

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 26. 2. 2025

Jan Otčenášek

Already as a child, writer Jan Otčenášek fell in love with film. In his unfinished autobiographical novel *Temptation Katarina* (Pokušení Katarina), he wrote: “The first film I ever saw was titled *The King of Kings* (1927). Even though it was a silent film, the experience was as intensive as first intercourse.”^[1] Later in life, Otčenášek would watch films from the projection box of the Husovka cinema in Prague’s Old Town where the projectionist let him stay when he had no money to buy a ticket. Several years later, his fascination with the images he saw on the big screen would lead him to become a screenwriter and dramaturge at the Barrandov Studios where he cooperated for instance with Otakar Vávra, Jiří Weiss and Karel Kachyňa.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the birthday of a representative of the first post-war generation of Czech prose writers. Originally, Otčenášek’s career path was far from writing and film. He grew up in the worker’s district of Žižkov in a family of a carpenter and his humble origins steered him towards choosing a more practical vocation. After finishing elementary and high school, he enrolled at a business academy. He passed his school-leaving exams in 1943. Confrontation with his wealthier classmates who taunted him about his origin instilled in him a feeling of grave social injustice, something he later explored in his books and scripts. He drew inspiration from Russian classics such as Dostoyevsky and, surprisingly, his own father. Otčenášek allegedly began writing on an ironing board when he was 15 years old and “felt the delight of his father’s stories.”^[2]

Sadly, he couldn’t cultivate his literary talents as he became a forced labourer. First, he worked in ČKD Prague-Karlín and then in Avia Čakovice, making aircraft engines. During the last months of the war, Otčenášek was active in anti-fascist youth organisation Předvoj committed to Communist ideals. In May 1945, Otčenášek became a member of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and participated in the Prague Uprising. After the war, he studied under Jan Mukařovský at the Faculty of Arts of the

Charles University in Prague but quit for personal reasons in less than a year and started working as an accountant in Prague Chemical Plant. He got married in 1946 and a year later, his son Jan was born. In 1948, he began publishing articles on topical political and social issues in various periodicals.

Seven years after the liberation, Jan Otčenášek published his literary debut, engaged novel *Plným krokem* (Full Speed Ahead) about the efforts of workers fulfilling the two-year plan. Like other prosaists and poems of that time, he drew inspiration from the everyday lives and moral values of the working class with which he's been in close contact. In case of *Plným krokem*, he used the experiences of the workers of an old chamotte factory in their neighbourhood. The favourably received debut later inspired a drama titled *Without a Halo* (Bez svatozáře, 1963) by Ladislav Helge. As his first book was published, Otčenášek joined the secretariat of the Association of Czechoslovak Writers and focused fully on writing.

In the second half of the 1950s, he became the Association's First Secretary and a major figure of the Czechoslovak literary scene (and a strongly politically engaged figure). Some of the reasons for his ascent in the ranks included personal changes due to political liberalisation and the success of his second book *Citizen Brych* (Občan Brych) from 1955. ^[3] This groundbreaking introspective novel, whose structure and name were according to Jiří Weiss inspired by American film *Citizen Kane*, ^[4] introduced an extraordinary hero and a true recount of the ideological changes of the post-war society. The novel's protagonist is a vacillating intellectual who, after the events of February 1948, chooses between emigrating from Czechoslovakia or staying and accepting the new political system.

The book presenting the turbulent period as an era of changes and internal and external struggles got positive reviews from the press, was translated into many languages and also adapted into a film. The adaptation was directed by Otakar Vávra who also wrote the script. Otčenášek is named as a co-author, but in reality, he was more of a consultant on the film and himself said that he didn't contribute to the script. The 1958 film starring Karel Höger marked the beginning of Otčenášek's film career which would become at least equal to his literary career, no matter how he at first rejected working for film and television.

The collective style of film production didn't suit him, he couldn't play with the expressiveness of words which would be harmful to the flow of the dialogues. He had to learn to emphasise events and specific situations. But eventually he managed and in the following years wrote 22 film scripts, several television dramas and a theatre play. In retrospect, he saw some of them with a very critical eye due to his inexperience. He thought that for instance the dialogues in *Romeo, Juliet and Darkness* (Romeo, Julie a tma, 1959) were too wordy because he tried to include as much information as possible.

Jiří Weiss suggested adapting the novella in the same year *Citizen Brych* premiered. The Shakespearean story of grammar school student Pavel and Jewish girl Ester takes place during operation Anthropoid. Much like Arnošt Lustig and Josef Škvorecký, Otčenášek changed the optics which Czech prose used to view war. His story isn't a heroic portrayal of a collective of resistance fighters fighting Fascism, but rather an intimate story focused on a romance of two young people. Otčenášek wrote the scripts for two adaptations of *Romeo, Juliet and Darkness* himself. The first adaptation was the television drama by Eva Sadková and a year later, the story was filmed by Jiří Weiss. Other adaptations of the delicate story were made abroad (e.g. Finland and Hungary) and in 1997, Karel Smyczek directed another television film.

Also Otčenášek's other literary works were adapted for film and theatre such as the voluminous autobiographic novel from the Protectorate period *Limping Orpheus* (Kulhavý Orfeus, 1964) following the stories of several high school students who became forced workers and eventually founded their own resistance group named Orpheus. Some of the motifs from the book would become basis for the drama *Wedding without a Ring* (Svatba bez prstýnku, 1972) by Vladimír Čech. Ladislav Helge utilised a similar approach to *Citizen Brych* – for his *Spring Breeze* (Jarní povětrí, 1961), he only chose a plot line involving student Jana (Iva Janžurová), absent in Vávra's adaptation.

In 1960, Otčenášek became a professional writer, but paradoxically worked more on original and adapted scripts than prose. Together with Jiří Weiss, he worked on black comedy *Murder Czech Style* (Vražda po našem, 1966) ironizing the cowardice of a little Czech man. The lead female role was portrayed by Otčenášek's wife Libuše Švormová. Another poke at Czech provinciality was comedy *How I Stole a Million* (Jak

se krade million, 1967) by Jaroslav Balík. The script was inspired by a true story of a diligent clerk, renowned expert and an honest man who one day embezzled a million crowns by mistake.^[5] Due to his financial difficulties, he kept on stealing from the state.

Jaroslav Balík became Otčenášek's most frequent collaborator. Together, they tried to capture the spirit and meaning of Fučík's *Report from the Gallows* (Reportář psaná na oprátce, 1961) and Jaroslav Havlíček's psychological novel *The Third One* (Ta třetí, 1968). They used only the basic plotline and transferred the story of a First Republic office clerk experiencing a moral crisis to contemporary Prague. Balík was allegedly instrumental in keeping Otčenášek, discredited because of his work for the Writers Association and other associations, at Barrandov even after the events of August 1968 when his membership in the Communist Party was revoked.

Otčenášek was one of few writers who were allowed to keep writing despite his political activities from the 1960s. The reason behind that was probably *Citizen Brych* perceived as an emblematic work of social realism.

In 1971, a television adaptation titled *Romeo and Juliet at the End of November* (Romeo a Julie na konci listopadu) about an elderly couple received favourable reviews. Love in spite of circumstances is the main theme of *Lovers in the Year One* (Milenci v roce jedna, 1973) set shortly after the Second World War when law student Pavel meets shy Helena who spent most of the occupation in a concentration camp.^[6] Both variations on Otčenášek's arguably most popular novel *Romeo, Juliet and Darkness* were again directed by Jaroslav Balík.

Otčenášek thought they went along creatively so well because of their generational and opinion closeness but also thanks to their different artistic temperaments – “That's also important because we challenge each other and often discuss individual scenes,” he explained.^[7] Together, they made also a psychological probe of female homes in *A Woman in Every Room* (V každém pokoji žena, 1974) and psychological film *Shadow of a Flying Bird* (Stín létajícího ptáčka, 1977) which alternates the perspectives of three generations.

Beginning with the 1960s, Otčenášek's prose showed incline towards more intimate themes. He stopped telling stories of political engagement and efforts to change the

world and switched to more personal matters. *Young Man by Profession* (Mladík z povolání) is a portrait of an aging man fighting his fear of growing old by finding a young lover and joining her social group. Novel *When it Rained in Paradise* (Když v ráji pršelo) tells the story of a couple of young intellectuals who decide to leave the city to find new life in a remote mountain region. In 1987, the book was adapted into film by Magdalena Pivoňková. The aforementioned unfinished book *Temptation Katarina* included the most self-reflecting and introspective motifs from Otčenášek's late work. It was eventually published in 1984 after his death.

Otčenášek's work on a film project didn't end by submitting the literary script. He participated in the production and refined the dialogues with the actors. "After speaking with the actors, you realize that it's possible to make the dialogues more compact, where the actors can replace words and express feelings with their performance and style," admitted Otčenášek in an interview with magazine *Kino*.^[8] His interest in shaping the result during the production steered him towards the career path of a dramaturge which he officially became in 1973. But he continued working for television. Together with Oldřich Daněk, he wrote the series *There Was Once A House* (Byl jednou jeden dům, 1974) set in the street where Otčenášek lived when he was young. In 1979, Otčenášek collaborated with Vladimír Kalina on the script for *Love Between the Raindrops* (Lásky mezi kapkami deště), in which he returned to the Žižkov streets of his childhood for one last time. The nostalgic film was directed by Karel Kachyňa who felt that "Jan Otčenášek put a lot of autobiographical elements into his last film,"^[9] But Otčenášek didn't live to see the premiere of the film which completed his transformation from an author of socially engaged novels to a writer of more intimate realist prose about the search for reconciliation with oneself and one's surroundings. He died on 24th February 1979 after a severe illness.

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-ks-, Srozumění s lidmi. *Naše rodina* 8, 1975, iss. 28, p. 12.

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Notes:

[1] Vítězslav Ržounek, *Jan Otčenášek*. Prague: Československý spisovatel 1985, p. 33.

[2] -ks-, Srozumění s lidmi. *Naše rodina* 8, 1975, iss. 28, p. 12.

[3] Otčenášek wrote the version in 1949 when he was 25 years old. Based on the recommendation of Václav Řezáč, director of the Československý spisovatel publishing house, he put it aside for a couple of years to make significant changes later.

[4] Jiří Weiss, *Bílý mercedes*. Prague: Victoria Publishing 1995, p. 157.

[5] Jiří Frühauf, *Jaroslav Balík*. Prague: Čs. filmový ústav 1984, p. 13.

[6] Otčenášek recycled these motifs from the unfinished novel *Temptation Katarina*.

[7] Luboš Bartošek, Šárka Bartošková, *Filmové profily: Českoslovenští scenáristé, režiséři, kameramani, hudební skladatelé a architekti hraných filmů*. Prague: Československý filmový ústav 1986, p. 325.

[8] František Goldscheider, Interview with Jan Otčenášek. *Kino* 15, 1960, iss. 20 (22nd September), p. 310.

[9] Robert Kolář, Lásky mezi kapkami deště. *Záběr* 12, 1979, iss. 17 (24th August), p. 3.