

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 27. 5. 2025

A Squandered Sunday

Some filmmakers make their feature debut right after finishing film school. Others wait a few years. Drahomíra Vihanová premiered her first film in her sixties, two decades after it was finished. But *Squandered Sunday* almost wasn't made in the first place.

After graduating from FAMU, Vihanová worked as an assistant director on Otakar Vávra's *Romance for the Bugle* (*Romance pro křídlovku*, 1966). She also helped him with his following film, *The Thirteenth Chamber* (*Třináctá komnata*, 1968), but left the crew before the production wrapped. She started working on an adaptation of a novella by Jiří Křenek published in 1967 in the literary magazine *Plamen*.

While writing *Squandered Sunday*, Křenek drew inspiration from his own experience as a professional soldier. He portrays a brief period in the life of a young paratrooper, First Lieutenant Arnošt, who is filled with regret and can't find a reason to keep on living. Křenek managed to suggestively depict the sense of human and societal decline. The text won the *Naše vojsko* publishing house literary competition, which apparently accelerated the process of its adaptation to film.

"After reading the story, I wasn't thinking about whether it's suitable for men or women because it was the feeling that appealed to me," Vihanová said of what drew her to the text.^[1] She wanted to tell a story of a person in an extreme situation when they stop caring about everything. The military setting wasn't determinative for her. She saw Arnošt's story as a universal metaphor for the loneliness of a modern human and as a reflection of the era's spiritual climate. According to Stanislava Přádná, Arnošt is an "existential hero akin to Meursault from Albert Camus' *The Stranger*."^[2] He lacks the will to step out of himself and the vicious circle of aimless existence. During a squandered Sunday, which the film portrays in its entirety, he only solidifies his conviction of his own worthlessness.

Creative group Švabík-Procházka approved the script co-written by Vihanová and Křenek straight away and pre-production begun. The shoot was set to begin in the summer of 1968 and the film was supposed to be finished that year. But Vihanová couldn't find a cinematographer and an assistant director. The production was postponed several times and after the Invasion of the Warsaw Pact Armies in August 1968, was stopped entirely.

"I actually thought I wouldn't be able to make the film at all," admitted Vihanová in *Filmové informace*.^[3]

But she didn't give up so easily and reworked the script so the resigned antihero wouldn't seem like a typical representative of the Czechoslovak Army, whose reputation was supposed to be protected after the invasion, but more like an exception.

She submitted the reworked script in 1969. After consideration, Jan Procházka's group decided to approve it. Thanks to its military theme, the film also needed approval by the political authority of the Ministry of Defence. It was issued shortly. The preparations began in April 1969. Three months later, the press informed that the crew of *Squandered Sunday* had started filming on location in Josefov.^[4] But the complications were far from over. The main role was originally supposed to be portrayed by Michal Dočolomanský. But in 1969, his schedule was filled with theatre work. He was replaced by Slovakian actor Ivan Palúch. Vihanová later admitted that he was typologically a better fit for the role. But she regretted her decision to have Bořivoj Navrátil rerecord his lines which, she thought, made the character less genuine. In line with the original story, the main setting was the garrison town of Josefov with its historic fortress, barracks and other military objects. The town in East Bohemia was perfect for Vihanová also thanks to its plainness and orthogonal street plan corresponding to the spiritual torpor of the main character. The uniformity of the given location was enhanced by stylistic means, such as longer static shots and sharp contrasts of shadow and light and black and white.

But just like other Czechoslovak Army training facilities, Josefov was occupied by a Soviet garrison, and the tense filming thus took place close to the foreign soldiers. But according to Vihanová, Czech officers saw the production of a film supported by

the Ministry of Defence in Josefov as an act of resistance against the enemy invaders.

For her debut, the director had a very clear vision that she wanted to bring to life in a rather uncompromising manner, which often caused arguments with cinematographer Petr Volf (Vihanová originally chose Igor Luther, but he emigrated to Paris after the events of August 1968).^[5] “I required everything to be exactly as I pictured. Some people perhaps thought it was unnecessary, but I did it because I had waited so long for my opportunity to come,” explained Vihanová in period press.^[6]

Due to the aforementioned disagreements with the director, Petr Volf eventually left the project. As the crew couldn't find anybody on a short notice, the remaining two thirds of the film were shot by 1st AC Zdeněk Prchlík. In his work, he used a storyboard, which meant she had to put in extra work every day. On top of that, Vihanová also clashed with the assistant director, her then husband, Milan Jonáš.

As the production was a “last-minute” project, the crew didn't even have an audio camera. The whole soundtrack had to be added in post-production. But Vihanová saw this as an advantage. “It gave me much more options sound-wise,” she said during an interview with Adam Kotaška.^[7]

Various distorted noises, silence and asynchronous sounds amplify Arnošt's alienation to himself and his surroundings and enable us to immerse ourselves into his feelings. Jiří Šust's enlightening and soulful organ music, on the other hand, presents a contrast to his nihilist attitude and corresponds with the fact that the film takes place on Sunday, a holy day.

Another setback in the production was an accident in the laboratory in which several expensive scenes were lost and had to be re-shot. The last filming day was in November, much later than set in the original schedule. Just like other films approved by the pre-normalisation Barrandov Management, e.g. *The Ear* (Ucho, 1969), *Squandered Sunday* had to be finished in 1969. That meant that Vihanová and editor Miroslav Hájek edited the film during the filming. During the day, she worked on location in Josefov; during the night, she sat in the editing room. While Arnošt's hesitation, waiting and time standing still are depicted by long shots in which almost nothing is happening, his subjectively skewed fantasies and flashbacks – not present

in Křenek's novella – are characterised by frantic cuts representing his suppressed desire to get thing moving.

Sound mixing took place during Christmas 1969. The film was supposed to end with a shot from a pistol when Arnošt's "weapon that was the only satisfactory confirmation of his existence [...] becomes the tool for its quick termination."^[8]

But the visual effects department didn't have enough capacity for this scene.

Vihanová had to make do with an imperfect depiction. But she managed to finish *Squandered Sunday* in the nick of time. The first copy was finalised on 29 December 1969.

The new management of the nationalised cinematography, however, classified *Squandered Sunday* as a "black series" film – a work characterised by its scepticism, negativism and hopelessness. Vihanová was never told the official reason why the film was immediately locked in a vault. Perhaps it was because the film opposed the official government programme. It didn't offer any constructive solutions, just an image of the inability to set oneself free. This impressive study of a psychological decay of an individual who finds himself on the brink already at the beginning of the story was premiered in 1989 at the San Remo Festival where it won the Jury Award. Czech audiences had to wait until 1 April 1990. In collaboration with Zdena Salivarová, Vihanová wrote a script titled *Men's Show* (Pánská jízda), but wasn't able to bring the project to life.

But while waiting for another chance to film live-action films, Vihanová managed to fill the time in a more meaningful manner than Arnošt. During the Normalisation era, she made documentary films which ranked to the best non-fiction films of that time.

Squandered Sunday (Zabitá neděle, Czechoslovakia, 1969/1990), director: Drahomíra Vihanová, script: Drahomíra Vihanová, Jiří Křenek, cinematography: Petr Volf, Zdeněk Prchlík, music: Jiří Šust, cast: Ivan Palúch, Míla Myslíková, Otakar Žebrák, Petr Skarke, Irena Boleslavská, Vladislav Draždák, Jan Vostrčil, Alexandra Haškovcová, Marcela Nohýnková et al. Film Studio Barrandov, 77 min.

Literature:

Jiří Cieslar, Stanislava Přádná, Zdena Škapová, *Démanty všednosti: Český a slovenský film 60. let*. Prague: Pražská scéna 2002.

Briana Čechová, Pojetí činné mysli hrdinů v debutech Jana Němce a Drahomíry Vihanové. *Illuminace* 1, 2017, pp. 69–82.

Adam Kotaška, „...ušít si na sebe past, z níž pak už není úniku...“ 25. fps.cz: <http://25fps.cz/2010/rozhovor-vihanova/>

Jana Hádková, *Drahomíra Vihanová*. Prague: Český filmový ústav 1991.

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Natáčení filmu Zabitá neděle. *Filmové informace* 20, 1969, no. 12 (20th August), p. 3.

Interview with director Drahomíra Vihanová, *Filmové informace* 20, 1969, no. 50 (17th December), pp. 1–2.

Notes:

[1] Interview with director Drahomíra Vihanová, *Filmové informace* 20, 1969, no. 50 (17th December), p. 2.

[2] Jiří Cieslar, Stanislava Přádná, Zdena Škapová, *Démanty všednosti: Český a slovenský film 60. let*. Prague: Pražská scéna 2002, p. 269.

[3] Interview with director Drahomíra Vihanová, op. cit., p. 1.

[4] Natáčení filmu Zabitá neděle. *Filmové informace* 20, 1969, no. 12 (20th August), p. 3.

[5] Another approached cinematographer was allegedly Ivan Vojnár who declined because he didn't like the script. But he later said he regretted it: Jana Hádková, Chtěl bych se toulat. Interview with cinematographer Ivan Vojnár. *Film a doba* 36, 1990, no. 12, p. 661.

[6] Interview with director Drahomíra Vihanová, op. cit., p. 1.

[7] Adam Kotaška, „...ušít si na sebe past, z níž pak už není úniku...“ 25. *fps.cz*:
<http://25fps.cz/2010/rozhovor-vihanova/>

[8] Briana Čechová, Pojetí činné mysli hrdinů v debutech Jana Němce a Drahomíry Vihanové. *Illuminace* 29, 2017, no. 1, p. 71.