

ONDŘEJ TOUŽIMSKÝ / 2. 11. 2022

Director Cimrman or How Ladislav Smoljak Directed Ball-Lightning

Between 1974 and 1987, Zdeněk Svěrák and Ladislav Smoljak worked together on nine feature films. During this period, both became successful and popular screenwriters, actors and what's crucial for this article, the latter even a film director. But Ladislav Smoljak's path to becoming a film director wasn't easy and he had to fight to make his dream come true. Let's look behind the scenes of the popular Cimrmanologist's film career and find out how he managed to become a film director and how this influenced his screenwriting career and the work of his friend and colleague Zdeněk Svěrák.

Ladislav Smoljak's fascination with film started in his early age. His passion wasn't evidenced only by his frequent television reviews submitted to various magazines. Already as a student, he was mesmerised by audiovisual media. "Láďa really wanted to become a filmmaker. When we were students, me and Čepelka used to call him medium because [...] he saw a medium length film and started annoying us that that was it, that they've hit the nail on the head. He kept saying that it was the future, not short or feature films," [1] recounts Zdeněk Svěrák. Smoljak spotted his chance to direct in 1977 when he and Zdeněk Svěrák finished their fifth script titled *Ball-Lightning* (Kulový blesk, 1978). "I was a bit cheeky and felt that I could film our script better than any director." [2] claimed Smoljak later. And so, on 28th November 1977, he wrote his directorial explication for *Ball-Lightning*. In this text, he among other things asks that he is allowed to direct the film himself. "In conclusion, I would like to add that as a candidate for the director's chair I may be somewhat older but hopefully my life experience [...] will enable me to successfully perform the task which is my lifelong desire." [3] But at that time, however, Barrandov only allowed graduates of direction to direct their films. [4] "In 1977, this was an unprecedented and impudent

request. I didn't even study at FAMU (Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague). I had never directed anything. Even FAMU graduates were at first given only anthology films so they could prove themselves and learn the tricks of the trade," [5] adds Smoljak.

Despite the fact that Smoljak wrote three successful scripts for *Joachim, Put Him into the Machine* (Jáchyme, hoď ho do stroje, 1974), *Mareček, Please Pass Me a Pen!* (Marečku, podejte mi pero, 1976) and *A Cottage Near the Woods* (Na samotě u lesa, 1976) and even directed a television film titled *Door* (Dveře, 1976), the studio didn't trust him. Drahoslav Makovička, head of the dramaturgical group in charge of the film wrote a letter to the head dramaturge of FSB Ludvík Toman that says: "Smoljak asked to direct the film. After talking with him and you, we've come to the conclusion that this debut in the extent of a feature film is unreal." [6] Because of this, the studio decided to go with another director. "The script was offered to comrade Podskalský who was happy to accept immediately." [7] The studio wanted to offer Smoljak the post of assistant director. Podskalský, however, knew about Smoljak's dream of becoming a director and wanted the studio to give his younger colleague a bigger opportunity. "Barrandov told me they would offer the film to Zdeněk Podskalský and he could make me his assistant director and later give me a reference so I could direct on my own next time. Zdeněk Podskalský said that he wanted to co-direct the film with me." [8] explains Smoljak. Makovička agreed and so, on 10th May 1978, he sent the following recommendation letter to Toman: "We looked for a way to make the collaboration with comrade Smoljak happen. Director Podskalský offered to make comrade Smoljak co-director as he sees this would artistically benefit the film and his work on it. The dramaturge, the entire group, and Smoljak himself accepted this generous offer with gratitude. We believe that this manner of production would bring directorial inputs in the spirit of the Smoljak-Svěrák humour which has brought many popular films to our cinemas. Comrade Smoljak, who brought us many assets as a writer, honed his directorial skill in the theatre and television and it's his lifelong desire to direct a film. I am convinced that he should be given the opportunity. In his collaboration with experienced director Zdeněk Podskalský, I find the risk of such endeavour minimal and adequate to the outlook of extraordinary success. [...] It is our opinion that with regards to his work for film, comrade Smoljak deserves such an opportunity [...]. These are all reasons which after thorough and responsible

consideration encourage me to convey the request of Podskalský and Smoljak, recommend it and ask for your kind support.“ [9]

Thanks to the intercession of Podskalský and Makovička, Smoljak’s wish was slowly coming true. It was officially recommended to approve the co-direction of Smoljak-Podskalský.

“As I’ve already informed you, dramaturge Makovička proposes that *Ball-Lightning* should be directed by Z. Podskalský in cooperation with L. Smoljak. I recommend considering and approving this proposal (it will not increase the fee in any way),” wrote head dramaturge Toman to the FSB director František Marvan on 12th May 1978.

But that still didn’t mean Smoljak’s victory. The studio expected Podskalský to be the lead director. In his letter from 20th July 1978, Director General of Czechoslovak Film Juří Purš writes to Marvan: “It is unknown to me what prerequisites has one of the considered directors /L. Smoljak/ shown in the past. Did he work on a film? In the past, similar experiments yielded questionable results /e.g. P. Kohout, O. Daněk/. I therefore welcome the decision to make Zdeněk Podskalský the lead director. [...] To make myself clear, I do not wish to doubt comrade Smoljak’s talent nor oppose attracting new talented artists to directing films, I merely want to say that we need to have some previous guarantee of success.” [11]

In response to the letter, Marvan wrote to Toman on 31st July: “On 14th July 1978, I was asked to approve a list of creative workers of the film *Ball-Lightning* indicating that the directors are Zdeněk Podskalský and Ladislav Smoljak. I consider it my duty to give you a written confirmation of our agreement that Zdeněk Podskalský is the lead director in this case. I don’t wish to doubt the talent of L. Smoljak in the slightest nor oppose attracting new talented artists, but it is necessary to have a certain previous guarantee of success in the person of director Podskalský. I therefore ask you to inform the dramaturge responsible for this project.” [12]

The scepticism regarding Smoljak’s directing skills was more than apparent. Purš, Marvan and others not only wanted to let Smoljak direct alone, but they even required Podskalský to be appointed lead director and Smoljak his assistant director. But these efforts eventually proved to be in vain, as Smoljak recounts: “In the end, he (Zdeněk Podskalský – author’s note) let me direct the film all by myself.” [13] *Ball-*

Lightnings cinematographer Ivan Šlapeta confirms this: “I think that he (Zdeněk Podskalský – author’s note) directed two scenes, the one on the staircase [...]. And then the scene in which the gypsies are moving and they have all their thing on the streets, he directed that as well, I’m sure.” [14]

After a very difficult and protracted process, Smoljak finally got to direct his first feature film. However, the hard part was still ahead of him. “I was concerned how I would direct a crew of professionals who knew that I wasn’t one,” [15] admitted Smoljak later. It couldn’t have been easy for a debuting director without artistic education. On top of that, he had to deal with the distrust of the Czechoslovak Film Director Purš. Smoljak therefore wanted to give his best and think his vision through in great detail. That is, after all, apparent from his directorial explication: “Extreme situations would range from crazy comedy to sorrowful and serious scenes. This task is attractive to me not because of a desire to exhibit myself, but because of deep aesthetical reasons. In real life, comedy also appears next to tragedy – and what’s more, comic things often tend to be tragic at the same time. And if we want to give a true picture of life, this intertwining is only logical and necessary. That’s why the theme of our film about moving is presented in a more complex and layered form. The whole operation is shown in its complexity and vulnerability, and we have an opportunity to show many types of people and their personalities /as well as the environments they live in/ next to sad scenes /Bílek’s packing the night before moving/ [...]. It is obvious that such a complex topic could be harmonised and realised only if the director sticks to reality and doesn’t degrade it to a mere comedy clown show.” [16] The tool he planned to use to fulfil the abovementioned vision, was primarily acting. And that begins with casting. In their first films, when Smoljak and Svěrák were “only” screenwriters, they didn’t have much say in the casting. Zdeněk Svěrák recalls: “He (Oldřich Lipský – author’s note) always asked us what would we say if a certain character would be portrayed by a certain actor and we usually approved it.” [17] When Smoljak first sat in the director’s chair and could choose the actors himself, the situation changed. His strategy paradoxically involved not casting comedic actors. “I decided not to use established comedians. A comedian usually pushes a certain form of comedy he knows best, which sometimes collides with the director’s artistic intentions. [...] After all, an established comedian has another disadvantage – an established audience. He actually cannot afford to deviate from the

style the audience expects from him,” [18] explained Smoljak his intentions later. And he said something similar before making *Ball-Lightning*:

“The characters should not act as comedians, but like common people who suddenly find themselves in an uncommon situation. On this occasion, I would like to confess that I’m not a fan of the approach that reduces characters in comedies to mere comical figures that simply have to be funny at all times: when they walk, button up their suit, drink from a glass. [...] Everything leads from one comical situation to another. [...] That’s why – provided that I’m appointed the director – I would like to choose actors which the public doesn’t immediately recognize as comedic. Fresh faces, gentle and sensitive with a sense for reality and for colourful details observed in real life.” [19]

Ladislav Smoljak wanted to make a comedy, but not shallow. He wanted the humour to come out of ordinary situations, smoothly and not forcibly. He didn’t want to make humour using expressive gestures or established comedians. Humour was supposed to be a side product. This was reflected in the casting of *Ball-Lightning*. Lead roles were given to predominantly character actors who weren’t perceived as comedic actors at that time. In addition to Josef Abrhám, it was Daniela Kolářová, Karel Kalaš and particularly Rudolf Hrušínský. So there is a substantial difference between Smoljak and Svěrák’s first film *Joachim, Put Him into the Machine!*

But experienced dramatic actors were not the only type that Smoljak and Podskalský promoted during casting. Many roles in Smoljak’s films were played by non-professional actors. “It will be necessary to find and test non-professional actors for a number of minor characters,” [20] announced Podskalský before the production started. The popularity of non-professional actors was confirmed by Abrhám as well: “He (Ladislav Smoljak – author’s note) didn’t want “acting.” He didn’t want a skilled actress who could “play” a cold and unpleasant character – he preferred an authentic lady. He naturally picked “professional” actors to play big roles, but only the ones he was certain would “not act” the way he wanted.” [21]

This is evidenced by casting Milada Ježková, who was already known from Miloš Forman films to the role of Jechová and casting the Kiss family as the Fazekaš family. It would seem that by casting non-professional actors, Ladislav Smoljak wanted to

add a certain dose of improvisation to his film. But nothing can be further from the truth. Smoljak didn't like improvisation and wanted to avoid it both in film and in theatre. In a documentary titled *Všeuměl*, Jan Kašpar explains: "He hated when actors started coming up with their own lines and adding them to the performance." [22] Smoljak himself confirmed that: "Improvisation is a creation of the moment. I'm not against it, but I don't trust it. Especially when it's textual improvisation. I think it only brings a lot of waste through which the real rock shines only seldom." [23] In the same manner, Smoljak approached his official directorial debut *Waiter, Scarper!* (Vrchní, prchni, 1980), whose script was written solely by Svěrák. As the author himself says: "In general, Láďa wanted to approach comedy differently. When I wrote *Waiter, Scarper!* by myself, I imagined Petr Nárožný playing the lead role. And he told me that it would be too obvious, that everyone would know instantly that it was supposed to be fun. Back then, Nárožný performed sketches and scenes with Sobota and Šimek in variety shows. He said that he wanted a normal actor who would develop the comedic aspects gradually and so he gave the role to Abrahám who fulfilled his requirements" [24]

Also Smoljak mentions the recasting of the lead role: "Zdeněk wrote the script with Petr Nárožný in mind [...], so a slight shift from the original chain of comical confusions to that somewhat romanticising shape we arrived at would remain unnoticed. With his burden of audience stereotype, excellent and shapeable Nárožný eventually turned out to be a big obstacle for my plan. Serious actor Josef Abrahám, whose comedic skill were not known to many people, was the ideal solution for me." [25]

By this decision, Smoljak changed the poetics of the entire film. With Petr Nárožný in the leading role, *Waiter, Scarper!* would most likely incline towards a pure comedy than to the resulting satire. Serious actor Abrahám, whose comedic talent got more space than in *Ball-Lightning*, was a better fit for Smoljak's concept. Nevertheless, Abrahám's performance stays within the boundaries of the film's poetics, a satirical comedy. Recasting Petr Nárožný also indicates that Smoljak had a different view on film comedy than Svěrák. In the moment when Smoljak began directing their jointly written scripts (and in case of *Waiter, Scarper!* Svěrák's script), the younger of the duo had to make many concessions. These culminated by casting Abrahám in the aforementioned film. Svěrák admitted that he was surprised many times when he

found out whom Smoljak cast or what approach he chose when adapting their scripts. Smoljak didn't want to make classical comedies. He wanted to make films with humour as well as serious scenes.

O. T.: "That Smoljak didn't want to make crazy comedies?"

Z. S.: "Yes, that it was somewhere between serious and funny."

O. T.: "But I can't remember Smoljak making any serious films?"

Z. S.: "For instance in *Jára Cimrman, Lying Asleep* (Jára Cimrman, ležící, spící, 1983) has scenes which are way too serious. We actually had an argument about the scene where they shoot many rabbits during a hunt. I said: "Láďa, that's not something to watch, that doesn't belong to a comedy." [26]

As far as their films are concerned, Svěrák and Smoljak are seen as inseparable. But we can now see that their approaches were different. We need to distinguish their poetics, even within "Cimrman" films. When Smoljak sat in the director's chair, he had a significant impact on the tone of the given script and he often exercised this influence.

After his first two films, Smoljak made three more: *Jára Cimrman, Lying Asleep*, *Dissolved and Discharged* (Rozpuštěný a vypuštěný, 1984) and *Uncertain Season* (Nejistá sezóna, 1987). Ladislav Smoljak's directorial career spanned only nine years and shrank to five films. It began with co-directing *Ball-Lightning* and ended with *Uncertain Season*. This was coincidentally the last film he made together with Zdeněk Svěrák. After the success of *The Elementary School* (Obecná škola, 1991), Svěrák permanently moved to his son, director Jan Svěrák. The theory that this may be one of the reasons why Ladislav Smoljak didn't return to directing films is certainly not far from the truth, but it was definitely not the only reason. The other is related to the end of the Communist regime and by extension the powerful finance wings of the Barrandov Studios sponsoring all Smoljak's films. His son confirms this speculation: "He hated communicating with sponsors and investors, it was exhausting for him [...] he simply grew tired of it. He felt that he invested so much energy into it without getting any results." [27] There are certainly other reasons such as advanced age and health problems and waning interest in film and reignited love for theatre, but all

these remain unconfirmed speculations.

However, in the Normalisation Era, it would be hard to find a similar career as Ladislav Smoljak had. Mainly because the fact that he achieved his dream of being a film director despite never studying a film school and working as an assistant director as was customary for new directors.

Notes:

[1] Zdeněk Svěrák: 11th June 2018 (Prague), interviewed by Ondřej Toužimský.

[2] *Na plovárně*. [television programme]. Director Jan Hojtaš, 2001.

[3] Barrandov Studio a.s., Archive, Collection: Scripts and Production Documents, Film: *Ball-Lightning*, Directorial Explication to *Ball-Lightning*, p. 2, 28th November 1977. Ladislav Smoljak.

[4] *Příběhy slavných: Všeuměl* [documentary]. Director Pavel Křemen, 2011.

[5] Ladislav Smoljak, Blanka Čechová, *Mým divákům: rozhovor s Ladislavem Smoljakem*. Prague, Litomyšl: Paseka 2010, p. 83.

[6] Barrandov Studio a.s., Archive, Collection: Scripts and Production Documents, Film: *Ball-Lightning*, Letter to Ludvík Toman, p. 1, 10th May 1978. Drahošlav Makovička.

[7] *ibid.*

[8] Ladislav Smoljak, Blanka Čechová, c. d., p. 83.

[9] Barrandov Studio a.s., Archive, Collection: Scripts and Production Documents, Film: *Ball-Lightning*, Letter to Ludvík Toman, pp. 1–2, 10th May 1978. Drahošlav Makovička.

[10] *ibid.*

[11] *ibid*, Letter to František Marvan, p. 1, 20th July 1978. Jiří Purš.

[12] *ibid*, Letter to Ludvík Toman, p. 1, 31st July 1978. František Marvan.

[13] Ladislav Smoljak, Blanka Čechová, c. d., p. 83.

[14] Ivan Šlapeta: 20th August 2018, interviewed by Ondřej Toužimský.

[15] *ibid*, p. 84.

[16] Barrandov Studio a.s., Archive, Collection: Scripts and Production Documents, Film: *Ball-Lightning*, Directorial Explication to *Ball-Lightning*, p. 1, 26th November 1977. Ladislav Smoljak.

[17] Zdeněk Svěrák: 11th June 2018 (Prague), interviewed by Ondřej Toužimský.

[18] Pavel Taussig. *Filmový smích Ladislava Smoljaka a Zdeňka Svěráka*. Prague: Československý filmový ústav, Filmový klub 1987, pp. 20–21.

[19] Barrandov Studio a.s., Archive, Collection: Scripts and Production Documents, Film: *Ball-Lightning*, Directorial Explication to *Ball-Lightning*, p. 2, 28th November 1977, Ladislav Smoljak.

[20] *ibid*, p. 2, not dated, Zdeněk Podskalský.

[21] Collective Work. *Tady všude byl Ladislav Smoljak: očima přátel, synů a dcer*. Prague: Fragment 2013, p. 99.

[22] *Příběhy slavných: Všeuměl* [documentary]. Director Pavel Křemen, 2011.

[23] Pavel Taussig, c. d., pp. 23–24.

[24] Zdeněk Svěrák: 11th June 2018 (Prague), interviewed by Ondřej Toužimský.

[25] Pavel Taussig, c. d., pp. 20–21.

[26] Zdeněk Svěrák: 11th June 2018 (Prague), interviewed by Ondřej Toužimský.

[27] *Příběhy slavných: Všeuměl* [documentary]. Director Pavel Křemen, 2011.