

ALENA PROKOPOVÁ / 18. 2. 2016

“I’m creating my own film language”

At the age of thirty-one, Olmo Omerzu represents one of the most promising personalities in Czech film. He established himself with his forty-minute chamber drama *Druhé dějství* (*Second Act*, 2008), shot as a student film at Prague’s FAMU. This native of Ljubljana, Slovenia graduated with the feature drama *Příliš mladá noc* (*A Night Too Young*, 2012), which premiered at Berlinale and earned its creators Discovery of the Year at the Czech Film Critics Awards. The director's latest work, *Rodinný film* (*Family Film*), which comes to Czech theaters 18 February. The main award for artistic achievement at the Tokyo International Film Festival is far from the last award this film will earn. It will enter the game for domestic annual awards in a year.

Why did you move the Christmas premiere of *Rodinný film*? They say you wanted to avoid the powerful competition competing for this year’s annual Czech awards.

Not at all! That’s nonsense. In reality we realized that we had underestimated promotion. After the positive viewer response at festivals in San Sebastian and Tokyo our producer Jiří Konečný decided that we wouldn’t limit ourselves to arthouse distribution. Not that the original release date was a cheery one, since *Star Wars* and *Padesátka* had both come to theaters. We didn’t want to play on the notion that it’s a genre family film. Even though it sometimes happens that certain films are presented as comedies.

Viewers won’t have a problem with the genre of your film. It’s a psychological drama. Isn’t it?

I never originally thought about the genre of *Rodinný film* at all. But in the first phase of financing, during presentations, I had to classify it somehow. Especially in Germany the producers and sales agents need pigeon holes. We had the problem that our story was lacking a chief protagonist. That was also why I insisted on the title *Rodinný film*, which presents a key to the subject matter.

And the foreign producers also wanted to hear what it was about in one sentence?

I could handle that. When I said my film was the story of a dog, it caught their interest. They were willing to talk to me...

At the festival in Zagreb last November they even gave *Rodinný film* the English title *Dog's Life*. Did you know that Jan Svěrák once wanted to make a film about a dog lost during the floods?

I don't know... Yeah, and the producers always asked if *Rodinný film* is arthouse. I know what they mean by the term, but I never felt it that way. I wanted the viewer to think at the beginning that it was the same type of film as *Home Alone*. And right at the moment when they start to feel comfortable, everything changes. And then two times, three times...

How did you develop the story?

First I had the idea with the dog and then I thought about what family he would be in. I didn't want him to be the main character. But I wondered what would happen if at the climax of a dramatic, tense emotional moment I would cut away from the family – and start focusing on the dog. And that through him I'd tell about characters who aren't seen.

And then you place the dog into a tropical paradise where he is suddenly presented gloomily, like hell on earth.

That's why I set *Rodinný film* up from the beginning to change genre. To change point of view.

But the theme remains the same – it's about freedom, isn't it?

Yes. The children live without worries, then their parents leave and at first they love the freedom. But it's starts to get difficult, suffocating. Then I completely toss the young hero aside and focus on the ones responsible for everything that happened to them – the adults.

The principle is similar to your previous film, *Příliš mladá noc*. There you observed the world of adults through the child heroes. Even in *Druhé dějství*, while it is strictly a chamber piece, a text can be heard in the intro which the hero played by Petr Marek translates, and which in the end serves as another point of view on the entire story.

I always try to create an approach, find different ways to look at the story.

Do you feel that your studies at FAMU influenced you?

I studied for a year or two in the workshop of Věra Chytilová. We were maybe the last year that got to experience her at the top of her form. She did exactly what everyone warned us about. But her abrasiveness impressed me. I have the feeling that we understood each other, even though I sometimes couldn't deliver everything she demanded. She forced you to think and justify your decisions.

And what about Jan Němec?

Back in Slovenia I was a huge fan of his *Démanty noci* ("Diamonds of the Night"). But Chytilová took the school more seriously, she acted like a pedagogue. I myself am not that conservative, but I feel that school should be conservative. It should provide students with boundaries. At that age you need them.

Is your narrative style influenced by the fact that you worked in comics?

No, I did comics completely differently than I do films, like art brut. In elementary and secondary school they offered me a replacement for film. I started shooting short films as a boy, but I was frustrated because they never looked the way I needed them to. With comics, on the other hand, I had perfect control.

How was it with the short film *Almir*, which you shot in 1998?

It also played on television. And I intuitively hit on the political context of the time. A number of Slovenian families took in refugees from Bosnia, but my film showed that members of such families are vampires. So all of their helpfulness was just a mask. So they called me from the philosophical faculty to see if I would give them a lecture and I told them I couldn't. I was only thirteen.

Do you think children are innocent? Erik in *Rodinný film* is only three years older than the boys in *Příliš mladá noc*, but they're no longer innocent.

It's a cliché I worked with deliberately in *Příliš mladá noc*. As early as the rehearsal I realized that when a child is present in a love scene, it becomes clear what is wrong with adult behavior. The presence of a child in such a situation is unusual, it violates our moral principles. I said what I needed, and I didn't have to use any straightforward psychology. In such a concept I can also be melodramatic.

It must be fun to work like that. Is there anything you don't enjoy filming?

In the screenplay there are always a number of scenes I don't want to shoot. They seem boring to me, but they're critical to the story, to explaining it. For that reason in my films the viewers emotions are often born through eclipses because of what I leave out of the narrative.

In *Rodinný film*, for example, you don't show the motif the audience expects...

Yes.

And what about the tropical ocean storm? It doesn't seem random at all, it's as if the dramatic family situation has conjured it up. In your previous films you work similarly with the motif of another element – fire.

A storm is a sign that somethings happening. It corresponds with what happened differently and elsewhere. For me to do all of this and leave something out, I can't confuse the viewer. I have to be absolutely clear about the characters. That's why I cast Karel Roden. I knew that when he appears on screen as a father who handles everything and doesn't have any problems I don't have to work on that character as much as I would if someone else were playing it.

Because Roden is the one carrying the character?

Yes. With that I solved a number of problems right from the start. I have a collective protagonist, but I don't have to give all characters the same focus. And exposition doesn't have to last forty minutes. The beginning of *Rodinný film* is one big cliché. The characters look typical, even their car testifies to how they live an upper middle class life. Later I can go against the cliché: I show Roden's character as a person who doesn't respond aggressively, dominantly to the failure of his marriage, the way we would expect from so many other films. On the contrary, he is very gentle, things affect him deeply, he tries to save everything. On the other hand the wife, played by Vanda Hybnerová, acts rather pugnaciously for a woman.

Did you again have long rehearsals with the actors prior to shooting?

Of course. I wrote detailed stories of the individual characters, the actors knew them and worked with them. That's how I did it in *Druhé dějství*. And back then rewrote the screenplay according to the rehearsals. I like this phase of the preparations. Then I don't have to concentrate so much on the actors during filming. I have certainty in relation to the characters.

Is it connected to a certainty with the language?

I don't think so. I had those concerns in school, when I still didn't speak Czech very well. At that time I watched the faces of the actors rather than listening to the dialogue. I studied to see if I believed their expressions. When I look at the films of some other directors I am saddened that I can't savor so many good ideas because I don't believe the characters. But I'm realizing that the viewers have a high tolerance. They don't mind if someone acts unconvincingly.

How do you work with the cast? You talked about Roden, but for the majority viewer Martin Pechlát isn't at all readable.

I like Martin very much. In *Příliš mladá noc* and *Rodinný film* he plays completely different characters, even though they look almost the same from the outside. Even the hairstyles are no different. With the energy Martin radiates he can play a Don Juan in the first film and an introvert who has never left his place in the second. Certain American actors work this way too.

It occurred to me, Roden and Pechlát, who play brothers, aren't they similar in a peculiar way?

Yes, that's what I wanted, it's a very interesting combination.

Is there not therefore an aspect of mirroring? Roden's character would end up like his brother if he stayed in the family home and took care of their mother?

I would enjoy watching a film where those two are the main characters.

Pechlát is associated with the famous era of Divadlo Komedie just like his colleague Jiří Černý, who you also cast in *Příliš mladá noc*. Did you both appear on stage?

I thought it was interesting how the Divadlo Komedie worked with different types of acting.

You do that too. In addition to Roden and Pechlát you have amazing young actors in the film. How did you find the actor who played Erik, Daniel Kadlec?

The casting was long, it took about half a year. There were also some young actors who were wonderful but didn't fit with Roden and Pechlát by type.

Are you glad that both the young actors from *Příliš mladá noc* are continuing to act in film?

Yes, most of the time these child actors aren't that good afterward...

Why are the protagonists of your films either younger or older than you yourself?

In *Druhé dějství* I felt a bond with Petr Marek's character, even though he was older. At FAMU I saw classmates who made autobiographic films and had no distance from them. If you've experienced something yourself, it can strike you as powerful, but the viewer can consider it banality. I'm glad to have understood that something can be personal without being autobiographical. The age up to twenty-five, when a person is still forming, has always struck me as a bit uninteresting.

Do you plan to shoot something about a protagonist your own age?

I don't need to. In *Rodinný film* I can easily see myself in several characters. So for me it is a personal film. The film parents were free thinkers in their youth, then they focused on money, but now they want to make some time for themselves. At the same time it's a generation that has no problem communicating with children. My parents sometimes made me mad, for example, even though we have and have had a good relationship. In my opinion children will not be adults and will not disconnect from parents when they don't experience conflicts. The idea of a family with no problems is pretty strange.

Perfection can also conceal something, though, can't it? That's the theme of *Rodinný film*.

I myself am not obsessed with perfection or details. On the contrary I'm afraid that my work would appear inauthentic. So I don't even draw storyboards that much. I paint the camera position in space and so forth, so that we don't lose time on set. But even there I often change things. Excessive oversight ruins the result. Besides, some scenes can't be planned in advance, especially those with young actors. In *Rodinný film* Daniel Kadlec holds the hand of Eliška Křenková's character. In one of the shots Daniel had the look of a fifty-year-old man making his wife pay for his marital problems. In the end I didn't use it, it was too strong.

It's enough for the viewer to see Erik clasp the girl's hand in the spot where she has – as he knows – a fresh tattoo. The viewer imagines that it must hurt her terribly.

I try to have lots of similar situations in the film, that can't be described, predicted, rehearsed. When I feel some potential during improvisation, I leave it alone and wait for the shoot itself. The reason is that it's happened to me that when I repeated such a situation I was not longer able to get it on screen.

What will be the direction of your next film?

The last thing I would expect after *Rodinný film* would be shooting with child actors, even with younger actors than any time before. But I'm preparing a comedy about twelve-year-old boys. The screenplay, from the successful radio author Petr Pychý

offered me incomparably lively material with excellent dialogue. The story appeals to me in terms of form as well. From the outside it's very simple. The police find a small boy in a car with a license plate from the other side of the country. They try to find out what happened, to find his parents, but on he keeps lying. It will basically be a film about telling stories.

So it's another story about children who have ended up in the world of adults?

I was interested in the idea of a young boy driving a car. It automatically creates feelings of tension and worry in people. In each film I have a few strange poetic scenes I look forward to shooting. Given the structure and logic of the story I couldn't have any more than that. But my new film is actually based on such scenes. That way I can use what I like in a stylized way.

A road movie with an unreliable narrator will be a new thing in Czech film. Do you think there's something interesting starting to happen in Czech film?

Maybe so. It's noteworthy that Jan Těšitel, Vít Zapletal, and Tomasz Milenik all shot feature films as their masters projects. It's not at all simply, they have to make compromises. But every film is interesting in some way. A classmate of mine, Tomáš Weinreb, has a film at the Berlinale. My classmate Michal Hogenauer is also preparing his feature debut.

What do you think is causing this new situation?

When the translation came out for Bordwell's book *Film History*, I was surprised at how much space is devoted to economics and the political situation. But that's how it is, their changes have an influence on the emergence of new waves. In the Czech Republic a generation of producers has appeared who understand that they also have to get money from abroad. That financing a film from domestic sources is now pretty much impossible. For this reason projects have to be more ambitious. The subject of a film can't be local, it has to have reach. And a director can't be disconnected from the financial aspect of the project.

How do you like partnering with Endorfilm?

So far producer Jiří Konečný and I have always come to agreement. So far we've always been able to find foreign coproducers. I discuss all of my ideas with him. An entire team has to work on the project from the beginning, a producer has to work on it for several years if necessary.

Do you feel limited financially?

I know what I can afford. But I definitely don't want to keep doing just chamber films. On the other hand I'm still creating my language and exploring my options.

Now you'll be going by car that will be a change.

We start shooting in July.