

ŠTĚPÁNKA IŠTVÁNKOVÁ / 23. 12. 2016

# Ivan Fíla

Ivan Fíla is an enduring runner, and sometimes also an obstacle one. On the run, or at least on the move, ever since his youth. Long tracks are the only place he finds safe havens. This year, he has been running for sixty years. Still with jerk. Still with determination. Instead of obstacles, he leaves borders behind. Borders both geographic and human. Still, he does not quite manage to get over the most important one, getting him back to his native country. His domestic audience rarely notices him at all, and if it does, it's only in connection with the disputes he's had with his producers. But what is the life story behind the energy of the white-haired creator? And how far can his run get him?

One would believe that the children born on Christmas Eve must also be children of Fortune, including Ivan Fíla (\* 24 December 1956). But not even Fortune could handle all the pitfalls of socialism. Fíla's life trajectory shows that very clearly. Originally an assistant to Zbyněk Brynych and Jan Schmidt<sup>[1]</sup> at Barrandov Studios, he gradually grew to a point when, as a result of a confrontation with an election commission, among his other protests against the regime, he couldn't be accepted to study at a university or further develop his filmmaking talent <sup>[2]</sup>. That was why in 1977, at the age of 19, he decided to emigrate to Germany. It was not, however, his originally intended destination; he had been attracted to America, but getting there was not so easy. He escaped via Yugoslavia and then roamed around Europe for about half a year as an asylum seeker. With little avail, though, as it was complicated to reach asylum. His attempts in the Netherlands, Italy, France and Switzerland all failed. Germany was the first country to yield. One day, he bought a newspaper for exiled Czech natives at a railway station in Frankfurt and found an offer of aid to immigrants that he decided to take. He was offered accommodation and education, thanks to which he caught up with his German and passed German high school final exams, allowing him to pursue his studies. Eventually, he successfully finished his

studies in directing and screenwriting, there.<sup>[3]</sup> At the Film Faculty of Fachhochschule in Cologne. His was an experimental class, merging different fields with a subsequent possibility to opt for a specific specialization. That meant that he received education also in editing and photography.<sup>[4]</sup> He graduated in 1983 with a short documentary on motorbike collector Harley Heaven (1983). He decided to remain faithful to the documentary form. He used it as a ticket back to his native country.

Totalitarian turn of events in the countries of Eastern Europe, the history of the Czech nation and the relations between Czechoslovakia and both German republics, these were the recurring topics in many of Fíla's documentaries. It all started with the trilogy of *Ein deutsches Schicksal (The German Fate, 1987)* / *Im Namen der Revolution (In the Name of the Revolution, 1989)* / *Schritte im Labyrinth (Steps in a Labyrinth, 1990)*. The last one took him to his first real comeback to Czechoslovakia in 1989. Using essayistic form, all three treat the subject closest to Fíla: emigration of Czech artists. *Schritte im Labyrinth* shows a confrontation of testimonies given by dissidents (Jiří Dienstbier, Vlasta Chramostová and others) and exiles (Pavel Tigrid, Jaroslav Hutka, Karel Kryl, Pavel Kohout and others). Another story line of the documentary deals with his own experience. After many years of exile in West Germany, a fictional Pilgrim is setting on a journey back to his homeland; he watches the transformations of the landscape and the people, and he passes through a metaphorical labyrinth of thoughts and questions. He searches for a home and finds that, for him, just like for most exiles, the concept itself has ceased to exist.<sup>[6]</sup>

The above mentioned first part of the trilogy is a portrait of German communist journalist and both a concentration camp and a Soviet gulag survivor, *Margarete Buber-Neumann*. The second of the three-part series is *Im Namen der Revolution* (1989), describing the fate of German revolutionary Wolfgang Leonhard. As a result of historical events, he grew up in the Soviet Union. After his return to Germany, he became an acknowledged historian, among other things. He worked as a professor in East Berlin, but in 1950 he fled to Yugoslavia and later „back“ to West Germany, where he became a leader of revolutionary anti-stalinist politics.

This line, reflecting totality and recounting Czechoslovak stories, includes also the artistic portrait of the former Czech president, *Václav Havel, Ein böhmisches Märchen (Václav Havel, Czech Fairytale, 1993)*, the essay *Nebel (Fog, 1995)*, depicting the

magical atmosphere of Prague with the help of the distinctive Jazz performance of Jiří Stivín. And lastly, the six-volume documentary cycle dictator portrait, telling mainly the story of the German invasion into Czechoslovakia in 1939 (*Hitler-Eine Bilanz / Six Faces of Hitler*, 1995). [7]

This epic is the only work Fíla has ever made as a sort of a commission. He was offered the job thanks to his national background. In all his other works, he strictly adhered to his own screenwriting, directing and producing line. At the time of the filming of his first documentaries, he founded his own production company, Ivan Fíla Filmproduktion.

He is also no stranger to TV productions, though. His Hitler hexalogy along with *Václav Havel – Czech Fairytale*, even became a model of TV documentaries. His first short movie and his first work made out of school, *Salzige Träume (The Salted Dream)*, was another of the kind. He co-created it with director Claus Bienfait. The film is a record of a contrast between the staff and the passengers of the Vistafjord ship.

As far as Czech audience is aware of, once Ivan Fíla decides to cooperate with other producers, a disagreement is to be expected. For instance, he was approached with an offer to participate as a screenwriter on a movie on Jiří Kajínek, a convicted hitman. He was meant to work on it along with producer Patr Jákl. However, he was eventually cut off from the production. When he decided to make the movie on his own, the Jákl brothers sued him. In the end, he stepped back and the Kajínek movie was finished without him in 2010. Fíla entitled the original screenplay *Princip K (The K Principle)*. All of Fíla's filmmaking career is accompanied by conflicts with producers and that is also why there has been many unfinished projects or projects that Fíla has been striving to finish for years.

In Germany, it was the case of Fíla's accusations of censorship against the ZDF TV station, when he was not allowed to complete the creation of a documentary on the former foreign minister Joschka Fischer. The controversy was linked to compromising footage showing Fischer throwing bottle bombs. There have also been issues around the making of his most recent, yet still less and less relevant work *Den štěstí (A Day of Happiness)*, based on the life of the singer Petr Novák and actress Eva Jakoubková. The story is set in the communist era and the pre-revolutionary period.

It is a return to a subject that had an inevitable personal impact on the director. At the present time, however, further development of the work is blocked by disputes on the ownership of copyright for the songs used in the film. The copyright is claimed by Daniela Jakoubková, sister of Petr Novák's late wife, who acquired it in consequence of her sister's death and their father's legal incompetence. [8] If the movie is ever finished, Fíla intends to take it back to the TV format and to rework the original feature film for cinemas as a two part TV film.

*Den štěstí* is a proof that Ivan Fíla's running does not take place only on documentary tracks, even though it could seem so on the timeline of his creative work. *Lea*, his first full length fiction, only went out in 1996. It is a raw story about a fragile woman (impersonated by Lenka Vlasáková) and a despotic man (Christian Redl), telling a story about restitution of both property and love. „Somewhere in Eastern Slovakia“ (the only precision of place the audience gets), we find silent women, violent men, and general distortion of human psyche. The upsetting atmosphere of the movie becomes a defining feature of the director's gloomy style in all his films. That applies to the aspects of both the form and the content. The oppressive and intimate drama was first presented at the Venice Film Festival and later won many awards both at home and abroad (the work was a Czech-German coproduction). The most important breaking point was its screening in Naples, where Edward Lachman was one of the juries. He was so impressed by the film that he recommended it to the Telluride festival (Colorado), known for being attended by numerous agents, managers and representatives of big Hollywood studios. Shortly afterwards, Fíla was approached by Steven Spielberg with an offer to rewrite his script for *The Betty Schimmel Story*, which was planned as a production of his Dreamworks company. However, Fíla was uncomfortable with the studio's filmmaking approach, restrictive of creative freedom, and withdrew from the cooperation. The movie was based on a true story from wartime Hungary. Fíla was the seventh screenwriter to work on the script. After him, Kenneth Branagh picked up the baton, he too unsuccessfully. In the end, the movie never got completed. Lengthy arguments with the producer, who was not willing to give up his personal vision of the story, were again the main problem. [9]

Fíla's second feature film, *König der Diebe* (*King of Thieves*, 2004) was made in coproduction of the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and Slovakia. [10] The script had been completed in 1992, but the making of the movie itself was long obstructed by

constant lack of money. In the meantime, Fíla decided to make *Lea* first and come back to *König der Diebe* later. The movie reflects the subject of street children pickpockets that Fíla started to notice in 1992 in Milan, where he observed these little robbers stealing from tourists. Later, he made an acquaintance of the local police president and got to visit a house accommodating children who managed to flee robber gangs. There, he started to get a deeper understanding of the issue. He however observed this phenomenon, baring the consequences of illegal trade with children, in many other European cities. [11] Based on his learnings, he created a fictional story inspired by real events, but enriched the difficult subject with some color and even a possible vision of a happy ending. The premiere took place at the Moscow International Film Festival. Besides its success abroad, the film also won four Czech Lion Awards for the best camera, sound, original music and best actor in the lead role.

In general, one could say that his films, both features and documentaries, are focused on social and personal burdens (such as trafficking in people, violating women's rights, children's prostitution, street gangs, burn outs, depression, looking for a home, revolt against a political regime). Fíla works with elaborate psychology of his characters, he reveals their inner disintegration and aridness, while looking for human connection where it's usually unavailable. He is not afraid of impenetrable waters or high obstacles. And only because of that he is still able to run on and on. He keeps adapting to his continually changing environment, just like the protagonists of his films. He switches his places of residence depending on his possibilities and needs as a producer or as a creator.

Currently, you can reach him in Sicily. Probably not for too long, though. He keeps reaching (geographically transferable) points of support and he grants the same thing to his characters. And hopefully, all that melancholy and weight will sooner or later give rise to more (no less oppressive) works of value. We especially have in mind the above mentioned *Den štěstí*, which is still in the game. Let's hope to see some of them on the screen in 2017 and wish them not to get stuck over unfulfilled expectations and delays, which was the case of the American romantic comedy *Bella Luna*. Where are all the hopes of its realization gone, along with all the actresses (Meryl Streep, Sharon Stone, Fanny Ardant) who were successively suggested for the leading role? Despite all the pitfalls and proverbial tilting at windmills, Ivan Fíla never

gives up. It is our call to consider his action as strange, foolish or determined. What else to expect from someone who is always on the run, with things constantly changing in front of his eyes. If you wish to understand something like that, you have no other choice but to breathe in and keep on watching that creative running track of his. With the same energy and faith that he carries. As far as we know, he managed to successfully accomplish a great deal of projects after all.[12]

### Notes:

[1] Fikejz, Miloš. Lea. *Filmový přehled*, 1997, no. 4, p. 12

[2] Křivánková, Darina. Dokázal jsem říct ne Hollywoodu. *Lidové noviny* 16, 2003, no. 256, p. 25.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Skype interview with Ivan Fila 3. 4. 2013

[5] Fikejz, Miloš, cit. d., p. 12.

[6] Hofmanová, Libuše. Ivan Fíla: Kroky v labyrintu. *Film a doba* 1990, vol. 36, no. 10, p. 548-550.

[7] Voráč, Jiří. *Český film v exilu*. Brno: Host, 2004, p. 51-52.

[8] Information from Fila's open letter to Mrs. Jakoubková from 6 September, 2016, available on his Facebook profile. Further information at:

[http://kultura.zpravy.idnes.cz/den-stesti-petr-novak-0tr-/filmvideo.aspx?c=A150804\\_2181775\\_filmvideo\\_vha](http://kultura.zpravy.idnes.cz/den-stesti-petr-novak-0tr-/filmvideo.aspx?c=A150804_2181775_filmvideo_vha).

[9] Based on personal accounts of the creator during a screening of *Lea*, accompanied by a master class discussion on 22 March 2013, Prague: FAMU (Film and TV School of the Academy of Visual Arts).

[10] Fikejz, Miloš. Král zlodějů. *Filmový přehled*, 2004, no 3, p. 15.

[11] Uhlář, Břetislav. Režisér Ivan Fíla: Náměty k filmům přináší sám život.

*Moravskoslezský deník*, 4, no. 29, p. 22.

[12] To make the list of films complete, it is necessary to mention two more spiritual works: *Die Paulskirche – Ort der Hoffnung* (*Paulskirche – Place of Hope*, 1988), offering a view of a sacral monument in Frankfurt, and *Geschichten aus einer anderen Welt* (*Stories from the Other World*, 1991), dealing with the miracle of Lourdes. And last, but not least, his shorts: *Protokoll einer Hoffnung* (*Minutes of Hope*, 1986), *Die letzte Hexe* (*The Last Witch*, 1986) and *Zwei Brüder* (*Two Brothers*, 1986).