

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 9. 3. 2023

The Most Beautiful Age

Jaroslav Papoušek (1929–1995) was originally a piano tuner. But then he decided to become a painter and to that end, he tried to enrol at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague several times but wasn't accepted. Eventually, he was accepted to study Sculpture. After finishing his studies, he began drawing caricatures and comic strips. One of his friends at that time was journalist Jaroslav Boček who graduated in Film Studies and Dramaturgy at the Film and TV School of the Academy of Arts in Prague. Together, they watched films and talked about them extensively so often that they decided they would try to write something themselves. But their stories weren't successful. As he recalled in an interview, Papoušek started to write alone "just for the fun of it."^[1]

First, he wrote three stories and then a novella based on an embarrassing incident from his youth. He gave the text to his friend who worked in a publishing house and he liked it. Papoušek stopped sculpting – his last work was a sculpture in Sachsenhausen for an exposition in the place of a former concentration camp – and started focusing on writing. He spent his days writing. His literary debut was later read by Miloš Forman who offered him a collaboration. And so *Black Peter* (Černý Petr, 1963) was made and a creative collaboration which bore fruits for several years was formed.

Working in the film industry, Papoušek was happy that he was able to do everything he enjoyed – painting, sculpting, photography, literature... So he stayed in the industry. After *Black Peter* came *Loves of a Blonde* (Lásky jedné plavovlásky, 1965). In both cases, Papoušek worked on the scripts, mainly on the dialogues. For *Firemen's Ball* (Hoří, má panenko, 1967), Forman chose him as his assistant director. Forman praised his diligence. He said that without it, he wouldn't have been able to finish his film due to his innate laziness. Papoušek also contributed to the directorial debut of the second member of the "Forman trio", Ivan Passer's *Intimate Lighting* (Intimní

osvětlení, 1965).

When his friends and colleagues left to work in the West where they stayed, Papoušek finally made his own film. He summarised his ambitions and experiences from his first time as a director in the following words: “I would never dare to make film as Krejčík’s *Bed Time Story* (Penzion pro svobodné pány, 1967). That is a film I admire. I must and want to do something else. I enjoyed working with cinematographer Jozef Ort-Šnep. It was his first feature film as well and we got along well. One of the reasons was that he is a man of few words. I don’t like people who talk all the time.”
[2]

Just like Forman and Passer, Papoušek cast mainly non-professional actors; he borrowed many of them from Forman (e.g. Josef Šebánek and Milada Ježková); and based his stories on real events, even his own experiences. *The Most Beautiful Age* (Nejkrásnější věk, 1968) is in almost its entirety set in the sculpting studio of the Academy of Fine Arts where Papoušek spent many hours during his studies. It’s a place where three stories of people earning some extra money as models intertwine.

The protagonist of the first story is an elderly citizen named Hanzlík (Jan Stöckl) who is known for falling asleep the moment he sits on the model’s stool. In the second story, the students sculpt a naked model, young mother Vránová (Hana Brejchová). The plot involves her noisy new-born and similarly restless husband who has no understanding for his wife’s posing. The film ends with an episode starring coalman Vošta (Šebánek) who specialises in posing as wounded warriors roaring with enthusiasm.

According to Josef Škvorecký, the leading role in *The Most Beautiful Age* was supposed to be portrayed by Jan Stöckl, who portrayed Hanzlík. But he died of a heart attack on the day the Soviet tanks invaded Prague. Approximately half of the scenes had already been shot at that time so the script had to be drastically changed.[3] That is, perhaps, one of the reasons why *The Most Beautiful Age* doesn’t tell a self-contained story and its pace cannot be compared to Forman’s films. Instead, it offers a series of humorous episodes, occasionally without any inner links to the whole. Without any breaks, sequences transform, some characters reappear and some don’t. Just like in Forman’s and Passer’s films, *The Most Beautiful Age*’s

biggest strength is a sensitive detailed portrayal of characters and settings, believable awkwardness of situations and authenticity of conversations and clashes between representatives of various generations. With simple means of expression and a similarly simple story, Papoušek tries to explore the essence of people and the time they live in. When building upon Forman's style, Papoušek drew inspiration from his studies at the Academy, mainly from the atmosphere in the sculpting studio. His characters are well-observed ordinary types which were partially created by non-professional actors who could stay true to their own colloquial language.

In his film, Papoušek uses sceptical humour to confront the world of young sculptors with the world of their chauvinistic professor (Vladimír Šmeral) and models, older pensioners. But the line between these two phases of life is blurry. Mr. Hanzlík's snoring disturbs the sculptors just like the screaming of a baby in a pram. The seniors, waiting to be carved in stone, squabble like little children. The characters constantly reminisce about the past and compare it with the present. For everyone, the best times are typically those they are currently not living in. The scenes' order also emphasises the parallels between youth and old age, the ephemeral and eternal. All three models come to the studio to earn some extra money, but they also search for something higher; they want to find the meaning of life.

Along with people of various ages, the film also follows different life phases of clay. Sculpting seems to be an art capable of capturing and stopping time and preserving the appearance of humans, their age, beauty and warlike roar for the coming generations. The film also aptly composes the actors in the scene like sculptures displayed for others to see. Even when not posing as models, they look like they were placed on a concrete spot by an artist developing a certain vision.

Papoušek's first film isn't based on a linear sequence of events, but rather on contrasts and similarities, on an ironic confrontation of the two "most beautiful ages." The reconciled elders live off their memories of their faded youth, but the awareness that they have nothing to gain or lose is liberating them, puts them back on the level of careless children perceiving life as an endless entertaining game. The assiduous students, on the other hand, don't see everything so crystal clear, don't take everything for granted and agonize over everything, complaining that they are being "bossed around by every idiot."

The critics had many reservations to Papoušek's debut. They thought that due to its continually expanding number of episodes, the film loses pace, cohesion and intensity and its message is diluted by repetition and schematic vulgar gags only to fall apart entirely in the third story. Škvorecký even mentioned dilettantism. In retrospect, compared to timeless films by Passer and Forman, *The Most Beautiful Age*'s deficiencies appear even more striking. It can simultaneously be viewed as an in many ways imperfect but significant preparatory sketch for the following series starring the Homolka family which quickly overshadowed Papoušek's debut.

The Most Beautiful Age (Nejkrásnější věk, Czechoslovakia 1968), director: Jaroslav Papoušek, screenplay: Jaroslav Papoušek, director of photography: Jozef Ort-Šnep, music: Karel Mareš, cast: Hana Brejchová, Jan Stöckl, Josef Šebánek, Milada Ježková, Vladimír Šmeral, Jiří Sýkora, Ladislav Jakim, Věra Křesadlová, Milan Kříž et al. Filmové studio Barrandov, 76 min.

Notes:

[1] A. J. Liehm, Jaroslav Papoušek je slavný. *Filmové a televizní noviny*, no. 5 (5th March), 1969, p. 3.

[2] Ivan Soeldner, Ten třetí z Formanova týmu. *Kino 23*, no. 20 (17th October), 1968, p. 9.

[3] Josef Škvorecký, Všichni ti bystří mladí muži a ženy. In: Josef Škvorecký, *Nejdražší umění a jiné eseje o filmu*. Prague: Books and Cards, 2010, s. 85.