

ALENA PROKOPOVÁ / 3. 3. 2016

“Polednice tells about the magic of celluloid, parental lies, and male cowardice”

The Erben variation of *Polednice* (The Noonday Witch) comes to theaters as the directorial debut of Jiří Sárdek, with screenplay by Michal Samir. The thirty-year-old filmmaker shot his first feature film project three years ago – the experimental generation drama *Hany*. It was produced by Matěj Chlupáček, who Samir helped as acting supervisor on his own debut, *Bez doteku* (Touchless). Together they helped co-direct *Polednice*.

***Polednice* confirmed that you and Matěj Chlupáček are a team. How did you get together?**

It's almost a love story. We were flying to London in the same plane. He was sixteen, I was about twenty-four, twenty-five. He had been invited for a tour of the BBC and I was living in London at the time. We immediately started talking about films. We were competing to see who knew more directors. We were trying to find the most obscure films so we could top each other, which neither one of us actually managed to do, in fact we were almost dangerously like-minded. Shortly before that I had completed my directing studies at the London Drama Centre. I told him about what an amazing school it was... and so Matěj invited me to collaborate with him. He said he was making a short student film where he wanted to try a few things...

...and that led to his feature film debut, *Bez doteku*?

Yes. For me it was great, because here in England no one makes a film right after their studies, unless they're an actor or lucky. And here I was working all of a sudden on something that was almost a real film!

It was a real film, it was shown in theaters.

Yeah, I mean real in terms of its budget. *Bez doteku* had a budget of only about five million crowns. Fortunately Matěj's dad backed us back then – Michal Chlupáček. It's often said that Matěj's dad paid for the film. But that's nonsense.

Of course. Producers don't pay anyone money. Producers get the money, right?

And that's how it was. That was how the Barletta company was founded, which continues to operate today. It produced *Bez doteku*, my directorial debut *Hany*, and now *Polednice*. Over the past three years I've seen a clear shift: *Polednice* is a full-fledged film with all that comes with it. Even though it cost only twelve million. *Hany* had a budget of around six million, so we're still talking about a very small amount in terms of Czech budgets. Even though the shots apparently look more expensive. Especially *Polednice*, which was shot on film. It looks beautiful – it was shot by one of the best cameramen I know – Alexander Šurkala.

How were you able to shoot *Polednice* on film?

Matěj and I are cinephiles, we love celluloid. *Polednice* was originally supposed to be digital, but we got the opportunity to shoot on 35mm without having to drastically increase the budget. We got unused material from the film *Child 44*, which was shot in Prague. During the shooting they switched cameramen and ended up with a surplus of material. It had already expired, so we got it very cheap. We did our lab work in Zlín. We couldn't do it at Czech Television, and at UPP they were thrilled that someone was shooting on film and they'd be able to try out equipment they hadn't used in a while. But Matěj gets the credit, he came up with the entire system and put it all together. Then, when we saw the dailies, it was clear that the image was something completely different from digital recording. It would be incredible if we could shoot on film all the time.

You should try 70 mm sometime...

All in good time. (laughs)

I always wondered why it was such a hot summer, but when I saw *Polednice* I realized it was because of you.

Right. The heat started on the morning of the first day of shooting. It rained for the first time 30 minutes after the last clapperboard. I say that if we had started shooting two weeks earlier, the heat would have come two weeks earlier. It's no coincidence. It was the same way with *Hany*. There are higher powers involved, you can't plan around them. We wouldn't have shot *Polednice* if it hadn't been a summer like it was. We had no backup plan – and I know it's not good, but with *Bez doteku* we had agreed that instead of spending years working on it, we would either shoot it or not – and we never think the “not” is going to happen. We've always been absolutely convinced that things will work out for us.

And yet you like planning! You preceded the shooting of the film *Hany* with three months of rehearsals so you'd practically be able to shoot it in a single shot, wasn't it?

You're right, I make very careful preparations before shooting. With *Hany* it was risky, at one point it looked like it wasn't going to work. During the preparations some actors couldn't handle it. My vision was that it should be a well-oiled team, an organism. So even characters at the bar without a single line of dialogue were important to me. I don't like movies where you can feel the extras. Besides, in this country it's always the same maybe thirty extras, so the same lady is always sitting at the café. I wanted for everyone in *Hany* to create a real impression, like a part of that world, which has its own rules. Everybody had to know each other. The cameraman moved around the actors with some people around him and three sound techs. A total of six, seven people. Matěj and I were around the corner watching on the monitor.

You wouldn't have been able to do that without digital cameras. How did *Polednice* come about?

We met in a café, me and Matěj and Jiří Sádek. We still didn't know him that well. We were leaving and Jirka said he had an idea... that he'd like to shoot a film. To make a new *Polednice*. So we sat back down. He had finished school in Písek and at that time the Cinematography Fund had just announced grants for debuting directors. So we told Jirka to write a screenplay. And when we got some money from the Fund, we would shoot it. We got the grant, but from a small film for six million it became an “A-list” Czech title.

What did the project look like originally?

It was supposed to be more intimate, to play out only around that house. *Polednice* was supposed to be consistent with our previous films. Then I got the screenplay and *Polednice* began changing into something else entirely.

Yes, the film looks beautiful, but can you comment somehow on the failings of the script?

I know about them. It's hard to answer, because it's stupid to launch into self-defense, but at the same time I'm saddened that some people say about a film I spent two years of my life on that "it turned out well, except for that script"... There was a fourth version we were all happy with. After *Hany* it was great satisfaction for me, because wherever we went with the script, they always gave it an enthusiastic nod. It was on the basis of this version that Daniela Kolářová accepted her role, for example, right after reading it. London-based Room One Films joined co-production, a great reaction came from HBO, which is now also co-producing the film, as well as distributor and co-producer Falcon.

What did the screenplay look like originally?

It was thirty pages longer, deep, mysterious, still ours but also attractive and functional, integral and compact. Then there were the negotiations with the Czech Television Film Centre, whose deposit we were working hard to get, it was a matter of life or death at that time. Conditions started being set that changed the original concept significantly. Shorten it by thirty pages. Cut the prologue. Add more lines like "When Daddy comes back". Have Aňa swallow pills and wash them down with alcohol, so it's clear she's losing her mind. The film began to change beyond recognition, but I still believed that we could come to some sort of compromise together, and that we wouldn't lose sight of the creative intent. Of course, once the script was completely ripped apart, or worked over, if you will, the Film Centre suddenly withdrew from the project.

When was that?

Two months before we started shooting. It's true that they offered to postpone the film for a year, but from experience we know that this meant not doing it at all. We

had a shooting schedule for an eighty-page screenplay, which at that point looked like when the dog and the cat baked a cake together. A piece of this, a piece of that. So I returned the screenplay into a form that held together, one we could stand by. I won't say I'm the greatest screenwriter in history whose film was ruined by the Film Centre. I'm saying that it was all just the circumstances and some bumps in the road, which turned something that worked for other subjects into something that sometimes worked halfway. And yes, it bothers me. It makes me mad.

But Czech Television partnered with you on the film *Bez doteku*, for example!

Yes, they joined the film retroactively. I understand, for example, why they didn't support *Hany*, that makes sense to me. But then you show up with *Polednice*, Anna Geislerová in the leading role, Šurkala behind the camera, 35mm film and – according to pretty much everyone else involved – a compact vision. And they start changing it to suit themselves, either with or without a purpose, and a mysterious horror film about disappearing children suddenly looks like a social drama about a mother on pills. And those are exactly the things we didn't want to have in the film, and then everything ended up somewhere halfway.

If you've had a good experience with HBO, then it all worked out.

Yes, HBO is incomparably more appealing for us.

Was *Polednice* a psychological film with horror elements from the beginning?

It's being distributed as horror and we stand by that. Even though it does border on a psychological thriller.

But I was terrified, genuinely, the way I would be in a horror film! Even though you play kind of a game with the viewer in how you present the title role on screen.

I thought there were too few horror elements for it to be defined as a horror film. It tells about the psychological breakdown of a mother, not some being who devours everyone in the end. And yet, as we know from the response, lots of people were genuinely afraid. And that makes me happy.

On the film you and Matěj Chlupáček are credited as co-directors. How did your collaboration with Jiří Sádek work?

As a first film *Polednice* is a huge mouthful for a new director. So we helped each other and solved problems together. During post-production it was only Matěj with Jirka. I focused on the music, which was composed by the British composer Ben Corrigan, whom I had worked with previously in London. Even he ended up working directly with Matěj in the end, though, it was faster that way.

What were you responsible for during shooting?

Based on my field of study, I focused on the acting. Once again – just like the film *Hany* – we didn't use classic extras. For example, we picked the people in the pub scene ourselves. Maybe I'm obsessed with it, but I want the characters to look the way they're supposed to and to behave accordingly. The term "organism" seems to fit here as well. Matěj and I are obsessed with details. For example, the order of the people offering their condolences in the scene at the gravesite is not random. It's got a system, a logic, a story. I'm convinced that the viewer subconsciously registers all these details.

How did you find the actress who plays the daughter, Karolína Lipovská?

We had a casting for a commercial and Kája showed up. And I turned to Matěj and said: She's going to be in *Polednice*. He looked at her and said: So it seems. And that was a year before we started shooting! Basically, all the pieces start to fall into place and you know they're right without even trying them out. Kája later participated in a casting where we had four hundred other kids. We had to make sure that no one else would turn up. Not to mention what Kája could handle in terms of the acting.

Except that Anetka doesn't look anything like her film mother. Does the daughter take after her father more, who we only see in the film in a photo?

Yes, we looked for an actor who would resemble Kája in the photo. It has its own inner meaning, too, since you can see that Anetka is a "daddy's girl", so she's in conflict with her mother from the first glance.

Why did the father in *Polednice* commit suicide?

It's not directly stated in the film. In my opinion, as the writer, it was a situation where a family tried to make it in the big city and didn't succeed. The father couldn't manage to support his wife and child, he failed to fulfill his male role. He solved it by getting them life insurance – and then he had the feeling that if he killed himself he would help the family.

What should *Polednice* really mean for the viewer?

Polednice tells the story of a relationship between a mother and daughter, about the fact that she is unable to tell her the truth. She considers her child insufficiently developed for her to tell her about her father's death. So she has charged into the worst problem imaginable – a parent lying to her child about something crucial. If the mother grieved together with her daughter, it would of course be crazy, but not craziness.

So parents should treat their children as equals?

Yes. “You're just a child, you don't understand” – that's kind of our defining feature. If the mother in *Polednice* had immediately explained everything to Anetka, the child would most likely have had a breakdown, but none of the things we show would have happened. We took the basic premise from Erben, that the mother for certain reasons can't handle her role.

In Erben's *Polednice* the child is bothering her mother while she is cooking something in a rush because “daddy's coming home from work”.

In Erben the father is a missing element, he has to work, so that the mother “can cook”. But I would be the last person to say we did an adaptation of Erben.

But everyone will think of it immediately, children still read *Kytice* (“Wild Flowers”) in school. And *Polednice* is perhaps the most popular part of the collection. Even when I recall the film by F.A. Brabec, the thing I remember most is Bolek Polívka on crutches.

Polednice is the most popular maybe because of the amazing “twist”: a mother defends her child so powerfully against death that she ultimately strangles him herself. Originally we wanted to do that in this film, too. We even shot that version to

be on the safe side, but it didn't match our narrative style. As if we had suddenly wanted to give everyone a terrible shock, which of course was not our intent. What's more, for viewers it's a very predictable ending, given their knowledge of the subject matter.

I thought the catharsis with the setting of the sun was beautiful. The entire story is therefore about the sunset of a soul. The mother feels it – and around her she is surrounded by a sunny, golden field.

Exactly. The sunset of a soul. And at the same time the only thing she should have done was not lie, to say: "I'm sorry." In the moment when she realizes it, she and her daughter can find the way back to each other.

I didn't quite grasp the very end. In the content for *Filmový přehled (Film Review)* we discussed it quite a bit. In the epilogue the mother and daughter arrive in the village the way they did at the beginning. Wasn't it all just a mother's bad dream in the end?

That ending, for example, wasn't in the screenplay. It only appeared in the editing room. Everybody who worked on the film discussed it together. And many were certain that it was the right way to go. I don't mind it this way. It's a symbol in narrative like water from a tap that suddenly starts flowing again. There's hope, the characters can now begin anew – and someday everything will be okay again. I really would not want it to look like it was just the heroine's bad dream. That wouldn't be interesting, if the horror had never happened!

So the mother and the daughter will continue to live in the village, put new curtains on the window and so forth?

They open up the windows, clean up, they'll have a good time in that house. And they'll be honest with each other.

And they'll fit in with the village community... That's feasible, since you don't show the neighbors in a negative light. They seem consumerist, but they're not monsters. In Czech films country people are often shown as rednecks – disgusting, stupid, and comical.

I was born in a village with eight hundred residents on the Czech-Polish border. I lived there until I was six. The kind of people you describe lived there, but I adored them, because they were nice. In general, the most negative portrayal in the film is the character of Jiří Štrébl. I wrote the role of Poláček for him and I didn't want him to be an idiot. He's actually sexy, he's not simplistic. He longs to be good, but he's unable to control his drives. He always wants to "stick it in someone". So he's really more of a tragic figure. Whereas the mayor Mráz I see as a negative character. He helps the heroine in almost everything, but then his family story is gradually revealed. He is a weakling, he presents a parallel with Anetka's father. The moment when Mráz comes to the boarded-up house is key. He's supposed to do what he didn't do forty years ago, and save the situation. But instead he only says "When you want to talk, you know where to find me." And avoids the problem...

Should he kick in the door?

Yes, wake the village, call an ambulance, send the child to some grandparent... Because in that field the whole thing could easily end in death.

Does *Polednice* tell a story of male cowardice?

Yes, it is about women, their lot, and an inability to deal with a given situation. And for the heroine this is the result of male cowardice. Of the fact that her husband abandoned her to this situation.

You wrote this film about a woman who is older than you are, about a child you don't have... So I wonder if I'm missing some theme more personal to you in *Polednice*.

I follow a number of themes. My work is to observe people, the patterns of their behavior, their trains of thought... But yes, I draw from personal experiences of how a father can treat his family. In families close to me, women have been forced to deal with situations they've ended up in out of the cowardice of their partners.

A man's lack of manliness is a rather topical theme, isn't it? Women are often compelled to dominance, even though they sometimes would rather stick with the cooking...

I agree. I myself am dealing with how to approach the problem, like how as a man I am expected to have a family and children and provide for them. I feel a little uncertain in relation to this phase of life. I operate in the film environment, where there is no guarantee of income, so I could actually rather easily end up in a situation like the father in *Polednice*.