

ALENA PROKOPOVÁ / 7. 1. 2016

On Baarová, shoe cream, and the phenomenon of cinematography

The feature documentary *Doomed Beauty* comes to theaters 1 January. Helena Třeštíková joins with co-director and editor Jakub Hejna to tell the story of the unsettling fate of first Republic star Lída Baarová. We met the director for an interview before Easter, after the first public screening for the media.

***Doomed Beauty* strikes me as a bit unconventional in the context of your work. On the one hand, by genre it is almost purely a compilation documentary. In terms of production it is your “most collaborative” film. It was produced by your daughter Hana, who also helped source archival materials. And above all – your co-director is credited as Jakub Hejna...**

I've worked with Jakub for seven years as an editor, starting with *René*. We understand each other very well. It was he who encouraged me to work on *Doomed Beauty*. I requested that he do a remake of the documentary I made twenty years ago – *The Sweet Bitterness of Lída Baarová*. I filmed it back then with the eighty-one-year old actress over the course of four days in her flat in Salzburg. The runtime of the television documentary that resulted was only half an hour, so I had a great deal of unused material left over. At the time I asked Czech Television to archive it. But then four years ago, when Jakub and I first started thinking about *Doomed Beauty*, I discovered that the material had been deleted.

Wow.

Fortunately, after the shooting I had obtained my own guerrilla copy on Beta. They never converted one cassette (so I only have that material on VHS) but otherwise

nothing was lost. Even so, I didn't have a very good jumping off point for a feature compilation film. You see, back in 1995 Baarová only allowed herself to be filmed in a sitting position. So we just had a "talking head".

How did you want to bring static material like this back to life?

We considered interweaving the archival material with film of a figurine of Baarová being made for a wax museum. In Prague there are two such museums, both on Celetná Street. One of them, Grévin, specializes in global celebrities. The other, a Czech one, told us they weren't interested in Baarová.

In the end you relied on powerful confrontations using a compilation of various archival materials. You accentuate the minor gestures of Baarová: like when she is so upset she lights the filter of the cigarette, or downs a shot of Becherovka.

But you have one incredibly impressive shot, where Baarová rises and leaves the room...

Yes, that was the only moment where we managed to capture her in action. We ended up using the shot as the finale... Not to exaggerate, but the moments like this, when you desperately need something and don't know how to get it into the film, were incredibly frequent. For example, we had to reference her marriage to Jan Kopecký, with whom Baarová emigrated rather dramatically. But we had no photos of her wedding, nothing. So we put a shot in there where she's putting on makeup, and played with a commentary on the actress' mink coat, which her husband had to sell to get them across the border. And there we inserted a shot of the People's Militias marching.

The composition of the editing in your most recent films is heavily worked over.

How long did you work on editing *Doomed Beauty*?

Under typical television conditions we had only five days to edit *The Sweet Bitterness*. We worked on *Doomed Beauty* from March to October. There were breaks in there when we were waiting for archival materials. Jakub had other work to do in the meantime. For me it's incredibly important that I have enough distance from the material. I'm helped along by critiques from dramaturg Jan Gogola and my husband Michael.

You put a lot of work into the Baarová films. How did you choose your archival materials?

In Czechia alone Lída Baarová made over twenty films. And often the very situations she was living through in her life were affected. So we tried to tie them together. Of course, I wasn't sure whether such edits wouldn't ultimately be overly descriptive. When we started sourcing material we began by entering the search term "Lída Baarová" into the NFA. Then we expanded the search to the phenomenon of cinematography. And so leitmotifs found their way into *Doomed Beauty* in the guise of various locations – Barrandov, Lucerna, and even Wenceslas Square. One period shot ended up in the film of people saluting during the singing of the Czech national anthem in Wenceslas Square in 1942. It was the largest such gathering in the entire protectorate and the only one ever filmed. I told myself we would risk the possible criticism of historians, and we shifted the scene in time up to the year 1943. We also found a photo from Lucerna of Baarová and Karel Höger saluting. But we opted not to include it, it would have been a bit much.

How accessible were Baarová's international films?

Searching among Czech films wasn't hard, but here we had a problem. We had unexpectedly great difficulties with *Barcarole*, which was crucial as the first German film in her career. Even in Germany the 1935 film had never been issued on DVD.

And yet it was a rather important film, an epic of the time. The Germans created Venice in the studio, complete with canals and gondolas riding them.

In the end we found a horrible copy of *Barcarole* on the internet, where you could barely see anything. The owners of the copyright charge by the second, and when we asked for a good copy they wanted the exact timecode of the shots. We weren't supposed to pay only for what we ended up using, but for all material provided. And we all we had was some kind of fog. That was some drama! Only when we got the material at the highest technical quality did we see what we'd actually chosen.

But you'd chosen well. You edited a "moving" swastika onto the circle dance in carnival masks from *Barcarole*.

That cut was Jakub's idea.

Does it seem to you that the narrative of the film is accelerated under Jakub Hejna?

Absolutely. This cut here is only a few seconds long, and it works brilliantly.

These cuts are rather pregnant. You edited a crowd of Nazis applauding Goebbels's speech into a scene of an audience applauding Baarová's character performing in the cabaret.

I'm glad it works. I found an excellent collaborator in Jakub. In our partnership I'm the one who gazes into paper searching for text, testimony, logic. I need a transcript of every subsequent edit I'm working with. It's sort of my fetish. Only on paper can I see if there's a need to enhance something. Jakub thinks completely differently. Most of the time he doesn't even take notes. He works with a shot, the image, the cinematicity, and also the music... Which suited Baarová well. The music and songs are important in several of the films she plays in.

And what about the leitmotif "We love what we lose"?

That song is very expressive. It has immense nostalgic value... I myself had determined that *Doomed Beauty* is about beauty, emptiness – and ephemerality. It had already resonated when shooting with Lída, who had a box of her old photos on the ground – and that was all that remained of her past. I found it terribly moving at the time.

Apparently Baarová herself felt how you were moved, because her relationship to you transitioned from resistance to openness during the four days of shooting.

Except that she was not a person you would fall in love with. She was self-centered and authoritative in a strange way.

Did you have to work with a different distance from the character than in your previous films?

Yes, I figured it would be possible to add anything in the commentary. I myself had been warned, you see, that I'd do better not to ask Baarová about her affair with Goebbels. I worked with both Baarová's biographies: with the more open recollections

of *Útěky* (“Escapes”), which was published from an interview with Josef Škvorecký, and with her memoirs, *Života sladké hořkosti* (“A Life of Sweet Bitterness”), which apparently included contributions from František Kožík. We discovered that passages from Škvorecký’s book were recorded for radio by Zdenka Procházková... Incidentally, she plays the old Lída Baarová in the film by Filip Renč.

What do you think about having two films about Baarová coming to theaters at almost the same time?

It’s a coincidence. And I think it will help both films, because they’re from two completely different genres... So Zdenka Procházková recorded Baarová’s recollections, but presented them with a bit too much pathos. Besides, it was only a selection of the texts. But then we were sitting with Jakub at a Chinese bistro and we overheard a woman who had a voice just like Baarová, and in the end we got her to record the texts. Mrs. Alena Šislerová had nothing to do with film, she works as a biochemist. She read the text without pathos. Even the dramaturgs at Czech Television rate her version above the Zdenka Procházková version.

The film achieves a certain distance using Alena Šislerová, though Baarová herself remains quite dramatic. At the same time, you yourself retain a point of view that understands but doesn’t judge.

Baarová was terrified of Goebbels and attracted to him at the same time, even though she wanted to go on living with Gustav Fröhlich. Only when Goebbels’s wife got involved and ended their relationship did Baarová realize what he meant to her. I tried hard through these quotations from her recollections to indicate that human feelings are inscrutable, uncertain, indirect. And that it’s hard to judge anyone.

The viewer needs to form their own opinions about Baarová. In 1995 you sometimes asked Baarová rather leading questions. You asked, for example, if her life had not been more dramatic than the films in which she played.

Perhaps she herself would not have formulated it that way, but I wanted to have something like it in there. It’s the kind of question you already know the answer to.

From your interview it can be seen that she was unable to assess her relationship with Goebbels even at the end of her life, unlike her professional

career.

Yes, she knew exactly where she had made her greatest professional error: when she refused an offer from Hollywood. We don't know how things would have turned out for her there, maybe she would have become someone like Ingrid Bergman. Or she would have bombed completely. In any case, she had a great talent for languages. She learned German, then Italian... Her level of international activity was amazing. She acted in Italian and Spanish films. And they weren't B movies either, she got important roles in respectable films. So it was more than just Federico Fellini's *Vittelloni* from 1953. She truly built an international career. It was interesting to explore this. I can't judge what kind of an actress she was, but it seems to me that she made a fair bit of progress from the early insecurities recorded in her first screen tests.

That was some valuable material. Where did you find those screen tests?

In the series *In Search of Lost Time* by the historian Karel Čáslavský. There I found a recording of the arrival of Karel Lamač, who became Baarová's first lover. At one point I had filmed a documentary portrait of Čáslavský for the GENUS series. It was he who pointed out my favorite piece with the shoe cream, which we added to this vignette. At the end of GENUS a film trick causes Mr. Čáslavský himself to become shoe cream.

GENUS also gave you material in how you used the bio of Baarová by Otakar Vávra.

Thanks to Fero Fenič and Jitka Němcová, who allowed it to be used. What was interesting was that Ms. Lída was wearing the same dress she was in our shoot. We used a few responses she had formulated more clearly or concisely than she had with me.

Still, you didn't make it without a few minor pick-ups.

There are relatively few pick-ups in the film. For example, when the topic shifts to emigration and border crossing, we used stock footage of a forest at night and rapid breathing. And then there is a shot of the villa in Krumme Lanke where Baarová met with Goebbels. In reality this was a similar villa near us in Vyžlovka. We modified that shot a bit to make it look like an archive clip. We had a bigger problem with photos.

We were afraid that this method wasn't compatible with television: a shot of Baarová talking and then a cut – a photo. So we did it a bit differently, where the photos gradually appear like in a developing bath. It's not a digital trick. We actually shot it with a cameraman who retook the photos and then developed them in front of the camera. This process is rather effective, I think, for the photos of Baarová's second husband, Kurt Lundwall. We did, however, digitally modify the material with Baarová to give it a cinematic appearance.

So *Doomed Beauty* was originally conceived as a film for the large screen.

Yes, definitely. It was a bit difficult deciding on the picture format. Nowadays films are shot in 16:9 format, while everything we had – the archival materials and the interview with Baarová – was in 3:4 format. We somewhat shocked the technicians at a meeting with Czech Television when we insisted on the old format because we didn't want to destroy the old cameramen's image composition by modifying it to fit the new format. But then we agreed that it was the only way.

You are uncommonly sensitive toward your material.

For me the very genre in which I was operating was a challenge. Imagine you're telling a story where pretty much everyone knows the plot and the ending. In the prologue from the ball at Lucerna everyone is searching for Baarová's lost diamond at the prompting of Miloš Havel. Underneath it there's her commentary to the effect that she would never have become so upset over a diamond back then if she'd known that the Communists would ultimately take all of her jewelry... When Lída spent those sixteen months in prison after the war, she never knew whether or not it would end with her execution. And when she told me about it, she did so with the dismissal that she had never been convicted and was eventually released. She told terribly funny stories about how she stole cigarettes and traded them for food. At the same time she was eating expired dog food. And she lost everything. She learned that her mother had died and that her sister Zorka had committed suicide. After the emigration she never saw her father again. The loneliness at the end of her life was because she had no family of her own, nothing, she was completely alone...

It is yet another of your family stories. The father who never saw the actress in Lída, the mother who vehemently supported her, the talented but sensitive sister

Zorka, who also became an actress...

They expelled Zorka from the Vinohrady theatre simply because she was Lída Baarová's sister. It didn't help that she had distanced herself from Lída's positions and leaned left. It's a very Czech approach... My favorite is the archive footage about how shoe cream can be made from filmstrips.

What year is that footage from?

It comes from the time of the occupation, from 1944. We shifted it to 1945, however, because we figured that it suited the postwar era: according to the film commentary film serves people even after its death.

From the first fraction you can make nail polish. And ultimately you get the raw material for shoe cream.

Were the illustrative shots of Baarová used by the original authors?

No, in the original some American star was used as illustration. We put in shots of Baarová from *Fiery Summer*. But otherwise all of it is original.

This shot ties in to the feeling of ephemerality that is the leitmotif of *Doomed Beauty*. It seems to be a personal topic for you as well. That *Doomed Beauty* is also about films, about the technical aspects of shooting and projecting.

Yes, we tell about the phenomenon of film and also about the illusion that film brings us, but which is incredibly ephemeral. We contemplated how to get that topic in there, and then we realized that the editing table is more expressive than a shot from the projector where there isn't actually a lot to see. What's more, on the viewing screen of an editing table you can show the film itself. This is definitely my theme, indeed I started working with 35 mm and plenty of movies have been made on film.

And yet Jakub Hejna is from the digital generation.

Yes, of course... Film passing through the plates of an editing table, it's a nice metaphor for the course of life. And then the entire reel unwinds with only the end flapping... and in the end there's nothing, just emptiness.