

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 2. 8. 2024

# Oil Lamps

Jaroslav Havlíček's short stories, novellas, and novels include elements of naturalism and expressionism. But above all, he was a leading representative of Czech psychological prose. In his work, Havlíček mostly focused on the individual development of his characters and their complicated relationships. His first more extensive piece of work was the novel *Oil Lamps* (Petrolejobé lampy), which was meant to be the first part of a trilogy putting together a picture of the small-town milieu from the turn of the 20th century to the beginning of World War II. However, from the Ulrychovsko cycle, it was only *Lamps* that he completed. The following *Wolf's Skin* (Vlčí kůže) remained incomplete, and the last part of the trilogy has only been preserved in the form of the author's notes.

It was Karel Sezima, editor of the fiction *Lumír* weekly and a recognized literary critic, who inspired Havlíček to write a book about the tragic fate of Štěpa Kiliánová, a young woman struggling to find a purpose in life. This character, who refuses to comply with backward small-town norms, was meant to appear throughout the trilogy. In the town, she faces ridicule due to her free-spirited nature, unconventional behaviour and style of clothing. In that environment, it is difficult for her to find a suitable groom. In the end, she marries her worldly cousin, with resignation. It is only after the wedding that she finds out the weary soldier also suffers from syphilis.

The heroine's desires remain unfulfilled. This is what the name *Thirsty Lusts* (Vyprahlé touhy) referred to, under which the novel was first published in 1935 in a popular edition of the Sfinx Publishing House. However, Havlíček did not like the pandering title (he argued for *Oil Lanterns* (Petrolejobé svítilny)). He later revised the text to make it fit the broader concept of the planned trilogy. In 1944, a year after the writer's death, the revised version was published under its current name *Oil Lamps*. It was adapted for film nearly thirty years later. In the meantime, four other pieces by Havlíček were transformed into motion picture or TV films: *Barbora Hlavsová* (1942),

*Invisible* (Neviditelný, 1965), *The Third One* (Ta třetí, 1968), and *Butterfly and Death* (Motýl a smrt, 1968).

At the start of the normalization period, Juraj Herz was trying to make another adaptation of Ladislav Fuks' work, building on *Cremator* (Spalovač mrtvol, 1968). However, none of the projects was approved for production. At the same time, he was approached by the dramaturgist Václav Šašek with the first version of a screenplay based on *Oil Lamps*. Herz didn't like Šašek's screenplay too much, but the story attracted his attention. He therefore engaged another screenwriter, his friend Lubomír Dohnal, to adapt it this way. Nevertheless, the fee for the screenplay had already been paid to Šašek, at least according to Herz's recollection. Dohnal only got CSK 5,000, about a tenth of the usual fee.

Moreover, Šašek, whose screenplay had been approved by the central Barrandov dramaturgist Ludvík Toman, was contractually listed as one of the authors and so his name had to appear in the closing credits, even though the screenplay was written by Dohnal. After this failed attempt, Šašek still came back to Jaroslav Havlíček's work a few more times. Based on the novel *Invisible*, he wrote a screenplay for the horror themed *The Damned House of Hajn* (Prokletí domu Hajnů, 1988). He adapted Havlíček's last complete book, *Helimadoe* (1992), and he also wrote the screenplay for the two TV adaptations of Havlíček's work (*Judge Paukner's Ghost* [Duch soudce Pauknera, 1983], and *The Third one* [2001]).<sup>[1]</sup>

Herz and Dohnal had to trim Havlíček's extensive psychological study of a small town and its inhabitants significantly. They omitted the education and adolescence of the main heroine and the rich description of small-town customs. They primarily focused on the second and third parts depicting the disillusion of the already adult Štěpa, a daughter of a rich family, who in the desire to have a husband and children settles for her cousin Pavel Malina, even though she knows that he is mostly interested in her dowry, so as to save his decaying family estate. Realistically and with the meticulousness of a chronicler, both the film and the book record Malina's physical and mental disintegration due to the insidious venereal disease.<sup>[2]</sup>

As the lead, Herz cast Iva Janžurová, whom he had already worked with in *Sign of the Cancer* (Znamení raka, 1966). Her portrayal of Štěpa is different from the literary

model in many ways. As Havlíček describes her, the book heroine is warm-hearted, but also saucy, noisy, naive, and unattractive. The film Štěpa also does not fit in the narrow-minded small town, but she is not as boisterous. She is more polite and more acceptable to the audience. As such, the film doesn't work with the contrast between different elements of her personality.

The prologue, showing a group of officers leaving a brothel, was also specially made for the film. The authors wanted to show how the debauched Malina got syphilis. However, the scene was not approved by the dramaturgist, and that's why, just like the novel, the film starts with the 1899 New Year's Eve party, which aptly portrays Štěpa's character being a disruptive element from the very beginning.

In parallel to its start, the film was meant to end with a garden party to which Štěpa is invited after visiting her husband in the asylum. However, there wasn't enough money for this scene, which would have strengthened the motivic coherence of the work based on repetition, mirroring, and contrasts. Expensive were mainly Irena Greifová's Art Nouveau costumes, such as Štěpa's flashy hats of different shapes and colours, complementing the heroine's character and the atmosphere of the time. The interiors were also designed in the spirit of ornamental Art Nouveau. Equally careful was the work of make-up artists, who together with Petr Čepek contributed to Pavel's convincing transformation from a young attractive man into a half-crazy monster.

According to Herz, the film was received positively mainly thanks to the chemistry between Janžurová and Čepek. However, his adaptation of Havlíček's novel is also unique since he managed to sensitively group and regroup the book's motifs into a coherent drama with an impressive culmination and psychological credibility.

*Oil Lamps* was selected for the main competition of the Cannes Festival. The director went to the Côte d'Azur together with the First Deputy General Manager of the Czechoslovak Film, Bohumil Steiner. In his memoirs, Herz recalls wanting to watch the screening of another competition film, *Solaris* (dir. by Andrej Tarkovsky, 1972), but having to spend the evening differently to what he had in mind – in a local porn cinema, where he was eagerly dragged by Steiner.

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**Oil Lamps** (Czechoslovakia, 1971), director: Juraj Herz, script: Lubomír Dohnal, cinematography: Dodo Šimončič, music: Luboš Fišer, cast: Iva Janžurová, Petr Čepek, Marie Rosůlková, Ota Sklenčka, Vladimír Jedenáctík, Karel Chromík, Jana Plichtová, Evelyn Steimarová, Karel Černoš, et al. Barrandov Film Studios, 104 min.

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**Notes:**

[1] Havlíček's *Oil Lamps* inspired not only filmmakers but also theatre artists. In 2006, its adaptation premièred in the Prague Na Jezerce Theatre. Also directed by Juraj Herz, the performance featured Barbora Hrzánová and Radek Holub in the leading roles.

[2] Petr Čepek, playing Malina, prepared for the role by studying medical literature. He learned the tabetic gait, caused by the damage of the dorsal column and roots of the spinal cord, under the guidance of a Charles University professor.