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Kristian – just for today?

“What Casablanca means to Americans, Kristian means to Czechs.”

“The essential source of the glorification of the First Czechoslovak Republic with its poverty and political corruption!”

“A precursor to later films about poor dreamers and sympathetic tricksters – Men About Town and Waiter, Scarper!”

“Intelligent entertainment!”

“A rather depressing reflection on the oppressive everyday and the unbearable stereotype of ordinary life...”

As many viewers, as many opinions and views on the film *Kristian* (dir. Martin Frič, 1939). Leaving aside the cult of the film, who is the film's *Kristian* and what is he trying to tell us? And how did he get presented to the film audience?

Production

The film *Kristian* (Kristian) was made in 1939 by Lucernafilm in the film studios of AB Barrandov. The filming took place from 2nd to 25th May 1939. Before its creation, the comedy was discussed by the Film Advisory Board and the project's viability was not at all certain. Václav Binovec, the chairman of the Czechoslovak Film Union, for example criticized the project, based on a French play, for its foreign, non-original subject matter.[1] The aversion to French themes is not surprising, given that we are talking about the period a few months after the Munich Agreement was signed. Josef Hořička, the chairman of the Central Union of Cinematographers, was bothered by the fact that the film glorifies snobbery, the environment of mondain bars, and fancy women. The only one who could have been really heard defending the upcoming film was Miloš Havel, who, on the contrary, pointed to its commercial and export potential.

The film was thus put into production with a budget of approx. CZK710,000 (together with 15 exploitation film copies it cost nearly CZK800,000). Oldřich Nový starring in the double role of Alois Novák alias Kristian got CZK20,000 out of the total costs.

The film was directed by Martin Frič. There were two scriptwriters: assistant director Eduard Šimáček and actor Josef Gruss. Josef Gruss is also the author of the film's theme song, *Just for Today* (Jen pro ten dnešní den). Two years later, Gruss wrote the script for yet another film by Frič – *The Hard Life of an Adventurer* (Těžký život dobrodruha, 1941) – and later directed one of the most successful films made after the 1948 Czechoslovak coup d'état, *The Stone Table Inn* (Hostinec „U kamenného stolu“, 1948).

Martin Frič received the National St. Wenceslas Award for his direction of *Kristian*. Adina Mandlová received the same award for Best Actress. Famous for her irony, Mandlová slightly downplayed her award at the time, saying that it should have gone to the designer Hana Podolská who sew all the costumes for *Kristian*. According to Mandlová's recollections, Oldřich Nový was also supposed to receive the film prize, but he did not – because of his wife's Jewish background.[3]

Theatre play vs film

The script was based on a French play by playwright Yvan Noé. This play was successfully staged by the Prague Chamber Theatre (Komorní divadlo) already in the autumn of 1935, four years before the film. The main role had been played by Bedřich Vrbský, the role of Zuzana by the then unknown Nataša Gollová. She later played in the film – not Zuzana, but Alois's wife Marie.

However, the story of the play which the audience could see in the Chamber Theatre, was completely different to the one later offered to the film audience. Screenwriters Šimáček and Gruss substantially reworked and expanded the original French work. They added new characters and themes and, most importantly, changed the overall feel of the story. They emphasized the comedic potential, which gradually fades away in the play and the ending itself has an explicitly tragic flavour.

First of all, the characters of the main characters have changed significantly:

The central character of the play is Vincent Jourdain, a clerk at the Ministry of Agriculture, an elderly and unattractive gentleman (the theatrical Zuzana assesses him with a diffident, “I don’t know who you are. You are not handsome, you are not young.”). The main character in the film is Alois Novák (a symbol of elegance as played by Oldřich Nový), an employee of a travel agency. Thanks to his job, he is able to faithfully tell stories of travel and exoticism, which lends him an aura of mystery.

The theatrical Zuzana is a rather mondain lady, a voluntarily kept woman of many men. She actually has three boyfriends. Vincenc glosses their role in Zuzana’s life as follows: the car dealer Roger is the “official concubinus” with whom Zuzana spends time only because “women’s clothes are expensive;” the sportsman Jacques is the lover of today’s day; and the film actor André the lover of tomorrow’s day. The professions of Zuzana’s lovers are not accidental – the play explicitly communicates that spiritual love (for Kristian) is more powerful than money (Roger), power (Jacques), and romance (André). Despite her living high, the theatrical Zuzana is essentially a simple, naive girl. But the film’s Zuzana is a modern, emancipated and intelligent woman with a sense of humour who has only one boyfriend and maintains a rather platonic, social relationship with him. The difference between the two Zuzanas can also be demonstrated by how differently the final line, heard in identical wording both in the play and the film, sounds: “I used to think that if one is to laugh, one must have a reason to laugh, and if one is to cry, one must have a reason to cry... And now I could cry or laugh – for you – at your will! That’s beautiful, Kristian!” While the theatrical Zuzana is deadly serious in her final line and must suppress her sincere tears while delivering this, in the film the same words (spoken by Adina Mandlová) are meant as irony. The film’s Zuzana confesses to Kristian only for show, only to then throw it in his face that she saw through his game right from the beginning and wanted to punish him.

The character of Alois’s wife was changed even more. Vincent’s wife Julie is, to put it mildly, a loud-mouthed vixen. She berates both her husband and their maid who even quits her job because of the insufferable landlady. But the film’s wife Marie is lovely and rather naive – a charming wife despite her simplicity and whining. A mother-hen tending the warmth of the family hearth (without the help of a maid). She loves her husband faithfully and out of love for him, she undergoes a transformation at the end of the film.

But the greatest intervention into the original play can be found at the very end of the story. The play's Vincenc is being stultified by his work at the ministry. His wife wants to leave him after she finds out about his escapades. Vincent then voluntarily gives up his adventurous trips, his only pleasure. In the end, he does not divorce his wife, but he remains unhappy. He would like to live a different life, with different people, with a different profession. Yet he takes a defeatist stance – his native environment supposedly predestined him to the life he is living. Vincent is incapable of change and ends tragically.

For the film's Alois, on the other hand, working in a travel agency is an opportunity to dream of travelling. After his double life is revealed, he returns to the family hearth, his wife forgives him and even claims to understand his aversion to stereotypes and his desire for change. The film's Alois, unlike the play's one, does not long for young, beautiful Zuzana, who, although formidable, is still a bit cold. Zuzana belongs to another world, and Alois realises that. He knows well that a man like him, rather humble and conservative at heart, can only find happiness by the side of his lovely naive Marie.

This is the most significant deviation from the original. The play's Vincent warns us, saying: We're not supposed to pretend we're something we're not. Hopeless dreams end tragically. The film's hero almost took this message up as well, as is evident from the surviving synopsis where the plot is still abject to the theatrical one. It concludes with the following motto: "The world would not be the world and life would not be life if there were not one bond common to all human beings: the eternal and perhaps never fulfilled [!] longing for the ideal."^[4] What does the film's Alois tell us in contrast? Let us dream. Let us enjoy life to the full. Even in the mundane reality one can find adventure.

Compared to the film, the play also lacks poetry in its language and plot construction. The replicas of the characters are more caustic, more vulgar in meaning (Julie calls her husband Vincenzo "you filthy pig"). Their motivations are often overtly low and their morals questionable. For example, the characters talk openly about who is sleeping with whom or who wants to sleep with whom and what they are asking for in return (Roger, the film's Fred, refers to Zuzana as an originally very poor "girl from the streets" to whom he gave a large sum of money in exchange for a love affair).

Period atmosphere

Kristian premiered on 8th September 1939. Let us imagine for a moment that we are attending this première. It is 8th September 1939. A year ago, in September 1938, the rest of Europe betrayed us. The Munich Agreement was signed and, with a view to maintaining peace in Europe, our Western “friends” gave Germany our Sudetenland. Six months ago, in March 1939, Hitler usurped the rest of Bohemia and Moravia. A protectorate was established. And exactly one week ago, on 1st September 1939, the Germans invaded Poland, and the Second World War began. You and your families have lived through the First World War, which ended 21 years ago. You remember well what a conflict of this magnitude can bring. And now you are sitting in a cinema which, by the way, no Jew shares with you, because a month ago – in August 1939 – they were banned from visiting the pictures. So you are sitting in the cinema and you want to forget about life out there, outside the screening room, at least for a while. Oldřich Nový sings his most famous song. *Just for today, life is worth living for...*

Here it is necessary to remember that people in the Protectorate perceived these words differently. The present was bad and the future uncertain. Under these conditions, everything really was “just for today” – because we may not be here tomorrow.

In the estate of Josef Gruss, there is the original text of the song. He wrote: “You mustn’t ask: is tomorrow perhaps going to bring what yesterday brought.” The word “**perhaps**” describes the uncertainty of the Protectorate occupation. Will it ever end? Or will Germany rule us forever? Or will someone else rule us forever? This is also the form in which the text was included in the technical script, but the typescript is corrected by hand in pencil: “You mustn’t ask: is tomorrow going to bring **again** what yesterday brought.” This is the version Oldřich Nový sings in the film. A small but essentially fundamental correction. The overall tone is more relaxed, more carefree, in short, a hedonistic shrug-off, without fear or tension. *Kristian* could have sung a love song to Zuzana that would have copied the motifs of popular hits of the time – about her beauty and charms or about blue-skied horizons and Cairo the travel agent is raving about in the film. Instead, Gruss wrote a universally valid message the altogether hedonistic sense of which is easy to identify with for the viewer even in today’s consumerist era. There is no doubt that *Kristian*’s song is essential to the film. Thanks to it, *Kristian* wins over not only Zuzana, but also the viewers across

generations. It can be said that *Just for Today* has become an acknowledged musical synonym of the First Czechoslovak Republic (paradoxically despite the film's Protectorate origins).

The message of the film

People often ask what makes *Kristian* special, why it should be put on a pedestal. After all, there are many other hilarious comedies of the time, for example *The Blue Star Hotel* (*Hotel Modrá hvězda*) or *Eva Fools Around* (*Eva tropí hlouposti*). Is it fair? It is, considering that *Kristian* is not only a great social comedy, but it stands out above other comedies for its extraordinarily human dimension as well. Similarly to Alois Novák, each of us sometimes longs to be someone else. If only for a moment, if only in the eyes of others. All of us sometimes long to escape from the hard, stereotypical reality and achieve different qualities and dimensions in our lives. The contemporary critic Oldřich Kautský summed it up perfectly in his review:

“In film, the main characters are usually exceptional people. People who have had something happen to them, or who are interesting enough by nature to capture the viewer's attention. But such people are a tiny minority in the world. Millions have nothing happen to them in a lifetime. [...] And in a time of a complete lack of new subjects, [*Kristian*] reaches out to places film has never before turned to. It does not strive to portray a bland man but one man of a million of nameless and uninteresting ones. [...] Even a little man can experience a romantic story without having to travel all around the world. [...] Even for people who are in a hurry on their way from work, there is a beautiful world if they can imagine it. For everything that is written and invented in the world belongs to everyone. [...] It is beautiful to live our own life while being convinced that all the beauty of the world is made for us. The awareness of the greatness and splendour of the world belongs to us as well, even though we may be sipping coffee in Prague centre, far from the sea or the Indian forests – it adds an unknown magic to everyday life. [...] The film about *Kristian* is a comedy for people who think and feel. Its subject matter is beyond the average and its treatment is of the level of a European film.”[5]

Would you agree?

Notes:

[1] OPA NFA, fond FPS, inv. č. 22, Schůze č. 169–204, 1939. Zápis o 179. schůzi FPS, 2. května 1939, p. 8.

[2] FOND: Prag-Film A.Gr. (A-B), sig. VI/d, inv. 534/

[3] Adina Mandlová. *Dneska už se tomu směju*. Praha: Československý filmový ústav 1990, p. 72.

[4] NFA fond: FRIČ Martin (1902–1968), sig. III 8) 2), inv.č. 234.

[5] *Kinorevue* no. 44, 21/06/1939, p. 343–345.