chenal was eventually able to find Marly. When they met again, she was emaciated and sick because of the high altitude in Bolivia. When she recovered, she returned to acting and appeared in three Argentine films. One of them, *The end of the Night* (*El fin de la noche*, 1944), is set in occupied Paris.

After the war, Marly returned to Europe. The height of her career was the aforementioned film *The Damned*. In this drama set shortly before the fall of the Third Reich, she portrayed the partner of an Italian industrialist. Along with other Nazi sympathisers, she wants to use a submarine to elude justice. The film competed at Cannes, where it won the award for the best adventure or criminal film (Prix du meilleur film d'aventures et policier).

Marly was once again able to travel freely through Europe and, in 1946, she came to Prague. In addition to visiting her mother, she also met Otakar Vávra, who immediately cast her in his adaptation of Čapek's *Krakatit*. Czech reviewers weren't blown away by her performance. But some objections were based on the conviction that films produced by the nationalised film industry should cast only Czech and Slovak actors. Marly's profile in magazine *Kino* written during the production of *Krakatit* said she had been learning English for her role in a British adaptation of Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.<sup>[3]</sup> But the Czech actress didn't appear in the project as it was cancelled. Marly, however, had a chance to put her English skills to good use because Hollywood reached out to her. She starred alongside Ray Milland in Paramount's *Sealed Verdict* (1948). The film poster used a provocative photograph of Marly with her sensual and in some respects exotic beauty.

Marly allegedly told a foreign correspondent from *Kino* magazine that she wasn't satisfied with her Hollywood career. "I must admit that there were moments last year when I felt desperate. At some points, I considered boarding a ship and going back to Prague, where – and I can say that with pride – an actor is not doomed to inactivity, unless it's a bad actor, of course." This strongly anti-capitalist quote, published after the Communist coup, must be taken with a pinch of salt.<sup>[4]</sup>

In the noir film *Tokyo Joe*, Marly partnered with an even bigger star. The film's protagonist, a former US Air Force colonel, was portrayed by Humphrey Bogart. Marly played his wife, whom he had long thought dead. The film was the first American production fully carried out in Japan. In another American-Japanese co-production, the crime film *Tokyo File 212* (1951), Marly portrayed the leading role. But she didn't visit Southeast Asia only because of filming. In the late 1950s, she was the star of USO shows for American troops in Korea. Although producers continued to use her mesmerising beauty on film posters (e.g., for the comedy *Gobs and Gals*, 1952), Marly didn't become a big film star, and her only dramatically valuable role was the one from *The Damned*.

Her career was put on hold during the McCarthyism era, when she was accused of being a Communist sympathiser. She was blacklisted and no one wanted to work with her. On top of that, she wasn't allowed to return to the country. After she left for Chile to film *El ídolo* (1952) with Chenal, the American Consulate in Chile refused to renew her visa as she was considered a "subversive element." Eventually, she was granted access to the US after two years.

With the help of consul Carey C. White, Marly was able to prove that she had been mistaken for the Russian club singer Anny Marly and was rehabilitated. But the damage was done. For the rest of her career, Marly didn't appear in any major productions. She was cast mainly in B-films and television production (for instance, the iconic horror film *Queen of Blood* (1966), and series such as *Dragnet*, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* and *The Twilight Zone*).

In the meantime, Marly and Chenal divorced. Her second husband became Austrian Count Degenhart von Wurmbrand-Stuppach. But Marly wasn't a countess for long. The couple, who were 26 years apart in age, soon split. Marly's downfall continued in

the 1960s, when she was found guilty of possessing illegal drugs. She got a fine and three years of probation.

One of her last films was a six-minute-long sci-fi titled *Space Boy* (1973). For the film intended as a sequel to *Queen of Blood*, Marly wrote the script and music. The soundtrack was made with the help of electronic music pioneers Bebe and Luis Barron and allegedly the legendary American musician Frank Zappa. It was Marly's second and last film in the Cannes competition.

Florence Marly/Hana Smékalová died all but forgotten on 9 November 1978, aged just 59, from a heart attack. She died in Glendale, California. She had no children and was survived by a brother and sister in Czechoslovakia.

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#### **Notes:**

[1] Princezna Willemína na Barrandově. *Informační zprávy: Státní výroby celovečerních filmů o průběhu natáčení českých filmů 2*, 1947, no. 11 (15<sup>th</sup> June), p. 7.

[2] Hana Smékalová-Florence Marly. *Filmové noviny 1*, 1947, no. 4 (25<sup>th</sup> January), p. 3.

[3] J. Brojar, První setkání s Florence Marly před zahájením Krakatitu. *Kino 2*, 1947, no. 2 (23<sup>rd</sup> May), p. 411.

[4] Hana Smékalová (Florence Marly) nespokojena v Hollywoodu. *Kino 4*, 1949, no. 7 (31<sup>st</sup> March), p. 82.