

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 28. 7. 2021

# Czech Tricks in Hollywood

Beach. Rocks to the left, sea to the right. The Statue of Liberty in the middle, half buried in the sand. The iconic final scene of *Planet of the Apes* (1968) is known even to those who have never seen the sci-fi film by Franklin J. Schaffner. Made with the matte painting technique involving detailed painting on the glass, the trick shot has yet another dimension for Czech viewers. It originated in the mind of the Czech-French artist Emil Kosa Jr., a winner of the Academy Award for Best Visual Effects.

Kosa was one of the many talented artists of Czech descent getting a foothold in Hollywood in the era when the studio system was being established – just like the actors František Lederer and Rudolf Myzet, the film entrepreneur Paul Kohner, the composers Rudolf Friml and Erich Wolfgang Korngold, or film effects creator Ferdinand Sršeň. Born in Veselí nad Moravou and working in the United States under the pseudonym Fred Sersen, it was Ferdinand Sršeň who was behind Kosa's American career.

Sršeň immigrated to the US in 1907 at age 17. His beginnings were not easy. He first worked in a Pittsburgh vessel and locomotive factory, then in Tennessee copper mines and at a Minnesota farm. After two years of manual labour, he moved to California where he entered an art college and started creating panoramic paintings. He was commissioned by private companies and the Canadian government, and in 1918, he received an offer to create a commercial for the Fox Film Corporation.<sup>[1]</sup>

Under the name Fred Sersen, he became a pioneer of visual effects based on the matte painting technique, with part of the scene painted on glass placed in front of the camera. His aquarelles were used in hundreds of films. Even studio halls were decorated with his paintings. After some time, he was promoted to the head of the special effect department that he had co-founded. Between 1939 and 1948, he received a total of eight Academy Award for Best Visual Effects nominations. He won

the award twice: for the colonial India romance *The Rains Came* (1939), with its impressive scenes of devastating floods and earthquakes, and for the war film *Crash Dive* (1943).

In *In Old Chicago* (1938), Sersen let the title city burn, and in *Suez* (1938), he realistically depicted the excavation of the Suez Canal. He also had a hand in the visualization of the spaceship arrival in the iconic sci-fi film *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) and of the sinking of the *Titanic* (1953). Fox Film trick shots, the most elaborate ones in all of Hollywood despite the low production costs, were collectively referred to as “Sersen’s shots” after their main author.

The pond excavated on the studio grounds for *The Rains Came* was named Sersen Lake to honour the Czech effects master. Sersen did not just limit himself to painting. In a visionary way, he also used photos or miniatures. Having retired in 1952, he cooperated with the studio for many years as a consultant. All that time, he had experts in different technical fields at his disposal. When looking for new colleagues, Sersen did not forget his Czech roots. One of the people he invited to collaborate was Emil Kosa Jr.

Kosa’s grandfather was born to a Třešť weaver’s family in 1851. Having travelled around Central and Southern Europe, he took up painting. Living in Paris at the beginning of the 20th century, his oldest son Emil followed in his legacy. There he met the Paris Opera pianist Jeanne Mares, who gave birth to their son Emil Jr. on 28 November 1903. When Jeanne died, Kosa Sr. returned to Moravia and remarried. Invited by Alfons Mucha, he soon travelled to the United States together with his new wife and son. However, the family did not remain in the US permanently just yet. After his return to Europe in 1919, Kosa Jr. entered the Prague Academy of Fine Arts. Two years later, the Kosa family permanently settled in Los Angeles.

Emil continued his studies at the California Institute of the Arts. In 1927, he became an American citizen. He completed his art studies at the Paris École des Beaux-Arts under František Kupka, among others. Back in the United States, he painted watercolour landscapes on canvass and glass and made valuable contacts. In 1933, Fred Sersen offered him a job in his department. Before long, the talented artist became Sersen’s chief assistant and stayed with the Fox Film Corporation for 35

years.

One of Kosa's first film works was also the one probably seen by the most viewers. In 1933, he made a logotype for 20th Century Pictures – a company which after a merger with the Fox Film Corporation two years later became 20th Century Studios. The name of the company has changed a few times (20th Century Fox in the 1980s, 21st Century Fox since 2013), but Kosa's visual with a giant monument lit by several spotlights and surrounded by Art Deco buildings has remained more or less the same; just like the unforgettable music with fanfares composed by Alfred Newman.

Even though the name of the competent artist first appeared in the credits in 1958, he had been involved in several films appreciated for their effects, for instance in the aforementioned *In Old Chicago*. However, Kosa's most remarkable creations came into being in the 1960s. He created the prehistoric lizards in the adaptation of Doyle's *The Lost World* (1960) and the airship shots in the adaptation of Verne's *Five Weeks in a Balloon* (1962). He contributed to the art forms of *The Sound of Music* (1965) and the war film *Von Ryan's Express* (1965). He won the Academy Award for his photographic effects in *Cleopatra* (1963) starring Elizabeth Taylor.

At the same time, Kosa was still recognized for his portraits and landscapes. In the 1940s, Arthur Miller, who later became a famous playwright, contributed to *The Los Angeles Times* as an art critic. In November 1941, he wrote an article about Kosa's paintings exhibited in an L.A. gallery. At this exhibition, Kosa presented about two dozen Californian landscapes, of which Miller wrote, "In Kosa's paintings, we inadvertently find ourselves in nature and follow the wonderful panorama of Californian sun, shadow, surging hills and mountains, shining sky, and trees trembling in gentle breeze."<sup>[2]</sup>

We are reminded of the author of many unforgettable paintings with the first seconds of every Fox film. He died at the age of 64 in November 1968, only a few months after the première of *Planet of the Apes*, which became immortal also thanks to him.

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**Notes:**

[1] Vladimír Groš, Z veselských Chaloupek do Hollywoodu. *Malovaný kraj* 53, 2017, No. 3, p. 5.

[2] Josef S. Rouček, U Kosů v Kalifornii. *Amerikán* 68, 1945, No. 1, p. 129.