

KAROL SZYMAŃSKI / 9. 10. 2020

# Absent Persons Present

## **Attempts by the Jiří Voskovec / Jan Werich Duo to Return to the Screen after 1945**

Miloš Forman said that in the 1960s the average young man in Prague may not have known who the current prime minister was, but he certainly knew the names of Voskovec and Werich.<sup>[1]</sup> This duo of comedians, “inseparable and contrasting in their superficiality, temperament, and disposition,”<sup>[2]</sup> created in the interwar period by Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich, primarily on the stage of the Liberated Theatre (Osvobozené divadlo) and later also in cinemas, became a living and inspiring legend in post-war communist Czechoslovakia. The V/W brand was then (and continues to be in the Czech Republic) unprecedentedly popular and was one of the most significant and valued symbols of the golden age of Czechoslovak culture in the 1920s and 1930s, and, moreover, is linked with the most noble ideals of independence, democracy, and freedom in the social consciousness.<sup>[3]</sup>

In this article I would like to trace the ideas and projects of films appearing after the Second World War, ones in which Voskovec and Werich were to meet again on screen, and which reflected, among other things, the broader processes of recovery, drawing inspiration from the Czechoslovak artistic output of the interwar period and integrating it into the cultural circuit of the totalitarian state. Unfortunately, all these projects were not realized for various reasons related both to the production limits of the relatively small, nationalized cinematography and to the personality traits and limitations of the artists involved, but also and above all, to the social and political circumstances in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (CSSR). Thus, unlike the dramatic, literary, and musical output of Voskovec and Werich from the times of the First Republic, which to a greater or lesser extent, and varying through time, functioned, was resumed, lived, and found its successors in the CSSR, post-war Czechoslovak cinema failed to make use of the filmic potential and energy of the

creative V/W tandem and to reactivate its collaboration and joint presence on screen.

\*

Voskovec and Werich were peers (born in 1905, Werich was more than four months older) and they called themselves “Siamese brothers”; they met as ten-year-old boys and their friendship survived – despite the distance after Voskovec’s emigration in 1948 – for sixty-five years (Werich died in 1980 and Voskovec eight months later in 1981). As actors and singers, playwrights and songwriters, as well as set designers and stage directors, Voskovec and Werich were among the main creators of the famous Prague Liberated Theatre, together with director Jindřich Honzl and composer Jaroslav Ježek. On this stage, starting in 1927 with their first joint revue entitled *Vest Pocket Revue* followed by subsequent[4] shows which were very popular and appreciated by critics and authorities alike, they created a specific type of a show, considered to be one of the most interesting phenomena of the European avant-garde of the time.[5] In their performance they combined intellectual and aesthetic sophistication with forms of popular, folk, and/or proletarian creativity, bridging the gap between “high” and “low”, and transforming traditional, boulevard revues into modern stage works – equal in rank to other genres of dramatic creation – of great artistic and ideological value.[6] They mixed poetry, historical themes, classical drama motifs, the avant-garde, and journalism with elements of cabaret, pantomime, ballet, circus clownery, and music hall, all of which took on an integral character, finesse, brilliance, and life only during the performance.[7] The performances of the Liberated Theatre were of loose structure, with an outsized role being played by language jokes and absurd, nonsensical dialogues – Voskovec and Werich’s “semantic clownery,”[8] their direct contact with the audience and improvisations (with references to Prague’s realities and current topics, often with spicy anecdotes). All of this was combined with music, most often jazz, including popular hits often performed by the artists together with the audience. During the relatively short period of its existence, the Liberated Theatre prepared twenty-five full length, original performances, each of which was played eight times a week in a hall for a thousand seats and had an average of one hundred and twenty (the most popular: two hundred and fifty) performances – all that in Prague with a then population of less than a million inhabitants![9]

Over the years, as the social and political situation in Czechoslovakia and Europe changed, Voskovec and Werich's theatre steered away from its links with poetism,<sup>[10]</sup> which rejected engaged or ideological art, and which emphasized poetry, abstract humor, blissfulness, and the joy of life, toward an increasingly clear emphasis on their attitude toward the present day (especially since the premieres of *Osel a stín* (The Donkey and The Shadow), *Kat a blázen* (The Hangman and The Clown), and *Svět za mřížemi* (The World Behind Bars) in 1933–1934, up to the point where elements of parody and mockery and contemporary, virulent social and political satire were finally brought to the fore (among others: *Balada z hadrů* (The Rag Ballad), *Rub a líc* (The Front and the Reverse) and *Těžká Barbora* (Heavy Barbara)). As a result, the following productions of the Liberated Theatre – until its concession was revoked and theatre was closed in 1938 – had become the target of campaigns of both the German minority and the Czech right-wing press. The shows were often broken up by nationalist militias, provoked police interventions and protests of the German and... Mexican embassies,<sup>[11]</sup> and at the same time, in reaction to these events, turned into unconventional political and patriotic demonstrations.

What integrated all of the diversity described here was the constant presence of the Voskovec/Werich duo, who played different characters in their shows and called themselves different names (e.g. Publius Ruka and Sempronius Houska, Krev and Mlísko (Blood and Milk), Positiv and Negativ), but always represented the same type of comic characters. Voskovec was the slimmer, more handsome, more elegant and volatile, speaking at the “allegro” rate, while Werich was the heavier, coarser, and more spontaneous, acting at the “presto”<sup>[12]</sup> rate. According to the Polish scholar on the Liberated Theatre Barbara Teresa Jankowska, Voskovec and Werich developed a characteristic and unique model of the art of acting which was based on the improvisational talent and vitality of the protagonists and manifested itself in, among other things, their exaggerated make-up and white face-masks, in specific intonations of voice, in spontaneous gestures, etc.<sup>[13]</sup>

When creating new formulas for revues and performances, Voskovec and Werich made clear their references to film poetics<sup>[14]</sup> (for example, in a significant way they considered the comedians of the American slapstick<sup>[15]</sup> to be their “Stanislavsky”). It is not surprising that soon they also transferred their stage experience to cinema screens. In the 1930s they appeared together in four works which became great hits

in Czech cinemas: *Pudr a benzín* (Powder and Gas, 1931), *Peníze nebo život* (Your Money or Your Life, 1932) directed by Honzl, *Hej–Rup!* (Heave-Ho!, 1934), and *Svět patří nám* (The World Is Ours, 1937) directed by Martin Frič.[16] These films oscillate between classic narrative cinema and the vaudeville of theatrical provenance[17] – with its specific punctuations, sketchiness, situational humor, as well as casual atmosphere and loose form. While the first two pieces still focus on the clownery of Voskovec and Werich, on their word games and playing with the absurdity of the world, the last two are much more socially and politically committed, commenting on the current economic crisis, depicting unemployment, and warning against fascism. *Hej–Rup!* is even considered to be the first Czechoslovak social film[18] to offer a positive program of “Hej-Rup-ism” as a form of social solidarity or even cooperation, based on honesty, pugnacity, and heartfelt “camaraderie.”

Films with Voskovec and Werich generally received critical acclaim, although they were quite extreme in terms of both their ideological and artistic expression. On the one hand, they were presented as pro-Soviet propaganda, and on the other hand, they were criticized by the far left as insufficiently progressive.[19] Some considered them to be too coarse, theatrical, and insufficiently filmic, while others, on the contrary, saw them as modern works, perfectly executed and aware of the latest cinematographic trends, comparable to those of Charles Chaplin and René Clair.[20]

After the Germans invaded Czechoslovakia in 1939, Voskovec and Werich left for the United States, where, along with Ježek, they worked for the Office of War Information radio station (later Voice of America), for which they prepared more than two thousand broadcasts for Czech listeners in their homeland within four years. At the beginning of 1945 they also started to play on Broadway – in the highly successful (100 performances) Shakespearean *Tempest*: Werich as Stefano and Voskovec as Trinkulo.[21] After the end of the war, however, the two friends returned to Czechoslovakia and reactivated their stage activities; they created the V/W Theatre, the repertoire and type of staging of which referred to the tradition of the Liberated Theatre (they resumed, among other things, their last pre-war play *Pěšt na oko* (Eyesore), suggesting the continuation of their interrupted artistic activity).

\*

After the war Voskovec and Werich also planned to return to cinema screens. Together with Karel Steklý – at that time, in 1947, he was awarded the Golden Lion prize in Venice for his social-political drama *Siréna* (The Strike) but had started work in cinematography thanks to V/W (in a small role in *Pudr a benzín*) – Voskovec tried to co-direct the film *Z Putimi do Putimi* (From Putim to Putim) based on *The Adventures of the Good Soldier Schweik* by Jaroslav Hašek. Werich was supposed to play the main character in this film, while Voskovec was supposed to portray Sergeant Flanderka. However, the complete seizure of power by communists after the February coup of 1948 thwarted all common plans of the two friends. Voskovec emigrated again in May 1948 and, after a two-year stay in Paris, settled permanently in the USA (having been interned for almost a year due to a suspicion of communist sympathies!). As George Voskovec, he performed there in theatres, among others in significant Broadway productions (he received an Obie Award for Best Actor 1956 category for the role of Uncle Vanya), films (among others, in Sidney Lumet's *Twelve Angry Men* in 1957, *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* by Martin Ritt in 1965, and *The Boston Strangler* by Richard Fleischer in 1968), and also in TV series and shows. Josef Škvorecký called Voskovec's exile career "a troublesome one full of Shakespearean heights and falls of TV series."<sup>[22]</sup>

Werich, on the other hand, remained in Czechoslovakia and struggled to adapt to the new political reality. Until the mid-1950s, his theatre activities met with difficulties, including temporary bans on performances. Nevertheless, he appeared in films,<sup>[23]</sup> including those made with his collaboration on the script. These included the great hits of that era, allowing viewers to find in the cinema a respite from socialist realist templates and dogmas, such as *Císařův pekař – Pekařův císař* (The Emperor and the Golem, 1951) by Frič or *Byl jednou jeden král...* (There Was Once a King..., 1954) by Bořivoj Zeman. The former title was, moreover, the reason for a temporary freeze and crisis in the (mail) relations between Voskovec and Werich, as Werich had used the plot of the play *Golem*, prepared jointly at the Liberated Theatre in 1931, without the consent of his friend and without any credits given for his co-writing (it also became the basis for the script for Julien Duvivier's 1935 French film under the same title, shot in Prague). However, Voskovec and Werich were able to talk over all the possible past conflicts during their first meeting after their parting in 1948, which took place at the BBC studio in London in autumn 1956.

It was only the collapse of the Stalinist regime and the thaw, in fact the beginning of the 1960s – with the gradual expansion of freedoms and the eruption of cultural life in the CSSR – that allowed the names and works of Voskovec and Werich to return to normal public circulation. Their dramatic and literary output and songs were published (e.g. in 1965 Voskovec's highly successful collection of lyrics *Klobouk ve křoví* (Hat in the Bushes) which was reissued several times),<sup>[24]</sup> their plays were staged and records were pressed. A seven-disc edition of the collected songs of the Liberated Theatre entitled *Hudba a písně* (Music and Songs) was published in 1962<sup>[25]</sup> and, in 1966, the three-disc album *Scény z her Osvobozeného divadla* (Scenes from the Performances of the Liberated Theatre). Voskovec and Werich's films had already been screened a little earlier: *Svět patří nám* had been revived in cinemas even before the communist upheaval, in 1947, while the remaining titles started to be shown between 1952 and 1954.<sup>[26]</sup> In 1955–1961 Werich himself became the head of Prague's Divadlo Satira (transformed into Divadlo ABC in 1958), where, together with his new stage partner, co-author and artistic deputy Miroslav Horníček, he staged, among others, productions from the Liberated Theatre (in 1955 the updated revue *Caesar* and in 1960 *Balada z hadrů* (The Rag Ballad)). But perhaps even more importantly, the output and legend of Voskovec and Werich became an inspiration and a point of reference for the then very lively developing and extremely popular small form theatres in Czechoslovakia, especially Divadlo na Zábřadlí and Divadlo Semafor created by Jiří Suchý and Jiří Šlitr.

\*

The beginning of the 1960s also ushered in a period – as it turned out in retrospect: a relatively short one because limited to this “interrupted” decade – in which Voskovec and Werich were able to think anew, under the conditions of the communist regime, about reactivating some forms of direct collaboration. Apart from plans for a joint stage performance or a book, there were also ideas for making a film together.

The first impulse, paving the way and making new possibilities clear, appeared along with the great, also international (Special Jury Prize at the Cannes Festival) success of the film *Až přijde kocour* (The Cassandra Cat) by Vojtěch Jasný from 1963, for which Werich wrote dialogues and in which he played the leading character of the sorcerer Oliva. It was in this film, where one could also hear, for the first time in post-

war cinema, a song from the repertoire of the Liberated Theatre, *Holduj tanci, pohybu* (Long Live Dance and Movement) from *Heavy Barbora*. On the wave of this success and the final, as seemed to be the case, release of Werich from the ban of performance and the limiting of his artistic activity,<sup>[27]</sup> and when it also seemed possible to invite Voskovec to come and work in his homeland, Jasný planned to cast both artists in the film *Poslední člověk* (The Last Man) that he was planning. However, the idea of this piece did not finally go beyond the stage of enigmatic notes, in which the director attributed (and not without significance!) to Werich the role of a yeoman, and to Voskovec – an alien from another planet.<sup>[28]</sup>

The idea for the film *Kominík a korouhvičky* (The Chimney Sweep and The Wind Vanes) Jasný had in summer 1963 seemed far more promising.<sup>[29]</sup> The director planned to develop the experience gained during the production of *Až přijde kocour* using the effusion of colors, movement, and modern ballet to create a “naively” stylized (but with the use of a cinemascope or a polyscreen, for example in the visions of space-time flights, modeled on the paintings of El Greco and Cranach) parable about the times after Stalin’s death and the arrival of Khrushchev that favored “vanes,” that is to say people who caught the wind and followed its direction depending on who was in charge.<sup>[30]</sup> The film was also supposed to be a humorous romance set in Prague, and a story of a love full of poetry in a time of hope and the atmosphere of the beginning of social and political reforms.<sup>[31]</sup> On the one hand, it was hence thought of in the spirit of René Clair and Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale *The Shepherdess and the Chimney Sweep*, but on the other hand – as Jasný was then passionate about spiritual matters, reincarnation, astrology, and parallel worlds – the direct inspiration for the screenplay was also Jacques Bergier and Louis Pauwels’ book *Le Matin des magiciens* (Morning of the Magicians), dealing with the influence of magic, the occult, and secret conspiracies on science and society.<sup>[32]</sup>

The director planned an all-star cast for *Kominík a korouhvičky*: Jana Brejchová was to play the treacherous Woman in White, Emília Vášáryová the noble and faithful Woman in Blue, Vladimír Menšík the main Vane, and Jiří Sovák the devil Byrose, representing the dark forces of the KGB and StB (i.e., the Czechoslovak State Security services). Since the very beginning Jasný also counted on his collaboration with Werich, to whom he assigned the role of Man with Wings – a good fool who believed that he would one day rise to the heavens on wings he constructed.<sup>[33]</sup>

Although we do not find such direct testimonies in the documents, we can assume that also on the occasion of this project Jasný took into account the reactivation of the Voskovec/Werich duo, and perhaps considered the realization of their joint screen comeback. All the more so because after rejecting the candidacy of the famous mime Ladislav Fialka he had a problem with casting the main character of the Chimney Sweep (who was cared for in difficult times and protected from falling by – no less than – God’s Eye itself),<sup>[34]</sup> in which Voskovec would fit perfectly.

However, it so happened that Jasný, developing further the ideas and script of allegorical fantasy and “spectral ballet” about the Chimney Sweep and the vanes, became engaged at the same time in collaboration with Werich on *Filmfalstaff*. Unfortunately – as we will soon see – this project was not successful either, and what is more: the final parting of both creators in result of its failure meant also abandoning further work on *Kominík a korouhvičky*.<sup>[35]</sup>

\*

And it was *Filmfalstaff*, also known as *Falstaffovo babí léto* (Falstaff’s Indian Summer) that seemed to be the most mature and close to being finalized of all Jasný’s ideas related to Werich and Voskovec. The project was primarily a consequence of the idea, nurtured by Werich for many years – his “old hobby”<sup>[36]</sup> – for an original, free adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Henry IV*.

With this film, Werich also intended to renew his acting collaboration with his former partner from the Liberated Theatre.<sup>[37]</sup> Jasný was slated to be director and co-scriptwriter, for himself Werich reserved the role of Falstaff, while for Voskovec he intended the role of Shakespeare himself, to be written into to the drama. It was planned that the famous Stratfordian would appear on the screen in person, while the whole piece would take the form of Werich’s letter to him (in the prologue both actors were to stroll around and have a dialogue at the modern-day Prague Kampa area). Moreover, in such an intended adaptation, the elements of modernity were to mix with historical realities, and the whole would be combined with improvisations and commentary typical of the pre-war style of Voskovec and Werich. All three artists involved in the idea met briefly in February 1965 in Vienna to discuss the scenario and to clarify the details of the realization, as well as to agree on Voskovec’s arrival in



Prague and the conditions of his participation.[38]

Although *Filmfalstaff* became a subject of letters exchanged between Voskovec and Werich for a long time, it was eventually a failure. Jasný and Werich created four versions of the script between 1964 and 1965, but the fifth version – already written by the director himself (and according to him: very cinematic and full of vision[39]) – was not accepted by Werich and the authors split up. There was a triangular misunderstanding: Voskovec was impatient with the subsequent variants and changes to the text, while Werich criticized Jasný's slowness and his lack of dramatic sense, and Voskovec believed that the director had a better eye for the film than an ear. Moreover, it turned out that the budget and technical means of Czechoslovak cinematography at the time were too limited for the realization of the ideas of the colorful and wide-screen *Filmfalstaff*, and the vague intentions of co-production and parallel realization of the English version of the film (with the planned participation of Peter Ustinov) could not be realized. After parting with Jasný, Werich still tried to get his own adaptation[40] to be directed by Frič, Ján Kadar, the famous animator Jiří Trnka, and even Voskovec himself. A nail in the coffin of the project turned out to be the news of the screen adaptation of *Henry IV* which was undertaken by Orson Welles, with himself as Falstaff (*Falstaff / Campanadas a medianoche*, 1965).

By the time Jasný emigrated from Czechoslovakia in 1970, between the projects described above, which had a chance to become a vehicle to return the legendary duo to the screen, he had developed other, more or less detailed, ideas for films in which Werich, and possibly Voskovec, could appear. For the former, for example, he wrote two short texts in the summer of 1964: *Návrat starého pana* (The Return of the Old Man) and *Můj strýček nebožtík* (My Late Uncle), which were supposed to make up a feature film,[41] but after the adventures with *Filmfalstaff* they were left unfinished as well.[42] Jasný managed to direct Werich once again; in 1965 in a TV mid-length adaptation of O. Henry's short story *Jeff Peters as a Personal Magnet* entitled *Magnetické vlny léčí* (Magnetic Wave Treatment).

\*

In 1966, when Werich's collaboration with Jasný on *Filmfalstaff* began to crumble, Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos proposed to the V/W duo taking part in the screening of *Válka s*

*mloky* (War with the Newts) by Karel Čapek – a famous satirical science-fiction novel from 1935, warning against the fall of democracy and the approaching of totalitarian order. Kadár and Klos had been trying to make *Válka s mloky* at the Prague Barrandov production company since at least the mid-1950s and from the beginning they had thought of it as an international co-production: first (with a version of the script written together with the well known journalist and writer Edvard Valenta, the prototype of one of the minor characters in Čapek's novel) with India, then with the Soviet Union and Italy,<sup>[43]</sup> and in 1958 with the United States (based on a script written together with Jack Balch, which included two language versions and shooting in the Balearic Islands and the Caribbean, among others sites).<sup>[44]</sup> As all these years long efforts failed to produce results, the filmmakers returned to their cherished project in the mid-1960s, when, following the great success of their *Obchod na korze* (The Shop on Main Street) (acting awards at the Cannes Festival in 1965 and an Oscar for Best Foreign Film in 1966), and during the boom of the Czechoslovak New Wave, co-production with the Americans or Japanese seemed much more realistic than in the previous decade.

The Slovak-Czech directing duo K+K, through the adaptation of Čapek's anti-utopia, intended to look once again for the "roots of evil" in their work<sup>[45]</sup> and to create a film engaged with contemporary problems that would arouse reflection and discussion. At the same time, the filmmakers wanted to make a film that would be universally understood – "for the whole world and for every average viewer,"<sup>[46]</sup> – spectacular, with elements of sensational adventure and eroticism, combining traditional storyline with reportage, popular science, and even animated inserts. At the time, in Kadár and Klos's plans Werich was to "certainly" ("as we don't see another actor in this role at all"<sup>[47]</sup>) play the main character of the Czech-born Captain van Toch, who discovers an island in the Pacific inhabited by intelligent amphibians. In the so conceived *Válka s mloky* Voskovec was to play a newly written character of a television journalist – the writer's and the directors' *porte-parole*. To another pre-war star of Czech cinema and also an émigré, Hugo Haas, Kadár and Klos assigned the role of an industrialist, Gustav Bondy, a childhood friend of van Toch, who helps him set up an amphibian export company as a cheap labor force.

Eventually, however, this project involving Voskovec and Werich did not come to fruition, due to both the impossibility of finding a foreign co-producer and raising

funds for the spectacular adaptation, as well as the undertone of the film, which was officially presented as anti-fascist, although it was known that its core was a virulent anti-totalitarian message, which might have presented a risk for the government. After the failure of another approach to *Válka s mloky*, Kadár and Klos began preparing the film in late 1966 under the title *Niečo nesie voda* (Something in the Water), which was an adaptation of the popular novel by Lajos Zilahy which takes place in the 1920s on the Slovak-Hungarian border. This ballad about love, desire, and betrayal was planned to be produced by Barrandov in cooperation with the American company MPO Videotronics (operating mainly on the advertising market), while the international cast was to include actors from Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and the USA. In the summer of 1967 Kadár offered Voskovec the role of an old fisherman, boasting of his service in the Austrian fleet during World War I; the film was also to feature Werich as one of the members of the “Court of Conscience” – a fishermen’s choir.<sup>[48]</sup> The open-air shooting on the Danube, which began in July 1968 after complicated preparations and production negotiations, was interrupted after the Warsaw Pact troops entered Czechoslovakia. Kadár decided to emigrate to the USA and, finally, the film was completed in 1969 under the title *Touha zvaná Anada* (Adrift). Werich was rather distant from Kadár and Klos’s proposals from the outset, while Voskovec was very keen on them: he gave the directors ideas and suggested improvements to the script.<sup>[49]</sup> However, Kadár eventually stopped responding to his letters and the film’s difficult production did nothing to help matters; and in the end neither Voskovec (whose role was taken over by Jaroslav Marvan) nor Werich found themselves in the final cast of *Touha zvaná Anada*. It is a shame, as both Kadár and Klos’s projects created an opportunity for their joint appearance on the screen in completely different incarnations than before the war.

\*

After the fall of the Prague Spring of 1968, Josef Škvorecký and Evald Schorm (who had directed Werich on television the year before as Henry VIII in the short story *Král a žena* (The King and His Wife) also obtained the consent of Werich and Voskovec to perform together. Škvorecký and Schorm met in 1966 at the set of *O slavnosti a hostech* (A Report on the Party and Guests) by Jan Němec, and they got to know each other better and started to work together (in a tandem of scriptwriter and director) thanks to the starring, married couple of Jana Brejchová and Vlastimil Brodský. With

their participation they shot *Farářův konec* (The End of the Pastor, 1968), which proved to be such an “ideal cooperation” that they decided to continue it.<sup>[50]</sup>

They planned to make a musical film called *Vražda pro štěstí* (Murder for Luck) based on a parodic detective novel by Jan Zábřana, published in 1962 which takes place in Prague in the “golden age” of the 1930s. Its protagonist is Pivoňka, a doctor of philosophy and major of the security service, who recalls an investigation carried out when he had been a private detective in the Ostrozrak office belonging to the crazy Tom Lomal. The role of Dr. Watson at Pivoňka’s side in Zábřana’s text was taken by Božka Skovajsová, a beautiful saleswoman from a high-end boutique. The detective’s opponent is the misogynist and ironic police inspector Vodička.<sup>[51]</sup>

One of the main motives of Schorm and Škvorecký to bring to the screen this unit of colorful characters and bloody dialogues, taking place both in the underworld and in the higher spheres of the novel, was to bring together two artistic legends from two different eras, V/W and S/Š, in one film. Alongside Voskovec and Werich, their post-war successors, the creators of Divadlo Semafor, Jiří Suchý and Jiří Šlitr, were to perform in *Vražda pro štěstí*. Among others, one of the most popular Czech singers and symbols of the sixties, Eva Pilarová,<sup>[52]</sup> was also expected to participate.

Unfortunately, this project too was unsuccessful: its implementation was hampered by the aggression of the Warsaw Pact in August 1968 and the subsequent so-called consolidation and normalization, which made it impossible for Schorm and Škvorecký to work in cinematography, and then the premature death of Šlitr, as a result of gas poisoning, on Christmas 1969. It is truly a shame, for if the idea of *Vražda pro štěstí* had been successful, one could have foreseen a series of Dr. Pivoňka’s film adventures based on the two successive novels by Zábřana: *Vražda se zárukou* (Murder with a Guarantee, 1964) and *Vražda v zastoupení* (Murder by Proxy, 1967) – and thus subsequent performances by Voskovec and Werich.

A certain imagining as to what Schorm’s piece might have looked like, taking into account the completely different predispositions and temperaments of the directors, is given by the sensational-musical *Zločin v šantánu* (Crime in a Nightclub, 1968), which was produced more or less at the same time according to Škvorecký’s script by Jiří Menzl, in which both of Semafor’s team participated, led by Suchý and Šlitr, and

Pilarová.

\*

In the socio-political situation changed after the fall of the Prague Spring (when, incidentally, one of the hits sung in the streets was the song of the Liberated Theatre *Na shledanou v lepších časech* (See You in Better Times) from the play *Robin zbojník* (Robin the Outlaw[53])), thinking about the joint work of Voskovec and Werich in Czechoslovakia became impossible. All the more so because Voskovec was very actively involved in exile in the support of Czechoslovak reforms and opposition to the intervention of the Warsaw Pact armies (among other things, he was a reader of the English commentary on Němec's film *Oratorium pro Prahu* (Oratory for Prague) shot in Prague in August 1968, smuggled into the West, rewritten by the Canadian National Film Board and distributed as *Seven Days To Remember*. Werich, on the other hand, who signed the famous manifesto of the Prague Spring *Dva tisíce slov*[54] (Two Thousand Words) published in June 1968 in *Literární listy* magazine with more than a hundred thousand people (including several hundred public figures and artists) – calling for social activation for the continuation and deepening of reforms and for resistance against pressure from the Soviet authorities questioning these reforms – left for Vienna with his wife and daughter after the August invasion. In 1969, however, he returned to Czechoslovakia, even though the normalization of Gustav Husák's time once again brought restrictions on his activities: his (and Voskovec's) lyrics and songs were not published, and films and performances with his participation or his co-authorship were banned. They were not removed until after Werich signed the so-called anti-Charter – the regime's response to the emerging opposition in Czechoslovakia and the Charter 77 in 1977. Werich was ill and disappointed, although still very popular in Czech society, and it was in this period that he appeared in public for the last time.

All this, however, did not prevent Voskovec and Werich from dreaming, usually by correspondence, of further ideas for working together. For example, they thought about making a film in the USA, since it was impossible in their homeland. The film was to be directed by another August immigrant, Ivan Passer, the author of one of the leading New Wave works: *Intimní osvětlení* (Intimate Lighting, 1965), who successfully continued his career in the first half of the 1970s in the US market. Voskovec and

Werich planned to play two pensioners, Mr. V. and Mr. W., one of whom lives in America and the other somewhere in communist Europe. The plot of the film, which in flashbacks would go back to the late 1930s, was to be a meeting of protagonists years later, which on the one hand would shock them and arouse feelings of regret and bitterness and on the other allow them to rejuvenate and find “salvation” in looking at the past from a new perspective at the end of life.<sup>[55]</sup> Unfortunately, also this – the last and amply autobiographical – idea for film collaboration would remain on paper and in the heads of Voskovec and Werich.

The last time the friends met, for three weeks, was in Vienna in 1974.

\*

The unsuccessful attempts to make a film in the post-war reality in which the legendary and extremely popular artists of interwar theatre and cinema would meet again reflected the impossibility of fully and freely re-establishing in Czechoslovakia the broken thread of the artistic tradition ruled by the communists. Thus, the creative and revitalizing energy of Voskovec and Werich, proven, for example, in the difficult 1930s, could not be used in the multifaceted and often innovative attempts of Czechoslovakia’s post-war cinema (not only New Wave) to identify, describe, and comment on the socio-political reality of the time in a form that was attractive to viewers.

Translated by Joanna Derdowska

The article was published in Polish in the journal *Kwartalnik Filmowy* (2017, no. 97–98, pp. 294–306).

#### **Notes:**

[1] As cited in: J. Škvorecký, *All the Bright Young Men and Women: A Personal History of the Czech Cinema*, transl. M. Schonberg, Toronto 1975, p. 23.

[2] Z. Raszewski, *Przedmowa*, [in:] B. T. Jankowska, *Przygoda teatralna Voskovca i Wericha*, Wrocław 1977, p. 7.

[3] P. Hames, *The Czechoslovak New Wave*, London 2005, p. 17; see also e.g. the memoirs of Josef Škvorecký (*op. cit.*, p. 23) or Jiří Menzel (*Rozmarná léta*, Prague

2013, pp. 194–195).

[4] E.g. visiting Vsevolod Meyerhold in Prague (J. M. Burian, “The Liberated Theatre of Voskovec and Werich”, *Educational Theatre Journal* 1977, no. 2, p. 154).

[5] Z. Raszewski, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

[6] B. T. Jankowska, *ibid.*, pp. 22, 178.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 11.

[8] Roman Jakobson’s phrase – as quoted in: P. Hames, *Czech and Slovak Cinema: Theme and Tradition*, Edinburgh 2010, p. 34.

[9] J. M. Burian, *op. cit.*, pp. 153, 156.

[10] The Liberated Theatre began as a section of the avant-garde creative group *Devětsil* representing poetism (M. Schonberg, *Rozhovory s Voskovcem*, Prague 1995, p. 51).

[11] B. T. Jankowska, *op. cit.*, pp. 114, 124, 125.

[12] Z. Raszewski, *op. cit.*, p. 7; B. T. Jankowska, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 39. In 2012 a new updated Czech edition of Jankowska’s book entitled *Divadelní dobrodružství Voskovce a Wericha. Co jste ještě nečetli* was published.

[14] See: *ibid.*, p. 178.

[15] P. Hames, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

[16] As early as in 1930 Voskovec and Werich performed as Czech entertainers and actors in one of the comic-musical numbers (entitled *Three Policemen* in the American film *Paramount on Parade / Paramount revue*, dir. D. Arzner et al.). Several film proposals by Voskovec and Werich that were taken up in the 1930s were not realized (e.g. *Robinson and Pátek* (Robinson and Friday) or *Golem*).

[17] P. Hames, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 34.

[19] Ibid., p. 35.

[20] See *Panorama českého filmu*, ed. L. Ptáček, Prague 2000, p. 43.

[21] J. M. Burian, *Leading creators of twentieth-century Czech theatre*, London 2002, <https://books.google.pl/books?id=tT02EcFXDGoC&pg=PA62&lpg=PA62&dq=tempest+broadway+1945+v5aojtrOAhVWFMAKHWhqCD8Q6AEIKTAC#v=onepage&q=tempest%20broadway%201945%20werich%20> [accessed: 23.08.2016].

[22] As quoted in: J. Voráč, *Český film v exilu. Kapitoly z dějin po roce 1968*, Brno 2004, p. 23.

[23] Among other things, he paid tribute to the new communist authorities, appearing in 1949 as Hermann Göring in the monumental Soviet *Padenie Berlína* (The Fall of Berlin), awarded the Grand Prize at the International Film Festival in Karlovy Vary in 1950 and constituting the second part of the infamous, apologetic Stalin trilogy by Mikhail Chiaureli.

[24] J. Voskovec, J. Werich, *Korespondence II*, ed. L. Matějka, Prague 2007, p. 157.

[25] Although the songs of Ježek, Voskovec, and Werich had already been published in the 1930s in an arrangement for piano and recorded on records, it was the set *Hudba a písně* (prepared by Václav Holzkněcht) that was the first full edition of this output.

[26] V. Březina, *Lexikon českého filmu. 2000 filmů 1930–1996*, Prague 1996, pp. 119, 295, 343, 398.

[27] See: V. Jasný, *Život a film*, Prague 1999, p. 32.

[28] J. Voráč, “Nerealizovaný scénář Vojtěcha Jasného”, *Illuminace* 2003, no. 1, p. 105.

[29] J. Voráč, *Český film v exilu, op. cit.*, p. 96.

[30] J. Voráč, “Nerealizovaný scénář...”, *op. cit.*, p. 104; Jasný’s statement in: A. J. Liehm, *Ostře sledované filmy. Československá zkušenost*, Prague 2001, p. 182.



[31] V. Jasný, *op. cit.* 73; J. Voráč, “Nerealizovaný scénář...”, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

[32] *Ibid.*, pp. 103–104.

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 105.

[34] *Ibid.*

[35] Jasný returned to the project – under the slightly modified title *Kominiček a korouhvičky* (The Little Chimney Sweep [sic!] and The Vanes) – in 1970, in exile in Germany and in a completely different era. The experience of the suppression of the Prague Spring transformed the original idea of a fairy tale fantasy and allegory into an apocalyptic, violent parable about the Czech nation and the events of 1968–1970. Jasný’s efforts to produce the screenplay in Germany, Austria, Croatia, and the USA were unsuccessful, despite, for example, Kirk Douglas’ consent to take part in the film as *The Man with Wings* (*ibid.*, pp. 107, 111, 113).

[36] “I’m working on a script for a movie about Falstaff. I must add, this is my old ‘hobby.’ Whenever I found a free moment, I’d get down to translating Shakespeare’s *Henry IV* – as quoted in: (y), “Jeszcze jeden *Falstaff*. Jan Werich o swojej pracy”, *Ekran* 1966, no. 38, p. 13.

[37] J. Voskovec, J. Werich, *Korespondence II*, *op.cit.*, p. 76.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 157.

[39] J. Voráč, “Nerealizovaný scénář”, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

[40] Werich translated and adapted *Henry IV* with himself in the leading role in S. K. Neumann’s Theatre in 1964.

[41] V. Jasný, *op. cit.*, pp. 32, 39.

[42] Jasný finally brought both short stories to the screen in 1977 in Austria, with the participation of the local actors, as “Rückkehr” (*ibid.*, pp. 32, 38–39).

[43] *Naplánovaná kinematografie. Český filmový průmysl 1945 až 1960*, ed. P. Skopal, Prague 2013, p. 132; V. Zýzková, “Nerealizované československé sci-fi scénáře”,

*Filmový Přehled*, <http://www.filmovyprehled.cz>

[/Revue/Fokus/Nerealizovane-ceskoslovenske-sci-fi-scenare](#) [accessed: 8.09.2016];

see also “Wiadomości zagraniczne. Krótka o wszystkim”, *Film* 1955, no. 51–52, p. 8.

[44] *Naplánovaná kinematografie*, *op. cit.*, p. 133; “Krótka o wszystkim”, *Film* 1958, no. 10, p. 14; “Współprodukcja USA–CSR”, *Teatr i Film* 1958, no. 6, p. 18.

[45] V. Zýzková, *op. cit.*

[46] “Kadar i Klos mówią o *Inwazji jaszczurów* oraz ujawniają tajemnice wspólnego warsztatu reżyserskiego. Spotkanie ze zdobywcami Oscara, notował Cz. Michalski”, *Ekran* 1966, no. 33, p. 10.

[47] *Ibid.*

[48] V. Macek, “Touha zvaná Anada aneb rozpad dvojice Ján Kadár – Elmar Klos”, [in:] *Pražské jaro 1968. Literatura – Film – Média. Materiály z mezinárodní konference pořádané Literární akademii za spolupráce s Městskou knihovnou Praha 20.–22. května 2008*, Prague 2009, pp. 220, 224.

[49] *Ibid.*, p. 222.

[50] J. Bernard, *Evald Schorm a jeho filmy. Odvahu pro všední den*, Praha 1994, p. 96.

[51] M. Zelinský, *Zábrana, Jan: Vražda pro štěstí*,

<http://www.slovníkceskeliteratury.cz>

[/showContent.jsp?docId=1607](#) [accessed 8.09.2016].

[52] J. Škvorecký, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

[53] A. Horáčková, “Nekuř, prase, psal Voskovec Werichovi. Vyšly jejich poslední dopisy”, *iDNES.cz*, <http://kultura.zpravy.idnes.cz/nekur-prase-psal-voskovec-werichovi-vysly-jejich-posledni-dopisy-1c8->

[/literatura.aspx?c=A080913\\_1046568\\_literatura\\_kot](#) [accessed 8.09.2016].

[54] J. Lukeš, *Diagnózy času. Český a slovenský poválečný film (1945–2012)*, Prague 2013, p. 129.

[55] Ideas for the film are recapitulated, for example, by Voskovec in his letter to Werich from 12 July 1971. – J. Voskovec, J. Werich, *Korespondence III*, ed. L. Matějka, Prague 2008, p. 148–149; see also M. Schonberg, *op. cit.*, p. 93.