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Women in Czech film – directors (II.)

A continuation of an article about female Czech film directors

Single-film female directors

Today, only a handful of female directors who debuted during the normalisation era remain in the public consciousness. Assistant director **Magdalena Pivoňková** (1953) is one such example, having worked for directors Věra Plívová Šimková and Zdeňek Troška (who later cast her in some of his films). However, her *Když v ráji pršelo* (*When it Rained in Heaven*, 1987), an adaptation of a love-themed novel from author Jan Otčenášek, can hardly be said to have become a regular fixture on Czech television screens. A similar path to obscurity was shared by *Jemné umění obrany* (*The Gentle Art of Defence*, 1987), the first and hitherto last film from director **Jana Semschová** (1955). The film about adolescents growing up in a children's home faded from memory shortly after its premiere.

Marta Nováková (1975), a generation younger than Semschová, has hitherto only released a single film. Her minimalist drama *Marta* (2006) portrayed an effort to survive an unspecified military conflict. Critics lauded the film as a promising debut, and expressed high hopes for the young director's future output. Two years after *Marta*'s completion, Nováková began pre-production on her follow-up film *8 hlav šílenství* (*Eight Heads of Madness*, 2017). The film follows the life of Soviet poet Anna Barkova, as portrayed by Aneta Langerová. The film, which undoubtedly has feminist potential, is now in the post-production phase.

Asides from dozens of episodes of the TV series *13. komnata* (*13 Chambers*), the filmography of **Monika Elšíková** (1968), better known as Monika Le Fay, also contains the hour-long drama *Archa pro Vojtu* (*Ark for Voyta*, 2002) about a boy with Down's

Syndrome. The Czech Television production also enjoyed a theatrical release. **Iva Švarcová** is another example of a female director with only a single film credit, in this case the co-produced comedy *Když děda miloval Ritu Hayworthovou (When Grandpa Loved Rita Hayworth, 2000)*. After making a number of student films, the 26-year-old **Eva Toulová** (1990), who is also a published author of a number of books for women and young girls, directed the romantic comedy *Šťastná (Happy, 2014)*.

With the advent of low-cost filming technology, greater numbers of both men and women are being drawn to the documentary field. And for many, a single film was enough to gain them critical attention. **Bára Kopecká** (1970)'s career was primarily focused on script editing, screenwriting and teaching at FAMU International. Her sole directorial effort is an intimate portrait of her late husband, architect David Kopecký, who died prematurely. The film bears his initials: *DK* (2013). **Veronika Lišková** (1982) served as editor-in-chief of the magazine *Nový prostor*. She studied Cultural Theory at Charles University's Philosophical Faculty and screenwriting and script editing at FAMU. After a trio of short films, Lišková directed the feature *Danielův svět (Daniel's World, 2014)*, which features honest testimony from a young paedophile. Starting in Jihlava at a festival screening, and moving on to the mainstream media, the sensitive, non-judgemental portrait of the eponymous Daniel stoked some debate on the social standing of paedophiles.

Nebezpečný svět Rajka Dolečka (The Dangerous World of Doctor Doleček, 2015) also served to stoke heated debates. The film follows director **Kristýna Bartošová** as she seeks to engage in a debate with a doctor, who believes that the genocide in Srebrenica never occurred, but was actually invented by Muslims and the West. A journey to the Balkans represented a personal mission for the young director with Bosnian roots. Meanwhile, *Generace Singles (Generation Singles, 2011)* examines a phenomenon increasingly common among twenty and thirtysomethings. The film comes courtesy of **Jana Počtová** (1980), who has directed a number of other films, for example a portrait of her colleague Pavel Koutecký entitled *Fragmenty P. K.* (2013). But her documentary containing testimonies from a number of lonely-hearts who live alone caused the greatest stir. *Girl Power* (2016) is a documentary film co-directed by Jan Zajíček and a female director going under the pseudonym **Sany**. The film tells the story of a number of female graffiti artists both in the Czech Republic and around the world, who have taken up the art of spray-painting walls in a predominantly male-

oriented world.

Popular films

At the time of its release, *S tebou mě baví svět*, (*What a Wonderful World with You*, 1982) from director **Marie Poledňáková** (1941) was viewed as “the comedy of the century”. Poledňáková had previously directed a number of well-received television films also starring beloved child actor Tomáš Holý, namely *Jak vytrhnout velrybě stoličku* (*How to Pull out a Whale’s Tooth*, 1977) and *Jak dostat tatínka do polepšovny* (*How to Get your Dad into the Reformatory*, 1978). After a 17-year break Poledňáková stuck with decidedly un-political light family comedies with *Jak se krotí krokodýli* (*Taming Crocodiles*, 2006) and the most successful film of 2009 in Czech cinemas *Líbáš jako Bůh* (*You Kiss Like a God*), which was followed by the loose sequel *Líbáš jako ďábel* (*You Kiss Like the Devil*, 2012). Similarly to Zdeněk Troška or Jiří Vejdělek, Poledňáková managed to comprehend the expectations of a mass audience used to normalisation-era escapism. Such skills have made her one of the most successful post-revolution directors in the Czech Republic.

A similar pragmatic approach in terms of selecting and crafting film projects has also been evidenced a couple of times from the generation-younger **Alice Nellis** (1971). Nellis graduated from Charles University’s Philosophical Faculty in English and American studies, and then studied screenwriting and dramaturgy at FAMU. Her debut film *Ene Bene* (1999) was a bitter character comedy. In the wake of the road movie *Výlet* (*The Trip*, 2002) and the intimate psychological drama *Tajnosti* (*Secrets*, 2007) the critics began to write about Nellis as a maker of “women’s films”, meaning films about women and their emotional trials and tribulations. *Perfect Days – I ženy mají své dny* (*Perfect Days*, 2011) represented a shift away from Nellis’s previous three naturalistic efforts. The lifestyle comedy was then followed by another example of the move towards mass audience appeal, namely the significantly male-oriented *Revival* (2013). It is clear that Alice Nellis feels no need to openly and systematically declare her allegiance to the feminist viewpoint. It is evident that Nellis enjoys tackling subjects such as the mother-daughter relationship or pregnancy and motherhood – as demonstrated by the documentary *Adopce: Konkurz na rodiče*, (*Adoption: Recruiting Parents*, 2014) – but not necessarily on a systematic basis. One could even claim that the less effort she makes the greater the feminism of the end result, as shown in her

fairy-tale *Sedmero krkavců* (*The Seven Ravens*, 2015), which subtly updates a classic story via a strong female protagonist.

Irena Pavlásková (1960), a graduate of FAMU's documentary-making faculty, ranks among filmmakers such as Milan Šteindler, Zdeněk Tyc and Tomáš Vorel, who first came to prominence just before the Velvet Revolution. She initially spent a brief time at Czech Television, and then in 1987 became an assistant director at Barrandov film studios. Her debut *Čas sluhů* (*Time of the Servants*, 1989) was selected, among other honours, for a screening at Cannes. There it received a special commendation in the debut film category (Caméra d'Or). The relationship drama was also screened as part of a "New world directors" overview organised by the Museum of Modern Art in New York. A poll in the Czech film magazine *Záběr* called it the best film of the decade. However, Pavlásková never managed to recapture the extraordinary success of her debut feature. Her subsequent films *Čas dluhů* (*Debt Times*, 1998), *Bestiář* (*The Bitch's Diary*, 2007) and *Fotograf* (*The Photographer*, 2015), overturned preconceptions that stereotypical female characters only appear in male-directed films. However, these features did enjoy commercial success.

Andrea Sedláčková (1967) comes from the same strong generation of directors as Pavlásková. Her FAMU colleagues included Jan Hřebejk, Igor Chaun and Petr Jarchovský. However Sedláčková never completed her studies. In August 1989 she decided to not return from a trip to London; from there she travelled to Paris, where she gained political asylum and placement as a student in directing and editing at the FEMIS film school. Today she alternates her time between Prague and Paris. In France she works as an occasional editor (for example she worked on films such as *Joyeux Noël*, 2006, and *Welcome*, 2009). She has also directed both film and television projects in the Czech Republic. So far, her greatest success came by way of the sporting drama *Fair Play* (2014), which examined the subject of doping in professional sports during the normalisation era, and was viewed as one of the most accomplished Czech films of 2014.

True stories

Asides from Helena Třeštíková and Olga Sommerová, **Jana Ševčíková** (1953) represents another female director whose documentary feature films have enjoyed

theatrical releases. Since making the graduation film *Piemule* (1983), Ševčíková has chosen projects of personal interest, viewing their propagation as a personal mission. And this approach underscores her decision to remain an independent filmmaker, free from the pressures of producers and television executives. Although largely ignored at home, her films *Starověrci (Old Believers, 2001)*, *Svěcení jara (The Rite of Spring, 2002)* and *Gyumri (2008)* found favour with critics and audiences at screenings abroad. However, her *Opři žebřík o nebe (Lean a Ladder Against Heaven, 2014)*, a romantic portrait of the Slovak priest Marián Kuffa, finally brought domestic success, winning a Czech Lion and also a Czech Film Critics Award for best documentary.

The films of **Dagmar Smržová** (1966) also demonstrate a strong passion for specific subject matters. Besides from directing numerous episodes of the TV series *13. komnata (13 Chambers)*, Smržová also made the feature-length HBO documentary *Zachraňte Edwardse (Saving Edwards, 2010)* about the dilemmas faced by the parents of a child suffering from the genetic disorder Edwards Syndrome, and also the discerning documentary about a young schizophrenic *Otázky pana Lásky (Story of Mr. Love, 2013)*. This film was also produced by HBO, which is one of a growing number of companies willing to back promising documentary makers. **Olga Špátová** (1984), daughter of Olga Sommerová, has also made projects for HBO Europe, for example her third documentary feature *Oko nad Prahou, (Eye Over Prague, 2010)* and also *Největší přání (Greatest Wish, 2012)*. So far *Daleko za sluncem (Far Beyond the Sun, 2015)*, the story of Czech doctors in Africa, has only been seen by pay-per-view HBO viewers.

In *Cukr-blog (Sugar Blues, 2014)* director **Andrea Culková** (1977) creates an intimate video diary. Forced to cease consuming sugar due to the risk of diabetes, the mother-to-be explores the world of sugar consumption. The complex film, which also pointed to the lobbying power of producers of sugary products, premiered at the prestigious CPH:DOX festival in Copenhagen. The film was screened in the Czech Republic at the One World Festival and the Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival, and it was also twice screened by Czech Television. *Šmejdi (Hustlers, 2013)*, in which Prima TV reporter **Silvie Dymáková** (1982) uses hidden cameras to expose the fraudulent practices of product demonstration excursions for seniors, was afforded far greater media support. **Erika Hníková** (1976) also chose a timely subject via her *Ženy pro měny (The Beauty Exchange, 2004)*. The film examines concepts surrounding our perceptions of the ideal female body. Hníková then followed-up with *Sejdeme se v*

Eurocampu (*I Guess We'll Meet at the Eurocamp*, 2005) and *Nesvatbov* (*Matchmaking Mayor*, 2010).

During the early 2000s, documentary films such as *Ženy pro měny* and *Český sen* (*Czech Dream*, 2004) found favour with mass audiences and blazed a trail in terms of popular documentary features. **Linda Kallistová Jablonská** (1979) and **Lucie Králová** (1978) both studied documentary filmmaking at FAMU, and both tackle serious issues in their films with the aid of characteristic irony and humour. *Stále spolu* (*Still Together*, 2014) was the debut film from director **Eva Tomanová**. Co-produced with Czech Television – which is involved in numerous such projects – the film offers a portrait of a family with an alternative lifestyle. Over the last few years, the Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival has helped to cultivate awareness of young filmmakers and documentary films tackling complex social issues. This forum is helping a young generation of filmmakers rise to prominence, with **Tereza Reichová** (1981) serving as just such an example.

Director, screenwriter and producer **Lenka Kny** (1970) also studied documentary filmmaking at FAMU. Kny, who has Ukrainian and Russian roots, began by making music videos, commercials and charity videos, and also by directing in the theatre. Her short dramatic film *Poslední host* (*The Last Guest*, 1996) was screened at the Karlovy Vary Film Festival. Prior to her feature-film debut *Stínu neutečeš* (*No Escape from the Shadow*, 2009) Kny founded her own production company, Blue Time, while she also wrote a number of screenplays for Czech Television as well as a screenplay adaptation of *Slavná Nemesis*, the novel by writer Ladislav Klíma. Hitherto, this work has yet to be produced as a feature. Those expecting a similar effort to the dark drama *Stínu neutečeš* (*No Escape from the Shadow*, 2009) – which starred Pavel Landovský and Jaroslava Adamová – were no doubt surprised by Kny's next effort, *Přijde letos Ježíšek?* (*Little Baby Jesus*, 2013), which is a light-hearted Christmas comedy film, with an array of characters described by critics as resembling a Mexican soap opera.

Ivanna Benešová (1985) is another notable woman director of documentary features. Her “most shocking documentary of 2011” (as described on publicity posters) was

also self-distributed. *Zneužívaný (Abused, 2011)* is a fictional documentary film that deals with the issue of child abuse. Meanwhile, *Děti flamenka (Flamenco Children, 2013)* is a musical documentary film made by Kateřina Hager (1977), a graduate of cultural anthropology studies. The director set up her own production and distribution company for her hitherto only film project, namely Bohemian Productions. **Libuše Rudinská** (1974) is another filmmaker with her own production company. In this case, the eponymous Rudinska distribution company brought her two films to theatres – *Můj otec George Voskovec (My Father George Voskovec, 2011)* and *Pavel Wonka se zavazuje (Pavel Wonka Commits to Cooperate, 2014)*. Rather than an attempt by female directors to create a business footing in a male world, the phenomenon of directors creating their own distribution companies is related to the digitalisation of theatrical distribution and projection. This process has made such distribution considerably cheaper than in the days of celluloid prints. Distributor Falcon helped the documentary *Fulmaya, děvčátko s tenkýma nohama (Fulmaya, the Little Girl with Small Legs, 2013)* find a theatrical audience. In the film, director **Vendula Bradáčová** (1976) follows Slovak actress Dorota Nvotová around Nepal. A number of years earlier, the same distribution company brought the documentary *The Plastic People of the Universe* (2001) to theatres. The film was directed by **Jana Chytilová**, a long-time collaborator with Czech Television. **Veronika Korčáková Sobková** (1973) is the director of *Venku (Released, 2011)*, a documentary made for HBO which secured a theatrical release. Sobková studied social work and also documentary filmmaking at FAMU.

Back from the dead

So far, we have listed a good number of female directors whose documentary filmmaking exploits led them to try their hand at dramatic films. But **Michaela Pavlátová** (1961) belongs to a far smaller category of animation filmmakers who subsequently turned to live action films. She was able to join the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague (VŠUP) on the basis of a year's work as an animation in-betweeners at the Bratři v triku studio. Her diploma work *Etuda z alba (Album Etude, 1987)* was an animated short film based on a series of drawings. Pavlátová continued her humorous take on interpersonal relationships with her subsequent short animated works. Of these, *Řeči, řeči, řeči... (Words, Words, Words, 1991)* gained the greatest attention, having secured an Academy Award nomination.

Her 8-minute short *Tramvaj* (*Tram*, 2012), which visualised the sexual fantasies of a female tram driver, also caused a similar stir, and was screened at Cannes. Pavlátová has also directed two live action feature-films, namely the drama *Nevěrné hry* (*Faithless Games*, 2003) – which was recognised at the San Sebastián Film Festival – and *Děti noci* (*Children of the Night*, 2008), a generational drama which was in competition at the Karlovy Vary Film Festival.

Maria Procházková (1975) is also a director of both animated and live action films. The granddaughter of screenwriter Jan Procházka, and daughter of writer Lenka Procházková, her graduation film *Příušnice* (*The Mumps*, 1998) won the Golden Slipper Award at the Zlín Film Festival, and the top award at the Danube Film Festival. *Žralok v hlavě* (*Shark in the Head*, 2005) was Procházková's live action feature-film debut. Set in the apartment of actor Oldřich Kaiser, the film also utilised animation components. Procházková then harked back to the rich tradition of Czech children's films with the fairytale *Kdopak by se vlka bál* (*Who's Afraid of the Wolf*, 2008), an adaptation of *Little Red Riding Hood*. As with *Příušnice*, the combination of live-action scenes and animation helped to bring to life and present the film from a children's point-of-view. *Kdopak by se vlka bál* was screened at a number of international film festivals, including Berlin, Chicago and London. Procházková also directed two educational series for Czech Television, namely *Evropské pexeso* (*European Pexeso*, 2008) and *České pexeso* (*Czech Pexeso*, 2011). In 2013 she presented her first theatre production in Laterna Magica entitled *Vidím nevidím* (*I See, I Don't See*), also based on an interaction between live actors and animated pre-recorded sequences. Listing all the talented Czech female animators would certainly require an article of its own – but, in brief, it's worth mentioning such legends of Czech animation as **Hermína Týrlová** (1900–1993), **Irena Dodalová** (1900–1989) and **Vlasta Pospíšilová** (1935). Of the youngest up-and-comers, **Kristina Dufková** (1978), **Alexandra Hetmerová** (1986) and **Aneta Kýrová Žabková** (1986) undoubtedly merit watching closely.

Women in Czech film – directors (I.)

Czech female film directors, alphabetically listed:

Karin Babinská

Kristýna Bartošová

Lucie Bělohradská

Ivana Benešová

Eva Marie Bergerová

Jana Boková

Vendula Bradáčová

Andrea Culková

Thea Červenková

Olga Dabrowská

Irena Dodalová

Dagmar Doubková

Kristina Dufková

Silvie Dymáková

Monika Elšíková

Kateřina Hager

Angelika Hanauerová

Alexandra Hetmerová

Kateřina Hiřmanová

Erika Hníková

Jana Chytilová

Věra Chytilová

Linda Kallistová Jablonská

Vlasta Janečková

Věra Jordánová

Lenka Kny

Bára Kopecká

Libuše Koutná

Drahomíra Králová

Lucie Králová

Ester Krumbachová

Veronika Lišková

Zet Molas

Alice Nellis

Jitka Němcová

Markéta Nešlehová

Marta Nováková

Irena Pavlásková

Michaela Pavlátová

Hana Pinkavová

Jitka Pistoriusová

Magdalena Pivoňková

Věra Plívová-Šimková

Jana Počtová

Jiřina Pokorná-Makoszová

Marie Poledňáková

Vlasta Pospíšilová

Anna Procházková

Marie Procházková

Olga Rautenkranzová

Tereza Reichová

Jitka Rudolfová

Libuše Rudinská

Eva Sadková

Sany

Andrea Sedláčková

Květoslava Semonická

Jana Semschová

Svatava Simonová

Dagmar Smržová

Veronika Korčáková Sobková

Olga Sommerová

Jana Ševčíková

Alena Šimíčková-Hynková

Olga Špátová

Iva Švarcová

Eva Tomanová

Eva Toulová

Helena Třeštíková

Hermína Týrlová

Ljuba Václavová

Miroslava Valová

Dana Vávrová

Drahomíra Vihanová

Jaroslava Vošmiková

Petra Všelichová

Lenka Weissová

Zuzana Zemanová-Hojdová

Aneta Kýrová Žabková