

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 16. 4. 2021

# Miloš Makovec

“Back then, he seemed insipid and harmless, endlessly smoking and flicking ash, and his excessive cordiality aroused both trust and compassion” remembers Daňa Horáková Miloš Makovec, who was a close friend and card partner of her husband, Pavel Juráček.<sup>[1]</sup> Both men met at the Film and TV School of AMU, where Makovec was teaching directing in the fifties. According to Horáková, the two men “bonded” probably during the St. Nicholas party in 1957.

Horáková assumes that Makovec’s “civic decency most likely restrained his artistic ambitions.” However, she adds that “maybe, he was just not too overconfident and knew he was more of a skilled artificer rather than a chosen one bound by his art to ‘fight the regime’.”<sup>[2]</sup> At first, Juráček saw him less amicably as a director “without flight, fantasy or idea.”<sup>[3]</sup> At the same time, however, he deemed Makovec one of those conceited, overconfident and prematurely burn-out “uncles, tricksters and bourgeois people”<sup>[4]</sup>. Later though it seems that just like Horáková, he found the artist within him, who “never got embarrassed, sold to the extent to deserve a state’s prize or one of those generously subsidised titles like ,the Artist of Merit, ”,<sup>[5]</sup> and after his initial despise Juráček took mercy on him.

But perhaps Juráček never changed his opinion about Makovec drastically; perhaps he had spent sufficient time with him and got to know him well enough to be able to appreciate more aspects of his personality. It is quite similar to Makovec’s filmography. At first glance, most of it are time-conforming titles of mediocre artistic quality [*The Merry Duel (Veselý souboj)*, *Visitors from the Clouds (Návštěva z oblak)*, *A Hefty Fellow (Chlap jako hora)*]. When taking a closer look, however, we discover works that visibly stand out of the production at the time and enrich it with new themes [*The Great Adventure (Velké dobrodružství)*, *Lost People (Ztracenci)*, *An Easy Life (Snadný život)*]. In the fifties, Makovec was among the first directors who deviated from the concepts of social realism, showed greater stylistic courage and

turned away from fabricated conflicts to the real problems of the time. Simultaneously he continued to shoot comedies agitating for cohesion among people, exemplary leading of a team or civil defence education.

Miloš Makovec was born on 11 December 1919 in Turnov. He got into films when he was 13 and played a second grader (in an eight-year grammar school) in a school drama by Vladislav Vančura and Svatopluk Innemann *Before the Finals (Před maturitou)* [1932]. Vančura's excitement for films is said to make him dedicate himself to the same media. After his own finals, he worked as a director and short films screenwriter between 1940-1943 (*Defilé, Práce a peníze, Radost všem*). He then got employed at the news Aktuality and was one of the cameramen who filmed the uprising in May in Prague. With his colleagues Čeněk Zahradníček and František Herman they formed a crew of the Aktuality news car and were filming the events in streets of Prague.

In the post-war years, Makovec first shot several distinct documentaries for Short Film Prague. In a film about repatriation *Cesta zpátky* (1946), he showed Czechoslovakia as awoken, working nation fully occupied with building a new state. In his dynamic *Vesnice na rozcestí* (1948) he and a team of reporters ask villagers about the country's problems caused by mechanisation in agriculture and the transfer to socialism. The propagational short film where a British cameraman travelled western Bohemia to shoot a film about Czechoslovak spa *Na shledanou, Karlovy Vary* (1949) was remarkable too. After the war, a group of makers formed in the production of documentary films, who started shooting not only documentaries and reports but also short actors' films. Some of them were Jiří Krejčík, Elmar Klos, Bořivoj Zeman or Miloš Makovec.

In educational actors' comedy *What to Do with It? (Kam s ním?)* [1947], which encourages viewers to engage in mass collecting of paper, rags and metal, the screenwriter deals with the task to shoot a film about scrap materials. He finds inspiration in famous Neruda's feuilleton. The actors' novel *They Live Among Us (Žijí mezi námi)* [1948] was meant as a moral warning. In it, Makovec contrasts a happy household of young spouses and a bar full of drunkards and dubious characters. In this way, the film gives an illustrative example of how alcohol contributes to the disintegration of society. Useful tips from youth sex education brings the educational

film *About the Little Ones for the Grown-Ups (O malých pro velké)* [1948], for which Makovec himself invented the theme and script, just like for the previous film. He often used to write the original theme, technical and literary script for his projects also between 1948 and 1968 as an employee in the Film Studio Barrandov.

Makovec's feature film debut was a constructive drama *The Case of Doctor Kovář (Případ dr. Kováře)* [1950]. He followed up a story of a young doctor, who fights for the working people's health in a pre-Munich Republic, with the film *The Merry Duel (Veselý souboj)* [1950]. A comedy set up in a tram depot in Prague's district Libeň introduces us to members of the company's sports club who are so positively influenced by a young female company's doctor that the men decide to take part in the competition for the Tyrš's Badge of Fitness. The young doctor, who proves her competence despite the prejudices of the group of men ("for women do not have mathematical brain"), is played by Vlasta Matulová after having a few-year break from acting. One of the most attended comedies of the post-war decade (perhaps also thanks to Jaroslav Marvan in the leading man role) was filmed as part of a new topical plan which promoted comedies satirising anachronisms of the past and serving the constructive efforts. The film was reviewed from that perspective also by the critics of the time: "Overall, *The Merry Duel* is another step on the way to a good film comedy which tries to bring our film viewer a truly valuable entertainment."<sup>[6]</sup>

Apart from constructive comedies, a great number of portrayals of prominent figures were being made in the fifties. These were mainly biographical dramas by Václav Krška (*The Violin and the Dream (Housle a sen)*, *Mikolás Ales (Mikoláš Aleš)*, *Youthful Years (Mladá léta)*, *Messenger of Dawn (Posel úsvitu)*, *From My Life (Z mého života)*) but also *The Secret of Blood (Tajemství krve)* by Martin Frič or *Sons of the Mountains (Synové hor)* directed by Čeněk Doba. Makovec joined them with his film about the traveller Emil Holub *The Great Adventure (Velké dobrodružství)* [1952]. Together with screenwriter Jiří Brdečka, they utilised the increased interest in the African continent aroused by books and reports by Hanzelka and Zikmund. Holub, played by Otomar Krejča, is a character misunderstood by the bourgeois society who the greedy imperialists try to exploit for their own goals. However, thanks to his patriotism, humanism and progressive spirit, he does not let them to. A celebration of desire for knowledge and fulfilling life is permeated by Holub's poetic speeches, clearly reflecting also the post-war situation of the society in the United States and other

western countries: “It is sad there are people in the world who do not see a black man as a man but as an indigenous person, a primitive. We have to fight to change this. We all have to strive for a better world.”

The fact that Makovec was subsumed into the category of reliable artists is proven by his profile published in the weekly magazine of the time *Filmové informace*, in which he is introduced as “exceptionally gifted and reasonably ambitious director whose constantly increasing artistic quality promises him to become one of the leading Czech directors.”<sup>[7]</sup>

Evil comes from the capitalistic West also in a spy thriller set in large commercial docks *North Dock (Severní přístav)* [1954]. The shooting of the film intended to make its viewers more watchful and alert took place in a dock in Děčín on the river Elbe where the crew was assisted by ship captains and sailors. The critics did not find the script very good for, in their opinion, it replaced old topics with unlikely turns of events. However, they thought the shortcomings of the script were in many places overcome by Makovec’s directing, giving hints of previous meticulous preparation. Three months before the shooting, Makovec and his cameraman Rudolf Milíč clearly determined how individual scenes would look like for its composition required an exact positioning of the ships. The report from shooting also notices how Makovec “emphasises actors’ performance and carefully analyses each word, gesture, and instruction with them”.<sup>[8]</sup>

The absence of nerve-racking moments, typical for capitalistic works of that genre, was praised as well. From today’s viewer perspective, the plot of *North Dock* can, on the contrary, seem stiff, and the film will rather engage the viewer by its style – long varied scenes using intra-scene montage, the dynamics of which change depending on how characters move in space and initiate actions in different image planes. Attractive stylistic approaches were also praised by critics of that time: “The whole film clearly bears the sign of his distinctive work. However, we could object that some parts of the film had been too precisely mathematically calculated, that one can feel too much of a cold sense used to make it, and that in some instances those calculations even become autotelic. But we cannot deny the director to have a clear idea of the work and closely following it [...] Besides other things, he demonstrated he was able to use purely film means of expression, arouse tension and thrill, and had

been able to use those qualities already in the script.“[\[9\]](#)

The theme of comedy *Visitors from the Clouds* (1955) was created by Vratislav Blažek. By doing so, he complied with the requirement for the film to popularise the activities of Svazarm (The Union for Cooperation with the Army). The story of a group of paratroopers who want to capture the chairman of JZD (United Agricultural Cooperative) as a joke to prove to him the importance of parachuting contained a number of scenes difficult to make. One of them required a fifty-member Svazarm acrobatic group from Pardubice to take part, another one to demonstrate motorcycle acrobatics and combat preparations. The actors also had to undergo special training to improve at driving motor vehicles and to try out falling, jumping, and crawling. This time, however, the careful preparation did not deliver the expected response from the critics. Some of them mentioned inanimate characters, implausible portrayal of the village, and also too narrow plot. Overall, *Visitors from the Clouds* was viewed as a shallow and distorting film.

The most valuable film in Makovec's career is considered *Lost People* (1956), an anti-war drama freely inspired by a theme by Alois Jirásek. An intimate ballad-like film observing the trio of army deserters from the Teresian wars surpassed the approach to historical material at that time. It was not descriptive or thematically one-sided and had no propagandistic function, but looked more generally into the sense of war, victory and human life. The accent there was put on expressing the mood of fear and creating the atmosphere of that time. Another similarly raw picture of the past focused on minor events rather than the big is offered only when *The Devil's Trap* (*Ďáblova past*) [1961] by František Vlácil comes out. *Lost People* received awards at many festivals and were recognised at home and abroad. In 1959, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, a co-founder of French monthly magazine *Cahiers du cinéma* wrote about them the following: “This film, which premiered at the international film festival in Cannes in 1957 has not lost anything of its value to us, it has become even more up-to-date...”[\[10\]](#)

The suggestive visual side of Makovec's film was described by Ivan Dvořák in more detail for magazine *Kultura*: “In *Lost People*, Vladimír Novotný showed himself as a poet of a black-and-white picture. By using functional light contrasts, Makovec turned the three soldiers' journey for a safe shelter into a ballad-like anabasis; and

by carefully supporting actors' performance in dynamically differentiated changing shots, he turned the characters' dialogues into a dramatic clash of people and ideas. A visual ballad-like rhythm in dramatically serious scenes escalated into a lightning action."[\[11\]](#)

After the drama *Easy Life* (1957) to which we dedicated a separate [text](#), Makovec shot the story *A Legal Case* (*Právní případ*) for Čapek's triptych *Of Things Supernatural* (*O věcech nadpřirozených*) [1958]]. On the film which adapted several short stories by Karel Čapek also worked Jiří Krejčík and Josef Mach. Makovec adjusted Čapek's work with an experienced scriptwriter and script editor František Daniel. According to a report of that time, he then continued tuning-up the script also during filming and gave his best to every detail. Thanks to its flair and tempo, his story was deemed the best of the whole film.

In the sixties, Makovec's comedy *A Hefty Fellow* (1960), which promoted the socialistic workgroups' movement, started screening in cinemas. Also, in this case, it was based on a theme by Vratislav Blažek. The protagonist portrayed by František Peterka had to attain the knowledge that an individual should not overestimate his strengths at the expense of the group, which is summed up by the final caustic line: "Clap your hands, everybody does." The undemanding film was not criticised only by journalists (see the quoted review below), but also by the newly-appointed director of the Czechoslovak State Film Alois Poledňák, who used it as an example of a return to schematism and loss of exacting artistic standards.

"If you like Vratislav Blažek as the author of contemplative comedies *Třetí přání* and *Příliš štědrý večer* or as the author of comedies inclining to a farce, sharp, humorous style, where there is no lack of fun, even a bit casual – you will not recognise him there. If you think Miloš Makovec is a very talented director who can do an interesting job even with a poorer theme and that after *Lost People* he is still waiting for a good screenplay, you will be right only in the latter part."[\[12\]](#)

The more relaxed situation in the country during the sixties was symbolised by the musical comedy *Two Men from Another World* (*Dva z onoho světa*) [1962], in which Oldřich Nový plays the part of a strict music teacher, a stubborn enemy of jazz, and also his twin, an American jazzman. The American guest comes out of the film as a

more relaxed and friendly character than his stiff Czechoslovak brother. In choosing this genre and complementing a brothers' dispute with a subsidiary affair of two young lovers, we can see the effort to offer the Czechoslovak youth an analogue to western musicals, despite the actors' jerky choreography, using kitschy romantic scenes and texts such as "If Saganova were to be my wife, I would drive her away because of you, because of you", resemble from today's perspective more to the parodic film *Smoke (Kouř)* rather than the *West Side Story*.

In coproduction with the East German company DEFA, an adventurous drama from the beginning of the Second World War *Prague at Zero Hour (Praha, nultá hodina)* [1962] was made. German emigrants seek political asylum in Czechoslovakia after fleeing Nazi Germany. In the tendentious film, they are given a helping hand by Czech and German communists, illegally building the foundations of the anti-Nazi resistance. While the film was being made, Makovec had a dispute with the author of the theme Jan Koplowitz, who allegedly did not like the fact that the script belittles the work of anti-fascism fighters and puts too much emphasis on action and thriller features. Makovec's last feature film was the psychological crime drama *Four in a Circle (Čtyři v kruhu)* [1967]. A film built on complex psychological relationships and Jan Tříška's acting emphasises more its characters' psychology rather than detective features. Makovec finished his engagement in Barrandov a year later by the horror story *Poisoned Poisoner (Otrávená travička)* for *Prague Nights (Pražské noci)* [1968].

Apart from actors' and documentary films, Makovec also made several animated ones. With pseudonym Miloš Musil, he contributed to *Angelic Coat (Andělský kabát)* [1947], *The Emperor's Nightingale (Císařův slavík)* [1948], for which he directed played sequences, or *Ztracená varta* (1956). The last film was awarded a prize at the 7th International Festival of Documentary and Short Films in Venice. On International Films Meeting for Youth in Cannes, a certificate of merit was awarded to Makovec's work *Kotě* (1959), a combined tale in which a real kitten meets a kitten from woollen yarn.

Makovec finished his artistic work by writing the theme for crime film *Murderous Doubts (Vražedné pochybnosti)* [1978]. A director, who, even with less convincing, visibly thesis-based films, was able to demonstrate "incredible sense for film composition, film rhythm and strict characteristics with the use of solely film means",

[13] appeared shortly before his death in the age of eighty in Věra Chytilová's documentary *Flights and Falls (Vzlety a pády)* [2000].

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**Notes:**

[1] Daňa Horáková, *O Pavlovi*. Prague: Torst 2020, p. 19.

[2] Ibidem, p. 21.

[3] Pavel Juráček, *Deník (1959–1974)*. Prague: Národní filmový archiv 2003, p. 90.

[4] Ibidem, p. 303.

[5] Daňa Horáková, *O Pavlovi*. Prague: Torst 2020, p. 20.

[6] Antonín Malina, Veselý souboj. *Kino* 6, 1951, no. 3 (1. 2.), p. 54.

[7] Miloš Makovec. *Filmové informace*, 1952, no. 45 (6. 11.), p. 15.

[8] From shooting the film *North Dock*. *Filmové informace*, 1953, no. 37 (19. 9.), p. 10.

[9] Ludvík Veselý, Uchvátit srdce i mysl diváků! *Literární noviny* 3, 1954, no. 25 (29. 6.), p. 7.

[10] *Filmové informace*, 1959, no. 12 (25. 3.), p. 18.

[11] Ivan Dvořák, Ztracenci. *Kultura* 1, 1957, no. 20 (16. 5.), p. 5.

[12] Antonín J. Liehm, Kino a my. *Literární noviny* 9, 1960, no. 51 (21. 12.), p. 10.

[13] Antonín J. Liehm, Nad Návštěvou z oblak. *Film a doba*, 1955, no. 9–10, p. 452.