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Czech auteur animation shorts 2015-2016

Czech auteur animation enjoyed much success throughout last year and the first half of this year. Rather than the witnessing of a change in the system of financing (that is not taking place until this year, and it will be some time before it manifests itself) or in education systems at animations schools, what occurred was something of a pleasant accident. For there were so many Czech films that after many years this year's Anifilm festival had to revive the special Czech competition category, as they simply would not all have fitted into the international selection. Also of interest is the fact that most films that premiered during this period utilised traditional puppet and stop-motion animation techniques; some films even chose to boast of their "Trnka-esque" nature.

After several years of effort this period saw, among other things, the completion of two excellent and challenging puppet animation films. The first was *Vánoční balada* (*The Christmas Ballad*), and premiered this year. Břetislav Pojar came up with the story a few years back, but sadly the author died before the film's realisation, though he did manage to also write a screenplay before his passing. Studio Animation People then decided to go ahead and complete the project. Michal Žabka, a well-known Czech director and puppet designer, took up directing duties. Also on board was Michaela Pavlátová, experienced camera operator Ivan Vít, and composer Jan P. Muchow. The story takes place in a kind of post-apocalyptic world taken over by robots, who destroy anything reminiscent of a human presence. At the same time the film features a small boy who collects everything that reminds him of the poeticism of childhood and Christmas. The story revolves around a conflict between the boy and a robot, whose encounter develops in unexpected ways. The 12-minute *Vánoční balada* was subsequently the recipient of an award at a film festival in Athens.

After an approximate six-year effort, Filip Pošivač and Barbora Valecká also managed to complete their film. This puppet animation film fairytale is entitled *Až po uši v mechu* (*Deep in Moss*) and harks back to traditional Czech puppeteering – meaning the legacy of Jiří Trnka and Břetislav Pojar. The film, intended for young audiences, offers up the magical poeticism of the Czech forest, inhabited by forest goblins, water nymphs and glowing toadstools. The authors began work on *Až po uši v mechu* while still studying at UMPRUM; they subsequently sought to devise the project as a series. But ultimately it turned into a film of roughly half an hour, backed by the website Stream (on which it premiered last Christmas), produced by Nutprodukce and realised in Jan Balaj's studio, in which both artists had previously worked on the feature-film *Malé z rybárny* (*Little From The Fish Shop*).

A further ambitious project came about via the Maur Film studio, courtesy of meticulous Czech director Lucie Sunková, who specialises in the complex technique of oil painting on glass plates. Similarly to her previous works *Pelargonie* (*Geranium*) and *Nová dobrotivost* (*New Goodness*) the film *Strom* (*Tree*) is primarily a work of lyrical and refined artistry. It is intended to serve as a metaphor for the similarities between the lives of trees and people. The technical and storytelling methodologies fuse effectively, adding a wistful tone to the finished product. The 15-minute film is a French co-production, and has since been supplemented by an exhibition of back-lit paintings and also a book.

Director and designer Kristina Dufková also unveiled an auteur film last autumn. The effort, produced in Anifilm studios, carries the somewhat longer title of *Neříkej mi panda, jmenuju se Fanda* (*Don't Call Me Panda, My Name is Fanda*). Prior to this, the author had dedicated herself to glass painting techniques and puppet animation. However, her most recent film was undertaken utilising computer animation. Nonetheless, this too managed to contain her own unique and highly stylistic footprint, as also seen in her previous works such as *Ze života matek* (*From the Lives of Mothers*) and *Usnula jsem* (*A Tear Is Needed*). But what is different in this case is the subject matter: the film examines speech issues experienced by children (logopedics). *Neříkej mi panda, jmenuju se Fanda* has no festival ambitions as such, but it has contributed to the current creative scene by adding something entirely new. Animators Monika Houdková, Zuzana Studená and graphic designer David Puchern played a major part in the film's realisation.

The 25-minute film *Rosa & Dara a jejich velké prázdninové dobrodružství* (*Rosa & Dara and Their Great Adventures*) is a computer-animated film, albeit one with distinctive watercolour overtones. Directed by Martin Duda, the film even found its way into Czech cinema distribution. The story involves two seven-year-old twins who go on holiday to visit their grandparents. When Grandma's dog chases off a herd of cows – literally into all corners of the globe – then the twins take off in a flying car to find the missing cows. The film (formerly produced as a TV series) also contains educational components, seeking, by both subtle and overt means, to advance children's learning.

Long-serving Finnish director Katariina Lillqvist brought a new film to the Czech Republic last year. She too is known for her methodical puppeteering work and for a style that harks back to the Czech school of this art form. This time she selected a social-critical subject matter, but balanced that with a raw and absurdist humour. The film is entitled *BabyBox* and is a social drama with a remarkably grotesque twist. The story follows what happens when a young street musician decides to place their child in a baby box.

Sunrise, directed by Vít Pancíř, represents another auteur film from last year. Previously the director tended to focus on experimental work combining live action and animation. But this film is entirely animated. According to its makers *Sunrise* is a “metaphor for the diversity, complexity and fragility of life projected onto a white circle covered by the sun in its orbit”.

During this time, Czech Television (ČT) also saw the production of one auteur puppet film. Screenwriter, script editor and director Miloš Zvěřina usually produces children's programming, including the series *Večerníček* (*Bedtime Story*). *Transport Er* takes place on board a Jewish transport train. The puppets are exact replicas of those made by child prisoners in the Terezín ghetto during the Nazi German era. The film captures the atmosphere just before the train sets off. The passengers are filled with fear of the unknown, with false hope, and also a sense of a brotherhood of deportees. Czech Television also co-produced the student graduation film *První sníh* (*First Snow*) by director Lenka Ivančíková, a student at FAMO in Písek. This too is a poetic (and often tense) story of puppet characters, albeit in this case revolving around forest animals. *První sníh* had already made its mark at international festivals

– winning four awards and finding itself competing in around a dozen other festival competitions.

But *První sních* isn't the only successful student film to achieve a breakthrough abroad. At least two other films have also found such success. The first is student graduation film *Happy End* by Jan Saska of Prague's FAMU. The film took a long time to produce with many people involved. Upon completion it found success with both critics and audiences. It was first recognised via a special student film international jury prize at Anifilm, and was then screened at Cannes and at Annecy. The story revolves around a simple, but at the same time ingenious joke and plays with viewer expectations, and also utilises morbid, but effective humour. The choice of black and white enhances the poeticism of the piece, as does a simplistic caricature-like animation design. *Happy End* is a combination of computer and hand-drawn animation.

Krkavčí matka (*Raven Mother*) from young director Noemi Valentíny of Tomáš Baťa University, Zlín, is another effective student film worthy of mention, currently blazing a path for itself at international film festivals. It is a sombre tale set in an unspecific time "long ago", when people were still strongly influenced by their natural surroundings and did not believe that they themselves could impact history. Instead of a child, a raven is born to one couple, with events culminating in tragedy. Besides from the design, the film is noteworthy for its atmosphere, with both combining to create a sense of horror.

From 2015-16, the number of auteur animated films increased, especially those made at specialised high schools and universities, but also those made via animation studios. In the above text, we have focused on those films which found their way to international film festivals or are unusual in some other way. But the list would not be complete without also mentioning *Outdated* (Martin Máj), *Sobotní odpoledne* (*Saturday Afternoon*, Šimon Meszáros), *Orfea* (Michaela Hoffová) and *Láska* (*Love*, Jakub Zach).