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Hermína Týrlová

Hermína Týrlová (1900–1993) is one of the most important persons in Czech animation of the second half of the twentieth century. In her films, she may not have created popular children's animated heroes such as Krtek (Mole), Rákosníček (Water Sprite), Mach and Šebestová, Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse, Shaun the Sheep or Peppa the Pig, but her films are popular among children to this day nevertheless. The world of rags, yarn and wooden toys animated by Hermína Týrlová shows the youngest viewers that a story can be found in any trivial object around them and that such objects can be brought to life through play.

Týrlová's films are intended for the smallest children, are imbued with kindness and laughter, criticise evil and bad character traits, such as greed [*Devět kuřátek (The Nine Chicks)*, *Obávaná kačena (The Dreaded Duck)*], disobedience and mischief [*Vláček kolejíček (Tracky the Train)*, *Zatoulané telátko (The Stray Calf)*, *Pohádka na šňůře (Story on a String)*, *Psí nebe (Dog Heaven)*], slovenliness [*Uzel na kapesníku (The Knot on the Handkerchief)*] and prejudice [*Nepovedený panáček (The Imperfect Doll)*]. All the stories have a happy ending and contain a moral: evil is punished, the prankster is reprimanded and reformed, and the brave hero gets the princess or at least receives commendation and recognition. The filmmaker's ability to understand children's fantasy and grasp the world of the youngest viewers has made Hermína Týrlová's films internationally recognised gems of children's animated film.

Hermína Týrlová was born on 11 December 1900 in Březové Hory u Příbrami and died on 3 May 1993 in Zlín. She came from a mining family, and her childhood was marked by the loss of both her parents. As a fledgling actress, she met Karel Dodal, her future husband and collaborator, when working for the Urania Theatre. Dodal was so intrigued by the popular American slapstick cartoons being shown in Czech cinemas at the time that he decided to focus on cartoons and animation. He and his wife started shooting advertisements and trick films, such as *Poučení Kocoura Felixe (A Lesson for*

Felix the Tomcat, 1927), for the company Elektajournal in the 1920s. They could only gain experience and knowledge of “American movement” animation, which was a new and unknown technology in Czechoslovakia at the time, by trial and error or borrowing copies. At the end of the 1920s, they were given the chance to film their own films. *Bimbovo smutné dobrodružství* (*Bimbo's Sad Adventure*, 1930) is inspired by the popular American series by the Fleischer brothers *Out of the Inkwell*. In the melodramatic story about the short friendship of a drawn figure who, like his American counterpart, comes to life in the real world, Karel Dodal plays a draftsman disappointed by love. At the end, the man falls in love again and leaves his drawn friend Bimbo for his new love, which is played by Hermína Týrlová. Another film by the Dodals, *Tommy a mořská panna* (*Tommy and the Mermaid*, 1930), has been lost, unfortunately. *Zamilovaný vodník* (*A Water Goblin in Love*) may not have been completed, but it is considered the first film that Hermína Týrlová not only animated, but also directed. The preserved animation passages constitute the story of a flirtatious water goblin. The water goblin's spirited wife catches the water goblin on the shore with some water nymphs and forces him to return to the family hearth. The style of both the film and the animation is strongly influenced by American animated slapstick of the time, and the content likely by the marital crisis between Týrlová and Dodal, who divorced soon thereafter. Both artists, however, remained interested in animated film. Týrlová worked as the chief animator at IRE-film, which Dodal founded in the early 1930s with his second wife, Irena. IRE-film produced mainly animated advertisements. In 1936, Týrlová had her first chance to become acquainted with puppet animation when working on the advertisement *Tajemství Lucerny* (*The Secret of the Lantern*) and the custom film *Všudybylovo dobrodružství* (*Beeneverywhere's Adventures*). Puppet animation began to interest her more than cartoons, but IRE-film preferred cartoon technology. She did not even get any opportunities to film her own work. Due to the deteriorating political situation in Europe, Karel Dodal left the country in 1938 and IRE-film was shut down.

Hermína Týrlová utilised her draftsmanship to illustrate popular children's magazines and started to consider making her own puppet films. She chose the story of Ferda Mravenec (Ferdie the Ant), a popular character in Ondřej Sekora's newspaper cartoon series. The management of the Zlín film studios liked her idea and gave Týrlová the opportunity to use the studios to make her first independent puppet film. After the

successful but technically demanding Ferdy, she decided to try placing live actors and animated puppets together. For her film, she chose the story of a sick girl and a drawn figure that comes to life. The almost completed film was lost in a fire in February 1944. Her next attempt, *Vzpoura hraček (The Rebellion of the Toys, 1947)*, co-directed by F. Sádek, was not filmed until after the Second World War.

Thematically she revisits the period of the recent occupation and again combines animated puppets with humans, but with puppets predominating. The toys come to life to rebel against the unwarranted violence perpetrated by a Nazi soldier in a toymaker's workshop, and together they force him to flee. The film won Best Children's Film at the festival in Venice and Best Puppet Film at the festival in Brussels. Hermína Týrlová thus became a globally recognised animated filmmaker and a key figure in Czech post-war animation. In her post-war work, she does not revisit her pre-war experience and cooperation with Karel Dodal, nor does she build on it in any way. Thematically and directorially she takes a completely different approach than Karel Dodal before the war. The conditions afforded by the State's monopoly on film production gave Hermína Týrlová the financing and technical facilities she needed to focus on children in her work.

After the international success of *Vzpoura hraček*, it was not easy for Týrlová to come up with new ideas. She was aware of the expectations of the studio and the public. She remained faithful to the world of children and her other combined technique film *Ukolébavka (Lullaby, 1948)* showed that she made the right decision. This time, she chose a baby as the counterpart to a doll that comes to life. The story is simple: when the mother leaves, a doll comes to life and tries to entertain the child and make it go to sleep. *Ukolébavka* also received international recognition and is to this day cited in the history of world animation. In her next film, *Nepovedený panáček (The Imperfect Doll, 1951)*, co-directed by K. M. Walló, the heroes of the story are rag dolls made by children during class. They come to life during recess and experience the same fights, skirmishes, unwarranted ridicule and displays of friendship as the children.

In the short period that she was active, Týrlová focused on adaptations of fairy tales and stories by well-known writers using classic puppets and marionettes [*Zlatovláska (Princess Goldilocks)*, *Míček Flíček (Flíček the Ball)*, *Pasáček vepřů (The Pig Herder)*]. The films were successful with both the public and critics, but the director decided to return to sources that were more of an inspiration to her. She paid special attention

to materials and the emotions they elicited in the viewer. She even modified the form of the puppets and the storyline to this end. [e.g., *Vlněná pohádka* (*The Woollen Story*), *Kulička* (*The Marble*), *Píšťalka* (*The Whistle*), *Toulavé telátko* (*The Stray Calf*), *Žertíkem s čertíkem* (*Mischief with the Imp*), *Já a můj dvojnožec* (*Me and My Two-Footed Friend*) and so on]. In the period 1963–1969, she first animated a string of woollen yarn in the six “woollen stories” [*Vlněná pohádka* (*Woollen Story*), *Chlapeček nebo holčička* (*A Boy or A Girl*), *Sněhulák* (*The Snowman*), *Psí nebe* (*Dog Heaven*), *Vánoční stromeček* (*The Christmas Tree*), *Hvězda betlémská* (*The Star of Bethlehem*)]. In the period 1971–74, she creates a series of “felt stories” [*Toulavé telátko* (*The Stray Calf*), *Ukradené dítě* (*The Stolen Child*), *Jak pejsek vyčmuchal darebáka* (*How the Dog Sniffed Out the Rascal*), *Kluk dostává filipa* (*The Boy Learns to be Clever*), *Pejskův sen* (*The Doggy’s Dream*), *Obávaná kačena* (*The Dreaded Duck*) and so on]. In them, she makes use of the possibilities afforded by pastel colours and the structure of felt. Flat puppets of pets and children cut out of different colours of felt tell simple stories with similar themes that end in a moral. In the series about a tomcat, *Modročko* (*Blue Eyes*, 1974–76), the material she opts for is again wool, but this time the puppets are knitted and to young viewers resemble the sweaters, hats and toys knitted for them by their mothers, aunts and grandmothers. In the period 1977–1978, Týrlová revisits the heroes of artist and writer Ondřej Sekora in the series of stories about Ferda Mravenec (Ferdie the Ant) and his beetle friend Brouk Pytlík. This time around, relief animation is used. In *Uspávanka* (*Lullaby*, 1979) and *Žertíkem s čertíkem* (*Mischief with the Imp*, 1980), traditional figures made of Vizovice dough are used. Hermína Týrlová’s film *Pohádka na šňůře* (*Story on a String*, 1986) is her last. This story about a mischievous pair of boy’s trousers, an apron and a playsuit is again intended for a very young audience.

Director and animator Hermína Týrlová’s aim was to awaken children’s fantasy through film, and her films continue to achieve this aim to this day. Abroad, Týrlová’s work is highly valued, even more so than in her home country. Shows and retrospectives are frequent, and not only as part of specialised festivals. In recent years, her films have been placed in French distribution. Surprisingly, Hermína Týrlová’s work enjoys less recognition in the Czech Republic. Viewers in her home country grow up with her films, but as soon as they do, they quickly forget how important the films had been for them in their childhood and all that they have given them in life. Hermína Týrlová’s art today

can, just like it once did, awaken imagination and playfulness in children and spark their fantasies. And that is more important than just making them laugh.