

KLÁRA TRSKOVÁ / 14. 1. 2025

Juan Wenceslao Hayzus: what it means to feel at home in a place that is not your home

In December 2024, the Ponrepo cinema presented the short film Viva Česko (2023) by Argentine director Juan Wenceslao Hayzus, who has Czech roots, as part of the series „Each Film is a Small Victory“. Hayzus is currently studying at Prague’s FAMU. His film depicts the Czech community in Buenos Aires, blending documentary techniques with fictional scenes. The story of Melina, who falls in love with one of her dance partners at a Czech cultural club Český dům, intertwines with the elements of Czech culture and performances by non-actors.

Why did you choose to study in Prague at FAMU?

I began my studies at Fundación Universidad del Cine, one of the big film schools in Buenos Aires. It was quite a coincidence that my university happens to have an agreement with FAMU, it’s not a connection one would expect. Given that we’re Spanish speakers, most people my age tend to study abroad in Spain, or sometimes in Italy. It’s quite rare for someone to choose a school in Prague. I’ve always admired Miloš Forman from the Czechoslovak New Wave, and I wanted to know more about this cinematic tradition. Back in Argentina, the access to information about this part of the world and its film history is very limited. So it was this combination: the coincidence that my university had an agreement with FAMU and the fact that I was interested to come here because of my personal history and lineage. Studying at FAMU has been an amazing experience.

What was it like to come to Prague for the first time? Did you have different expectations before coming here?

I absolutely loved it, it's an amazing city. People often say it feels like a fairytale, and while that line might be a bit cliché, it really does feel that way. In Argentina, everything is so new; you never see old buildings or castles there. I was amazed just walking around Prague and seeing all of that. I didn't come with expectations, I only knew that this was more or less where my roots were. My great-grandfather was born in a small town in Slovakia, but he always referred to himself as Czech. We're not entirely sure why. Maybe it had to do with the mixed identities of the time, where ethnically Czech people could live in Slovakia. I had a very special chance to go to that Slovak town a few months ago, and it was incredible. It always feels good to connect with one's origins and see where you come from.

Were your parents or grandparents also active in Český dům in Buenos Aires?

No, because in my family's case, that identity was lost when they emigrated. My great-grandfather never spoke about his past. When I visited the small town of Poloma in Slovakia, I discovered that there were three houses, each belonging to a branch of my family named Hayzus. The house where my great-grandfather lived was the branch of the family that spread across America. After the death of my great-great-grandfather, all his children were still young, and without a family to rely on, they decided to emigrate — some to the United States, others to Argentina. I imagine that for my great-grandfather, this wasn't necessarily traumatic, but perhaps he wanted to forget that chapter of his life. Český dům served on the contrary as a way for immigrant families to connect and preserve their heritage. I have friends whose families have been involved in Český dům for three generations. In my case, I was the first to reconnect with this part of our past. My grandfather didn't speak Czech, my father didn't speak Czech... It ended with my great-grandfather, and he didn't pass it on.

Did your involvement in Český dům in Buenos Aires influenced your approach to storytelling as a filmmaker?

In the film, you can see how I aimed to blend documentary and fiction. I had hours upon hours of footage from my visits to Český dům, capturing people, their celebrations, and their traditions — like witch burning, wine festivities, or dancing. I filmed hours of observation of the people and their interactions. That influenced a lot

how I was filming, I wanted to include the club members in the project. Only the two main protagonists are traditional actors. The rest of the cast consists of 'non-professionals' (even though I don't like that term), they were just people from Český dům. In many ways, their participation was even more beneficial for the film. They bring a sense of authenticity and they have a type of character that's very easy to spot. First I wrote a script with the idea that it would be a fiction film, but as soon as I started spending time at Český dům, I realized I needed to incorporate the people of the club. In the end, it feels like it's really their story.

And what was first? The visits of Český dům or the idea to shoot a film there?

The original idea came from a friend of mine who is part of the Hungarian community. I remember, as a kid, his parents would speak Hungarian at home, and every Saturday, he would go to a Hungarian club. If we invited him to a party, he'd often say, 'Oh no, I have to go to Hungarian school.' It was through this friend that I first became interested in this world of what we call communities. That curiosity eventually led me to write a script that connected with my own roots. I wanted to create something I could relate to. And from there, I decided I didn't just want to go to the club and film — I wanted to be involved in some way. That's when I started folk dancing. I spent two years learning traditional Czech ballet. I don't remember the dances now, but I did my best at the time. It was quite funny, though, I wasn't very good at it, and the teacher once told me: 'It doesn't matter how you dance because, in the village, everyone used to dance.' That's when I realized I wasn't good! After about a year, I shared my script with the Český dům members and asked for their permission. They were very kind and supportive — they even lent me the keys to the club and told me I could use the space and they had complete confidence in me.

Do you feel the difference when you show the film in Argentina and in Czech cinemas? Do you get different reactions from the audience?

Outside of Český dům in Argentina, people know very little about Czech traditions. The experience was completely different when we screened the film at Český dům in Argentina because people recognized themselves or their friends, which made it very engaging. In one of the documentary segments, there's a man singing. I hadn't been able to get his permission beforehand, so I was a bit nervous when I saw him at the

screening. But when he saw himself on screen, he became very emotional — crying, hugging me, and expressing his deep gratitude for capturing that moment.

How did you use visuals, music, or language in *Viva Česko* to highlight the blend of Czech and Argentine cultures?

For example, there's a dance that the people at Český dům call '*tanči*', a word that has no meaning on its own. It was repeated so many times that its original message was changed. This reflects the idea of people being 'Argen-Czech', a blend of both cultures. The music is composed by Daniel Inger, who is a regular at the club's festivities and serves as something of a 'club musician'. His work combines Argentinian and Czech musical influences. We wanted to include his music because it represents this cultural mix. He even has a record of Czech tango, which again blends both traditions.

Have you already explored the topic of the Czech community in Buenos Aires enough, or are you planning to make more films about it?

As soon as I arrived in Prague, I had the idea of expanding some concepts from the short film into a full-length movie. I haven't written anything yet, but I plan to start working on the script when I return to Argentina. While it will be a different story, it will still focus on Český dům and maintain the same style. I also want to incorporate the people who are part of that environment. I find the topic very rich and almost unknown. The club itself, the relationships that develop, the sense of community — it offers a fascinating structure for fiction. It also allows me to explore more philosophical questions, like what it means to feel at home in a place that isn't your home.

If anyone wants to be notified of future screenings, please follow the accounts @ceskoproducciones or @wenchihayzus on Instagram.