

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 13. 8. 2025

Saturday

Olga Scheinpflugová is sometimes recalled just as the wife of Karel Čapek. As if that were her main quality. In fact, she was a Renaissance personality with a talent for acting and writing. She wrote poems, plays, novels, and film premises. In 1936, *The Seamstress* (Švadlenka), a comedy about a girl who wants to become a fashion designer, and a romantic comedy *A Well-Placed Man* (Dobře situovaný pán) starring Jaroslav Marvan and Antonie Nedošinská were shot based on her treatments. She wrote her third and last film idea – for the film *Saturday* (Sobota, 1944) – under the pseudonym Stáňa Ratajová. During the Protectorate era, she was gradually silenced by the Nazi leadership of domestic cultural institutions. For example, she was pressured to leave the National Theatre. She could no longer work under her own name and therefore sought alternative opportunities.

At the end of the Second World War, domestic film production was also in a complicated situation. An order from the Czech-Moravian Film Headquarters in the second half of 1944 restricted the operation of cinemas and the total deployment also significantly complicated the production of new feature films. Nevertheless, the Barrandov film studios continued in their work, at least to a limited extent. The penultimate film that was premiered before the May Uprising of the Czech People, was *Saturday*, based on the treatment by Scheinpflugová and directed by Václav Wasserman, a pioneer of domestic screenwriting. The two used to meet on the pages of the magazines *České slovo* (Czech Word) and *Filmový kurýr* (Film Courier) to which they both contributed (Scheinpflugová under various pseudonyms).

Wasserman established himself as a screenwriter in the 1920s, when he became part of the so-called “Strong Four” of silent film, together with Karel Lamač, Otto Heller, and Anna Ondráková. After the advent of sound, Wasserman adapted canonised works of domestic literature, such as *he Dog-Heads* (Psohlavci, 1931), *The Good Soldier Schweig* (Dobrý voják Švejk, 1931) or *The Lantern* (Lucerna, 1938). But he also wrote

more “consumerist” scripts, often for simple operettas or comedies with Vlasta Burian, which were then filmed by either Lamač or Martin Frič. Wasserman himself directed as well, from time to time. After the Nazis took over, however, he did not direct anything for several years. It was only during the production of *Saturday*, classified by the contemporary press as a “social comedy”, that he took the camera into his own hands again.

The main protagonist of *Saturday* is Helena (Hana Vítová), a young housewife bored with life on the outskirts of Prague. Her busy husband Petr (František Hanus) only takes her out on Saturdays. Moreover, he is often away from home on business trips. It is after he leaves on one of these trips that Helena decides to go into town on her own and help her brother Jiří (Ladislav Boháč) run his flower shop. In the process, she meets Richard (Oldřich Nový), an elegant middle-aged businessman. The naive heroine immediately succumbs to the elderly Don Juan about whom she knows nothing, and leaves Peter for him.

Helena feels that Richard gives her more attention (and more luxuries) than her perpetually busy husband and that she is really important to him. Until she catches him in a bar with his wife Luisa (Adina Mandlová). Helena’s loss of illusions of romantic love and the disintegration of her dream of socio-economic mobility are then topped by her meeting Karla (Jiřina Štěpničková), one of Richard’s many former lovers, who tells her that she was not the first and probably will not be the last to be led around by the grey-haired seducer. The film’s apparent happy ending, when we see three outwardly happy, reconciled couples, can be interpreted as a pragmatic acceptance of at least some kind of partnership, even if based on shared lies and pretence.

The film, closely monitored by the film press due to the minimal number of other works in production, was shot in the Hostivař studios (with the exception of a few shots of Prague’s suburbs and the Main Railway Station) in the decorations of architect Karel Škvor. The several-week-long production began in August 1944. The film premiered in smaller cinemas already in December. The press attention was caused both by Wasserman’s return to directing after a six-year hiatus and by the casting of Oldřich Nový in the role that consciously worked with the legacy of *Kristian* (1939). While *Saturday* has a similar cast, subject matter and moral lessons, it reverses the

perspective, in some ways polemicising with Martin Frič's popular film by siding with the cheating woman rather than the cheating man.

The extramarital infidelity and cheating on women are not framed as romantic-adventure acts, and the film does not dismiss or excuse Richard's lies at the end. He is an ambivalent, rather unsympathetic figure of a compulsive adulterer, unable to live without lying and cheating. Which is also summed up in the last scene of the film, when Richard is sitting in the car with his wife who decided to forgive him for his affairs, but still looks eagerly out of the window at a barely-of-age girl on a bicycle. *Saturday* also differs from *Kristian* in its more realistic and serious style.

Wasserman's film about the emotionally unfulfilled life of a housewife is, in the words of a contemporary article, "gently humorous" with a "serious undertone" rather than pure comedy.^[1]

According to the contemporary reviewers, *Saturday* was a tasteful, valuable and entertaining piece of art. The domestic critics hailed the film above all as a mirror of a society^[2] in which the institution of marriage was under threat, and praised its balancing act between mass spectacle and social critique. But does the film really affirm the importance of marital unions, as the Nazi ideology, which clearly defined the role and place of women (i.e. as home-makers), demanded? The film's conclusion says quite the opposite, does it not? It says that the happiness of all three couples is largely illusory and will soon pass. Moreover, neither Helena nor Richard have to face the more serious consequences of their failings. Their infidelity is tolerated by their partners as well as by the film as a whole and seen as one diversion in a worn-out marriage.

The film, deftly balancing between psychological drama and reconciliatory comedy, can thus be seen as a polemic not only with *Kristian*, but also with the hypocritical morality of the time and institutionally established social roles. Perhaps not only because of its star cast, but also because of this possibility of an oppositional reading, and thus at least a symbolic defiance against Nazi ideas of how society should ideally function, *Saturday* was also extremely well received by Czechoslovak viewers.

Saturday (Sobota, Czechoslovakia 1944), director: Václav Wasserman, script: Josef Neuberg, cinematography: Ferdinand Pečenka, music: Josef Stelibský, Jiří Traxler, cast: Hana Vítová, Oldřich Nový, Adina Mandlová, Ladislav Boháč, Jiřina Štěpničková, František Hanus, Růžena Šlemrová, Růžena Šlemrová. Lucernafilm, 89 min.

Notes:

^[1] Natáčí se nový český film Sobota. *Venkov* 1944, no. 39, p. 3. ^[2] Sobota. *Kinorevue* 11, 1944, no. 46, p. 363.