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Georgis Skalenakis and his prague blues

In 1963, the unusual feature debut of Greek director Georgis Skalenakis *Prague Blues* (Pražské blues, 1963) debuted on the screens of Czechoslovak cinemas. In the film, non-actors, students from Mali, Somalia and Brazil depicted situations from the life of foreign students in Prague. Skalenakis added jazz music and created a work that was stylistically and thematically very different from the Czech production of that time. At the same time, the film was a culmination of Skalenakis' several-year-long activity on the domestic art scene, after which he left to film (and teach) in Athens.

But Georgis Skalenakis' Greek origin is rather complicated. He was born on 17th May 1926 in Port Said, Egypt, where a large Greek community lived at the time. In his youth, he worked as a journalist in Greece and in the early 1950s, he settled in Czechoslovakia as a broadcaster and editor of the foreign broadcast of Czechoslovak Radio. He originally came to Prague as a political emigrant after the local communist resistance was defeated in the Greek Civil War (1946–1949). Thousands of left-wing oriented Greeks left for countries where they could freely express their opinions. Czechoslovakia accepted some 4 000 Greek refugees, many of whom used the opportunity to study free of charge at Czechoslovak schools including FAMU.

The attractiveness of the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, in addition to its good reputation, lay in the school's ideological background. Like the Soviet All-Union State Institute of Cinematography, it was known as an institution educating progressive filmmakers successful at festivals in socialist states. Some Greeks came to FAMU as scholarship holders of the Greek Communist Party or as a part of a cultural exchange between socialist countries.

At FAMU, Skalenakis studied direction from 1953 to 1958 when he graduated. During his studies, he lived in the student residence in Hradební street which served as an inspiration for his films. According to his recollection, the school offered access to films from all over the world and an exceptionally systematic educational plan including screenings of archive footage from eight o'clock in the morning to ten o'clock in the evening and practical lectures. 'It taught me not only how to make films, but also how to observe life and benefit from it to make good films,' described Skalenakis the contribution of FAMU to his career in an interview with Galina Kopaněva. Among the lecturers who had a great influence on him were Václav Krška, A. M. Brousil and Václav Wasserman.

Already during his studies, Skalenakis drew attention to himself with several short films. He achieved international success in 1957, when his documentary film *Emergency Case* (Naléhavý případ) and slapstick *Dormitory, School and I* (Kolej, škola a já) won an award at the Moscow Youth Festival. The latter film was a comedic study of the chaotic life of art school students living in student residences, where, for all the singing, dancing and noisy typewriting, there is no peace for studying itself. To some extent, the film foreshadows Skalenakis' later interest in the environment of multicultural academic communities. Most of the roles were portrayed by DAMU students and exterior scenes were filmed right in front of the student residence in Hradební street.

In the third year, Skalenakis was chosen by Zbyněk Brynych as the assistant director of *A Local Romance* (Žižkovská romance, 1958). He subsequently assisted on seven other films at Barrandov. In addition, he appeared in minor roles as an actor. In the first half of the 1960s, he also made music programmes for Czechoslovak Television in Prague and Bratislava – they were often experimental formats combining distinct artistic stylisation with political songs about Gagarin and agriculture.

In 1963, Skalenakis finished his most famous Czech project – feature film *Prague Blues*. Originally a short film story about African students in Prague written by Karel Štorkán, titled rather straightforwardly 'Black people in Prague,' it was adapted into a script by Vladimír Kalina. The film follows an African medical student named Omar who decides whether to stay as a research assistant at a Prague clinic or return home and help his people survive during a war. His dilemma becomes more complicated when

he meets a first-year chemistry student named Mariam. The film avoids traditional dramatic conflict and instead focuses on the everyday life of foreigners in the city – relationships, encounters, clashes with another culture and leisure activities.

As mentioned before, Skalenakis cast actual students – Mariam is portrayed by Amina Hasci from Somalia, Omar is portrayed by Sissoko Woandioun, an engineering student from Mali and Amadu by Brazilian Orlando Da Costa from the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering. Supporting roles were portrayed by Skalenakis' friends from the ranks of professional musicians and art school students. The role of sculptor Kobliha was portrayed by screenwriter and dramatist Vratislav Blažek, a former student of the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague and the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague.

Skalenakis' friends included Miloš Forman who was filming *Black Peter* (Černý Petr, 1963) at the same time. The Greek director would 'borrow' cinematographer Jan Němeček during the production and editor Miroslav Hájek in post-production. The music for *Prague Blues*, which plays a pivotal role in the film as it is used to characterise the characters and their environment and dynamize the narrative, was composed by multi-instrumentalist Karel Velebný with his group SHQ.

The score was recorded by other renowned jazz musicians: saxophonist Jan Konopásek, flutist Jiří Stivín, percussionist Alana Vitouš, singer Jarmila Veselá, pianists Míša Polák and Rudolf Rokl, trumpeter Laco Déczi and guitarist Rudolf Dašek. *Prague Blues* captured not only the story of foreign students, but also Prague music – primarily jazz – scene of the early 1960s. Fragments of the film score were released by Supraphon on the record *Československý džez 1963* (Czechoslovak Jazz 1963).

In 1965, Skalenakis returned to Greece. In Athens, he directed television series and films for cinemas. He is considered to be one of the first Greek filmmakers who, following the example of Italian neorealists, whose work he encountered at FAMU, began filming outside of studios – he took his camera to the streets of Athens, in order to capture the atmosphere of the period, just as he had done in Prague.

In addition to filming, he also taught direction. In 1975, he began lecturing at the Hellenic Cinema and Television School Stavrakos, where he spent more than three

decades. He became its honorary headmaster and during his life helped to train dozens of Greek filmmakers. He would often mention that his pedagogical approach was directly influenced by his studies at FAMU. 'I can lecture endlessly using what I've learned in Prague,' he said in the aforementioned interview with Galina Kopaněva.

Georgis Skalenakis was but one of many foreign students who graduated from FAMU in the 1950s and 1960s and then set out into the world. His work, however, stands out thanks to his extraordinary creative activity in Czechoslovak production – from student films to television to Barrandov. Several formative new wave lines converge in his work: an emphasis on authenticity, working with non-actors, focus on everyday life and interest in cultural and social contexts. Thanks to this, *Prague Blues* remains a historical document of the time when Prague was the multicultural centre of the Socialist Bloc where nations, languages and musical styles would mix.

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