

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 12. 8. 2024

# Film worlds of Jan Kačer

Jan Kačer originally hated film-making. His first major film role was partisan Pavel who is seriously injured at the end of WWII and recounts his experiences of the last few months in flashbacks. The character consumed by doubt and guilt appeared in *Death Is Called Engelchen* (*Smrt si říká Engelchen*, 1963). The directors Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos allegedly chose Kačer based on a TV coverage he anchored. It concerned the Silesian town of Opava, a destination which was close to the young DAMU graduate. His home stage was the Petr Bezruč Theatre in the nearby town Ostrava, where he went with his classmates after graduating from school.

The filming of this introspective drama, which, just like the book by Ladislav Mňaček, offered a fairer view of the partisan theme, took place at the opposite end of the country, near Liberec. In his book of memoirs *To Friends* (*K přátelům*), Kačer describes how every morning he boarded a fast train in Ostrava, went to the main train station in Prague, from there he took a taxi to Liberec and finally got a ride to the filming location where the partisan village was built. Late in the afternoon he would return to Ostrava for the evening performance.

As if that were not enough, Kadár and Klos were famous for their slow shooting. Their method of making one shot a day even earned them a derisive nickname. Sometimes they did not film anything usable all day. No wonder Kačer was exhausted and fed up. At the same time, however, he felt a growing fascination with the language of film. Watching his daily work, he noticed everything his face could express in the different angles and details. His initial resistance was slowly fading. Instead, he began to admire the possibilities of the film medium, learning to distinguish what a certain expression conveys. He then tried to transfer the knowledge from this “school of film acting” to the theatre.

Gradually, he realized that film could be another medium that would allow him to do what he had enjoyed since he was young – to tell stories and create his own worlds. In the magazine *Kino (Cinema)* in 1989, he recalled how as a young boy he wandered into the prop room of the amateur theatre in his native Holice. In his own words, he found himself in a “world of miracles” at that moment. But Holice did not offer many opportunities to shine. Especially if you grew up during the Protectorate in a poor family with only your mother, older brother, and grandfather. Kačer’s father took his own life after the bankruptcy of the family shoe factory.

After the war, Jan Kačer wanted to study at the Grammar School in Pardubice. But because of his bourgeois background, this was not possible. He therefore chose the secondary ceramic professional school in Bechyně. The far-seeing local teacher Bohumil Dobiáš cast him in a theatre performance with local amateur actors. It was at that time that Kačer realized, perhaps for the first time, that he could be a part of this “world of wonders” instead of just dreaming of it. So he read a book by the Russian theatre actor, director and theoretician Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavski, one of the few of its kind that he could get his hands on, and, on the recommendation of the aforementioned teacher, he applied to the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (DAMU). He was accepted.

After graduating, Kačer became one of the most renowned personalities of the Czech theatre thanks to his work in Ostrava and in Činoherní klub (the Prague Drama Club). But we would focus mainly on his film roles. After the success of *Engelchen*, which was screened in dozens of countries, Kačer began to receive fan letters and offers from new wave directors interested in new faces. Kačer refused many roles, though. This “unavailability” further increased its exclusivity and the interest of film-makers.

Less than a year after the partisan drama by Kádár and Klos, *Passing Through a Thick Forest (Cesta hlubokým lesem, 1963)* was premièred in Czechoslovak cinemas. Based on a screenplay by Jaroslav Dietl, this naturalistic psychological film was directed by Štěpán Skalský. Kačer convincingly portrayed Rudolph, a hardened communist who participates in the confiscation of a private enterprise, but in doing so pursues mainly his own benefit. Kačer’s next film, *Courage for Every Day (Každý den odvahy, 1964)*, thematically follows *Passing Through a Thick Forest*. Once again, he played a dogmatic communist. This former “hero of socialist labour” is floundering, though,

undergoing a crisis of values.

*Courage* was made by Evald Schorm based on Antonín Máša's script which Kačer admired for the ability to accurately name a feeling shared by many people in Czechoslovakia in the early 1960s. A sense of searching for a position in a changing world, and thus for the very reason to be alive. Similarly to other films by Schorm, the crisis of an individual reflects the crisis of the society as a whole in this film. Such a topic and its grasp were in line with Kačer's sceptical attitude, which also permeated into his theatrical work.

Kačer further reflected on the possibilities of man and his social role in plays staged by the Drama Club which he co-founded in 1965. He brought his fellow actors from Ostrava, Petr Čepek, Pavel Landovský, Josef Somr, and Nina Divíšková (his wife) to the small Prague stage. Just like him, most of them worked both in theatre and in films, sometimes thanks to Kačer himself – they turned to him as their film liaison. Josef Somr, for example, is said to have been cast as Hubička, the train conductor in *Closely Watched Trains (Ostře sledované vlaky)*, only after Kačer's intercession.

"I think all of us who had the good fortune to be around film longed for it... We admired our contemporaries who were entering cinema through the front door, and we wanted to be with them," Kačer later wrote in his memoir *Back Door (Zadními vrátky)*. He himself chose mainly roles which he could project himself and his attitude to life into. He repeatedly played brooding intellectuals who are alienated from their work, their loved ones, and themselves.

In the tragicomic adaptation of Kundera's short story *Nobody Gets the Last Laugh (Nikdo se nebude smát, 1965)*, it was art historian Karel Klíma, an assistant professor at the Academy of Fine Arts, a man afraid to face the truth and take responsibility for his actions. Running into an obstacle he is not responsible for, he decides to bypass it instead of removing it. However, this triggers the mechanism of "Kilian-style anonymous bureaucracy," to quote the film critic Galina Kopaneva. The protagonist of Schorm's second film, *The Return of the Prodigal Son (Návrat ztraceného syna, 1966)*, an architect questioning the meaning of all human action after a failed suicide attempt, also finds himself in a liminal situation.

“I decided that I would only play roles that are close to what goes on in my head... I prefer people who are less ambitious, who are tolerant, more human than their self-confident fellows, brimming with optimism and willing to commit any crime against others in the name of their happiness,” Kačer revealed in the *Lidová demokracie* ( *People’s Democracy*) newspaper in 1966. Nevertheless, he occasionally violated this principle of his. When it came to the role of a secret Western agent in the “Bond movie” *The End of the Agent W4C* (*Konec agenta W4C prostřednictvím psa pana Foustky*, 1967), Kačer said that he accepted it with self-denial, out of respect for the cinematographer František Uldrich with whom he had previously filmed *The Return of the Prodigal Son*.

However, even in the case of such a mocking genre film influenced by the charms of Western pop-culture, Kačer did not abandon his methods of preparing for a role. Before filming, he took judo lessons with world champions so that he would not have to be replaced by stuntmen during fights. In the film, his stiff seriousness, given perhaps by the fact that he did not feel entirely comfortable in the role, creates a humorous contrast to the chaos unwittingly unleashed by the clumsy accountant played by Jiří Sovák.

Kačer also collaborated with František Uldrich on *The Valley of the Bees* (*Údolí včel*, 1967), a historical fresco directed by František Vlášil. Kačer originally invited him to the Drama Club to see Petr Čepek’s acting up close. Vlášil eventually cast both actors. He originally offered the role of the fanatical crusader Armin to Miroslav Macháček. Macháček turned him down and Vlášil gave the role to Kačer who could therefore step out of the pigeonhole of torn intellectuals and show critics that he can play a different type of character as well. He again threw himself into the preparations with great commitment. He lost fifteen pounds, learned Latin, and took horse-riding lessons. “A knight deeply devoted to the higher order kept me awake at nights; I wanted to be one, I was on a starvation diet, trying to penetrate the mysteries of the faith, to acquire the virtues of a knight,” he recalled in his book *Visiting My Mother* (*Jedu k mámě*).

Kačer valued the collaboration with Vlášil and Schorm the most. He also liked the psychological drama *A Flirt with Miss Stříbrná* (*Flirt se slečnou Stříbrnou*, 1969) based on a novel by Josef Škvorecký. His work on films did not end on the set,

though. Just as in his early days, when filming *Engelchen*, he would later go to the editing room to compare individual shots from his day's work in order to further educate himself on how camera angle or image composition affected the acting and the narrative. Film-makers, on the other hand, appreciated him for being a creative performer and a skilled improviser who put his own experiences into his roles.

Like James Dean, Zbigniew Cybulski, and Marlon Brando, whom he referred to as his acting idol, Jan Kačer also represented a new type of hero in the 1960s. His well-built body, attractive visage and strong baritone contrasted with his inner fragility, restlessness and emotional authenticity. His unobtrusive civilian acting was based on spare gestures and eloquent expressions. Especially if he played introverted, hard-to-penetrate men. He played a similarly unanchored character, this time in a supporting role, in *Searching (Bloudění)*, 1965) by Antonín Máša who also gave him the role of narrator in his parable *Hotel for Strangers (Hotel pro cizince)*, 1966).

Kačer again departed from his typical characters in the chilling allegory *The Seventh Day, the Eighth Night (Den sedmý – osmá noc)*, 1969). In this film by Ewald Schorm, the director's last one for a long time, he played a teacher who succumbs to collective paranoia caused by signs of an invasion. Although he appears to be a humanitarian, in reality he is a morally twisted figure capable even of murder. The gloomy film ended up being banned and the first viewers could officially see it only in 1990. Kačer's debut as a film director was not a success, either; reportedly, he got involved by chance when Barrandov was looking for someone to film a finished script by Iva Hercíková after a personnel purge.

The intimate love drama *I Am Heaven (Jsem nebe)*, 1970), conveying the feelings of teenage lovers with all the hesitation and embarrassment, came to the cinemas at a time when heroes groping in the dark were going out of fashion. It is worth mentioning that the film takes place in Bechyně where Kačer once studied. The second film directed by Kačer, the building drama *The Town of My Hopes (Město mé naděje)*, 1978), on which Evald Schorm was originally supposed to collaborate as well, seems to have been rightfully forgotten. The schematic film tells the story of an engineer who is put in charge of the atomic programme in a metallurgical and engineering company. This time, however, the filming of the subject was also made more pleasant by situating the action in a town that was close to Kačer – in Ostrava, where he had returned to

play theatre.

Kačer got the job at the Antonín Dvořák Theatre after several years of almost no work neither in film nor in theatre – because of his friendship with banned directors like Schorm and Vlášil and his participation in their banned films, among other things. During the normalisation period he was cast mainly in television films. It was not until the second half of the 1980s that he was given a bit part in Vera Chytilová's *Wolf Chalet* (*Vlčí bouda*, 1986), and at the very end of the decade he got to act once more, in Ewald Schorm's reserved drama *Nothing Really Happened* (*Vlastně se nic nestalo*, 1988).

Compared to the 1960s, when Kačer, who directed in Denmark, Norway, Switzerland, and West Germany, was on his way to becoming an international film and theatre star, his normalization period seems to have been an era of great compromises. Nevertheless, he continued to approach his work as dutifully as possible, to project what he experienced in everyday life into his roles, and to portray truthfully what people and the world are like.

After the Velvet Revolution, Kačer expanded his acting portfolio to include long-running series such as *Family Ties* (*Rodinná pouta*), *Very Fragile Relationships* (*Velmi křehké vztahy*), and *Surgery In The Rose Garden* (*Ordinace v růžové zahradě*). Both the quality and the scope of his roles became rather limited. One of his last more noticeable roles was offered to him by Tomáš Pavlíček in the comedy *Bear with Us* (*Chata na prodej*, 2018). Kačer played the grandfather, who does not speak at all, in accordance with the principle he had been following since his very first collaboration with Kadár and Klos – that good acting does not require many words or tense gestures. If you have already experienced something and have something to say, which was true for Jan Kačer, a hint is always enough.

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