

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 11. 1. 2023

# “Mareček, Please Pass Me a Pen!”

Following the extraordinary success of the crazy comedy *Joachim, Put Him into the Machine!* (Jáchyme, hoď ho do stroje! [1974]), Ladislav Smoljak and Zdeněk Svěrák wrote a script from an environment particularly close to their hearts. Both of them had previously worked as teachers, and also in a working-class evening school, among others. It was in this environment that they set in their second, equally popular film “*Mareček, Please Pass Me a Pen!*” („Marečku, podejte mi pero!“ [1976]). Oldřich Lipský, a proven director who had collaborated with the popular screenwriting duo four times, took up the role again.

„We have been thinking about it for a long time, that we must write something about school and especially about teachers, because we know school not only as pupils“, Smoljak and Svěrák explained in a contemporary report from the shooting.[1] There, they also add that they found the topic of an ordinary school tried and tiring. Apparently, they were referring to the student dramas by Martin Frič (*The Ideal Schoolmaster* [Kantor Ideál, 1932], *School Is the Foundation of Life* [Škola základ života, 1938], *Journey into the Depth of the Student's Soul* [Cesta do hlubin študákovy duše, 1939]) and the drama by Miroslav Cikán *We Are Studying Outside the School* (Studujeme za školou, 1939). Therefore, in their film, they focused on school, where students are often older than their teachers.

The sentence from the film's title is uttered in his trembling voice before the examination by the respected Czech language teacher Hrbolek in an unforgettable performance by František Kovařík. When one of the students asked does not know the answer to his question, Hrbolek evaluates the performance with a saddened statement that we can sometimes hear even today: „You didn't please me, boy. I won't please you either“. Similarly, many other examples of Cimrmanian play with words,

which are heard in a classroom of pupils advanced in age, have become widely used by the general public.

Just like in any group of students, we can also find the class pranksters here (Ladislav Smoljak and Zdeněk Svěrák), the insistent try-hard (Josef Kemr) or the fawning Hujer (Václav Lohniský), who insinuates himself into his teachers' favour with plums from his garden. We are introduced to this set of caricatures by a more deeply elaborated character of Jiří Kroupa (Jiří Sovák), a foreman from an agricultural machinery factory. He is not happy about his return to school but if he wants to keep his job in a fully automated operation, he has no choice. He must retrain.

As in *Joachim*, the protagonist's life is interfered with by the scientific and technological revolution, to which one is forced to give way. The morose careerist Kroupa, relying more on his own experience and common sense rather than the achievements of modern technology, submits to it rather reluctantly. As a result, however, he gains the opportunity to run operations from a comfortable glass cabin, which was probably his main motivation, while he is also able to communicate better with his son (Sovák's real son Jiří Schmitzer), who offers to tutor him in mathematics.

The fact that the son and father both attend the same school and class, one during the day, the other in the evening, results in a number of humorous confusions and complications. For example, a classmate of Kroupa senior believes that the factory foreman is awkwardly asking her out on a date in the cemetery. By the time it becomes clear that the note was written by his son and addressed to his peer, who sees the cemetery as a place of romantic rendezvous rather than eternal rest, Kroupa's marriage almost falls apart.

At that time, Smoljak and Svěrák were already better adapted to filmmaking and were partly involved in casting. For example, they tailored the main male roles directly to Jiří Sovák and Jiří Schmitzer. Nevertheless, they fully trusted Lipský during the production itself, which took place in the Roudnice engineering plant or in a former school building in Dušní Street in Prague, as well as during the direction of the situational gags. Lipský was also the one who found Tomáš Holý for the film. The nephew of a prop maker stepped in at the last minute for a sick child actor. He portrayed the pupil Matula carrying a message from the headmaster. Not long later,

when Lipský was preparing the family film *Long Live Ghosts!* (*Ať žijí duchové!* [1977]), he was able to offer a larger role to Holý.

Even though it is again a stylized comedy, it does not exaggerate and ridicule the common facts of late socialist reality to the same extent as *Joachim*. The characters may represent abstract types, but they are experiencing situations one can believe, it is easier to sympathise with them and perceive the social-critical level of the story through them. The more civilized conception corresponds to the author's intention to express „admiration for those who still return to school many years after leaving it and sit down in the evening after work to continue studying“.[2]

Greater screenwriting independence is evident in the compositional precision of the narrative. Some of the jokes, such as the one with the person named Hliník (Aluminium), who has moved to the town of Humpolec, are set up throughout the plot so that they can shine when we no longer expect a punchline. A witty, sophisticated and smoothly flowing film with no blank spots has been seen in Czech cinemas by over two million viewers since its premiere at the summer Workers' Film Festival while millions more have since then watched it on TV screens and streaming platforms.

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**“Mareček, Please Pass Me a Pen!”** (Czechoslovakia 1976), director: Oldřich Lipský, screenplay: Ladislav Smoljak, Zdeněk Svěrák, director of photography: Jiří Macák, music: Svatopluk Havelka, cast: Jiří Sovák, Václav Lohniský, Iva Janžurová, Míla Myslíková, Josef Kemr, Ladislav Smoljak, Zdeněk Svěrák, František Kovářík, Josef Abrahám and others. Film studio Barrandov, 93 min.

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#### **Notes:**

[1] Olga Kühnelová, *Nová komedie Oldřicha Lipského. Záběr*, no. 2, 1976, p. 3.

[2] Ivan Hrdina, *Zítřka to snad natočíme aneb Těžká cesta za českou komedií. Scéna*, no. 14, 1976, p. 6.