

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 28. 7. 2023

# Little Mermaid

The story of Rusalka, a water demoness from Slavic mythology, has been reworked many times by many authors. Hans Christian Andersen approached it in a distinctive way. His 1836 *Little Mermaid* gives up her voice for the prince and leaves home. But she is not accepted by the people as a human being and her love remains unrequited, with tragic consequences. The story of desire and sacrifice is nowadays interpreted as a queer allegory based on the feeling of being rejected that the Danish storyteller experienced as a gay man. He supposedly intended the tale to be a love letter to his close friend Edward Collin with whom he was in love. *Little Mermaid* was written in the same year Collin announced his engagement to his wife.

“Queer” in the original meaning of the word, i.e. strange, not fitting in, is also a film adaptation of the classic story made by Karel Kachyňa in 1976. In the 1970s, the director of the politically delicate films *A Carriage Going to Vienna* (Kočár do Vídně), *The Nun's Night* (Noc nevěsty) and *The Ear* (Ucho) returned to the world of children and adolescents who he had masterfully navigated in the early years of his career (see *The Slinger* [Práče] or *Trials and Tribulations* [Trápení]). In addition to the family film about a polio boy, *Jumping over Puddles Again* [Už zase skáču přes kaluže], the last film Jan Procházka worked on with him, he also made *The Train to the Heaven Station* [Vlak do stanice Nebe], *The Girl Robinson* (Robinsonka) and the fairytale *Little Mermaid* [Malá mořská víla] in the relatively free conditions of the Barrandov children's film group.

For the latter one, Ota Hofman, the acclaimed writer and script editor of children films, wrote the script in 1975, on the centenary of Anderson's death. (At the same time, the script for *The Snow Queen*, which was supposed to be directed by Věra Plívová-Šimková, was written.)<sup>[1]</sup> He did not interfere in any significant way with the draft. He maintained the young heroine in love and living in the sea as well as the central motifs of self-sacrifice and of futile, stubborn pursuit of a single life goal.

The fate of the queen, the heroine's mother, adds to the compactness of the story. However, in accordance with the ideology of the period (and in response to the co-production with Soviet Mosfilm), Hofman made changes to the Christian martyr-like end. The protagonist is not granted redemption, salvation, and life after life.

With a finished script, however, the filmmakers were faced with the challenge of realizing an underwater fairy tale in a landlocked state. They rejected the possibility of diving shots because of their difficulty. According to Kachyňa, a completely original scenery would have had a mashed-up effect.<sup>[2]</sup> He wanted to take into account that Andersen depicts the world of sea creatures in much the same way as the world of land creatures. In the end, the well-chosen locations and lots of blue smoke helped. Scenes from the underwater realm were filmed in the Prachov Rocks near the town of Jičín, especially in the Emperor's Corridor, stone steps which the characters in the film are constantly running up and down in slow motion. Other scenes were shot at Veltrusy Castle, Rock Castle Sloup, Mořina Quarry, and the Wallenstein Garden in Prague.

"We wanted to make a believable picture of the sea, yet it must have not been a naturalistic description of the depths of the sea as we know it from diving pictures. During the photographic exploration, we were most attracted by the genuine artistic elements of the local sandstone rocks – surely also because there was once a real sea bed right here,"<sup>[3]</sup> Kachyňa explained the choice of locations in a contemporary report from the filming. The blending of romanticism and realism that characterises Andersen's texts, the essentially realistic stories in which fairytale things happen, also occurs in the film – in a strikingly stylized imagery which was significantly contributed to the cameraman Jaroslav Kučera.

The smoke bombs helped to soften the image and co-determine the colour scheme of the land dominated by cool shades of blue and green. The terrestrial world where the last third of the film is set is represented by shinier materials and warmer and more vivid colours that sometimes penetrate even underwater through some of the props – such as the red rose and the ruby on the ring. The jewellery for the film was created by Ester Krumbachová and, as in other films she worked on, her pieces are not purely decorative. They actively influence the plot and provide protection to those who wear them (just as the amulets that Krumbachová made for her friends and that were

intended to bear various magical functions).

Krumbachová worked on the film as an art director. Šárka Hejnová was entrusted with the artistic conception and costumes, an essential part of the *mise-en-scène*. She dressed the actors in gowns similar to the Greek chitons and in cold muted tones. Boulders replaced the furniture and various shells, pearls, and objects from wrecks sunken to the seabed were used for decoration. The visual character of the underwater world is completed by excessive hair creations on the heads of the actors, made up of various twigs, seaweed, and flags. The landscapes, masks and costumes thus intertwine and complement each other.

Zdeněk Liška composed the music for several of Kachyňa's films for children in the 1970s. *Little Mermaid* was no exception. In this case, he used electronic generator music along with a film symphony orchestra and female vocals. This combination captures the dark nature of the story and contributes to the mysterious and, for the youngest members of the audience, perhaps at times even frightening atmosphere of the almost silent underwater scenes in which the characters often express themselves with movements reminiscent of ritualised dance or trance (the fairy must go among mortals completely wordless).

The unusually bleak tale, more poetic than plot-based, defies the then usual optimistic nature of works for youth. It is completely different to any other adaptation of this Andersen tale as well (and least of all to the Disney one). The existential undertones, the thematization of mortality, and the dreamlike stylization, unintentionally evoking foreign avant-garde films by Kenneth Anger, Jean Cocteau or Maya Deren (and looking at contemporary filmmakers, also films by Bertrand Mandic, for example, with just a little bit of exaggeration) rather than classic Czech fairy tales, will probably be appreciated especially by older viewers with a taste for obscure, hypnotic and hypothetically cult works.

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**Little Mermaid** (Czechoslovakia 1976), director: Karel Kachyňa, script: Ota Hofman, Karel Kachyňa, cinematography: Jaroslav Kučera, music: Zdeněk Liška, cast: Miroslava Šafránková, Radovan Lukavský, Petr Svojtka, Marie Rosůlková, Milena Dvorská, Libuše Šafránková, Jiří Ornest, Dagmar Patrasová et al. Barrandov Film Studios, 84 min.

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**Notes:**

[1] Eva Hepnerová, Před premiérou filmu Malá mořská víla. Rozhovor s režisérem Karlem Kachyňou. *Film a doba* 22, 1976, no. 2, p. 76.

[2] Ibid, p. 79.

[3] Jana Bednářová, Kde v Čechách bydlí mořské víly... *Kino* 31, 1976, no. 6 (23/03), p. 9.