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A Feast of Snowdrops

Jiří Menzel adapted six literary works by Bohumil Hrabal. Short film *The Death of Mr. Baltazar* (Smrt pana Baltazara, 1965) for the anthology film *Pearls of the Deep* (Perličky na dně, 1965), *Closely Watched Trains* (Ostře sledované vlaky, 1966), *Larks on a String* (Skřivánci na niti, 1969), *Cutting It Short* (Postřižiny, 1980), *A Feast of Snowdrops* (Slavnosti sněženek, 1983) and *I Served the King of England* (Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále, 2006). With the exception of the last one, Hrabal himself contributed to all the adapted scripts and in majority of the aforementioned films, he also played an episodic role. Menzel's adaptations, mainly those made in the 1980s, faced criticism by reviewers and experts on Hrabal's work that they transform the writer's multi-layered work into a banal sequence of easily digestible bucolic scenes not imbued with existential themes, but rather with kind humour. But this flattening, focus on the Dionysian aspects of life can on the other hand be perceived as a faithful reflection of the value orientation of Normalisation-era society.

The tone of Hrabal's adaptations corresponds with Menzel's sensibility aptly expressed in his explication of *Closely Watched Trains* cited in the filmmaker's memoirs *Rozmarná léta* (Praha: Sloart 2013, p. 147) where he writes: "Each of us knows that life is cruel and sad. It's not necessary to show it in films. Let us prove our courage by laughing in the face of evil. Do not look for cynicism in that laughter, look for reconciliation."

In the first half of the 1970s, Hrabal's books were published in Samizdat, for instance in the Petlice edition founded in 1972 by Ludvík Vaculík. It wasn't until 1976, after Hrabal's tendentious interview for *Tvorba* weekly in which he, among other things, praised the results of the 14th Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, that his literary production was once again published officially, albeit it started with a selection of his stories. Besides, he had to conform to normalisation censoring.

A Feast of Snowdrops was first published in November 1978 in the Malá žatva series by Československý spisovatel publishing house. Hrabal conceived the book as a collage of portraits of real inhabitants of the village of Kersko, a place which was his refuge from the hustle of a big city. Compared to the original typescript from 1975, there were many changes and some stories were scrapped at the behest of the censorship committee. The non-censored version was published within the Collected Works of Bohumil Hrabal by Pražská imaginace in 1993.

The film is composed of motifs borrowed from multiple stories. The main storyline is taken from the story Hostina (Feast). Many other motifs were taken from the story Leli. The main setting of the film, just like in Feast, is a beerhouse called Hájenka, where seasonal vacationers and old residents of Kersko meet. The peaceful life in the village, disrupted only from time to time by petty conflicts between neighbourhoods and partners, is turned upside down by a grotesque hunt for a wild boar and a subsequent dispute between the hunters who should keep the trophy.

According to Jiří Menzel, the management of Czechoslovak State Film was reluctant to film the completed script of *Cutting It Short* (Postřižiny, 1980) due to high production costs. As a substitute, Menzel and Hrabal hurriedly prepared *A Feast of Snowdrops*. But Czechoslovak State Film Director Jiří Purše once again refused: "When the script was done, they got scared a little and said they would rather do *Cutting It Short*. So I made it and, seeing it was successful, they came back and said we have to make another Hrabal at once," recalled Menzel.^[1]

The shooting took place from August to November 1983 on location in Kersko, with contribution by locals, and in studios in Prague. Menzel and cinematographer Jiří Macák filmed the scene with the boar at the village square of Sluštice near Říčany. Menzel relied on tried and tested actors from previous collaborations such as *Cutting It Short*.

Publican Lád'a Novák was played by Jiří Schmitzer and the role of Leli was offered to Jaromír Hanzlík. The character of Leli was created by merging two characters from the stories. Other characters were created similarly and often combine characteristics and traits of several literary counterparts.

The most important character was portrayed by Rudolf Hrušínský. His Franc, uniting most episodes, is based on the story *Mazánkův zázrak* (Mazánek's Miracle). In addition to popular actors, you can also see cameos by Menzel's fellow directors Jiří Krejčík (Karel) and František Vláčil (old nimrod). Bohumil Hrabal himself appeared as a man cleaning a cesspit.

What the story lacks in drama, it compensates for by anecdotal scenes inspired by silent slapsticks, elements of communal satire highlighting the small-mindedness and provincialism of the characters and also a tragic sentimental ending. If Hrabal described the film as a "bitter present-day ballad," or "a tragicomedy with its context as well as subtext," he was presumably describing an ideal vision which was eventually unfulfilled.[2]

According to the critics, the film oscillates between new-wave formal experiments and a nostalgic rustic comedy. Menzel blamed its imbalances in tone and idea structure on the hurriedly written script.[3] In an effort to rehabilitate Hrabal in the film industry, he thought the literary theme wasn't as chiselled as *Closely Watched Trains* (*Ostře sledované vlaky*, 1966) and *Larks on a String* (*Skřivánci na niti*, 1969). But the film remains very popular among the general public and whole scenes and lines from the film are still often used.

A Feast of Snowdrops (Slavnosti sněženek, Czechoslovakia, 1983), director: Jiří Menzel, screenplay: Bohumil Hrabal, Jiří Menzel, director of photography: Jiří Macák, music: Jiří Šust, cast: Rudolf Hrušínský, Jaromír Hanzlík, Josef Somr, Petr Čepek, Miloslav Štibich, Petr Brukner, Rudolf Hrušínský ml., Eugen Jegorov et al. Filmové studio Barrandov, 83 min.

Notes:

[1] Eva Strusková, Základem komedie je rychlé tempo. Interview with Jiří Menzel about Cutting It Short [online]. *Filmový přehled*, 2020 [quote 13th Jan 2020]: <https://www.filmovyprehled.cz/cs/revue/detail/zakladem-komedie-je-rychle-tempo-rozhovor-s-jirim-menzelem-o-filmu-postriziny>

[2] Helena Hejčová, Slavnosti sněženek. *Kino*, no. 38 (31st January), 1984, p. 9.

[3] Eva Strusková, Základem komedie je rychlé tempo. Interview with Jiří Menzel about Cutting It Short. *Filmový přehled*, 2020 [quote 13th Jan 2020]:

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