

ALENA PROKOPOVÁ / 3. 11. 2016

# On gangsters, shattering schemata, and feminine fragility

Petra Nesvačilová has just returned from the Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival, which kicked off with a screening of her feature documentary *Zákon Helena* (Helena's Law). This suited her – as a director, actress, and woman who doesn't accept compromises because they don't appeal to her. In this the well-rounded thirty-year-old artist resembles the title protagonist of her debut – the former elite detective Helena Kahnová, who was responsible for catching and arresting the Berdych gang.

## **What caught your interest in Jihlava?**

The documentary by Adéla Komrzá, *Výchova k válce* (“Teaching War”). Unfortunately I couldn't attend the screening of the film due to time constraints as I was attending to my duties for *Zákon Helena*.

## **How has the response been to your film?**

Good, I'm pleased. There was praise and criticism, but I consider it useful, I don't mind. On the contrary I'm glad the film lives and resonates.

## **What was some of the criticism?**

Sometimes somebody didn't understand something, or felt something was missing. For example, I heard the opinion that not enough space was devoted to Helena. Of course, I've shot far more footage with her, in the editing room we had two, three hundred hours of material. But the format had been clearly defined.

**And yet by its very title the film talks about Helena and about the Law.**

Yes, but a human law, not an institutional, bureaucratic one. These aren't always right, they're fallible. Which, of course, we humans are too. The film is more about principles, values.

**You show the judges who reject her request for parole because the prisoner David Berdych doesn't strike them as contrite enough. And that Helena Kahnová, who put fifty criminals behind bars, was never properly compensated for her work.**

Helena received a bonus of ten thousand crowns and they promoted her to major, but then the service law changed. She hadn't met the requirements for the rank, and lost it. Simply put, she was missing an exam in English language studies: She hadn't had enough time for the study material because she hadn't received the information and instructions for the test in time.

**Unlike the institutions in the film, you show individuals who are reevaluating their positions, adapting to the change in the situations, who are able to forgive.**

For me that was crucial. This film is a mosaic, where specific and personal situations and influences are present, but at the same time the characters are representatives of different positions. Helena represents forgiveness and broken faith. I think it's important not to let yourself be broken. It happens in life that there are people around you who don't respect you or simply don't like you. The cause tends to be some misunderstanding, a communications breakdown. We people don't listen to each other – and it's been like that for centuries. We can't lose faith simply because we've come into contact with people who have disappointed us, who haven't appreciated us. Instead you can end up hurting someone else. From my experience I know that it helps to take time, forgive, and let go of wrongs. And it can sometimes be a difficult task. But of course I understand Helena. With this film I also wanted to tell her how great she is and how much I appreciate her.

**In your film you obviously avoid judging or condemning. You leave it to the criminals to speak for themselves. They admit that they killed and stole for money, for a feeling of power. They defend themselves by saying that the people**

**they robbed came into the money dishonestly.**

In the film Helena's colleague, Tomáš Gregor, says this is only an alibi. Of course it's not up to them to judge who they can rob and who they can't. They aren't judges that they should decide and take the fates of other people into their hands.

**Did you expect, for example, that they might be apologetic or ashamed? And did it surprise you that they reacted like this?**

Yes, I did. And I was surprised the entire time I was filming. That's four years. I was surprised – and terrified.

**You found yourself in Dante's *Inferno*.**

That was actually wonderful, that David Berdych read Dante's *Inferno* in prison, and that he wrote me about it. Dante brilliantly described everything we're looking and searching for. Hell, Purgatory, Paradise. For me it means that you have to permanently work on yourself, that this is your task. And the actual goal is the path itself.

**David Berdych – unlike the accomplices you were able to catch on film – managed to make something of himself, to change his path. Are you still in touch with him? Does it look like his change is a lasting one?**

I saw him two weeks ago and yes, it is. He's mostly still in touch with Helena. I think I won't be following David Berdych in any way anymore. Even though I've spent such a long time with this subject, I tried to keep my distance. Otherwise it would have been unbearable for me.

**Is it true that you came upon the subject of *Zákon Helena* by chance?**

Yes, though accidents supposedly don't happen. They say coincidence is god walking. Of course it was always entertaining for me to analyze and psychologize, even when I was a child, and then during my studies at FAMU and in theatre and film, when I'm acting... I've always loved reading psychological and sociological books the most, biographies. I was interested in what was beneath the surface, where the sources of certain realities lie. I collect information, I study how something works... and of

course this is the type of subject matter that appeals to me. My photography is like that and my acting is the same.

**I was wondering why Berdych's gang was so interesting to you when you were still a child in the mid-nineties.**

Yes, I was still watching fairy tales on TV. But I got to the subject matter through Helena. I got help from the investigative journalist Janek Kroupa, who had already worked with her, he contacted me along with other people who appear in the film – Samopalník and the others. He helped me a lot. And then things got underway. When someone becomes part of your film, you find out that they're full of layers and you have to study them. Since she was in her twenties Helena has encountered truly dangerous people in her work, so I went to go take a look at them... and it was like opening Pandora's box.

**Would you consider your approach investigative?**

No. I know that the film is understandable anywhere in the world because of this. Berdych's gang is just a "model situation", it could have been the Italian mafia, a gang from the East, or the USA... I wanted to get down to how these people think, how they work with their conscience. When I got all the way here, they started defending themselves vigorously – and started attacking me.

**Because you got under their skin?**

I guess so. I was interested in the essence of evil. Whereas Helena is a bearer of acceptance, forgiveness, and womanly principles. And I'm not a feminist or an advocate of gender awareness. Quite the contrary. I was just interested in how during such demanding work she still naturally managed to take care of her appearance.

**In *Zákon Helena* I see a subject you also look at in your previous film made at FAMU. You frequently focus on women and you have a feminine approach to them. The film entitled *Bábovka, turek, slepice a polévka (Cake, coffee, chicken, and soup)* could hardly have been made by a man...**

I think it could have been made by a man. The film came about because I had discovered Olga Simonová, a woman who sometime in her fifties decided to write her

favorite author Agatha Christie. She corresponded with her for years afterward. It presented her with an escape from her abusive husband. Agatha Christie even named a character in one of her books after her. I made the film like sort of a short “fairy tale”, but the story had much greater potential... As far as the theme of escape, I examined that in the film *Klára letní tábor (Klara's Summer Camp)*.

**That was the story of a girl who decided to enter the convent, right?**

I spent three days with her and her sister in that convent. It was interesting, but to be honest I didn't feel right there. Of course I respect it, but it was too confining for me.

**As far as strong female characters like Helena, who don't escape, but instead resist their fate, you also examined Milada Horáková.**

Some people like *Opus č. 50 na motivy Milady Horákové (Opus No. 50 on Motifs of Milada Horáková)* and some people are terribly irritated by it. It's pretty particular. I had the need to work on a large topic, to connect it to small things I encounter in everyday life. I made the film at a time when lots of people were looking at Milada Horáková and I said to myself that she was actually becoming their property. And that many of them didn't even know all of what she did, what she was like. Her daughter said that they never considered her pathetic at all, the way she's often portrayed in the theatre or films. She was funny and cheerful. I wanted to make a film about Milada Horáková's favorite recipes or jokes. I longed to “unbronze” her, to make her a human being again – because when someone is funny and cheerful, it doesn't at all mean that they're not deep or that they don't know big words. I looked for where she found her courage, what compelled her to such actions... I relied on the fact Horáková was devout and that she was a mother.

**It seems to me that male protagonists interest you mainly when they are in some kind of function, part of an institution.**

Every one of us has some function and is in some institution. Marriage is also an institution. But I also made a movie about Ivan Medek – *Prsty v medu mám (Fingers in Honey)* – which tells about love and knights. I made it when I was eighteen, and put it together when Mr. Medek died. Maybe you're right, but I'd be more likely to say that

these institutions are part of interesting subjects. For example, the film *Řekni, kde ti Němci jsou* (*Tell Me Where the Germans Are*) tells about Bernd Posselt, who based his political career on the expulsion of the Germans. He bet on the cancellation of the Beneš decrees. It's a film about how people constantly want to disrupt and shift something. Everyone has trauma and conflict within them, everyone suppresses and pushes away thoughts that don't suit them. In the film there are also Germans who were glad to have been expelled. Or this one amazing man, whose entire family died in the concentration camp, but right after the end of the war he fell in love with a German woman and returned with her to Berlin. Love can do that – it knows how to forgive. That and nature – they are for me irreplaceable values. In our everyday lives, however, we can downplay their value.

**Do you enjoy going below the surface of majority thought? Attacking thought schemata?**

Yes, I enjoy it. I enjoy what gives me meaning. Some schemata are wonderful, others simply don't work. Nature knows how to deal with war. A tree can grow in a ruined landscape. And love works the same way. Hatred has always been and perhaps always will be, but the trick is to reconcile yourself with trauma and injustice, to forgive. And sometimes we can do it, or it just doesn't work. I think that when individuals deal with something inside them it influences not only on they themselves but the attitudes of those around them.

**That's the case of Helena, Milada Horáková... and even you yourself. Would you have taken on the filming of *Zákon Helena* if you had known what it would be like, that you would suffer and be afraid?**

It's important to say that I had someone to lean on – cinematographer Klára Belicová, producer Klára Žaloudková, and producer Pavla Klimešová. And even Helena herself. ...but I'm afraid of ordinary things too – like... like riding my bike too far at night.

Pretty much everyone is afraid of that!

**Aha, well, I'm afraid to go by myself into the forest to pick mushrooms during the daytime.**

A person is afraid, but despite that can do something unconventional. In *Zákon Helena* you show how you tried to do karate or shoot a pistol. Did you earn the respect of the gangsters that way?

I don't know, you'd have to ask them.

**Do you think they trusted you more because you're a woman?**

Perhaps so. There were mostly five of us during the shooting. It's similar to how they were more open during their arrest interrogations when a woman was present – Helena Kahnová.

**In *Zákon Helena* – but also in the documentary about Václav Klaus *Z Borotína až na Sněžku* (From Borotin All the Way to Snezka) – you are the narrator of your “stories”: you walk, you open doors, you comment, you pose questions...**

Editor Josef Krajbich, who I've worked with now for eight years, told me that I might not realize it but I always use this same method when filming. Ever since the film about the film *Pusinky* (*Dolls*) I've been telling stories with my environment. I consider that to be the easiest. To point a camera at someone else is a tremendous responsibility. And especially in *Zákon Helena* I was constantly second guessing, I was always looking at the full details, subliminal intricacies. I concentrate on it during filming and then during editing. Life is not film and film is not life, but at the same time yes, it is, because it's only up to us what we put into it. The most important thing in life is to answer for yourself. That much more can you accept responsibility for others as well. But lots of books write about that, I'm not saying anything new.

**And it is this responsibility for your actions that can set you free... But aren't you sometimes too hard on yourself?**

Me? I am and I'm not. I guess I'm hard on myself, in my work I'm a maximalist, but at the same time I know how not to do anything. And communication and trust, the setting of boundaries, are absolutely important for me. It's a question of searching.

**Why did you play Hitler?**

Jesus... that was when I was eighteen! I adapted a story by István Örkény, *Planctus za matkou* ("Lament for Mother"), into a stage play format and directed the whole thing myself. It was about mockery, irony... I was hidden behind a giant world atlas, everyone likened it to Chaplin's *Modern Times*.

**At that time you were also playing Vendula in *Pusinky*, she also used her strength for a number of things.**

For each role you take something from yourself. For me Vendula is fragile and romantic – and I made a film that was fragile, too, about dreams, about a feather factory – *Putování jedné kachny za sny* ("The Journey of a Duck to Dreamland"). Fragility is close to me. Maybe I'm afraid of strength, that's why I make films about it...

**Good. And in relation to it you are repeatedly fascinated by controversial, dominant men in the public space – Hitler, Posselt, Berdych and his people?**

In extreme examples you can observe details, ask how it's possible that some things can happen. World War II, the expulsion of the Germans, Horáková... In secondary school students are fascinated by these topics. What's more, you have distance from them, because they aren't your own experiences. Even on the basis of these topics everyone can build their own value system, clarify what world they live in. I was interested in it.

**And what about your documentary about Klaus, which you made as part of the FAMU cycle on ex-premiers?**

That was an Apolena Rychlíková project. We drew lots to see who would get which politician, and everyone thought it was funny that I would be the one filming about Klaus. For me the film tells about how I may not have gotten him, but how the people who spoke about him ultimately told me who he is. So it was ultimately fortunate that Klaus wouldn't meet with me. It seems I would never have gotten there with him.

**Your authorial work is dominated by themes associated with the past. Are you planning to make any changes?**



I've been working for years now with Alice Růžičková, Květa Přibyllová, and Kristina Nedvědová to develop a series for ČT, *Hledání rovnováhy* (*Searching for Balance*). It tells about couples in which both partners are scientists. We focus on how they handle motherhood and partnership in their work, which has tremendous social reach. We're waiting for the project to be approved by the Board of Czech Television. And I have another film in progress on the sly. Its subject is fragility. I started in spring, I'm still in the phase of researching, of seeking and not knowing.

### **And acting?**

I'm acting at Divadlo Ungelt and Vosto5. I'm working on a film, *Sněží* (*It's Snowing*). And I spent a month in the desert in America for the film *Mars*. Halka Třešňáková is in it with me. At one point during a break we were lying on a hill and talking about our favorite sayings, so she told me about the Japanese saying "Life is unjust." It may sound hopeless, but it depends on how you process it – and actually your existence can be that much more just as a result.