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Thea Červenková

The beginnings of Czech cinematography are usually associated exclusively with men. Women of many professions, however, also deserve a fair amount of credit for the development of the new industry. This recognition pertains not only to female actors, but also to female librettists, editors, costume designers and directors. One of the pioneers of film direction in this country was Thea Červenková, one of two Czech female directors, the other being Olga Rautenkranzová, about whose life and works we are aware.

Terezie Císařová, the daughter of a Prague butcher, was born on 27 May 1882 in Prague. Her father was the owner of House No. 13 in Klicperova Street (today Záhřebská Street) in the Prague district of Vinohrady, which house would later serve as a makeshift film studio. Available information about Císařová's childhood suggest that she was interested in theatre from a very early age and gained the knowledge she required for her future professional abroad. She was likely a frequent attendee at the drama seminars given by the important theatre director Max Reinhardt at the Schönbrunn in Vienna.

Terezie Císařová's first documented artistic endeavour under her new chosen name, Thea Červenková, was the dramatization of Václav Štech's novel *Hřích paní Hýrové* (*Mrs Hýrová's Sin*) about life in Žižkov, now a district of Prague. Uranie Theatre included it in its programme in 1915. A year earlier, Červenková was to have contributed to the lost film comedy *Láska a dřeváky* (*Love and the Wooden Shoes*), but existing documents only list baker and trained projectionist Josef Brabec as the director [1]. It was Brabec whom Červenková ended up working with for most of her future film career.

Brabec and Červenková allegedly met while working for the film production company Praga-film, where the future director was responsible for intertitles. She also wrote

the screenplays for the short film *Lásko třikrát svatá* (*Thrice Holy Love*) (1918) and her own *Ada se učí jezdit* (*Ada Is Learning to Ride*) (1919), with the popular Prague operetta comic *Ada Karlovský*. Červenková was also able to quench her literary ambitions in her travel book *Toulky moravským Slovenskem: Dojmy, nálady a vzpomínky* (*Strolls Through Moravian Slovakia: Impressions, Moods and Memories*) from 1917.

In 1918, Červenková took to the streets of Prague to film documentary scenes of the October 28th coup. The work was allegedly commissioned by the Viennese company Phillip e Press-burger, which fact became a pretext to accuse Červenková of pragmatic collaboration with the enemy. This incident did not, however, have any long-term implications for her career as a film director and entrepreneur.

Thea Červenková's literary efforts mainly comprised regular contributions to the magazine *Československý film* (*Czechoslovak Film*) during 1919 and 1920. In addition to criticizing the films of routinier Vladimír Slavínský, she discussed national character and the poor quality of Czech film. It did not take her long to put words into action, though, and in 1919 she began filming for Slaviafilm. Her first attempts included the short slapsticks *Náměsíčník* (*Sleepwalker*) and *Monarchistické spiknutí v Praze* (*Monarchist Conspiracy in Prague*).

The farcical short film *Zloděj* (*The Thief*) about a woman cheating on her husband who is investigating a series of burglaries was shot by Červenková in just one interior, and she herself appeared in it in the role of the maid. The aforementioned Josef Brabec stood behind the camera. Because of the poor lighting, however, he had to film at a reduced speed of 12 frames per second. Poor technical quality and similarly austere conditions also plagued the feature-length films that followed.

On 10 June 1919, the short film *Byl první máj* (*It Was The First of May*) premiered at the Koruna cinema. Červenková wrote the film and shot it in the Seminary Garden and in the courtyard of the Kolowrat Palace. The simple plot was based on the dream of a young poet (played by future director *Svatopluk Innemann*), in which his fiancée runs off shortly before the wedding with a seducer played by popular entertainer *Josef Šváb Malostranský*.

When Slaviafilm began to focus solely on film distribution in 1921, Červenková and Brabec left the company and founded Filmový ústav (The Film Institute). Their aim was

to raise the national self-esteem of viewers by filming adaptations of classic Czech literature and documentary portraits of important political and cultural personalities. On the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the birth of K. H. Borovský, for example, they created an educational film entitled *Havlíček, jeho život a literární význam* (*Havlíček, His Life and His Literary Significance*) (1921), which contained an acted scene. They further created film portraits of Jindřich Fügner, Josef Svatopluk Machar, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and Alois Rašín. Each time, the building in Klicperova Street served as their studio and laboratory.

One of the first films by the Film Institute was the now lost costume drama *Rytíř bledé růže* (*The Knight of the Pale Rose*) (1921), which was to have been financially and artistically backed by American entrepreneur and director T. J. Shaw. He had first wanted to use his capital to rebuild the Břevnov brickworks into a film studio. In the end, however, he invested the entire sum into the chivalry-inspired film. The picture caught the attention of critics, but only for the poor quality of the theatrical props and costumes. It was played in the Alma cinema for three days before vanishing of the face of the earth.

Babička (*Grandmother*), which Červenková wrote and directed, was better received. This was not a film adaptation of the whole book by Božena Němcová, but only an adaption of five selected parts, with the longest one being grandma's flashback to when she met Emperor Joseph II (played by legendary František Smolík – his first ever role). The title role was played by Svatopluk Innemann's mother Ludmila; Barunka was played by Innemann's younger sister Liduška; and the other roles were played by volunteers from the ranks of relatives. As always, the interior scenes were filmed in the building in Klicperova Street in Vinohrady. For the outdoor shots, they crew travelled to Babiččino údolí (Grandma's Valley) in northern Bohemia.

Babička premiered on 22 February 1922. Film columnists, in some cases Červenková's colleagues, were not very enthusiastic:

“The Film Institute, which produced the film, paid more attention to effects and trying to wow the audience than anything else. It crammed the history of Viktorka and the chapters with Míla and Kristla into five parts and added a little palatial ambience. Photographically, *Babička* is a second-rate film. The set design and direction reek of

amateurism (they scenes are played out in one shot) if not utter incompetence (...)
The problem faced by all Czech films – lack of time and money – can be painfully felt throughout the entire work.” [2]

Czechoslovak cinematographer Jiří Hrbas chose a more generous tone in his look back at the beginnings of Czechoslovak cinematography:

“We have to give a very positive assessment to this honest and industrious attempt to transfer one of the most popular and well-read literary stories by Božena Němcová into film – even though this work failed to achieve any special artistic appeal.” [3]

Červenková also wanted to film Božena Němcová’s extensive novel *Pohorská vesnice* (*The Mountain Village*), but the project was shelved. The ambitious film entrepreneur did, however, obtain consent from playwright Jaroslav Kvapil to film his play *Bludička* (*Will-o’-the-Wisp*) set in the bohemian art scene of Prague. The film *Ty petřínské stráně* (*The Hillsides of Petřín*) (1922), which follows the tragic story of an artist and his unrequited love, thus came to be. Not even a proper literary basis from an experienced author could save the film from the primitive filming conditions. The studios were no bigger than a living room, and the exterior scenes were usually filmed in a small courtyard of an apartment block, where it was only possible to film around noon because of the lack of light at other times. The poor quality of the decorations also pointed to a lack of funding.

Of the films produced by the Film Institute, the adaptation of Neruda’s short essay *Kam s ním?* (*What to Do with It?*) (1922), filmed for the company by 24-year-old debutant *Václav Wasserman*, and *Paličova dceřa* (*Fire-Raiser’s Daughter*) (1923) based on the eponymous play by Josef Kajetán Tyl, were more successful. As documented by the citations below, the second film, which premiered on 14 December 1923 at the Alma cinema, was well-received by critics and described by them as a step in the right direction. Unfortunately, it was one of the last.

“She has presented us again with a piece of honest Czech work, for which we can congratulate her and which gives her full legitimacy to continue down this path, although one such meaningful work could ever be produced in any one year under conditions prevalent in this country. May she persevere and make use of all her rich experience from our literary and film works to make our cinematography a success.”

[4]

“The film was directed by Mrs T. Červenková, who has shown a marked improvement from her previous films (*Babička* etc.).” [5]

The crisis that hit the domestic film industry after it was flooded by foreign films also affected the Film Institute. Business failures and poor reviews led to the company being closed in the 1920s. Josef Brabec continued to work with other filmmakers as a cameraman and was awarded an Esteemed Pioneer of Czech Film diploma in 1946. Thea Červenková moved to São Paulo, Brazil, with her brother. She was thus hopefully spared the words of Ivan Dvořák, who noted in *Film a doba (Film and the Times)* in the 1950s that she was notorious for her “absolute amateurishness, kitschy direction and passion for sweet, sentimental scenes” and that her biographical film about poet Karel Hynek Mácha was “sentimental trash sweetened with hyperventilated erotica.” [6]

It is not clear in what year the “lady obsessed by film”, as Brabec called her, [7] died (most likely in 1957 or 1961). We can claim with certainty, however, that despite the poor quality of her quickly made short films and a lack of deeper knowledge of the trade, she enriched early Czechoslovak cinematography, be it as a journalist calling attention to the importance of film in creating national identity and cultivating aesthetic perception or as a film entrepreneur who brought to film numerous personalities who later contributed to a prospering domestic film production.

Notes:

[1] Brabec originally worked as a cameraman for Alois Jalovec, the founder of Ilusionfilm.

[2] *Babička* (The Grandma). *Filmový kurýr (Film Courier)* 1922, Issue 5 (February 24), p. 59.

[3] Hrbas, Jiří, V socialistickém duchu. K historii Československé kinematografie I. (In the Spirit of Socialism. On the History of Czechoslovak Cinematography) 1898–1930. *Film a doba (Film and the Times)* 1971, Vol. 17, Issue 7, pg. 351.

[4] Paličova dcera (The Arsonist's Daughter). *Filmová Praha* (Film Prague) 1923, Vol. 4, Issue 33 (October 12), pg. 258.

[5] F. H., Paličova dcera (The Arsonist's Daughter). *Český filmový svět* (Czech World of Film) 1923, Vol. 3, Issue 2 (November 1), pg. 25.

[6] Dvořák, Ivan, Dílo J. K. Tyla v československém filmu (I.) (The Works of J. K. Tyl in Czechoslovak Film (I)). *Film a doba* (Film and the Times) 1956, Vol. 2, Issue 10, pg. 696.

[7] Bartošek, Luboš. *Dějiny československé kinematografie* (History of Czechoslovak Cinematography), Vol. 1, Part 1. Prague: Státní pedagogické nakladatelství, 1979, pg. 92.