

ALENA PROKOPOVÁ / 24. 6. 2016

“Don’t lose the child inside you”

The producer and director from Negativ presented his new film *Ani ve snu!* (In Your Dreams) at the Berlinale and the Finále Plzeň. Now he brings his unconventional teenage romance from the setting of urban parkour to Czech cinemas.

What has been the reaction to your film?

The response from the festival in Plzeň was very positive, just as it was from abroad – in Germany, for example. Everything started at the premiere at Berlinale. There we experienced four large screenings of *Ani ve snu!* and I truly enjoyed each one. My greatest experience was in the Haus der Kulturen, it’s a huge projection room with over a thousand seats. And ninety percent of them were young viewers. They received the film incredibly well and the discussion after the screening was very lively.

The film has a strong dreamlike plane and is somewhat secretive. Did they ask what everything meant?

Some of them, of course. But I don’t give any explication. It’s up to each viewer, how they interpret the story... Now our film has been selected for a number of other festivals. Even though there are fewer specializing in production for teenagers than there are children’s festivals. We even received an invitation to Shanghai. And we got a great following in Scandinavia. They have a tradition of films for children and youth, but at the same time they’re very selective. In Sweden the twelve titles they’re presenting have been chosen from eight hundred films, for example. *Ani ve snu!* lacks the serious social subject matter the way the films that win festivals do. But somehow it brings them together. It’s different from most films they choose, you can feel the Czech roots in it.

How aware are they of Czech tradition?

They know the films of Ota Hofman, Václav Vorlíček, and Karel Kachyňa... I grew up on them, so I have them stored in my subconscious. And I studied them because I wanted *Ani ve snu!* to have a link to what had already been done in this genre in Czechia before. It seems natural to me.

How do you see the film in relation to your debut – *Modrý tygr (Blue Tiger)*? And why did you choose a youth film for your debut?

I'm infantile, but I can't say that out loud too much... I just don't want to forget the child inside of me, to lose him. Originally it was a question of my desire as a producer to start making movies for younger viewers. I wasn't even supposed to direct *Modrý tygr*, but then I realized that no one but me would do it. Even the author of the source material, Tereza Horváthová, told me so. What's more, I also live a double life – in my home theatre, where I work with children. We have thirteen, fourteen seasons behind us. There I started directing and I found an inner joy in it, a courage to take up live action films as a director.

How do you see the target audience of your two films?

For *Modrý tygr* the responses of the viewers were what you would have guessed. The teenagers *Ani ve snu!* was intended for, of course, are more problematic. If they communicate anything, it's in a shorter format. Even television has no idea how to approach them. So up to the last second we had no idea if we would appeal to their tastes. So far it looks like we did. The Northern festivals for test screenings of selected films invite young people directly. Only according to their reactions do they confirm films to participate in the festival. They take films that are artistically interesting, progressive. But they need to appeal to the target audience.

How old are the viewers of your film intended to be?

The festivals do their own rating and *Ani ve snu!* is open to ages of eleven and above. Even younger viewers can handle this film, it's very prudish. That's a given for the parkour community itself.

But the heroes of the film don't look much like *Rychlé šípy (Rapid Arrows)* ...

They don't but paradoxically the parkourists we consulted or who act in the film censored us more than we did ourselves. They simply do not use certain expressions and don't do certain things. For example, they absolutely do not take drugs. That activity appeals to individuals, but with a purpose of fellowship. When the classic twenty-minute run through the streets is happening, they adapt to the slowest.

What else draws you to that community?

No one supports them but they have their own sense of organization. For example, they all pitch in on rent for a gym to train in. That's amazing in today's age, where people are always trying to somehow activate youth. It was almost touching for me when I came to a summer camp organized for young boys for a casting. They train these children for ten days, giving them initiation and companionship – and it's the most famous Czech parkourists who are doing it.

How safe is this sport?

They take courses in medicine, because of course ankles get twisted, muscles pulled... More dangerous tricks are practiced with rescue workers.

In the film the character of Luky takes a risk, which violates the rules of the community...

He is actually a pretty negative character. *Ani ve snu!* is of course the story of the girl who falls in love with Luky and wants to become a part of the party because of it. And yet she also yearns to prove herself. In the end she succeeds, but has to accept the reality that Luky belongs to someone else. It's kind of an unrequited romance.

And is it easy for parkourists to accept girls?

Yes, there's no problem there. There's actually quite a few girls who start off admiring the boys but then get into the sport. They get some wide sweat pants and start training.

To the real environment of parkour you add a highly stylized fairytale parallel. Did you think about a specific story?

I thought about *Maláorská víla* (*The Little Mermaid*). The beginning is pseudoromantic, it has the quality of a girl's dream. But then the atmosphere intensifies, and Laura's worse self is manifested in her dreams. In reality, of course, Luky doesn't fight with his girlfriend, he goes and blows off steam physically – on the climbing wall.

In the film there are characters of two other boys...

Alex films the band of parkourists, he's a good kid who cares about Laura. And then there's Andreas who plays the son of Vladimír Mišík, who is a very contrasting character in relation to Laura.

Andreas is kind of a scientist, he looks straight out of a Michel Gondry film.

Then you've guessed our source.

Even these supporting characters are precisely placed, they have a foundation. That isn't typical in Czech films for youth. Or in Czech film in general. How did the work on the screenplay actually look?

Egon Tobiáš originally had the story for a series on Czech Television. We began to develop it together, but it didn't work out.

Was there parkour in it?

No, there were some falls in elevators, dreaming, but the heroine was only twelve. Writing the screenplay wasn't easy at all, even though we wanted the narrative to have a light touch. Kateřina Kačerovská worked with us as dramaturg. Our work was also complicated by the fact that international contacts appeared during the development of the screenplay and the story had to function universally. And captivate the target audience.

You're a father of three, did you make *Modrý tygr* and now *Ani ve snu!* with them in mind?

For my debut it's probably pretty obvious, yes. My son is fifteen now and my middle daughter is twelve – she's the one fascinated with parkour. She likes the main heroine Laura and the boy world in the film. Egon had a daughter this age, from which he

borrowed authentic details, such as the dialogue with her mother.

How do you think *Ani ve snu!* will work on the parent generation? When you say “parkour”, older viewers go looking for a horse!

The full name of the sport is urban parkour... but I already have responses, such as from the festival in Plzeň. For adults it's a fascinating trip to an unknown world. They can tell it's homogenous, that it has its own rule and that they can use it to learn more about their children.

In the film you can see that you cast actual parkourists in the main roles, that they're not actors. Their movements seem completely natural.

Parkourists work on coordination, on lightness and harmony of movement. This sport is also a performance, they film themselves doing it, they want to be seen, they want to share it with others. They had no reservations in front of the camera, because it's a natural thing for them.

Were you able to improvise with them?

No, the dialogue was written and we stuck to it. They had no problem learning the lines, but improvisation paradoxically tied them in knots.

And in parkour do they know what they'll do in the next moment or do they sometimes improvise as well?

They plan to a certain extent. I was always terrified when they moved around high up, because they automatically jump for the ledges. They had to reassure me that they know exactly what they're doing and they always have at least three points of contact if they lose their balance.

How did the principal actress, Barbora Štikarová, handle the parkour on screen?

When you have a gymnast or simply athletically talented girl in a film, it still doesn't mean that she has an inclination to do parkour on screen. Bára is of course a sensitive actress and at the same time has sport talent. Whatever she touches she excels at, but she participates in fundamentally boy sports – she started to play football, she does judo, parkour... She strikes you as somewhat of a boy who also has

female features. And at the same time there is still something childlike in her – a vulnerability and a purity, which I had been looking for in the child characters in *Modrý tygr*.

What had you wanted to say for yourself using this female character?

I'm interested in tension appearing at that age, that movement on the ledge. A pure child wishes to project their energy into the world. There's great hope and power in this, but at the same time it is the first conflict with reality. Similar to the small heroine in *Modrý tygr* Laura is a warrior, but here she is experiencing a difficult, real situation. The happy ending is a little different than with other films about first love: the heroine learns something, grows somehow. She now knows that she can't have everything at all costs. Recognizing this helps her form her future life.

Does it mean that Laura manages to wish the people around her their paths – including her mother?

Yes. Through the main heroine I also tell the story of the mother, who seems a little ridiculous – seen through Laura's eyes. Between the mother and daughter there is a mirrored relationship, she experiences a similar story to Laura's, perhaps even in a more infantile way than she does. I like telling stories this way. And what's more, Laura's story doesn't end...

...but when she returns to Prague from her father's in the mountains the community, and all the boys with it, will still exist. Yay, so you'll make *Ani ve snu!* 2.

Oh no. But as far as a sequel is concerned, I know that there are some young girls who have written a sequel to *Modrý tygr*. For a long time there have been a lot of child fans who absolutely devoured my first film. Adults tell me, parents who never paid much attention to that film. *Modrý tygr* still finds its audience and we tried for that universal, timeless impression in *Ani ve snu!* as well. There are no specific ads, animations, or applications. Even the Princess brand on the billboard is made up. There is also some producing reasoning too: we want our films to work in ten years, for example.

These teenage films often tend to be rather fleeting...

...and also subject to local demand. So we'll see how it goes.

What will you direct next? Will you take an interest in older protagonists?

No. I want to go back to creating for children, for the audience of *Modrý tygr*. It's actually a type of family film, because children don't go to the theater alone, but with adults. I'm very intrigued by working with fantasy. I think that audiences at this age can still influence it. For many children *Modrý tygr* was the first film in their lives that they saw on the big screen. Pragmatically speaking, as a producer I'm also interested in a broader application of such a film.

What are your plans as a producer?

The feature film debut of Michal Hogenauer, whose hour-long film *Tambyless* was selected in the student film section at Cannes five years ago. It will be a coproduced film with an international cast. It's called *Venku (Outside)* and it's a story of systematic manipulation inspired by the true story of a German sect. It had tried to raise thousands of "perfect" children using corporal punishment. Michal wrote the story of a Czech girl who comes to a German family as an au pair. She gradually realizes what kind of family she's ended up in, what they did to the boy she's taking care of. And she herself starts to transform. It's kind of a chamber piece.

That will once again be something completely new in Czech film.

I believe in Michal's talent. His care, thoughtfulness, and overall approach remind me of Saša Gedeon.

You started Gedeon's *Indiánské léto (Indian Summer)*, produced it, when you were twenty-three. When I look at your filmography as a producer, there are the same personal, highly generational films from 1995 to 2007. Your colleague in *Negativ*, Pavel Strnad, doesn't have it this way.

They were mostly debut films – in addition to *Indiánské léto* there was *Šeptej* (Whisper) by David Ondříček, *Zoufalci* (Dreamers) by Jitka Rudolfová. And *Láska shora* (Love from Above), the first film by Petr Marek, which was put into distribution. *Děti noci* (Night Owls) was the screenwriting debut of Irena Hejdová. I worked with beginning directors and the tendency toward auteur films was generational. It was no

conscious plan of mine.

Do you think that there's something happening in Czechia now that could also be of interest abroad?

Yes, at the Berlinale it was clear, and even Cannes doesn't look bad. Czech documentaries have a good position now. And in live action production there is a number of debuts, there's more money in the system, more is going toward project development. A generation has grown up that isn't afraid, that opens outward, that coproduces internationally. They don't settle for average. And there is an inner desire here to be original. Now it will be interesting to watch the finals of the Cinematography Fund, because there are several big-budget films in it – *Zátopek*, *Nabarvené ptáče* (The Painted Bird), *Legie* (The Legion) by Petr Nikolaev, a film about Milada Horáková. Matador producers are usually the ones submitting requests for contributions to these big-budget projects. It'll be interesting to see how the decision-making of the Fund will turn out compared to new generation projects.