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Nobody Gets the Last Laugh

Hynek Bočan's feature debut is a bitter comedy about serious consequences of small concessions.

In 1963, Chateau Libice in Central Bohemia hosted a conference on Prague German literature which significantly contributed to lifting the shroud of taboo concealing the work of Franz Kafka in Czechoslovakia. In the same year, Milan Kundera published the first book of his *Laughable Loves* and the mid-length allegory *Joseph Kilian* (Postava k podpírání) by Jan Schmidt and Pavel Juráček received distribution approval. These three seemingly unrelated events can be retrospectively interpreted as an indication that a Kafkaesque tragicomedy titled *Nobody Gets the Last Laugh* (Nikdo se nebude smát, 1965) was soon to be made.

For his feature debut, Hynek Bočan, one of the youngest filmmakers of the Czechoslovak New Wave (he made his graduate film *Hate* (Nenávist, 1960) when he was 22), chose the last story of *Laughable Loves* by Milan Kundera, his professor of the history of literature at the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. Bočan explained his choice saying: "I liked it because it uses an easy, almost anecdotal form, to explore serious things. I accentuate the serious elements in the film while keeping a comedic perspective. The story intrigued me mainly by the fact that some people, without having the moral right to do it, feel obliged to interfere in the private life of an individual who defies their norms. They often do it in the name of socialist morale, but it's nothing more than modern-age small-mindedness."^[1] In case of *Nobody Gets the Last Laugh*, the person interfering in the name of social principles is an untalented graphomaniac named Zátůrecký (Josef Chvalina). He compiled a pseudo-scientific paper on Mikoláš Aleš and would like to obtain a positive expert's opinion by Karel Klíma (Jan Kačer), a young university assistant at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague. Klíma soon finds out that the result of Zátůrecký's three-year-long effort has no scientific value. But he lacks the courage to

communicate this to the importunate author. As it often happens in Kundera's work, this banal event triggers a series of events with irreversible consequences. Klíma gradually spins a web of lies and excuses which has a negative impact on his academic renown and his relationship with his girlfriend Klára (Štěpánka Řeháková).

To help him with the script, Bočan asked his schoolmate Pavel Juráček who identified Klíma as another one of his melancholic, socially useless heroes who "roams the world unable to participate in human relationships due to his polite intelligence." [2] In Kundera's point of view, the script and the resulting film shifting the accent from the uneven relationship of educated Klíma and not-very-bright Klára to the clash of the protagonist with social norms (personalised by Záturecký), wasn't very good. Later he nevertheless admitted that *Nobody Gets the Last Laugh* is probably the best adaptation of his work. The film's production started in autumn 1964 under the supervision of the creative group Švabík-Procházka.

Professional supervision of the film was provided by Karel Kachyňa. Bočan previously assisted him during the production of his psychological drama *Fetters* (Pouta, 1961). Bočan originally wanted Polish "James Dean," star of the film *Ashes and Diamonds*, Zbigniew Cybulski, to play the lead role, but because of his busy schedule, typologically similar actor Jan Kačer was eventually cast. Bočan chose Štěpánka Řeháková to play Klára based on the recommendation of assistant director Jiří Stránský (he plays the small part of the "Canadian" in the film) who saw her artistic portrait by Taras Kuščinsky in *Divadelní noviny*.

Divadelní noviny also gave Řeháková space to comment on her role and indirectly point out the problem shared by many new wave films – a stereotypical approach to female characters who are often only beautiful and stupid and whose naivety makes them easy targets: "I couldn't identify with my character, I often found her to be stupid and simply impossible. I must admit that I'm really concerned about the result. Klára is different than me..." [3] Although Řeháková couldn't identify with Klára, film critics paradoxically praised her debut more than the performance of her much more experienced counterpart Jan Kačer.

The first copy of the film was finished in August 1965, Czech audiences, however, had to wait another 6 months. Bočan's biting irony was premiered in

October 1965 in Mannheim, West Germany, where the film won the Mannheim Grand Prix for the Best Feature and Documentary Debut. After Věra Chytilová's *Something Different* (O něčem jiném, 1963) and Jan Němec's *Diamonds of the Night* (Démanty noci, 1964), it was another success for Czech cinema at the second oldest German film festival (after Berlinale).

The Czech premiere was held on 4th February 1966.

Although the authors presented their film as an anecdotal look on a situation of a socially valuable person whose life is destroyed by the relentless efforts of those less capable, no character in *Nobody Gets the Last Laugh* is, in fact, innocent. Klíma acts as a coward. He's afraid to tell the truth (at the very beginning, he denies that someone else is in his apartment) and unwilling to accept responsibility for his actions. He himself triggers the devastating mechanism of "Kilian's anonymous bureaucracy",^[4] when he decides to bypass an obstacle he didn't create instead of removing it.

The very first scene of the film is a fitting metaphor of human adaptability we observe in Klíma. To avoid a ditch by the pavement, pedestrians rather walk in snow. Just like Klíma, they are unable to resist external conditions. They rather succumb to them. But it's not just Klíma who falls victim to the inability to accept responsibility for cowardice. His moral failure affects others, particularly Klára. In this, Bočan and Juráček were among the first ones to open the very relevant theme for the 1960s – the co-responsibility of an intellectual for the moral downfall of a society.

The visual gag with the path in snow is also one of the first proofs of Bočan's exact and austere directing. He records the everyday absurdity without moralising and uses details to get to the core of the problem. He approaches characters of different age and education with the same moderation and escalates the urgency of the narration with non-violent shifts in meaning (the at first comedically framed snooping later turns against the hero). His masterful control of the film's tone mixing futility, awkwardness, sadness and sarcasm, didn't go unnoticed by the period journalists: "It's a mature debut: with a well thought-out and superbly executed concept, professionally sure, yet unconventional in its approach to life, strumming many chords – from self-deprecation and sadness to awkwardness, caricature and absurdity."^[5]

Other reviews were also positive. According to Jiří Pitterman, Bočan's film "bears the marks of professionally pure, goal-oriented, rewarding and provocative work."^[6] Galina Kopaněvová wrote this about *Nobody Gets the Last Laugh*: "The narrative flows smoothly, the prevailing frolicsome tone works very well, comical situations use gentle humour and the scenes depicting human dullness and small-mindedness are chilling."^[7] One of the few noticeably negative reviews came from the infamous Communist critic Jan Kliment, whose failure to understand the authors' intent is demonstrated in the following sentence (as well as his limited vocabulary): "The screenwriter and the director express the inability of the members of socialist society to communicate by a fantastic scenery of a street where some Kafkaesque worker senselessly keeps digging a hole every day and night without moving forward."^[8] But Jan Kliment didn't get the last laugh. In his pamphlet, he referred to a review published by the West-German *Frankfurter Neue Press* which, just like other West-German periodicals, allegedly used the film to criticise the socialist regime forcing individuals to conform to the prescribed order. Ivan Urban responded to the ideological attack of his colleague in *Literární noviny* where he used three excerpts from three different West-German reviews to point out the misleading nature of Kliment's generalising claims.^[9] The incident had an afterclap because in April 1966, Kliment was invited to FITES (Czechoslovak Film and Television Union) where he was openly rebuked for the way he reviewed *Nobody Gets the Last Laugh*.^[10]

Jan Kliment, however, didn't cease fighting against bourgeois art and his persistence secured him the position of the editor in chief of the *Rudé právo* cultural section in July 1969. He wasn't the first nor the last opportunist resembling Záturecký who made it because no Klíma found the courage to stop him.

Nobody Gets the Last Laugh (Nikdo se nebude smát, Czechoslovakia 1965), director: Hynek Bočan, screenplay: Hynek Bočan, Pavel Juráček, director of photography: Jan Němeček, music: Wiliam Bukový, cast: Jan Kačer, Štěpánka Řeháková, Josef Chvalina, Hana Kreihanslová, Jaromír Spal, Zdeněk Hoder, Libuše Havelková, Bohumil Vávra, Radoslav Brzobohatý, František Krahulík, Ludmila Píchová, Jan Libíček, Alena Frimlová et al. Filmové studio Barrandov, 94 min.

Notes:

[1] -BK- K filmu Nikdo se nebude smát. *Filmový přehled* 1966, no. 2 (17th January), p. 2.

[2] Pavel Juráček, *Deník (1959–1974)*. Prague, National Film Archive 2003, p. 44.

[3] Libuše Hofmanová, První kapitoly. *Divadelní a filmové noviny* 9, 1965, no. 2 (22nd September), p. 4.

[4] From a review by Galina Kopaněvová. Galina Kopaněvová, Poezie trpké reality. *Film a doba* 12, 1966, no. 1, p. 51.

[5] Miloš Fiala, Nikdo se nebude smát. *Rudé právo* 46, 1966, no. 47 (17th February), p. 2.

[6] Jiří Pitterman, Kinokritika. Nikdo se nebude smát. *Kino* 21, 1966, p. 4 (24th February), p. 5.

[7] Galina Kopaněvová, c. d., p. 51.

[8] Jan Kliment, Kdo se bude smát? *Kulturní tvorba* 4, 1966, p. 7 (17th February), p. 12.

[9] Ivan Urban, Poctivě a bez škodolibosti. *Literární noviny* 15, 1966, p. 9 (26th February), p. 2.

[10] Z činnosti sekce hraného filmu. *Zprávy Svazu československých filmových a televizních umělců FITES* 1966, pp. 2–3 (15th May), p. 1.