

TOMÁŠ HÁLA / 12. 12. 2024

The Ninth Heart

According to his biography, after Juraz Herz finished the successful psychological drama *A Day for My Love* (Den pro mou lásku, 1976), an intimate drama of young parents coming to terms with the loss of their child, studio executives wanted him to make a political film. In order to avoid that, he accepted an offer to direct a fairy tale from Ota Hofmann's Barrandov dramaturgical group focusing on films for children and young adults. It was supposed to be a new adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast* based on the version by poet and writer František Hrubín. Titled *The Virgin and the Monster* (Panna a netvor), the film premiered in March 1979. Its majority was filmed in the biggest studio, Studio no. 6, where architect Vladimír Labský built a huge set resembling an old castle which was so expensive that Barrandov management wanted Herz to reuse it for another film. Hofman's dramaturgical group again reached out to Herz and offered him *The Ninth Heart* (Deváté srdce, 1979), which premiered a month after is "sibling."^[1]

In addition to Herz, the script of this fairy-tale was written by poet Josef Hanzlík who wrote literature for children. Together, they wrote a story in which a wandering student named Martin frees the beautiful princess Adriena from the clutches of astrologist Count Aldobrandini. Herz and Hanzlík embellished the story with additional motifs, two of which come to the forefront. The world of travelling acrobats and puppeteers where Martin meets his beloved, puppeteer Tonička, and the world the astrologist's dark force which the hero, as the ninth contender for the princess's heart, confronts mainly to escape punishment for his disorderly conduct at the grand duke's court.

About a third of the film takes place at Aldobrandini's cursed castle. The scenes were filmed at the aforementioned set.^[2] Both fairy tales were filmed in parallel. Days when the crew worked on both films in one day were not uncommon as the crew for *The Ninth Heart* and *The Virgin and the Monster* was largely the same

(cinematographer Jiří Macháně, sound engineer František Černý, production lead Karel Kochman). But the resulting films weren't affected.[3] Credit goes also to graphic designers Herz invited to work on the films – Josef Vyleťal worked on *The Virgin and the Monster* and Eva and Jan Švankmajer worked on *The Ninth Heart*. Despite their shared passion for surrealism, the stylisation of *The Ninth Heart* used gaudy and flashy visuals (in line with the story). The tone is set already in the opening credits, basically an animated sequence in which two skeletons pull on a human heart until it's torn apart. The heart is made whole again in an alchemist's flask after adding mysterious ingredients. A physical "representation" of this experiment was a machine in Count Aldobrandini's laboratory which extracted the essence of nine human hearts to keep its owner immortal.

The morbid elements Juraj Herz used while making *The Ninth Heart* indicate that its genre is close to horror, which was also the case of *The Virgin and the Monster*, mainly thanks to its rather elaborate script.[4]

Some reviewers perceived *The Ninth Heart* as problematic in relation to child audiences.[5] On the other hand, foreign cinemas screened it as a film for children and the film received praise.[6] In comparison to Czech fairy tale films which were usually characterised by a certain kind of kindness and humour,[7] *The Ninth Heart* was an unprecedented title pushed through by the enlightened management of the Barrandov dramaturgical group.[8]

The Ninth Heart, just like *The Virgin and the Monster*, occupies a prominent spot in Herz's filmography, not just thanks to the high quality of the production, but also thanks to the overall approach to the project which Herz had to accept during the period of the normalisation of Czechoslovak film industry.[9]

As one of the filmmakers belonging to the Czechoslovak New Wave, who didn't study at FAMU, but at the Department of Puppetry of the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts, the management of Barrandov perceived him as unwanted and employing him was problematic. After successful adaptations of literary classics (*Oil Lamps* [Petrolejšové lampy], 1971; *Morgiana*, 1972) which followed the pinnacle of his career, *The Cremator* (Spalovač mrtvol, 1968) based on the novel of the same name by Ladislav Fuks, Herz accepted the requirements of the film industry thematic plans. He

didn't avoid various genres and still tried to remain faithful to his own poetics in which a propensity to sombre stories was balanced by the passion for slapstick comedy and situational humour.

Herz managed to discover new talents, unlock untapped potential in established actors and put veteran actors into daring positions. In case of *The Ninth Heart*, the leading female role of Tonička was portrayed by up-and-coming actress Anna Maľová who became a renowned theatre and television actress. The portrayal of Count Aldobrandini by Juraj Kukura was memorable also thanks to the work of the film's special make-up artist Jiři Hurych. A masterful, though brief, performance was given by Josef Kemr as the puppeteer who travels the world and reenacts "the story of unhappy love and terrible injustice that had befallen the perfect and gorgeous knight Filodene and the adorable princess Beatrice in the kingdom of Naples" as a counterpart of the film's main plotline. Herz returned to fairy tales in 1986 with *The Magic Galoshes* (*Galoše štastia*, 1986), a H. Ch. Andersen adaptation co-produced by the Slovak Štúdio hraných filmov and German Omnia Film and later in 1987 in Germany where he emigrated (*The Frog Prince* [*Žabí princ*], 1991, *Emperor's New Dress* [*Císařovy nové šaty*], 1993). But these films lacked the inventiveness of his previous titles. In 2011, Herz revived *The Ninth Heart* as a theatre play in the National Theatre in Prague. It was reprised until March 2013. The play copied scenes from the film and kept the original score by Petr Hapka, considered some of his best work.^[10]

The Ninth Heart (*Deváté srdce*, Czechoslovakia, 1978), director: Juraj Herz, script: Josef Hanzlík, Juraj Herz, cinematography: Jiři Macháně, music: Petr Hapka, cast: Ondřej Pavelka, Anna Maľová, Josef Kemr, Julie Jurištová, Juraj Kukura, František Filipovský, Přemysl Kočí, Josef Somr, Václav Lohniský, Lubomír Černík et al. Barrandov Film Studios, 88 min.

Notes:

[1] Juraj Herz – Jan Drbohlav, *Autopsie*. Mladá fronta: Prague 2015, s. 274–292.

[2] The principal photography took place also in Ploskovice near Litoměřice, Veltrusy Chateau, Znojmo, Mnichovo Hradiště and in Troja in Prague.

[3] The director said about the cinematographer: “Jiří Macháně fascinated me because he was able change his style for every film. He understood my vision and use the camera to express it.” In Juraj Herz – Jan Drboslav, c. d., pp. 268–269.

[4] E.g. Luděk Čermák criticised *The Ninth Heart* for imbalances in composition and style. Luděk Čermák. See Píšeme o filmu Deváté srdce. *Záběr*, no. 8 (20th April 4.), p. 4.

[5] Petr Klimpl, Deváté srdce. *Rovnost*, no. 94 (7th June), 1979, p. 5.

[6] At the International Festival of Film Fantasy and Science-Fiction in Madrid (12th – 19th January 1980, *The Ninth Heart* was selected the best feature film for children. In: *Filmový monitor*, no. 3, 1980, p. 10.

[7] More in Jitka Šidláková, *Filmová pohádka*. In: Luboš Ptáček (ed.), *Panorama českého filmu*. Rubico: Olomouc, 2000, pp. 333–351.

[8] “I attended an international conference on films for children in USSR, and a Polish man talked about horror fairy tales. I was so thrilled that I championed this genre back home. We made *The Ninth Heart* and *Beauty and the Beast*, films which scared kids. But some people still remember them.” In: Magdaléna Medková, *Pohádkám dnes chybí morální tah. Děti baví situace, ne příběh, říká dramaturgyně*, see <https://magazin.aktualne.cz/pohadkam-dnes-chybi-moralni-tah-deti-bavi-situace-ne-pribeh/r~324dfa64201511ea82ef0cc47ab5f122/> [interview with Marcela Pittermannová, quoted 29th March 2020].

[9] It remains to be re-examined whether both films were, in fact, horrors masked as fairy tales. See Rudolf Schimera – Michal Kříž, *Panna a netvor a Deváté srdce v kontextu díla Juraje Herze*. *Film a doba*, no. 2, 2014, pp. 27–32.

[10] More at <http://archiv.narodni-divadlo.cz/default.aspx?jz=cs&dk=Titul.aspx&ti=5165&sz=0&abc=D&pn=456affcc-f401-4000-aaff-c11223344aaa>