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Situation of contemporary Czech animated feature film

Recently there have been voices opining that Czech animated film is “catching a second wind”. It is true that Czech filmmakers in the animated category are attracting attention at foreign festivals. This applies mostly to students’ short films, which, for instance, were selected in 2016 by festivals in Cannes and Annecy. But there are also a number of feature-length animated films being made in the country and it is those that are the subject of this article.

It is well-known that since the fall of the regime in late 1989 securing funding for full-length animated films (and this extends to short auteur films as well) is rather difficult and many films take a number of years, even a decade, to reach completion, with some never actually making it to the cinema. Shooting a film at the usual 24 frames per second creates extreme time demands for manually animated, stop-motion films where a day’s work seldom exceeds a few seconds of usable material. However, even computer-animated 3D films, when done properly, require lots of effort and time. It is necessary to model the required backgrounds and the individual characters whose “bare bones” are subsequently provided with surface textures, and so forth. Add to that the fact that only a limited number of animators are available to work on a film (often on a voluntary basis or without the security of remuneration) and it comes as no surprise that productions often drag on. Filmmakers thus keep up the search for sponsors and co-producers even after they have started work on their animated films, more often than not securing co-production partnerships with Czech Television (ČT) or foreign parties.

Despite these hardships, Czech cinemas do actually screen finished Czech animated feature films from time to time. Last year it was the eagerly awaited *Malá z rybárny* (*Little From The Fish Shop*) directed by Jan Balej. It took several years for the film to

make it into cinemas, but it excited a number of its future viewers along the way as they had the opportunity to visit exhibitions of its beautiful puppets. The originally designed marionettes with a high degree of detail, placed in the surroundings of a gloomy, weather-worn port, promised good entertainment. Yet the outcome was rather vague even though neither the puppets nor the traditional manual animation lost anything of their respective silver screen magic. The problem was rather in the use of computer-aided special effects, the uncertain targeting of the film and missing dialogues which were replaced by stiff off-screen commentary. *Malá z rybárny* thus became more of an artefact, a marionette showpiece rather than a successful movie (even though it was screened at the Annecy festival outside its competition agenda). *Malý Pán* (*Little Man*, directed by Radek Beran) entered cinemas at around the same time and fared better with audiences. However, as it is a live-action marionette movie and not a case of stop-motion animation it falls outside the remit of this article.

This year there have already been two premieres of Czech feature-length animated films. The first was *Smrtelné historky* (*Murderous Tales*) directed by Jan Bubeníček. The composite narrative was created over a number of years under the working title of *Trilogie Kaktusák*. The film is no exception to one typical rule of Czech post-1989 animation in being composed of several stories, similar to the *Fimfárum* trilogy or *Jedné noci v jednom městě* (*One Night, One City*), another puppet animation. The stories are perfectly capable of standing on their own two feet and in the case of *Smrtelné historky* they are connected very loosely indeed. The authors themselves say that the separate stories share the theme of an encounter between “something small” and “something big”. The little lead protagonist relies in his adventures on good fortune remaining on his side, and on prevailing eventually, yet he fails and dies in the end. The film is of a rather varied quality and combines several animation techniques, including live action and marionettes. Nevertheless, the director still succeeded in spicing up the film with original humour in several places. The final story is probably the best of the black-humour narratives, in this case describing the adventures of a pair of inept gangsters who set off on their final mission with an obscure objective. *Smrtelné historky* has already featured at several festivals including Febiofest and Anifilm.

Another animated feature film that premiered this year was *Pat a Mat ve filmu* (*Pat and Mat: The Movie*) directed by Marek Beneš. It was created to mark the 40th

anniversary of the cult pair of DIY enthusiasts originally designed by illustrator Vladimír Jiránek and film director Lubomír Beneš. The family baton of film direction is now carried by son Marek, who works from his own studio Patmat s.r.o. where he continues to make children's bedtime short stories. Sadly, it seems that Marek Beneš is having more success in merchandising than filmmaking as the duo of Pat and Mat feature more prominently in toy shops and on advertising materials than in quality film production.

This autumn will bring one more animated premiere in the form of an adaptation of the first book of the *Lichožrouti* trilogy penned by Pavel Šrut. The original story with equally original illustrations was voted the children's book of the decade and made into a film using 3D computer animation in studio Alkay, which also co-produced it. Visual artist Galina Miklínová who illustrated the book assumed the director's chair for the film, bringing in her previous experience of making short films and children's bedtime stories. When the making of *Lichožrouti* commenced five years ago some feared that the switch from two-dimensional illustrations to 3D computer graphics would take away from the characters' appeal in much the same way the Columbia Pictures' *The Smurfs* flopped as a 3D live-action/computer-animated version. Thanks to careful modelling and painstaking texturing the little creatures lost nothing of their magic even though some die-hard fans might be somewhat confused by the use of slightly different colour schemes. The film is slated for an autumn premiere and is already considered the most eagerly awaited product of 2016's Czech film animation.

There are several other feature-length animated films in various stages of production. In most cases the creators are hoping to obtain extra funding with the prospect of making it to the cinemas between 2017 and 2020. The situation improved somewhat in 2016 as the State Cinematography Fund obtained CZK 350m from the national budget to prop up Czech cinema production. The Fund's executive council, responsible for distributing the money, has drawn up a new long-term policy for financial support, including clearly defined priorities when it comes to animated film. Producers are thus able to apply for subsidies towards the costs of production, distribution and promotion of their animated films, making it conceivable that productions that have dragged on for years may soon surge forward.

Planned for release in 2017, feature-length puppet movie *Lajka (Laika)*, developed under the direction of Aurel Klimt in studio Zvon, is probably the one Czech animated film that is taking the longest to reach completion. Early clips from the film, whose budget has already climbed to a staggering EUR 2m, were presented during AniFest in South Bohemia's Třeboň more than a decade ago. *Lajka* is presented as a sci-fi musical that follows the fates of animals sent to space. There has already been not only a teaser for the movie which is available on the internet, but a theatre performance exploring the theme.

The ranks of directors gearing up to make an animated movie include Jan Švankmajer. The legendary Czech surrealist filmmaker already has a script and art props at the ready for his planned film *Hmyz (Insect)*, inspired by the Čapek brothers' play *Ze života hmyzu (The Insect Play)*. The film's story follows a rural community of amateur actors who decide to perform the play. The idea for the film was conceived way back in the 1970s but Švankmajer was held back from realising it by various circumstances until quite recently. The director claims it will be his last feature film while also being the first he attempts to co-fund by means of crowdfunding. With this approach he has already managed to put together almost the full required sum. Filming is to commence in the summer thanks to enthusiasts from all over the world.

Studio Anima, based in Prague's quarter of Holešovice, is in the process of creating not one but two feature films. The film that is already further along is an adaptation of a book by Iva Procházková, *Myši patří do nebe (Mice Belong In Heaven)*. The project is being developed by some leading figures in the industry: Alice Nellis and Richard Malatinský are the authors of the script while the duo of Denisa Grimmová and Jan Bubeníček have assumed the directors' chairs. Funding of the internationally co-produced film has its undisputable demands yet the project has already scored initial successes and collected awards at various international fora such as Cinekid Amsterdam, Cartoon Movie Lyon, Financing Forum Malmö and APD Stuttgart. The project has secured strong co-producers from abroad with actual production expected to begin in 2017.

The other project developed by Anima is the puppet film *Život k sežrání*, currently at the picture script stage with some of the puppets already made. A short clip was made some two years ago. What is remarkable about the project is the theme

explored: child obesity. The film is directed by Kristina Dufková, who after being previously associated with painted glass animation seems to have switched to puppets (Czech Television recently premiered her puppet bedtime short story *Povídání o mamince a tatínkovi* (*Tales About Mum And Dad*)). Dufková herself has said that *Život k sežrání* deals with a “substantial” theme that is best expressed by a puppet.

Another animation studio, Maur Film, works on both short and feature-length film projects. The studio achieved fame especially with the popular trilogy *Fimfárum*. Where feature-length films are concerned, the studio has a couple in the pipeline: *Jedenáctka* (*The Eleven*), an adaptation of Eduard Bass’ football-themed novel *Klapzubova jedenáctka* (*The Klapzuba Eleven*), and *Přes hranici* (*The Crossing*), to be directed by well-known French director and visual artist Florence Mialhe. The latter is co-produced by filmmakers from no less than four countries (France, Belgium, Germany and the Czech Republic) and is to be made using the demanding technique of painted glass animation. However, neither of the two movies has progressed past the early development stages into preparation for actual filming. What the studio does have nearly ready for shooting is *Biofilm* whose story takes place inside the human body.

Film company nutprodukce is another one teasing a promising project in the shape of puppet film *Tonda, Slávka a génius*. The theme for the film was developed by Filip Pošivač and Barbora Valecká, authors of *Až po uši v mechu* (*Up To One’s Ears In Moss*) premiered in late 2015 and awarded the spectators’ prize at Anifilm 2016. *Tonda, Slávka a génius* is once again a magic-filled fairy tale, even if it is mildly gloomy. The rather uncommon theme of two oddball children living in a dark tenement house brought together by their eccentricity was taken up by screenwriter Jana Šrámková. The project has entered the stage of script and visual designs development (while the filmmakers seek funding to cover expected costs of EUR 1.5m). It is hoped *Tonda, Slávka a génius* will be finished in 2020.

There are a number of other animated feature films in development in the Czech Republic, mostly in their very early stages. Let me name one of them: Jiří Barta’s *Golem* has been worked on since the 1990s. The only tangible outcome of that effort so far is a short clip released in 1996. Barta has created the script together with Edgar Dutka but the project is yet to find a producer to fund its sizeable budget. In

the meantime, Barta has succeeded in finishing another feature film coproduced with a Slovak partner, *Na půdě aneb Kdo má dneska narozeniny* (*In the Attic or Who Has a Birthday Today?*) plus a short film (*Sněžná žena* (*Snow Woman*), coproduced with Japanese money.

The financial boost to the State Cinematography Fund's budget is yet to have a real impact on the completion of existing unfinished projects and the smoother creation of new ones. It appears that there is a potential for success in securing funding for projects (or the completion thereof) through participation in international pitching fora where filmmakers present their ideas in the hope of attracting co-producers. There are also other opportunities but recent developments show quite clearly that what today's animated film needs more than anything is a capable producer familiar with all available options and proficient at making good use of them.