

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 30. 1. 2025

# The Proud Princess

Work and class conflict. These were the topics the nationalised Czechoslovak film industry preferred after the events of February 1948. Each film was supposed to reflect the sociopolitical situation of the time it was filmed in. That meant that not even genre films, comedies or fairy tales were spared these dramaturgical requirements. One of the first produced fairy tales, very popular with audiences to this day, set the tone of the whole genre for decades to come. It doesn't tell the traditional story of good versus evil, but it portrays a smug princess who turns into a hardworking woman of a new type. Because it's only by honest work, that you can build a classless Communist society where everyone will be well off.

*The Proud Princess* (Pyšná princezna, 1952) by Bořivoj Zeman was made four years after the Communist coup d'état and seven years after the nationalisation of Czechoslovak film industry in a time when its management started to take into account young audiences. But fairy tales appeared in the Barrandov production plans sooner, right after the war. But *The Golden Tassel* (Zlatý střepec) in which Princess Astuta is magically transported to a land of tomorrow, Socialist Czechoslovakia, didn't get approved in 1947. Not even the Brother Grimm Tale *Seven at One Blow* was filmed (it was eventually filmed by Dušan Trančík as a co-production of several European countries in 1988).

Barrandov eventually found an ideal and adequately class-conscious author in Božena Němcová whose work praised honest work, traditions and folksiness. Drawing inspiration from Czech literature – in addition to Němcová, there was also Karel Jaromír Erben (*Stick, Stick, Start Beating* [Obušku, z pytle ven!, 1955]) and Jan Drda (*Playing with the Devil* [Hrátky s čertem, 1956], *Dařbuján and Pandrhola* [Dařbuján and Pandrhola, 1959]) – was also desirable due to the emphasis on Czech landscape and culture. The films weren't supposed to be cosmopolitan; they were supposed to be anchored in domestic specificities. But stories and main motifs could, or rather

had to be, imported from the Soviet Union. Just like the ideology.

From Němcová's rich literary legacy, filmmakers chose *Punished Pride* (Potrestaná pýcha) published in 1845 in *National Legends and Tales* (Národní báchorky a pověsti). The film adaptation written by Henryk Bloch and Oldřich Kautský was entrusted to Bořivoj Zeman, who managed to film simplistic socialism-building tales with a necessary comedic approach and emphasis on attractive genre elements. In *The Proud Princess*, it's for instance the adventurous sequences such as the duel in the mill and the famous log ride, something which wasn't used very often in Czechoslovak films at that time.

That's why Zeman's work from the 1950s (*Holiday with Angel* [Dovolená s Andělem, 1952], *Once Upon a Time, There Was a King* [Byl jednou jeden král..., 1954], *Angel in the Mountains* [Anděl na horách, 1955]) is popular to this day and *The Proud Princess* attracted more than eight million cinemagoers over time, which makes it the most successful Czechoslovak film of all time. This remarkable success is one of the reasons why in the years following its release, filmmakers and reviewers would refer to *The Proud Princess* as an unattainable ideal that established a new and binding canon. <sup>[1]</sup>

The first mention of *The Proud Princess* in the period press appeared in 1951 when *Filmové informace* wrote that Bořivoj Zeman would start filming his new film in late June. The final script, with some modifications made by Zeman, differed from the original story – it highlighted the class perspective and the positive effects of work on the collective and changed the character of the King of the Midnight Kingdom. Němcová's king is an old man who commands respect and esteem. In Zeman's version, he's a ridiculous and vain infantile old man. The film also added three schemers who wield bigger power than the noblemen.

Following the example of *The Proud Princess*, highlighting the ingenuity of the working class and ridiculing nobility became an unwritten law for Czechoslovak fairy tales. In a Communist utopia, existing at least in films, it wasn't origin that was the decisive factor, but rather the efforts of individuals.

There are, in fact, two kings in *The Proud Princess*. In the land of the just King Miroslav, there is collective harmony. Markets offer plenty of goods, there are no

empty stalls or lines and workers sing joyfully. Everyone's happy are on first-name terms in the spirit of comradeship. The young king represents a kind-hearted ruler who doesn't look down on anyone. In the film's opening operatic sequence, he approaches his subjects, butcher, basket weaver, blacksmith and peasant girls as his equals. "All work is useful if you do it honestly," says the cheerful Miroslav. His people trust each other and work freely for the good of the collective.

Excessive idealisation of the feudal ruler raised doubts among the members of the approval committee who, according to Oldřich Kautský, had feared that the children would become monarchists after seeing the film. [2] Vladimír Ráž's character also divided the audiences and reviewers alike. Some of them felt that King Miroslav didn't appropriately represent national values and only flashed smiles and gave vague advice – see for instance the strong polemic reaction for the review in *Kino* magazine sent to the editors by two FAMU students. [3]

But Miroslav's subjects adore him. He himself falls in love with the portrait of Princess Krasomila (Alena Vránová) of the neighbouring kingdom. He wants to marry her. In order for his chosen wife to see him, Miroslav has his own portrait done. At first, he is portrayed as a mighty ruler, but he refuses to send her this portrait. The second one portrays him as military leader, but he doesn't like that one either. He is satisfied with the third one in the spirit of social realism – it portrays Miroslav as an ordinary working man.

But the proud princess refuses the king. He isn't discouraged and, disguised as a gardener [4], he sets of to "cure" the spoilt young woman from her pride. The setting of the film changes to the Midnight Kingdom. With its outside characteristics and inner workings, it's the opposite of Miroslav's ideal society. The change in the atmosphere is foreshadowed by an ominous black vulture sitting on a signpost on the border between the two kingdoms (Miroslav's kingdom is naturally on the left). Also the landscape is hostile – dark clouds, strong winds and withered trees.

While Miroslav's country, filmed on location in the picturesque landscape near České Budějovice and Třeboň, is open and slightly undulating, the Midnight Kingdom is full of craggy rocks, steep hills and wild forests. In order to find the right terrain, the crew had to relocate to Northern Bohemia and use locations near Hřensko and České

Kamenice where they found suitable basalt columns.

Also the architecture of both kingdoms is different. The buildings in Miroslav's kingdom are built in an uplifting renaissance style celebrating the human spirit, the style of the neighbouring kingdom is full of distant towering gothic buildings. The choice of the gothic style reflects the inaccessibility of and reactionism of the Midnight Kingdom where the lives of the exploited people, who are bled dry by the imposed taxes, are ruled by senseless laws. We don't hear the king's subjects singing while working, it's forbidden. Singing doesn't generate any material wealth which is the most important thing here.

In addition to the pseudo-gothic castle in Hluboká nad Vltavou, scenes taking place in the Midnight Kingdom were filmed in a little village built by architect Jan Pacák in a rock-bound valley near Všemily. Other locations included Panská Skála, Český Krumlov, Telč and Dolský mlýn. The border between the kingdoms was created near Děčín. The Midnight King's throne room with gothic vaults and columns was built in the studio.

But the senile king (Stanislav Neumann) has no say. He's merely a puppet manipulated by three calculating advisors (Miloš Kopecký, Karel Effa, Oldřich Dědek). In accordance with the portrayals of capitalism presented by communist propaganda, Midnight Kingdom is a non-democratic state where corruption runs rampant and the people in power are dissociated from the common folk as well as reality.

But the three schemers aren't the only ones with remarkable manipulations skills. King Miroslav doesn't care that the princess doesn't want him. He likes her (in this case, he's only enchanted by her beauty) so she shall be his. With the help of a disguise and a singing flower, he seduces, humiliates and re-educates her. When Krasomila tries to rebel towards the end – and after Miroslav's paternalizing and lies, one couldn't be surprised – the King uses violence to subdue her. Krasomila eventually resignedly sighs “I still like you even though you're a king.”

Once the princess yields and gains class conscience (“Work ennobles man”), the victory of one political system over another is ensured. Understandably, it's not a violent revolution, The old king representing the declining old-type democracy renounces his throne voluntarily. The common folk have their rights restored and taxes are lowered. The subjects can once again sing and dance. Everyone together,

naturally, as there are no class differences.

Thanks to a song from her childhood, Krasomila herself remembers that she used to have musical talent and a positive relation to nature and work and she's, in fact, a member of the proletariat. From the very beginning, songs are associated with work, diligence and help, and spread and support the passion for socialism building. The film's melodic score was composed by Dalibor C. Vačkář in the spring of 1952 when all the exterior, interior and studio shots were finished. The lyrics, including the most famous one – *Rozvíjej se, poupátko* – were written by poet František Hrubín.

After the premiere, the score and songs were subject to further criticism. The musical prologue and epilogue supposedly weren't organically attached to the plot. Another criticised thing was the modernity of the songs and their lack of national spirit. But, as we now know, excessive concern whether the first socialist fairy tale was engaged enough, was pointless. The educational fairy tale teaching children "to love work and people" [5] became an instant hit.

The film's popularity didn't suffer in any way from the fact that it wasn't filmed on colour material as originally intended. The Barrandov management deemed it wasteful back then. Colour is for Hussite epics and perhaps musicals with tractors, not films for children. But the planned sequel, *The Proud Princess Becomes a Queen* (*Pyšná princezna královna*) was supposed to be filmed in colour. The film was supposed to focus on Miroslav and Krasomila's daughter who falls in love with a gardener. "In the first part of the film, we would have used approximately 600 m of film stock from the old film for a tinted retrospective," said screenwriter Ota Hofman. [6]

But the sequel was shelved and the classical fairy tale had to wait for its colour version until this year. In a new animated remake, the characters remained and the story is similar. But instead of working for the good of the collective, the new film idealises a romantic relationship of two characters.

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**The Proud Princess** (*Pyšná princezna*, Czechoslovakia, 1952), director: Bořivoj Zeman, script: Bořivoj Zeman, Henryk Bloch, Oldřich Kautský, cinematography: Jan Roth, music: Dalibor C. Vačkář, cast: Alena Vránová, Vladimír Ráž, Stanislav Neumann, Mária Sýkorová, Jaroslav Seník, Miloš Kopecký, Oldřich Dědek, Karel Effa, Gustav

Heverle, Josef Hlinomaz and others. Filmové studio Barrandov, 91 min.

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Jiří Hrbas, Jak princezna Krasomila se naučila milovat lidi, život a práci. *Kino* 7, 1952, iss. 20, p. 392.

Olga Hrivňáková, Zlatý poklad pohádek. *Lidová demokracie* 29, 1973, iss. 136 (9<sup>th</sup> June), p. 5

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V. Petrů, J. Prošek, Za národnost ve filmovém umění. Kritický příspěvek posluchačů AMU k filmu Pyšná princezna. *Kino* 7, 1952, iss. 4, p. 63.

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Vladimír Solec ký, Interview with Bořivoj Zeman. O veselohře, satíře a vůbec... *Film a doba* 4, 1958, iss. 11, p. 740.

Jaroslav Šikl, Pyšná princezna. *Kino* 7, 1952, iss. 26, p. 494.

Pavel Taussig, Marginálie X. Jak se rodila tradice (o genezi české filmové pohádky). *Film a doba* 29, 1983, iss. 10, pp. 585–587.

Vh, Skutečnost v pohádce. *Kino* 7, 1952, iss. 5, pp. 102–103.

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### Notes:

[1] See some period reviews of *Three Nuts for Cinderella* (Tři oříšky pro popelku, 1973): Luboš Bartošek, Filmová Popelka. *Tvorba* 1973, iss. 49 (5<sup>th</sup> Decermber), p. 12;

Olga Hrivňáková, Zlatý poklad pohádek. *Lidová demokracie* 29, 1973, iss. 136 (9<sup>th</sup> June), p. 5; Jiří Kříž, Jsme bohatší o pohádku. *Rovnost* 89, 1974, iss. 127 (31<sup>st</sup> May), p. 5.

[2] Oldřich Kautský, Dětem nejlepší filmy. *Film a doba* 2, 1953, iss. 3, p. 308

[3] V. Petrů, J. Prošek, Za národnost ve filmovém umění. Kritický příspěvek posluchačů AMU k filmu *Pyšná princezna*. *Kino* 7, 1952, iss. 4, p. 63.

[4] According to Zeman's memories, it was Miroslav's passion for gardening that finally convinced the approval committee to greenlight the film. See Olga Nytrová, Václav Strachova, *Králové, královny, princové a princezny českého filmu*. Prague: Formát 1998.

[5] Jiří Hrbas, Jak princezna Krasomila se naučila milovat lidi, život a práci. *Kino* 7, 1952, iss. 20, p. 392.

[6] Olga Hrivňáková, op. cit., p. 5.