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I became the uninvited guest of cinema. Interview with Vlastimil Venclík

Vlastimil Venclík (1942) is a director, dramatist and actor who portrayed many unforgettable roles. As a young promising talent, Venclík started studying at the Department of Directing at the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague in 1966. During his studies, he directed films *The Wedding Night* (Svatební noc, 1968), *Nation to Itself* (Národ sobě, 1968) and *The Uninvited Guest* (Nezvaný host, 1969) for which he was expelled in 1970. During the era of Normalisation, he worked as an assistant director, screenwriter, theatre director (initially under a pseudonym), occasional actor and even monitored people on sick leave. After the Velvet Revolution, he made several television films, documentaries and series. For his entire life, he has been writing theatre plays which were often not staged anywhere. Lately, he has been organising readings of his theatre plays with Jan Kačer.

The motivation behind this interview was the March screening of *The Wedding Night* in Ponrepo during a showcase of student films from the series Paralelní kino.

What are your memories of the 1960s?

I'm a child of the 1960s and I experienced the biggest boom of that era when everything culminated. I came to FAMU in 1966 and then everything took a turn for the worse when the era of Normalisation came. *The Uninvited Guest* acquired topicality thanks to what happened after as it shows collaboration.

What were the main impulses behind your decision to study FAMU?

The impulses were clear. In my adolescence, I wanted to become an actor, but my exhibitionism was luckily satisfied by portraying many forgettable characters in about thirty films. The last film I was in was *Occupation* (Okupace, 2021). I think it's a highly overrated film.

Luckily, I wasn't accepted to DAMU to study acting. I was friends with Michal Viewegh's mom Slávka Krušinová. She went to grammar school with a Jan Moravec (who later married Marta Kubišová and even later became a cop, life is eventful). Back then, Moravec studied at FAMU and directed a film for which he needed someone strange looking and she recommended me. The film was titled *White Cane* (Bílá hůl). We became friends and under his influence I submitted an application to FAMU. What was interesting was that they accepted me based on my acting, they said I astonished them. In school, I was interested in writing etc. I had a naïve fantasy that I would become a director. I thought I had better ideas than screenwriters so I wrote my own stuff. I had never adapted anything else than my stuff. So I thought that would go on forever and I was very wrong.

What were your first school projects?

If I start with Adam, or the first year, everyone thought I was going to be successful because I was making comedies. Some even imagined that it would be comedies like *Sun, Hay and Strawberries* (Slunce, seno, jahody, 1983) which I despise. But from the very beginning, I tended to prefer a certain type of absurdity. My first film was silent, we shot it on 8 mm, it was titled *The Wrong Bridge* (Chyba lávky). I read somewhere that it takes seven years to paint one side of the Golden Gate bridge. So when they finish one side, they move to the other and after finishing that, they can start over, I was intrigued by that. I reduced the bridge to Czechoslovak environment so I had a small footbridge and I came up with a story of a man who owns a footbridge. We filmed in the Průhonice Park where we placed a sign "Private footbridge, do not enter." The reactions of the people were much more interesting than the film itself. They said: "Oh, it's private, we need to go back." They didn't realise that it was an utter nonsense, a private footbridge over a brook in a park. It was about the people respecting that.

Then I made *The Wedding Night* (Svatební noc, 1968) which also ended up being an absurdity. If I was to characterise the method, it would be from reality to absurdity. What I didn't like on absurd theatre was that the absurdity was given. I was more interested in the process how reality transforms into absurdity. We can see that every day in many political events, or even at home. Everything starts with a small thing and suddenly turns into an affair. The process was very intriguing but I didn't build up on it as it ended in *The Uninvited Guest*.

I would like to keep doing that, but I'm old now, it's all gone. I had a tendency to continue, but I didn't manage to follow up on that.

And your FAMU studies?

To this day, I perceive my studies as the best period of my life. I was very passionate about it, I sacrificed everything to it, it was my purpose in life, to be a director and make my own film. Such hope – but a sparkler burns fast. I made some films and directed some theatre plays, so it wasn't all for nothing. But when I look at it now, nearly eighty years old, it's terrible, a life partially wasted because I didn't do what I loved.

The whole appeal of the Film Faculty was, at least back when I was there, that it had many practical exercises. At least two each year. In the first year, it was a report and a live-action film. In the second, we had to make a documentary and a live-action film. In the third, a live-action film, that was *The Uninvited Guest*, and a personality portrait. And as I was busy as a bee, as Kachyňa used to tell me, I made a double portrait. It was titled *Man and Woman* (Muž a žena). The woman was a painter, who told me fifty years ago that her work would become topical one day. And now her paintings are sold for hundred thousand crowns. Then I had the man, he originally came from Russia. He escaped during the revolution and had a very peculiar life; he was a self-taught person without any higher education but he was immensely wise. He also appeared in *Marketa Lazarová* (1967) as a quirky character.

And what about your classmates and professors?

It seemed that we were a very ambitious year. There was Agnieszka Holland, she's renowned all over the world today, then Jiří Svoboda, he joined the Communist Party

in order to be able to make films. Laco Adamík, who later married Holland. And Lordan Zafranović. Our results were very good and I remember that after final exams, we were told that as far as films are concerned, we had better results than the new wave. As Kachyňa worked with Jan Procházka who had a group at Barrandov, it looked like we would debut with some short stories at Barrandov, it looked very promising. But then it served as an impulse to suspicions that there was a counter-revolution at school. Many people welcomed it, all those Normalisation era directors, the bastards who are now all gone. So because of this film people at the Department had to be fired and they won. According to them, *The Uninvited Guest* served as one of the main indicators of counter-revolution.

So the Communists managed to eliminate you?

It wasn't just me, but yes, they succeeded. Every project brings many doubts and anxiety, you want it to succeed. And once they strip you off this thirst for work and force you to make a living and take care of your children and family, you start to perish and it's a kind of pulverisation. When your work has no continuity. Notice how important this is for authors who leave something behind. If Woody Allen's life story was similar to mine, he would have been found hanging off a tree long ago.

Had I become famous earlier, I might have found something somewhere, just like Schorm in the theatre. Chytilová owed it to female hysteria when she visited Müller in his kitchen, gave him hell and was allowed to film. We had limited possibilities. A year after I was expelled, I worked with Antonin Máša as his assistant director. Then I worked for five years in healthcare. But what's important is that you have nothing to show for yourself. You don't have the chance.

How problematic was your student documentary *Nation to Itself* also titled *A Grotesque Documentary About the Way to Socialism*?

Before I was expelled from school, I was told to take my films with me. So I had *The Wedding Night* and *Nation to Itself*, which I quite like, at home. It was bizarre, we were editing it in 1968 and behind the FAMU windows were Russian tanks. I originally wanted to do a film rehabilitation. Year 1968 was crucial for my generation and I sometimes think that it was crucial for the whole planet as it was the only hope when socialism could be connected to freedom. There was a way, it wasn't ideal, but there

were some inclinations. And I thought it was what our civilisation was missing, I thought capitalism was a tough system. It's obviously better than socialism, but it also regulates many things.

But how I ended up doing this film – I always had a Duo tape recorder with me so I would have enough material. It was really heavy; I wouldn't be able to carry it today. And I collected testimonies from political prisoners. I talked for instance to professor Peška, who was sentenced to 25 years in the trial with Horáková, he was a very intelligent and delicate person, he was an older gentleman back then. I also had a man who worked for president Beneš and he spent most of his sentence in correction. He told me that during a week in correction, he was subjected to more hardship and torture than during his entire time in a concentration camp in Germany during the war. There was also a lady who gave birth in the Pankrác prison. Various types, it was very interesting. I had enough material for 24 hours, which I later edited to an acceptable length. The more I listened to it, the more I was telling myself that I had no right to make a film about what I didn't experience. These testimonies cannot be compressed into a short film. You would have to make a feature film. And from the wide range of interesting people, one stood out – it was Klement Lukeš, who later became a dissident. He was recommended to me by Milan Kundera who lectured literature at FAMU. I have to stress that Lukeš was blind. So there was a strange metaphor that a blind Communist talked about his own blindness in the sense of what he did in the 1950s. He saw the star of future in the Soviet Union and Communism and was very active. He sobered up in time and later naturally became a dissident.

And what did you do with the recorded interviews?

I had it at home, it was out of question to publish it. After the Velvet Revolution, *The Uninvited Guest* was published in the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, it was published on DVD along with a film by Švankmajer and a documentary about Jan Palach.

How did *The Uninvited Guest* affect your directorial career?

Significantly, because I became an uninvited guest in filmmaking myself. It foreshadowed my personal and professional fate. When they expelled me, they consoled me that Barrandov will take care of me, but that was a lie. Just like they

betrayed me with the expulsion, they told me I was to have a disciplinary proceeding, but that it would only be a formality. So I came there and they expelled me. Had I known, I wouldn't have made it so easy for them.

It was a common practice that during final exams, there were only people from the school present, no outsiders, and the school subsequently determined whether the film could be screened outside the school.

The films were also screened to younger students. Klos told me that I shouldn't show the film to them as a student called Kavčiak was an informer and a rat. The instruction that should have been given by Vávra as the Department's Head, wasn't given. So I went to see Schorm with whom I've been friends already at school. I told him "Evald, I'd like you to persuade Vávra to allow the film to be copied." Vávra, who was later very sorry for that, signed it and then came a denunciation at Barrandov. When I went there to collect my copy of the film, I was told that it had already been taken to the ministry. Had I not insisted on that copy, there probably wouldn't have been an affair, but who knows, there are many rats here.

So you didn't expect such a dramatic impact?

The film was confiscated during the holidays in 1970. There were two controllers whose careers at Barrandov were boosted because of that. There were also talks of closing FAMU because two critical cases – film *The Uninvited Guest* and professor Milan Kundera. In this respect, it was quite flattering, but it was still crushing.

How did the approval process for production look like back then and what about the script of *The Uninvited Guest*? There must have been some indications.

I finished the story a year earlier; it was more or less an absurdity in the lines of "there's someone who watches others in every family." But as I had more material than for *The Wedding Night*, I kept it. And then the Russians came so we were living in that absurdity. The situation influenced me. The Ministry of Interior pointed out that Landovský's character had two watches and that I chose Hálek for his resemblance to Biřák and other nonsensical stuff that a normal person wouldn't even think about. But the message was clear. We all eventually ended up in the Ruzyně prison being interrogated, the whole crew and pedagogues as well. We tried to argue

that it was an absurdity and look for connections to absurd theatre. In school, you could react immediately. Kachyňa looked at the script and told me that it was crazy but that I should do it if I want. But he wasn't very excited about the script.

What film did you plan to make in school but couldn't finish?

In the fifth year, I prepared a film, I even finished the script. I eventually made it after the Velvet Revolution, it's titled *Happy Family* (Šťastná Rodina, 1990). But I didn't have the drive I used to have. The Revolution came ten or fifteen years too late for me.