

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 6. 10. 2023

# Morgiana

After *The Cremator* (Spalovač mrtvol, 1968), Juraj Herz submitted three horror stories based on works by Ladislav Fuks (*Mrs. Mooshabrová's Mouses*, *Ball of the Deceased* and *Story of the Criminal Counsel*). The normalised management of nationalised film industry, however, didn't approve any of them. Instead, Herz made two other literary adaptations, decadent studies of the decomposition of the human body and spirit – psychological drama *Oil Lamps* (Petrolejšové lampy, 1961) and gothic horror *Morgiana* (1972). The latter is based on the story *Jessie and Morgiana* from 1929 written by Russian neo-romantic Aleksandr Stepanovich Grin. It depicts the disintegration of a relation between two sisters caused by greed, lust and black magic. Both of them, ethereal Klára and obsessively jealous Viktoria, are portrayed by Iva Janžurová. To this day, this atmospheric dark fairy-tale with mise-en-scène filled with symbols is appreciated as feminist camp. Thanks to British company Second Run, *Morgiana* has for some time been available on DVD abroad. It was also newly published in Blu-ray. Herz was offered the script to *Morgiana* by Vladimír Bor, head of one of Barrandov creative groups. But it wasn't the script that caught the director's interest, it was Grin's tragic fate. In Post-revolution Russia, no one wanted to publish his fantasy novels. He lived in poverty and starved to death. Herz, however, realised that thanks to Bor's patronage, the project could go smoothly. He decided to approach the archetypal story of love and hate and good in close vicinity to evil as a stylistic exercise.

Herz didn't like the conclusion of the story and the names of the sisters. He therefore renamed Jessie and Morgiana to Klára and Viktoria. Morgiana remained in the film, but it's the name of a Siamese cat whose perspective is used in some scenes (cinematographer Jaroslav Kučera used widescreen lenses deforming perspective). The working title of the script was *Black cat* (Černá kočka).

The story's ending was a bit more complicated. In Grin's original, the evil sister commits suicide and the good one survives poisoning. Just like a proper fairy tale, good triumphs over evil. But Herz's version had a twist known from many later American mind-game thrillers: when Klára awakens, she looks for Viktoria, but others assure her that she has no sister. It turns out that the protagonist is schizophrenic. When head dramaturge Ludvík Toman found out about this change, he immediately forbade it. According to Herz, his absurd reason was that schizophrenia is a bourgeois illness and has no place in socialist cinema.

Herz's intention was confirmed by Iva Janžurová in an interview with Milena Nyklová: "In *Morgiana*, Herz offered me to choose between the good and evil sister. I chose Morgiana, the evil one, as evil is always more dramatic, but at one point, there was a suggestion that I would play both sisters. The script subsequently underwent a lot of rewrites. In one version, it was supposed to be just one woman whose personality splits into good and evil parts, and the schizophrenia, the split, was supposed to happen in a feverish dream. In another version, Jessie, whose name was changed to Klára in the film, simply forgot she had an evil sister due to an illness." The preparatory works started in May 1971 and the film's budget was 4,6 million Czech Crowns. In July, the crew moved to Bulgaria to shoot exteriors. The shoot took place during peak tourist season in popular seaside resorts such as Balchick and Golden Sands. Thousands of tourists complicated accommodation and catering. Due to bad organisation on the Bulgarian side, the actors and crew were forced to change hotels and eat leftovers in restaurants.

"In order to keep the schedule, we were shooting up to 16 hours a day. The actors spent the entire time in heavy costumes and with make-up on, sweating. It often seemed like torture, just like standing in front of a thirsty person with a glass of water without offering a sip. We shot on dusty roads and in the forests because it was necessary for the film. We shot on steep slopes, often dozens of meters above the sea, it was quite dangerous," recalled Herz in an interview with Aleš Fuchs.

According to the production report, in addition to the unwilling Bulgarian crew and unreliable equipment, the production was affected by the weather. When the crew needed sun, it was overcast and vice versa. There was also the tragic death of actor Eva Blažková. In the role of Nela, she was replaced by Drahomíra Fialková who

happened to be on vacation in Bulgaria. The production was plagued even after returning to Czechoslovakia and many crew members fell ill due to exhaustion caused by the strenuous work. In September, the production resumed in the Barrandov Studios. But the process was far from smooth. The cat chosen and trained to play Morgiana went missing. The crew couldn't manage to find a replacement with the required characteristics and training. "When shooting with cats, their owners and trainers were present, but we weren't able to make the cats do the simplest tasks like drinking out of a bowl," explain the production materials. Due to disobedient cats, three shooting days were lost.

For the whole duration of the shoot, scenes with both sisters posed a big challenge. Herz described the complicated process in his memoirs *Autopsy: Director's Dissection* (Autopsie: pitva režiséra): "We covered half of the set and shot the scene. The camera naturally couldn't move because we then covered the second half of the set and shot the same scene with the second sister on exposed film material. We repeated the process in the scene when one sister observes the other in a mirror. First, we had to cover the mirror and shoot everything around it, then we covered the background of the mirror and shot the sister in the reflection."

Before every scene, Iva Janžurová spent a long time with make-up artists who drew inspiration from Klimt's Art Nouveau paintings. Also the interior set design is Art Nouveau and uses for instance wallpapers with flower motives. Klára feels the most comfortable in the garden, Viktorie surrounded by cliffs and in uninviting rooms.

The nature of both sisters is reflected also in costumes designed by Irena Greifová. The primary difference is, however, manifested in Janžurová's performance. Klára has a higher voice, her movement is light and she smiles a lot. Viktorie, on the other hand, has a coarser voice and aggressive movement and barely smiles. The oppressive atmosphere of the film is intensified by Luboš Fišer's orchestral music and Jaroslav Kučera's expressionist cinematography. Thanks to his cinematography, *Morgiana* is often considered to be the last film of the new wave. Kučera based the visual dynamics on the contrast between black and white while simultaneously emphasising the central motif of duality. Viktorie has an unhealthy pale complexion but dresses only in tight dresses of dark and cold colours. Her castle on rocky cliffs, where she lives with her cat Morgiana and terrified servants, is equally unwelcoming. Younger,

prettier and more naïve Klára is popular. She dresses in light and shiny colours. Her vitality is reflected in flowers surrounding her all the time. She represents joy, carelessness and lust for life which Viktorie misses. In a fit of jealousy, Viktorie decides to poison Klára with a slow poison. In the scenes with feverish hallucinations, Kučera found the perfect opportunity to experiment, mainly with light but also zoom and slow motion. In these scenes, the images are equally distorted as Klára's perception of reality.

The shoot finished in November 1971. Due to Janžurová's dual role, post-synchronisation and post-production took longer than anticipated and the budget was exceeded by 200 thousand crowns. That could have been one of the reasons why Herz was banned from filmmaking after *Morgiana*. But the main reason, according to the director himself, was the opinion of Ludvík Toman who, upon seeing the film at the approval screening, called *Morgiana* sadomasochist. Herz tried to convince that it was, in fact, a romantic film, as per their original agreement. But to no avail. In the following years, Herz was only allowed to direct in theatre and television.

According to Štěpán Hulík, Barrandov viewed *Morgiana* as one of the biggest artistic failures of 1972. But foreign audiences saw the film in a different light. It was probably the positive reception by Soviet filmmakers, for example screenwriter Nikolai Figurovsky, who in *Svobodné slovo* and *Záběr* said that this film is the best adaptation of Grin, an author "so popular home in the Soviet Union," that helped the film to be screened in cinemas.

In addition, the scary fairy-tale about two sisters and one cat won the Golden Hugo, the main prize of the Chicago International Film Festival. It also served as an inspiration for some foreign filmmakers. For instance Peter Strickland openly admits that he used Herz's symmetrical – and yes, possibly sadomasochistic – jewel while making his study of dominance and submission *The Duke of Burgundy* (2014).

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**Morgiana** (Czechoslovakia 1972), director: Juraj Herz, script: Vladimír Bor, Juraj Herz, cinematography: Jaroslav Kučera, music: Luboš Fišer, cast: Iva Janžurová, Josef Abrahám, Nina Divíšková, Petr Čepek, Josef Somr, Jiří Kodet, Jiří Lír, Ivan Palúch, Zuzana Fišárková et al. Barrandov Film Studios, 99 min.

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