

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 4. 8. 2021

Oldřich Kmínek's Scary Fairy-Tales

Czech cinema gave the world many bad films. But only a few are as dilettantish on so many levels as two fairy-tales by Oldřich Kmínek.

His 'fairy-tale' ballet *The Gingerbread House* (Perníková chaloupka, 1933) and peculiar adaptation of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (Sněhurka a sedm trpaslíků, 1933) in which the evil queen simply has a heart attack at the end, arouse shock, amazement, amusement and embarrassment due to amateurish performances, poor sound mixing, discontinuous editing and cardboard sceneries.

But neither film, each abundant with unexpected yet at the same time ill-conceived and poorly implement ideas, can be denied a tremendous creative enthusiasm which places Kmínek up there with his American colleague Ed Wood, 'the worst director of all time.'

Oldřich Kmínek was originally a travelling salesman for a stationary company. But then he gave vent to his acting ambitions in two films by the first Czech female director, Olga Rautenkranzová. One year after his appearances in *Satyr* (Kozlonoh, 1918) and *The Oriental Languages Teacher* (Učitel orientálních jazyků, 1918), he wrote, directed and starred in a melodramatic film titled *Jindra* (1919). It was followed by a film version of *The Bartered Bride* (Prodaná nevěsta, 1922) and many other films. While reviewing one of Kmínek's films, Karel Smrž wrote that had the Lumière brothers known what their cinematograph could be used for, they never would have invented it. Other reviews were not much kinder.

But despite that, in 1933 production company Chicagofilm imprudently asked Kmínek to film three classic fairy-tales they wanted to use to expand their limited offer of films for children.

The first one Kmínek made according to his own script was *The Gingerbread House*. His modernised adaptation begins with several news reports presenting achievements of modern times. The film was apparently trying to suggest that scientific and technical advancement didn't bring just trains, airplanes, motorbikes and Tomáš G. Masaryk's speeches, but also robbed us of the magic of our everydayness. That's why the prologue ends with children exclaiming 'We want a fairy-tale!'. If they only knew what they were in for...

The story respects the basic elements of the Grimm original, but it also includes supernatural beings such as a water sprite and a fairy queen; the film has several ballet interludes starring National Theatre dancers (including a passage from *The Nutcracker*), and the grand finale has the oven explode with the witch in it.

The witch, whose terrifying mask and hair-raising raspy guffaw imbue the film with certain disturbing and horror undertones, is played by the extraordinarily active theatre and film actress Milka Balek-Brodská. In the film, she inhabits a house full of what are apparently paper bats on strings with her cat who never leaves her shoulder. How could he when he's stuffed? But the company of an inanimate animal is not enough for the woman with an unhealthy look. She is hungry. To find something to eat, she gazes into her crystal ball. Using a primitive optic trick, the ball shows Hansel and Gretel (Kmínek's five-year-old daughter, Dagmar) picking strawberries in the forest. That makes the witch's mouth water.

Before they stumble upon the gingerbread house in the second half of the film, the children meet four anthropomorphised frogs, water sprites, a spider-man, and a procession of angels walking for several endless minutes up and down the stairway to heaven.

The charmingly stiff performances by both child actors are underscored by bad voiceovers. Their bodies seem to be detached from their voices, which often provide an utterly redundant description of what we see on the screen. Most characters, however, use scenic dance to communicate.

The badly lit dance performances of fairies, frogs and skeletons take up so much of the film's running time that a thought suggests itself: could *The Gingerbread House* be a daring multimedia experiment based on a fusion of cinematic and theatrical

means of expression? A similarly composed film simply cannot fulfil the requirements laid upon narrative cinema. The insufficiently elaborate plot is insignificant, the most important scenes are the ballet interludes.

Also, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* has a lot of dancing. After *Snow White*, Chicagofilm didn't want any more films by Kmínek (*Little Red Riding Hood* was supposed to be next). Not even in this case did the director and screenwriter stick to the classic story. The scheming of the evil queen and Snow White's sorrows are interspersed by minutes-long joyful dances of dwarves who not only look like children with fake beards but sound like them (one was again played by the director's daughter).

While the dialogues and intertitles such as 'The Queen decided to get rid of Snow White' are once again redundant, we have to deduce many important things. For example, the interior of the dwarves' hut under a rock is left to our imagination. We learn from Snow White that everything inside is 'tiny and soft,' but we never see it for ourselves.

The actors filmed from a considerable distance, strange angles and from beyond bushes or trees absurdly comment their own actions, the causality of the scenes is virtually non-existent, and the rhythm of the narration is gruellingly repetitive.

Music, foley and voices aren't mixed together and at any given time; always we can hear only one of these elements. But thanks to a shorter running length and shorter scenes, *Snow White* is at least a bit more dynamic than *The Gingerbread House*.

Both films were too scary for children and excessively primitive for adults, so neither film was screened in Prague, though both appeared in cinemas outside of the Czech capital. However, audiences were small and reviews harsh. The kinder reviewers wrote that the director had many good ideas, but the films were technically imperfect. According to Luboš Bartošek, however, Kmínek's name became a 'factory term for artistic impotence.'

But if some Czech films deserve to be iconic for their spectacularly low quality, it's without a doubt these two old attempts at the fairy-tale genre.

The Gingerbread House (Perníková chaloupka, Czechoslovakia, 1933), director and screenplay: Oldřich Kmínek, director of photography: Josef Bulánek, music: Antonín Maria Nademlejnský, cast: František Kotal, Dagmar Kmínková, Jan W. Speerger, Marie Holanová, Milka Balek-Brodská, Růžena Píšová et al. Oldřich Kmínek, 64 min.

Snow White and the Seven Dwarves (Sněhurka a sedm trpaslíků, Czechoslovakia, 1933), director and screenplay: Oldřich Kmínek, director of photography: Josef Bulánek, music: Antonín Maria Nademlejnský, cast: Helena Kubalíková, Ela Šárková, František Bubla, Antonín Frič, Dagmar Kmínková et al. Oldřich Kmínek, 45 min.