

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 29. 1. 2024

# Václav Šašek

“But I would really like to talk about Příbram with Drda. And if not with Drda, and if not about Příbram, then with anyone about anything, because I’m the youngest one here, I don’t know anyone and no one talks to me, except for Šašek. He is a boy who used to work at *Večerní Praha* and is now a script editor at Šebor’s; I know him from the hall of residence”<sup>[1]</sup>

This is what Pavel Juráček wrote down in his diary in October 1960, when he attended a seminar of the film section of the Writers’ Union in the Czech town of Dobříš. The boy in question was twenty-seven-year-old Václav Šašek (1933–2023), who was soon to become one of the leading figures in Czech film script editing. During his more than 50-year-long career, he was a script editor of many films, including *Loves of a Blonde* (*Lásky jedné plavovlásky*), *Firemen’s Ball* (*Hoří, má panenko*), *Ecce Homo Homolka* (*Ecce homo Homolka*), *A Cottage Near the Woods* (*Na samotě u lesa*), *Story from a Housing Estate* (*Panelstory*), *Waiter, Scarper!* (*Vrchní, prchni*), *My Sweet Little Village* (*Vesničko má středisková*), and *The Elementary School* (*Obecná škola*). He wrote scripts for dozens of others.

Šašek started working as a script editor at the Barrandov Studios in 1960. However, he had previously read literary materials for the films in development as an external lecturer of screenplays. He had also commented on films as a critic writing for the newspapers *Večerní Praha* (Evening Prague) and *Zemědělské noviny* (Agricultural Newspapers). Him working with words corresponded to his original education. The Kladno native studied Czech, Literary Studies and Russian at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University.

As a script editor, Šašek was assigned to the newly founded creative group Šebor-Bor under which the most important works of the New Wave were created. Jiří Šebor was the head of the group, and Vladimír Bor was the chief script editor. In addition to

Šašek, the script editing team consisted of Radovan Kalina, Věra Kalábová, and František Kožík.

Šašek's first script editing task was a collaboration on a script based on Škvorecký's short story *Just a Little Bit of Jazz* (*Eine kleine Jazzmusik*). He worked on the adaptation with Miloš Forman, for whom it was to be his directorial debut. The script was approved, but then, according to Šašek's recollections, rumours spread that the Barrandov Studios were to make a film adaptation of another, more problematic book by Škvorecký – *The Cowards* (*Zbabělci*), a novel that had been banned for ten years. The production of *Just a Little Bit of Jazz* was subsequently banned as well. The first film Šašek successfully realized as a script editor was Forman's *Black Peter* (*Černý Petr*).

The autobiographical novella was written by Jaroslav Papoušek, a painter, sculptor and future director and screenwriter for whom it was a prose début and whose *Homolka* trilogy also owes its dramatic structure to Šašek. The novella about the life of a small-town merchant's apprentice was originally set in 1947. However, the young actors and non-actors were not sure how to handle the dialogues and the realism. They were not authentic in their roles. Thanks to the indulgence of Šebor and Bor, though, the entire script was rewritten and re-set in the present day.

When writing about the Forman-Passer-Papoušek triumvirate, the fourth man in the background is usually neglected; yet his contribution to the final form of the films we still admire today was no less significant. Although Šašek usually entered the production process later, when the literary script was already finished – and he himself spoke of voluntary side lining so that the talented authors would not be limited in their self-expression – he still participated with the others in the polishing of every word and the overall structure. The latter was more solid in the case of his next film, *Loves of a Blonde*, than in the case of the youthfully flamboyant *Black Peter*.

At the same time Šašek began writing his own scripts. Together with Miloš Macourek, Břetislav Pojar and Václav Havel, he wrote, for example, the script for *Visit* (*Návštěva*), a comedy that was probably supposed to be animated. Havel presented it at the Barrandov Studios in February 1964. However, this film was not realised either.<sup>[2]</sup> (

*Visit* was also the title of the synopsis and screenplay from 1975, which Šašek based on the true story of the student informer who had earlier inspired Krejčík's *A Higher Principle* [ *Vyšší princip*].)

The first script that was partly Šašek's and made it to the film was *Intimate Lighting* ( *Intimní osvětlení*). The idea was his own, the film story was written together with Papoušek. They asked Passer to read it; he later recalled the early version of the script, which no one at the Barrandov Studios wanted to film, with slight embarrassment: "It was a story that took place on a ferry on the river, over the course of a two-week holiday. A violinist and a girl went down a river. For two weeks. That was it." [3] However, he decided to go beyond that idea and gave birth to a masterful atmospheric miniature.

In the 1960s, according to Šašek, the main task of the script editors was to motivate and encourage the creators coming in with their ideas, which they could give relatively free rein to. The friendly atmosphere at the Barrandov Studios, or at least in the creative group Šebor-Bor, after the 1962 reorganization is confirmed by the fact that Šašek does not remember any problems with censorship from that period. [4] Or at least not in the development phase. Another one of Forman's films he co-wrote, *Firemen's Ball*, only had complications after its release.

Although the approval of the script went smoothly, its form underwent a significant transformation, just like *Black Peter*. According to Šašek, the film was originally supposed to take place in Lucerna Palace and tell the story of an old man who makes a living as a dance promoter. But when Forman, Passer and Papoušek had written half of the script, they realised it was not right, so they started again and came up with the firemen's ball. [5]

Šašek's next script was the crime drama *A Game Without Rules* (*Hra bez pravidel*). Like Drahoslav Makovička, he would return to this genre throughout the whole of the normalisation period, which was when he also started collaborating with Dušan Klein. He wrote mystery films for him: *One of Them Is the Murderer* (*Jeden z nich je vrah*), *A Warrant Against the Queen* (*Zatykač na královnu*), *The Case of the Dead Man* (*Případ mrtvého muže*), and *Where No One Is Allowed* (*Kam nikdo nesmí*). [6] In the 1970s and 1980s, he also worked on two more films based on the detective conventions, *The*

*Gold Fish (Zlaté rybky)* a *The Chain (Řetěz)* in the creative groups of Karel Cop, Karel Valterra and Miloslav Vydra.

Although Šašek collaborated on films by directors who fell out of favour with the new Barrandov Studios management after the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, he was not affected by the drastic vetting, unlike other script editors who were replaced by screened staff. Experienced film-makers such as Vladimír Bor, Marcela Pittermannová, Václav Nývlt or Václav Šašek tried to maintain the high level of Barrandov script editing. But they were constantly shown their place and paired with less competent colleagues to balance the personnel from the ideological point of view.

Šašek referred to *Crime in the Blue Star (Zločin v Modré hvězdě)*, a film based on a minor motif from *Anna the Proletarian (Anna proletářka)*, as his penance, which allowed him to continue his work without a longer break. The insight into the structures of the Social Democracy during the First Czechoslovak Republic told the story of a typical party member, MP Jandák. The subject matter was offered to Šašek by Barrandov director Miloslav Fábeka. He tried to treat the subject as a crime film, but unfortunately for Šašek, the studio assigned the direction to Antonín Kachlík, “who had just returned from Moscow where he had drawn inspiration on how to make political films.”<sup>[7]</sup>

One of Šašek’s most valuable works from the normalisation era is *Oil Lamps (Petrolejové lampy)*. “As with other adaptations of Czech literature, Šašek’s advantage was his education and connections: ‘Because my studies at the Faculty of Arts at Charles University were oriented towards literature (I have no film education), I had many friends in various publishing houses, especially in Československý spisovatel and Mladá fronta. There I borrowed manuscripts, which I then, from my position of a script editor, offered to the screenwriters.”<sup>[8]</sup>

Already during his studies, Šašek grew fond of Jaroslav Havlíček. He admired his well-written characters, his sense of drama, and the points of his books. He was therefore an ideal candidate to write a screenplay based on the last few chapters of this evocative psychological novel. Although Šašek’s script was approved for production by the chief script editor Ludvík Toman, the hired director Juraj Herz was not

satisfied with it.

Herz therefore turned to his compatriot, Slovak screenwriter Lubomír Dohnal. Dohnal accepted the job offer on the condition that he could create a completely new adaptation. However, Šašek was stated as the main author in the credits and he also received the royalty for the script – before the film was completed, Dohnal found himself on the ever-growing list of banned authors.<sup>[9]</sup>

To introduce yet another significant collaboration of Šašek, the following memory of Zdeněk Svěrák seems more than suitable: “We became known as the authors of the Jára Cimrman Theatre and one day we received an offer from the Barrandov script writing department to write a film based on our theatrical poetics. We wrote a script called *The Seven Principles of Inspector Trachta* (*Sedm zásad Inspektora Trachty*). [...] We wrote a few more films until our script editor, Václav Šašek, suggested that we revisit the first film.”<sup>[10]</sup>

Šašek subsequently contributed to most of the films of Svěrák and Smoljak: *Joachim, Put Him into the Machine!* (*Jáchym, hod' ho do stroje!*), *A Cottage Near the Woods* (*Na samotě u lesa*), *Ball-Lighting* (*Kulový blesk*), and others. In his opinion, Svěrák and Smoljak's cinematic narratives were not as sovereign as the ones for theatre and therefore he allowed himself to direct them more than he had done with Forman or Passer in the past. Šašek's contribution to Svěrák's screenplay for the tragicomedy *My Sweet Little Village* was not insignificant. The creative group rejected the first version, claiming that an intellectually disabled person cannot be a hero of a comedy.

The material was taken over by the group under which Šašek worked and he “came up with the idea that the driver's assistant Otík should act as a litmus test. How the other characters treat him is how they are,” Svěrák recalled. At the same time, he appreciated Šašek's ability to praise: “And that is the right boost of encouragement for a writer. When you appreciate what has been done, you feel like continuing.”<sup>[11]</sup>

Svěrák's words confirm what Šašek also claimed in his interviews – that script editing is primarily a question of trust. Šašek himself repeatedly encountered its undermining. Even though the post-Soviet fairy tale *How to Earn a Princess* (*Jak si zasloužit princeznu*) and the drama *Vengeance Is Mine* (*Má je pomsta*) were based on his scripts (he considered the latter one of his best), during the conversion to the

final product there were shifts that made both these works completely different from the films Šašek and the directors (Jan Schmidt and Lordan Zafranovič) had agreed on.

Despite these disappointments, Šašek did not slacken off in his work activities in the 1990s. He worked intensively for Czech Television. He was a script editor of a series of films for the older generation and also a screenwriter. Together with Dušan Klein, he prepared a ten-episode series based on Škvorecký's short story book *Sins for Father Knox* (*Hříchy pro pátera Knoxe*) in 1992. He also adapted Eva Kantůrková's book *Girlfriends from the House of Sorrow* (*Přítelkyně z domu smutku*) into a TV series. In 1994, he received the Czech Lion award for his screenplay for the film *Helimadoe* (*Helimadoe*), which was based on yet another novel by Jaroslav Havlíček. His frequent co-writer and co-script editor was his wife Věra.

One of the most sought-after Czech script editors and screenwriters whose maxim was the truthfulness of every prepared text died on 21 September 2023. The script editing help, which he and several of his colleagues offered to the most capable Czech directors for many years, is tangibly lacking in Czech film today.

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#### Notes:

[1] Pavel Juráček, *Deník III. (1959–1974)*. Praha: Torst 2018, p. 232.

[2] For more information see Jan Bernard, *Václav Havel a film*. Praha: Národní filmový archiv 2018.

[3] Jiří Voráč, Outsider Ivan Passer. *Kinorevue* 3, 1993, no. 16 (26/07), p. 26.

[4] Lukáš Skupa, *Vadí – nevadí. Česká filmová cenuzura v 60. letech*. Praha: Národní filmový archiv 2016, p. 84.

[5] Anna Batistová (ed.), *Hoří, má panenko*. Praha: Národní filmový archiv 2012, p. 152.

[6] Together with Klein, Šašek was working on a yet-to-be-realized whodunit, *The Prestige of the Unwritten Law* (*Prestiž nepsaného zákona*), about a fake Socialist Public Security officer who tries to cover up his crimes with murder.

[7] Štěpán Hulík, *Kinematografie zapomnění: Počátky normalizace ve Filmovém studiu Barrandov (1968–1973)*. Praha: Academia 2011, p. 254.

[8] Petra Buštíková, *Produkční historie filmových adaptací podle literárních předloh Michala Viewegha*. Master thesis. Masarykova univerzita Filozofická fakulta Ústav teorie a dějin filmu a audiovizuální kultury. Brno 2008, p. 41.

[9] Štěpán Hulík, c. d., p. 164.

[10] Miloslav Šmídmajer, Povídání s cimrmanology. *Záběr* 19, no. 17 (16/08), p. 8.

[11] Jakub Porteš, *Postup práce českých scenáristů komedie v kontextu teorie a praxe*. Master thesis. Univerzita Tomáše Bati ve Zlíně, Fakulta multimediálních komunikací 2021, p. 35.