

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 9. 2. 2021

The Hop-Pickers

Right after the première night, the story of the first love and the first sin of 17-year-old students Hanka and Filip became a manifesto of the young generation, who understood the individualistic heroes, ostracised for showing their true feelings and the courage to defy those exercising their authority. What allowed this musical love story set during hop-picking season to be shot was not only the social atmosphere well disposed towards young liberals.

The seeds of this very first true film musical in Czechoslovakia could be seen both in the Semafor theatre and in TV production at the turn of 1950s. The first “picture songs”, the predecessors of today’s video clips, were shot for example by Ladislav Rychman (*What We’ll Have in the Flat – Dáme si do bytu*, 1958), Ján Roháč (*Driving without Accidents – Jezdím bez nehod*, 1961) and Zdeněk Podskalský (*Lost Revue – Ztracená revue*, 1961). They were inspired by Western musicals, which were more and more present on the domestic market thanks to films and musical albums.

One of the greatest inspirations was found in the American musical *West Side Story* (1961) with music by Leonard Bernstein. Despite the fact that the film-makers behind *The Hop-Pickers* (*Starci na chmelu*) did not hide their love for this modern version of Romeo and Juliet, the script-writer Vratislav Blažek (e.g. musical comedy *Music from Mars – Hudba z Marsu*, 1955), a follower of the Osvobozené theatre tradition, had actually come up with the idea even before Wise and Robbins’ film was screened for the first time.[1] It was originally a scenic musical for the ABC theatre reacting to a lack of plays about feelings and issues of young protagonists. With the New Wave, films about young people and for young people became popular, and it was suddenly not enough to cast young actors in them.

Even though the theatre version of *The Hop-Pickers* was never performed, Blažek could offer it to Rychman, his colleague from the Theatre of Satire, who was looking

for material that could be turned into a musical. The script for the film with the budget of more than 3.5 million Czechoslovakian crowns was finished in June 1963. Casting, one of the most demanding preparatory phases, began a month later. The auditions, held by Rychman, choreographer Josef Koníček and composer Jiří Malásek, took place in Prague, Bratislava and Košice.

The film-makers chose 25 of the most talented boys and girls out of more than 1,200 candidates and added eight ballet school students, including Vlastimil Harapes. Josef Laufer was originally considered for the role of Honza, the antagonist, because he was more experienced, but in the end, the role was given to Miloš Zavadil, and Laufer became one of the three guitarists in black commenting the story with their “ancient choir-like” songs. Ctibor Turba was originally considered for the main role of Filip, but in the end, the role was given to Vladimír Pucholt, who had to be repeatedly let off by Miloš Forman from the parallel shooting of *Black Peter* (Černý Petr, 1963).

The exteriors were shot in Lounky near Roudnice nad Labem, a picturesque village recommended by the props man, in summer 1963. Many crew members, including the props man, first had to clear the village square of weeds and repair the building façades by plastering and painting them but then returning their patina so that they did not look too new. The hop cones bought from local farmers were enhanced in a similar way – the brown seed cones were sprayed green.

The autumn was dedicated to editing the exterior shots, building the sets and castings for dancers to replace those who had to return to school, and in January 1964, the interior shooting started at Barrandov Studio. The shooting took three months and then the postproduction phase began; it had to be done by July since the première was to be held at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival.

Naturally, Barrandov took special care of recording the accompanying music, jointly written by Jiří Bažant, Jiří Malásek and Vlastimil Hála and played by the Dance Orchestra of the Czechoslovakian Radio and the Karel Vlach Orchestra. The songs of the inexperienced young actors were recorded by domestic pop music stars such as Josef Zíma, Karel Štědrý, Jana Petrů, and Karel Gott. The music was recorded in time, and the colour wide-screen film musical with quadraphonic sound was premièred for the first viewers, both domestic and from abroad, at the Karlovy Vary on 18 July 1964.

The main question for most reviewers was how the film-makers dealt with a genre with basically no Czechoslovak tradition: "Rychman proved that he can handle even a long musical show, and won many things for the whole domestic film industry. Especially another piece of self-confidence because now we know that we can compare ourselves to foreign film-makers even when it comes to a genre which is well-established abroad yet new for us." [2]

The Hop-Pickers was not only meant to prove that Czech film-makers could compete with Hollywood but also that the domestic film industry was technologically advanced; this can be seen in Barrandov Studio's internal correspondence about the quality of the copies in distribution and of the screening rooms where the film was to be shown. For the Prague première, for example, Alfa cinema was recommended instead of Blaník cinema, because its sound technology was better. The distribution dispatch note sent to the cinemas along with the film copies included a request for perfect sound reproduction.

Despite all these efforts, *The Hop-Pickers* was sometimes spoiled by bad German subtitles (for example when it was screened in the Czechoslovakian Centre in East Berlin where the film was introduced under the mellifluous title *Hopfenpflücker*) or by faded colours (opening night of the Prague cinema Kino 64 U Hradeb). But the low quality of some copies did not dishearten the audience. They were also encouraged by the promotion efforts: gramophone records were sold, competitions for young people were organized, and a plan of dates and times of special screenings was prepared.

During the first year, 1.5 million people saw *The Hop-Pickers*. In the years to follow, the film was screened repeatedly and the total number of viewers increased to almost 3 million. This proved right many critics who had predicted the film would be extraordinarily successful. The turnout was the second main theme of contemporary reviews; the first one was the conflict between the collective and the individualistic principles, with which some reviewers, both domestic and foreign, tried to put *The Hop-Pickers* into the right ideological context and to justify what could be seen as an ideology-free kind of entertainment at first glance:

"A new, unique kind of authorship emerged; thanks to the creative adaptation of the genre combined with Czech artistry, a musical with a true message came into

existence.”[3]

“The film does not celebrate individualism at all. It celebrates honour above craftiness, directness above evasiveness, true feelings above stupidity, character above dullness. ‘Her Majesty the Love’ herself enchants the audience with her nobility, poetry, and the sad fact of having been expelled from paradise.”[4]

“I find it unhealthy that our adults care more for the sexual aspect of growing up than for the general cultivation of adolescents. Is there nothing more to share with young people than our opinions on sexual life?”[5]

“The directors propose revolutionary things: to trust young people, to trust their ability to recognize the good from the bad, to apply the same measures to them that adults apply to themselves.”[6]

The norms conforming to the era are not fully rejected in *The Hop-Pickers*; sometimes it is hard to tell whether the film makes fun of the endless naivety of the young people or rather sympathizes with them. Unlike in some other New Wave films, banality is not portrayed in an awkwardly funny way, and the storyline is compliant with many socialist comedies, such as *Holiday with Angel* (*Dovolená s Andělem*, 1952), apart from the bitter ending. On the other hand, Blažek manages to stay ironically above the forced collective optimism with his lines, such as “It is for a good thing, everybody sings, so sing along’ in the parodic dream sequence, or by pointing out the two-facedness of the collective chairman, who tolerates Honza’s night escapades but cannot rise above Filip’s romance.

Today, we leave it up to each viewer to review the extent of nonconformity in *The Hop-Pickers*. Yet we cannot deny that unlike most Czechoslovak films, it truly met the musical conventions, combining the story with dancing and singing in an organic way. Rychman and Blažek thought about shooting a sequel in time, but they had only managed to finish their *The Lady of the Lines* (*Dáma na kolejích*, 1966) with Jiřina Bohdalová singing as an emancipated female tram driver, before Blažek immigrated to West Germany.

The Hop-Pickers (*Starci na chmelu*, Czechoslovakia, 1964), director: Ladislav Rychman, screenplay: Ladislav Rychman, Vratislav Blažek, director of photography:

Jan Stallich, music: Jiří Malásek, Jiří Bažant, Vlastimil Hála, editor: Miroslav Hájek, Vilma Binterová, cast: Vladimír Pucholt, Miloš Zavadil, Ivana Pavlová, Irena Kačírková, Josef Kemr et al. Filmové studio Barrandov, 89 min.

Notes:

[1] It was mainly Soviet reviewers who noticed the plot similarity between *The Hop-Pickers* and *What if it's love?* (*A yesli eto lyubov?*, 1961), a drama about young love with inauspicious consequences by Yuli Raizman.

[2] Fiala, Miloš, *Starci na chmelu*. *Kino* 1964, 19, no. 21, p. 13.

[3] Bor, Vladimír: *Starci na chmelu*. *Film a doba*, no. 11, 1964, p. 582–585.

[4] Out of a review published in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. *Československá kinematografie ve světle zahraničního tisku* 1969, no. 11-12, p. 46–47.

[5] Out of a review published in *Church of England Newspaper*. *Československá kinematografie ve světle zahraničního tisku* 1965, no. 11-12, p. 50.

[6] *Ibid*, p. 15-16.