Discussions about movie

Marek Leščák – Martin Šulík (eds.)

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Introduction

How to teach filmmakers? In our opinion, the best form of teaching is conversation and co-creation. We perceive mastering the art of filmmaking as a continuous dialogue in which there is a discovery of historical context, an exchange of theoretical knowledge, but above all a sharing of life and practical experience. We know what we are talking about, because our cooperation began thirty years ago at the film faculty as a student-teacher dialogue. Gradually our roles changed, we learned from each other, wrote scripts together, made films together, and became friends.

Thanks to this experience, we decided to initiate dialogues between film students and their senior colleagues. We wanted to create a space for an intergenerational dialogue in which they would get to know each other and share their knowledge and experiences. The following texts are dialogues about what we all love – film.

Marek Leščák – Martin Šulík

Ondrej Šulaj

September 26, 1949, Vígľaš

Slovak screenwriter, playwright, dramaturg, director, and teacher. In 1974 he graduated in film dramaturgy and screenwriting at the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts. Subsequently, he worked as a theatre dramaturg at the SNP Theatre in Martin and at Nová Scéna in Bratislava.

He is the author of dramatizations of the literary texts Ťapákovci (1975), *Pomocník / The Helper* (1979) and original plays: *Episode 39 – 44* (1979), *Doggie and Cattie* (1994), *Svadobná noc v dobre utajenom salóne / Wedding Night in a Secret Apartment* (1996).

As a screenwriter, he participated in the creation of the television films *How Vinco Got Stubborn* (1977, directed by Juraj Lihosit), *The Boy from the Lighthouse* (1979, directed by Stanislav Párnický), and *Jozef Mak* (2021, directed by Peter Bebjak).

In the field of filmmaking Ondrej Šulaj collaborated with many Slovak and Czech directors, with whom he made *The Helper* (1981, directed by Zoro Záhon), *The Pavilion of the Beasts* (1982, directed by Dušan Trančík), *Silent Joy* (1985, directed by Dušan Hanák), *The Keeper of the Outdoor Museum* (1988, directed by Štefan Uher), Štek (1988, directed by Miloslav Luther), *Tenderness* (1991, directed by Martin Šulík), *Everything I Like* (1992, directed by Martin Šulík), *Garden* (1995, directed by Martin Šulík), *Orbis pictus* (1997, directed by Martin Šulík), *Sokoliar Tomáš / Thomas and the Falcon King* (2000, directed by Václav Vorlíček), Čert *ví proč* / *Devil knows why* (2003, directed by Roman Vávra), *Muzika / Music* (2007, directed by Juraj Nvota).

As a television director, he introduced himself with the production of *Doggie and Cattie* (1992) and continued with the adaptation of the novel by Jozef C. Hronský's *Na Bukvovom dvore / On Bukva's Yard*

(1994). *Agáva is feature film debut* (2016), based on Ladislav Ballek's novel Agáta.

Ondrej Šulaj is one of the founding personalities of the Slovak Film and Television Academy and the Film and Television Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts, where he worked as a dean and lecturer until 2018. He also served as the rector of the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava.

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The first and most fundamental question is: How did you get into film? You studied at the theatre faculty...

I studied at the Theatre Faculty, but my study program was film. We were the first film department opened at the end of the sixties at the Academy of Performing Arts – the Department of Film and Television Dramaturgy and Screenwriting. I was one of the first graduates. That's kind of how I started with film, although I actually started long before that.

When I brought old *Film a doba* magazines to the students a few years ago, I discovered that I had started buying them in 1959, that is, when I was ten years old. As a ten-year-old I started reading them (and occasionally understood something), and that's where I discovered screenwriting star Jean-Claude Carrière. Instead of just reading literature, I also started reading the scripts that were published in *Film a doba* magazine. It sounds both scary and comical at the same time, but sometime in the 5th grade of elementary school, I was determined to be screenwriting star. Film, and especially screenwriting, seems to have possessed me from a young age and has held me all my life. I graduated from high school in 1967, I didn't manage to send in my application to the Academy of Performing Arts, but that same year I ended up working at Koliba in the editing room as an assistant editor. It was then

that young directors from the New Wave – Hanák, Jakubisko and Havetta – appeared there. In a small cubicle there, I synchronized the shots of their first films (I cut with a razor blade and glued the day's work to the selection screenings), so I saw their films countless times, shot after shot. That was a good school for me, too. In 1969 I started to study screenwriting with Tibor Vichta, one of the best Slovak screenwriters. Tibor Vichta was an excellent teacher, he directed us to good literature on the basics and rules of writing for film, but most importantly he passed on to us a lot of his own experience. He was a great storyteller, a master of precisely punctuated stories. I always remember the book *Telling a Story*, which Jean-Claude Carrière compiled from his lectures to screenwriting students at the Brussels Film School. Tibor Vichta's wise and witty lectures made us understand the mysteries of screenwriting. At the end of the sixties, the turbulent atmosphere of the revival process was still reverberating at the school, but a few months later, the onset of normalization at the Academy of Performing Arts drastically affected the barely started screenwriting department. The director was Ján Ladislav Kalina. However, he soon ended up in prison and later emigrated; Tibor Vichta and Albert Marenčina were severely banned from teaching (Vichta fortunately returned and I graduated in his class).

You didn't "get away from" theatre, since you studied at the theatre faculty.

There were only a few of us – filmmakers on campus. For a while I lived in a room with Marián Urban, Jaro Filip and Jožo Puškáš, so we were an isolated group of filmmakers, because the dormitory was mostly occupied by theatre students and musicians.

Later I found myself in a room with the theatre director Blaho Uhlár, for whom I prepared a dramatic band *Front Theatre*, for the acting

class, which included Zuzka Kronerová, Maroš Zednikovič, my future wife Anna (then still Nagyová) and other actors, who then formed the core of the Theatre for Children and Youth in Trnava. With the *Front Theatre* we travelled around Slovakia during the holidays, just like the acting group used to do during the SNP. So I was a vagrant theatre person, but around that time Miloš Pietor directed my school film script from my second year at Slovak Television. It was an adaptation of a short story by H.G. Wells, *The Hammerpond Park Robbery*. Thus, already during my student years, film and theatre were intertwined in my work. And this has remained with me throughout my creative life, so it is not surprising that after finishing film scriptwriting in 1974 I found myself working at the SNP Martin Theatre. The first thing I wrote for the professional theatre was Ťapákovci, an adaptation of a great novella by Božena Slančíková-Timrava.

Working in the theatre with dramatic texts, with actors, with live dialogue, which is constantly being polished in rehearsals, revealing surprising meanings, helped me later in writing film dialogue. I learned how dialogue can be adapted, how it can be fitted into a particular character type. The years in the theatre in Martin were a good extension of my studies at the screenwriting department.

How long were you in Martin? Or, more precisely, when and how did film attract you back to Bratislava?

I was in Martin for 4 years. Actually in the theatre only for the first two years, for the remaining two years I was called up to do military service, because I didn't do the "student" one at school. I ended up in Košice in a unit that was technical support for training pilots. There I was discovered by former "Corsairs" – Paľko Mikulík, Marián Labuda, Stano Dančiak and Maco Debnár, who persuaded me to come as a dramaturge to the Nová scéna theatre in Bratislava after the end of

Shooting the film *The Helper*

the two-year military service, where the aforementioned actors had worked after the closure of their famous Korzo Theatre. It was already 1978, a time of harsh normalization, but the creative atmosphere in the theatres was a bit freer than in the Koliba studio, closely guarded by ideologues from the UV KSS. High-quality classical dramatic texts have a certain potential to name metaphorically, yet surprisingly accurately, the state of society. Theatremakers are able to use this tool with subtlety. Analyzing and adapting dramatic texts has been a good school for me, opening up space for further dramatizations of classical as well as contemporary texts. I will mention, for example, the production *"My Brother"*, which was based on my adaptation of six short stories by the great filmmaker Vasiliy Shukshin. But mostly everything was really standardized and screwed up, so that only here and there it was possible to make a production that would shine with something new and bridge the limitations that were already present in those

years, not only in the theatre, in film, in literature, in the visual arts, in short, in the whole of society. Those were the years that in some ways resembled those of Covid. Most artists were forced to wear imaginary facemasks that prevented them from expressing themselves freely.

I think that even today we are subject to a kind of censorship or self-censorship. You found asylum at school at the beginning of normalization, but I would like to ask where and how did it catch up with you then? How does one deal with that censorship or self-censorship?

I probably had the advantage of being in the theatre. I've mentioned before that theatre people have been able to subtly exploit the metaphorical power of the stage. Classical dramatic texts have an amazing potential to reflect critically on the present. And Shakespeare, Gogol, Ibsen, and Chekhov were harder to ban than contemporary texts by sharply watched screenwriters. Every single screenplay, every single film, was to be approved by various committees, and there it was all investigated and censored. And where there is strong central censorship, there is usually more personal self-censorship. But that's something that Koliba's scriptwriters and dramaturgs could talk about more objectively. I was fortunate that my first film scripts were not implemented until the early 1980s. Those were already the years when such a “perestroika” keyhole was slowly opening in society, through which one could slip through with luck and avoid even the hard censorship of normalization. At that time I also started writing a screenplay based on Ballek's prose *The Helper*. I was lucky that Tibor Vichta and Rudo Sloboda also helped me dramaturgically; they gave me valuable advice on practical screenwriting and also advised me on how to cope with the pitfalls of the normalization approval machine. Moreover, Ballek was already a renowned writer in those days, his work earned him respect in the cultural and social spheres. His novel was imbued with the capti-

vating atmosphere of turbulent post-war life in a small town on the southern border, with inhabitants who kept the traditions from the times of monarchy alive. The protagonist gradually succumbs to external pressure and manipulation, unable to fight back against evil; this topic helped to incorporate the parallels to the state of society at the time into the script. The film was made by director Zoro Záhon in 1981. Shortly after *The Helper,* together with Ján Fleischer, I wrote the screenplay for Dušan Trančík's film *The Pavilion of the Beasts*. Then I was approached by Dušan Hanák, and together we wrote the screenplay for the film *Silent Joy*. At the end of the eighties, I collaborated with Štefan Uher in writing *The Curator of the Open Air Museum*.

I've almost always written scripts with directors. I never enjoyed writing alone, sitting behind that clacking typewriter with at least three copies in it and those ugly black photocopiers, that was a nightmare for me. I needed to have a dialogue with someone while I was writing. Either a dialogue with the literary source material I was adapting and sometimes with the author, as was the case with Ballek, or a dialogue with the director sitting next to me, collaborating on every possible stage of the scriptwriting. Part of a screenwriter's job is the way he or she can turn a small detail taken from life into a powerful dramatic situation that fits precisely and reinforces the reality of the film's story. And I love it when the director also brings in his or her collected life details during the writing of a script. It certainly has a good effect on the overall quality of the future film.

Those first TV movies of yours and this great debut of yours, The Helper*, were adaptations. Maybe it's just an assumption, but wasn't that also a strategy to realize yourself and to get through those control mechanisms a little bit?*

Yes, it was. In the theatre I learned that it is possible to encode and

send a strong contemporary message to the audience through a classical dramatic text. That's also how I approached the dramatization of *Ťapákovci*. At school I was a bit allergic to our older classics, I mostly read the latest and most vivid from our and world literature. Actually, it was only in Martin that I rediscovered Timrava, I was literally amazed by her Ťapákovci, I thought, after all, this was also the image of contemporary Slovakia. A sleepy Slovakia. Smothered in a dark room without windows, which we are afraid to open to the world, as the critic Alexander Matuška has already said. Ťapákovci was my first dramatic text for the theatre, I wrote it in 1975 and it is still alive, topical and is still being performed in theatres today. Also, it could have been called "something rotten in the state of Denmark" without using characters and situations from the most contemporary present.

When I look at it formally, even screenwriting students end their undergraduate work with an adaptation. I ask this rather naively – how do you adapt? Transitioning one medium into another or possibly even a third, into theatre, or transitioning across those mediums, what's the strategy there? Or what is the essence for you that you're after, that you're looking for, that you're transmitting?

From the very first lessons, we teach students to seek and find topics that are close to their hearts, that make them think about the reality around them, that unlock everything they know about themselves. Every screenwriter has to search in this way for a theme they would like to work on. One of the possibilities is to search for the themes close to them in literature or in drama and find those he would like to transfer into a screenplay. That's the first step. But then the hardest part is to translate the literary language into cinematic images while retaining the "spirit" of the source material. I mean the adaptations that are faithful to the source, the screenwriter doesn't try to remake

them so that they no longer have anything to do with the source. In the screenwriting studio, we strive for just such a faithful approach to the author and his or her source material. It seems simple, but it's very tricky. Students often think that they can just underline some sentences, dialogues and situations that are there in the source. Put it together and the adaptation is done. It doesn't work that way. The language of literature and the language of the screenplay are only superficially similar. The screenplay, in my opinion, is also an autonomous art form, but it's not final; the final artifact is only the finished film. The strength of a screenplay is not commensurate with the quality of its literary language; that is only given by a specific screenwriting language free of literary "gimcrackery", "glittering ornaments" and "original literary metaphors". The power of cinematic imagery is often found in the source material in less literary places, and the film dialogue often emerges only by transformation from the lengthy literary descriptions in the source material. Conversely, sometimes the lengthy dialogue passages in the literary source material are used in the film adaptation to create dramatic situations without dialogue. Literary dialogue is the most treacherous. When it gets right into the film, it looks artificial, like it was plucked out of thin air somewhere, not out of life. The whole transformation from literary language to cinematic language usually takes place covertly, individually in each screenwriter's head. And I'm convinced that even a screenwriter can't describe exactly how it happens.

The essence that guides my writing is the realization that a screenwriter cannot change or fix the world with his work. He only helps others, and especially himself, to know at least something of the mysteries of life around us. And the knowledge and its description in the screenplay are actually also a kind of correction, that is, a possible change of how we perceive things around us, and thus a partial revelation of the truth. And what the audience then does with that truth revealed on the screen is their business, not the screenwriter's.

Shooting the film Keeper of the *Outdoor Museum*, Stefan Uher with the megaphone

Was there anything that you had to give up?

I think so, but I've always been lucky that I gave it up completely at the beginning. I understood during my studies that you can't write a script just for the sake of good intentions. You really have to get those out of your head before you start writing.

What is the difference between theatre and film? They may seem interchangeable because they are dramatic genres, but personally I think they have completely different DNA. Still, there are some overlaps. I'm more interested in in it metaphysically, how you see it.

The difference between theatre and film can be characterized in dif-

ferent ways, depending on whether you look at the problem through the lens of the film or evaluate it in the light of the theatrical spotlight. Since I deal with both artistic disciplines, I don't feel there's such a sharp line between them. But I'll try something. I entered theatre as a dramaturg and also a playwright. I became an integral part of the creative team, editing my own text with the director and actors directly in rehearsals, sitting in on all rehearsals, and watching most of the performances directly from backstage as well. One doesn't just become part of the creative process, one is partially present in the live final artistic form, directly confronted at each performance with the audience. And each performance brings surprising details, often new meanings in the text are uncovered, situational and dialogue punchlines are sharpened, sometimes exceptionally brilliant improvisation emerges. It is as if the text is always reborn and undergoes an amazing transformation through the actors on stage. The theatre has thousands of years of experience, but in that time it has undergone almost no technological transformation. It can still be performed on an empty stage. Film, on the other hand, is limited and, more importantly, bound with technological hoops. These often determine not only the technical method of implementation, but also the content and the manner of artistic expression. At the beginning of theatre was the poetic word. Film was born of cold technology. It would seem, then, that theatre is freer. The theatrical space is metaphorical, it counts on the spectator to fill in the real space of the dramatic narrative with their own imagination, it doesn't even need to be filled in as a rule. Dialogue, direct contact with a live actor, and a kindred audience that doesn't munch popcorn and sip coke in a theatre hall will suffice. But the film offers a different kind of freedom – absolute freedom for the filmmakers to use their imagination to create a true three-dimensional reality on a two-dimensional screen. Already the screenwriter has to have a perfect command of how to convey in short images, through stark and sparse language, the detailed descriptions of real environments, com-

plex characters, vivid dialogue and dramatic situations magically emanating from the screen.

A screenwriter sometimes writes up to twenty versions of a film story, only to preserve forever the final implemented form, which is screened unchanged and then stored in an archive. A playwright, on the other hand, publishes in book form his definitive version of a play, which is then performed by many theatres for centuries in hundreds of new adaptations, reinterpretations, rewrites, and outputs. I should add that this is often at the expense of the quality of the original dramatic text.

To switch from writing for theatre to writing for film requires switching the switch in your head from a road paved with classic cubes to an electrified expressway that is being inexorably technologically upgraded in short intervals. It's just a superficial platitude I've uttered, but I can't say anything more sensible than that.

It's one of the current trends that film is being adapted into theatre.

It's a two-way movement. Several different approaches need to be distinguished. Film recordings of theatre performances are made, primarily for archiving purposes, but it is not exactly a pleasure to watch such a recording. It takes away the lively atmosphere of the stage. That footage is more for critics who are concerned with the history of the theatre. The film often reaches for dramatic texts, but in doing so it is always a rigorous transcription into the language of film, whether it is a successful one or a less successful one. From its inception, film has always been inspired by centuries of time-honoured drama, honed in literature and genre. The language of cinema was at the beginning artistically simple, so it drew on what was considered more artistically mature. There's really been a trend lately to bring some film stories from the screen to the stage. But again, it has to be a rigorous adapta-

tion from one language to another. This is happening, I think, because film has now gained in artistic power, in narrative and pictorial imagination. It is also becoming an inspiration for the theatre, especially because the quality of contemporary dramatic texts is significantly declining. Theatres are flooded with various production projects, mostly one-offs, only for a specific ensemble, without a solid dramatic text. Film currently offers more. Perhaps.

You've already hinted at it, but I'd still come back to it: writer-director collaboration. From my own experience during my studies, I don't take that for granted. Many directors try to be 100% writers at all costs, but not everyone is equipped to do that. But when it comes to writer-director collaboration, it doesn't have to work.

There aren't any special rules for a writer-director collaboration. The most basic one is that at the beginning of the collaboration there must be a spark, a shared authorial chemistry, during which the screenwriter and the director realise that they are thinking the same way about the outlined topic, that they are tuned to the same frequency. The feeling for determining such a state of harmony can be cultivated even during the course of study. When this is done, a creative symbiosis between the screenwriter and the director is already established at the school, which usually lasts until the eventual falling out. But it's usually the case that the screenwriter sits lonely in a corner behind his computer, waiting like a doll at a ball to be asked to dance by a director. Directors are usually already attached to a particular producer, often with a stable of creative collaborators around them, from cameraman to editor. Therefore, they are usually the dominant ones in seeking out collaborations with the screenwriter.

Shortly after my collaboration with Dušan Trančík and Jan Fleischer on the screenplay for the film *Pavilion of Beasts, I* was approached by

Dušan Hanák to collaborate. I quickly understood that he wanted to work on a theme that he already had deeply rooted inside himself, that he no longer needed to search for it gradually with the screenwriter, he wanted us to materialise it together into film images, and to do it as accurately as possible according to his ideas. And no artificial constructions, no schemes devised at the table. All situations had to be verified in real life, every dialogue already heard somewhere concrete. Director Hanák had a whole stack of notebooks densely covered with notes. There were snippets of situations and dialogues randomly caught in the whirlwind of life. For weeks we read them and debated whether they could be used and how to use them, even though we didn't yet know the exact contours of the future paintings. And then we spent the next months together roaming around different environments, interviewing selected types of people, hunting for authentic snippets of dialogue and details of situations. This, too, was a way of tuning in together before actually writing the script for *Silent Joy*. If it hadn't worked that way from the beginning, our collaboration would definitely not have continued.

At the end of the eighties I had the opportunity to experience an extraordinary collaboration with Štefan Uher in the writing of the *Open-Air Museum Administrator*. I remember Uher as an extremely erudite man, a filmmaker in body and soul. It was fascinating how he talked about the directors of Koliba, with what respect and admiration he was able to talk about the so-called young wave – Jakubiskova, Havetto, Hanák. At the end of his life, however, he was marked by everything he had been through. He harbored a certain bitterness, a sense of personal failure, an inability to stand up to the political pressures directed not only at him but also at his family. A similar theme can be traced in The Keeper of *the Open Air Museum*. We arrived at it while writing also by the absolute trust that developed between us. Štefan Uher talked about himself, about his studies in Prague, about his experiences as a documentary filmmaker, he talked about how

normalization was destroying him, about his unfulfilled dreams and nightmares, about his failures. It was an amazing experience for me to work with such a director.

I don't even know what to say about my collaboration with director Martin Šulík, I've said so much everywhere... I don't know myself what is the truth and what is the invention of my leaky memory. This collaboration is also special because he was the first director who was thirteen years younger than me. The first time I saw him was at the Martin Theatre, when he was only twelve, when his father, the actor Anton Šulík, introduced him to me. Then I met him as a directing student at the Academy of Performing Arts, when I was still teaching theatre stage design. I was Mr. Vychodil's assistant there, and I made directorial explications of dramatic texts for the future stage designers, on the basis of which they then made drafts of their school stage designs. One of the students was Fero Lipták. Martin Šulík came to see him from time to time and found himself in my classes. With the audacity of a future director, he poked me, asked provocative questions and oozed his own kind of rough humour. A few years later he came to me as a finished director and modestly asked me if we could together write something for a film. Who could resist him. So we started thinking about the script. For a long time we didn't know what it should be about, so we wandered around the streets of Bratislava for weeks, talking about everything, in short, testing each other to see if we were both tuned to the same frequency. We sat in cafes, cinemas, visited exhibitions, exchanged books and debated about them. I remember that we were strongly influenced by Hesse's prose *Siddhartha* and also by Carrière's *Dictionary of Bullshit and Delusion*. And once we had started writing, we found that every situation, every single sentence, every single word in the picture had to be found together; nobody could bring a text prepared in advance. We'd play each dialogue aloud to each other, and then we'd hone it until we were both satisfied. To construct even an ordinary sentence – "He walked into the room and sat down oppo-

site the window." – was sometimes desperately difficult and lengthy to get both of us to agree to it. We could argue until we bled over every word. The script, meanwhile, had an affectionate title: *tenderness*.

We worked on *Neha* for many months and I was there for the implementation. It doesn't hurt when the screenwriter sees what's going on with the script. I also found out that the cinematographer Martin Štrba and the production designer Fero Lipták are also excellent dramaturgs who can advise the scriptwriter in a meaningful way. It is very stimulating for a scriptwriter to get to know the atmosphere in the production crew. In a similar way, our collaboration continued on the script for *Everything I like*. Later I also participated in the projects *The Garden* and *Orbis Pictus, which* Martin Šulík had already worked on with the screenwriter Marek Leščák.

How do you deal with, for example, when deadlines are burning, you can't make it and you have to struggle with yourself?

The dates were mostly burning in the theatre, and I remember that I was approached by the dramaturgy from the Slovak National Theatre to prepare a dramatic text for them. A contract was signed and I went for it, but I couldn't do it, I got stuck and couldn't move a line. However, I was horrified to discover that the theatre already had a stable window for my text in the next season, with an exact date for the start of acting rehearsals. Changing dates and repertoire in the theatre is not easy at all. When you have the sword of Damocles hanging over your head with a warning date in your contract, that's not exactly the best motivation in when blocked in writing. Gritting my teeth, I eventually finished the text, but its quality fell short of my initial expectations. I know someone needs just that kind of time pressure to build him up to peak performance. For me, this is not the case.

Fortunately, when writing film scripts, deadlines didn't burn me up

Shooting the film *Agáva*

so much. Mostly I was approached by directors, they were just such non-binding offers to collaborate without a contract and fixed deadlines. We didn't write under stress, we could talk for weeks or even months, look for a theme, build images and fine-tune the first version of the script. Only with that did we go to the producer and sign the contract. I love that first phase of writing without a contract, with almost unlimited time that doesn't push and make you nervous. It also has the disadvantage that the producer will tell you brusquely, after reading the first version, that he's not interested. That's why it's a good thing when a screenwriter also has a steady job that feeds him or her.

We are always moving between theatre and film. At the beginning, you mentioned how it helped you to learn how to write dialogue in the mouths

of the characters in the theatre in Martin. I think this is exactly the problem with scripts and, as a result, films. As they say – they rustle the paper. How to avoid it?

The best way for a screenwriter to avoid this is to write dialogue that doesn't rustle the paper. But seriously now – film dialogue often comes across as a faithful record of real live dialogue, from a real situation that took place in real life, but it's not. When a couple sits in a coffee shop and has a half-hour serious conversation, that's a real live dialogue that has a beginning, a middle, and an end, is about something, and is leading up to something. It's just that if you need to squeeze that half-hour conversation into your movie picture because your story demands it, you'll find that you have two minutes at most to do it in a particular picture. What to take out of that dialogue? Do you just rip out the beginning? You don't cover the whole topic that was discussed in the café. Do you pick out the seven essential sentences then? That kind of cutting and picking out raisins is already a kind of stylization, and you're moving away from live dialogue. You have to squeeze into those two minutes the condensed essence of what went on in the café during that half-hour. And that condensed essence has to feel like a live, colloquial dialogue. It looks complicated, but when a screenwriter has cultivated (learned!) the ability to construct film dialogue in this way, he doesn't need to have learned any theoretical lessons or techniques on how to do it. There are even screenwriters who specialize only in writing dialogue. The intuition for good dialogue needs to be cultivated during one's studies. There are a lot of opportunities to test your ability on a number of small etudes that are written even in the first year. I remember that I often made students uncomfortable just on dialogue etudes. The students had to achieve an idea of the particular setting in which it was taking place through dialogue alone, build up a dramatic situation, again through dialogue alone, and

similarly suggest the basic traits of the characters. Of course, all this without a single sentence of description. Eva Borušovičová claims that I had her rewrite the etude 15 times. She was furious, she cried, she argued with me, but later she confessed that such an endless round of editing and rewriting helped her understand at least partly the pitfalls of writing film dialogue. I do not claim that such a method is the only possible and almighty one.

Can screenwriting be taught? Or what is its peculiarity? The equipment, both personality and talent, or even the way of looking at the world and the film too?

The required works submitted by applicants to the screenwriting course are usually dramatic etudes on a given theme, as well as short prose pieces of their own choice. Thus, we only accept those who have demonstrated literary aptitude. The first steps await them in the screenwriting studio to gradually transform their free, flamboyant literary key into a rigorous, figurative screenwriting mindset. This happens through the writing of short etudes, which are the first syllables of a future film language. So we're not teaching them to write scripts, they have the talent to write, rather we're guiding them to start thinking through film imagery. We remind them that their texts are never definitive, that the playwright, the director, the producer, and even the actors can intervene in the implementation. At times, even the interior or exterior spaces chosen can shift the meaning of certain motifs laboriously constructed by the screenwriter. Therefore, the scriptwriting must be concise, clear, and precise so that the meaning of the images is equally understood by the entire production creative crew. And it is important for the screenwriter to be constantly aware and reminded that the script is not a perfect copy of real life. A screenplay is born out of fragments of what the screenwriter knows about

himself, about literature, about art, about music, about life around him, and especially what he knows about the film. The screenwriter never examines any real person in detail with the premeditated intention of consistently copying and pasting the whole of them into the script. The process of building a film character and his or her traits is more complex. The material is usually a wealth of details gathered and observed by the screenwriter from the lives of various people. It is futile for film critics to try to understand this process of creation and to justify it theoretically, because even the screenwriter cannot properly explain how it happens.

Oscar Wilde was the author of the humorous idea that a writer should first become famous and then start writing. I argue, with a subtle dose of sarcasm, that a screenwriter has to write all his life in order to make famous the director he has worked for.

You're happy on set. For someone, maybe a screenwriter's work ends with the moment of handover, and then sometimes they wonder what they see on the screen.

Again, it's probably because I've experienced the whole process in the theatre, from the writing of the text to its implementation, to its re-enactment on stage. Mostly I've been part of that whole process. When Martin and I finished writing *Tenderness* and then *Everything I like,* I was really drawn to join the crew from time to time and watch the creative mumble on "the playground". I couldn't be there all the time, that would be a pain for the director, but I needed to see what was happening with the text, how it was changing from a written form into a multi-layered living image. I also like it because I have also directed in the theatre myself, and I have also directed two of my own texts on television – *On Bukva's Yard, Doggie and Cattie.* And I remind you that the film *Agáva* was also originally a TV project, even a two-part one,

but it ended up as a badly scratched and imperfectly directed one-part feature film for the cinema. Being on set with a film crew is always interesting to me, also because I'm not really a writer who's used to sitting in a corner behind a desk.

It seems to me that you don't care that much whether something works out or not. Sometimes it works out, sometimes it doesn't, you look at it pragmatically. But when you look back, which of your films are your favorites?

I have always suffered when I had to look back at my texts, whether on stage, television screen, or on the movie screen. I can't concentrate the way I can when I'm looking at someone else's thing. I can't relax and enjoy the things I've done, and so I usually rage about how I could have made the mistakes I now see. I don't remember lasting through any of my premieres. At the premiere of *Everything I like,* Martin Šulík and I were wandering the corridors outside the cinema during the screening and didn't even peek inside. So actually I don't have my films particularly watched. I haven't even seen many of them properly. So it's hard to say which ones I like, which is why in my memories I sometimes look back with pleasure to those pleasant and meaningful processes that took place during the writing of the scripts. Recently Šulík's film *Tenderness* was released on Blu-ray disc in England, and on that occasion an English documentary filmmaker interviewed us about our feelings during the writing and making of the film. So we reminisced again a bit about those turbulent months after the Velvet Revolution, during which we wrote *Tenderness*. Internally, we had our story sort of divided. I more consistently followed the motif of a mysterious couple shedding their own unwanted, cruel past marked by the aftertaste of the normalization era. Martin, on the other hand, related more to the young protagonist, who was experiencing a sense of previously un-

known, unmanaged freedom after leaving his parents, while at the same time wallowing in a search for himself. What was going on around us in society was subconsciously but also deliberately making its way into the images of our script. I'll have to watch the whole film one day.

I also like to remember everything that took place during the writing and implementation of the text *Doggie and Cattie*. It was originally written as a script for a television film, but I eventually implemented it in the form of a classical production on Slovak television. In the opening shot, the cameraman Ján Ďuriš reveals the grey space of the television studio in a large overhead shot, admitting to the viewer that it takes place in a tiled backdrop. It's a sad, at times cynically grotesque tale of two centenarian spouses, reliving poignant and comic fragments of their lives lived together throughout the twentieth century. Everything is tangled and mixed together in their heads, including love, suffered betrayals, wars, and chaotic changes of borders and regimes. We filmed it a few days before the end of 1992. In the last shot, Doggie and Cattie celebrate October 28, the founding of the Czechoslovak Republic, looking out the window onto the street, waving flags, and enjoying the fact that everyone on the busy street is celebrating with them. This was originally in the script, but just a few days after the implementation, the real streets were abuzz with the celebration of the establishment of the independent Slovak Republic. The break-up of Czechoslovakia then entered my text two years later as an important motif in the production of *Doggie and Cattie* at the National Theatre in Prague. Doggie was played by the Czech Bronislav Poloczek and Cattie by the Slovak Eva Krížiková. By then we were already divided.

You managed to experience two critical periods of film in Slovakia. Normalization and then the 90s, which killed off a whole generation of directors, and the school was so differently divided. There was neither money nor support from the state.

Writing film scripts became for me a kind of knowledge, a true vision of the absurd reality, especially in the normalization years of the 1980s. I wrote five scripts at that time, which were also implemented. It was for me a more immediate and direct exposure of the warped social system of the time than through classical drama on the theatre stage. Nevertheless, my home space at that time was the theatre and the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts. I worked at the Theatre Nová scéna and the Department of Theatre Scenography until almost the end of the 1980s. It wasn't until Tibor Vichta invited me to teach film scriptwriting in 1988 that I opened my first year.

In June 1990 an independent Faculty of Film and Television was established. Martin Slivka was the first dean, but not for the whole term. He wanted to devote himself fully to his project *Children of the Wind*. The leadership of the faculty ended up on my shoulders. It was the beginning of a very difficult and turbulent period for me. I tried to attract other quality film practitioners and theoreticians to the faculty; Martin Šulík, Vlado Balco, Dušan Dušek, Jozef Paštéka, Martin Šmatlák, Martin Ciel and many others joined the teaching process. Thus, two strong generations found themselves side by side, one from Koliba, who had still studied at FAMU, and then the generation that had already graduated from the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava. I think it was a beneficial combination. We started to do regular screenings "mini-showcases" of student work, year exercises and graduation films were screened, which was a precursor of the future " Áčko". In the mid-nineties, we began to find that the space on Ventúrska Street was already limiting us. And what is more important, restitutions began, Ventúrska was gradually being cut off from us, the former owners were taking rooms away from us. We were looking for a way out of this critical situation, and so the idea was born to build a new Film Faculty on Zochova Street next to the Faculty of Music. It was already at the time of the independent Slovak Republic, the infamous period of "mečiarizmus". The Film Faculty was like a red rag to a

bull for "mečiarovci". The budget of the faculty was getting thinner, we didn't have a single cent available for students to make films. There was nothing to build technological facilities out of, but surprisingly the students who studied during those difficult years were able to bridge the spatial, technological and financial poverty. They put tremendous energy, talent, creative ideas and initiative into their film projects. The faculty could especially boast of a strong generation of young documentary filmmakers, animators and cinematographers. That is why it was worth the Sisyphean effort to try to build a separate building for the film faculty, even at a bad time for us.

And a bit of optimism at the end – our intention with the new building was fulfilled and the filmmakers moved to the premises on Svoradova Street in 2003. This filmmaking period will be discussed and remembered after a while by those who are currently just beginning to learn and present their first filmmaking work.

led by Lucia Ditte

Stanislav Párnický

April 11, 1945, Piešťany

Slovak theatre, film and television director and teacher. In 1971 he graduated in theatre directing from the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava. Already during his studies, he worked at the SNP Theatre in Martin, from the beginning of the 1970s he started to work at Slovak Television.

Among his theatre works, *Molière's School for Women* (1969), Mrożek's *Tango* (1969), Shakespeare's tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* (1970), Sukhovo-Kobylina's grotesque *Tarelkin's Death* (1971) at the SNP Martin Theatre caught attention. Critics also praised the productions of Gorky's play *The Last* (1976) at the Slovak National Theatre, Brecht's epic drama *Man as Man* (1975) at the Poetic Stage, Gorin's *The House after Swift* (1988), and the adaptation of Heller's *Catch XXII* (1985) at the Nová Scéna theatre.

During the 1970s Stanislav Párnický emerged as a prominent personality of Slovak television production. The miniseries *Lost and Found* (1972), *American Tragedy* (1977), *Diving Record* (1980) and the films *The Boy from the Lighthouse* (1980), *The Hired Clown* (1980), *Adored* (1980), *The Trap* (1981), *Sugar* (1982), *On Men, Women and Children* (1983) not only captured the interest of the audiences, but were also awarded at many festivals.

In 1985 he started to work in the Slovak film studio Koliba. The titles *The Cart Full of Pain* (1985) and *Southern Mail* (1987) were made there. After the social changes in 1989, he continuously filmed for television, the sitcom *The Teacher's Room* (1999), two series of *Colonnade* (2013, 2014), a production of *Tales from Hollywood* (1992), *An Hour Without Television* (1992*), Blúznenie srdca i rozumu / The Madness of the Heart and Reason* (1997), *The Cage* (1999), *Intimate Enemies* (2009), *Dušičky seniorov / Souls of the Retired* (2011) and films for film distribution

Sleeping Beauty (1990), *...horses on concrete / Crying for the moon* (1995), *The Miraculous Nose* (2016).

After 1990 Stanislav Párnický continued his long-term pedagogical activity, and as Vice-Rector and later as Dean, he participated in the establishment and development of the Film and Television Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava. For a long time, he was also the Head of the Department of Film and Television Directing. He is a member of the Slovak Film and Television Academy.

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DIRECTING

Directing is a mysterious thing. When you have it in you, you can't avoid it, and when you don't have it in you, you chase it all your life.

Directing has one brilliant advantage, I've never revealed that to you, I'll only reveal it now, and forget you've ever heard it: It doesn't happen all at once, it splits, it divides, it decomposes, directing is a process, and that's why you have to know how to use the process, to work with the process, you have to have the associative ability, you have to know how to connect things.

It is a constant synthesis and analysis. Directing is subconscious, nothing conscious, no speculating, everything has to be subconscious and immediate, and since it's splitting, first you are the director, the dramaturge, the scriptwriter, and the author, who is lost and searching for words, searching for solutions, for an idea. Of course, you have to be a bit of a philosopher as well, but that's all sort of subtly external. You read a book that makes you think of something, or you just flip through pictures of all sorts of actors that make you think of something. Somebody has an interesting nose, somebody else has interesting ears ...In the beginning, you're grasping at everything. Šulík will draw, Jakubisko will create a picture script, draw everything, and Šulík

will finish drawing it only during the filming, when there are lights on for a long time. But in that first phase, the director is the dramaturge, the screenwriter, the author, and the philosopher.

And also a material collector. Because you steal everything. Steal like an artist, steal in such a way that nobody knows you stole it. Everybody steals and just pretends it's their original idea. Aristotle had the original idea in his time, and maybe he had a secondary idea, because I don't know if anything has been invented since Plato's cave. You can grab something from everybody, because everybody had something at one time or another, something that might have been quite interesting to you, and maybe it's just right for you now. And if it fits, then shamelessly take it and count it among your own. But you have to do it in such a way that neither he nor you will ultimately know what's whose. You must forget that. This is the kind of theft that is called “steal like an artist”.

Well and then you do the structure of the whole narrative, you have the scenes, the story, and so on. And at that point, you start working with other people. With the set designers, with the costume designers. With the casting agency, you're looking at character typology and the cast. Then the cameraman comes in, and he – of course – has some ideas right from the beginning, and you have to make sure that it corresponds with the basic theme, the idea. At this stage, special artists can come in, which sometimes happens. For example, when I shot *Sleeping Beauty*, the fairies had symbols weighing twenty kilos on their heads, tall royal crowns, do you think that was funny? That was all custom-made and it was artistic. The costume designer, Jelínek, had some special collaborators for that. For all the artistic artifacts.

MISE EN SCÈNE

The director has one incredible leverage over everyone. It's called mise en scène, and when someone has talent, they can use it. I have a talent

for mise en scène and spatial vision. In theatre and film, I've always been able to read instantly all the cuts, all the possibilities that the environment offers. And the mise en scène is such a device that when you have it in your hands – and you have it in your hands, nobody has it, the director has it – it helps you create, build a situation.

A mise en scène is always related to one internal situation tied to one internal theme, to one spatial and situational relationship. This means that if the space is very structured, the mise en scène can also be very complicated. Take, for example, the films of Miklós Jancsó. He used long takes and had to build them up in that desolation – the relationships, the meanings, everything. It wasn't so easy in those days, but he used six-foot film cassettes, which was 20 minutes. And later, with electronic recording, they started using footage that was the length of a whole film. *The Russian Ark*, for example, but there are more films like that... *The Russian Ark* was probably the first, very interesting historical study that showed us a cross-section of several centuries of Russian history. It has thousands of extras, and when we talk about mise en scène, the mise en scène space there was the whole Hermitage. Everything! Because that shot was continuous, even though we went through centuries of history, even though we went through about sixty halls, even though we went to balls and banquets and so on. It was commented by the voice of some stranger moving in an unknown space all the time. Even though it's this complicated, it's still one mise en scène.

The film's mise en scène is conditioned by the camera, the point of view, because the difference is in the angle of view. A theatrical scene is perceived from one point, and a cinematic scene is perceived from one point only when we want it like that. If we want the camera to be in motion, as in *Russian Ark*, of course, everything has to be in motion – the actors, the lights. That was a mise en scène built for the camera to provide the possibility of shooting and turning a full three hundred and sixty degrees.

Shooting the film *Southern mail* – Stanislav Párnický and Laco Kraus

I've always tried to make films and television productions in such a way that the viewer doesn't find out that I'm not shooting in three hundred and sixty degrees. Of course, sometimes I've shot 360-degree shots, but it's not always possible. It requires a specific situation and conditions. The film needs some technique, some technological background, some lights, and so on. You can't always cover everything. For example, when you're shooting sound with some boom pole, that's something that defines the space in a way. There are people there, there are sound guys there, there are cameramen there – it's common in the studio.

Americans have always shot on a lot of cameras. A silent film was shot on eleven cameras, it was only in our country that we did everything with one camera. It was a period of new wave and almost pioneering European filmmaking, which behaved in such a way that everything had to be shot with one camera, and that everything had to be moved and rebuilt before every shot.

But that's also a matter of mise en scène, for example. When you're shooting an elaborately lit space, you shoot in one direction first – because you don't have to shoot continuously – and then you set up counter shots that are lit a little bit differently. Of course, the main stream of light must always be respected, it mustn't change in any way because you would rotate the space.

And in a continuous scene, you can't even cut shots that are shot in the sun to shots shot in the clouds. Because you can see it in the light, in the light texture. Light is such an intense component of the film image that you always have to respect it. You can't cut a shot in a cloudy environment, that is to say, it's actually in the shadow, in semi-darkness, in diffused light, for a shot in the bright light of sun rays. Even the shadows are completely different, more pronounced, the drawing of the face is different...

THE ONTOLOGICAL CHARACTER OF FILM DIRECTING

As far as the directors are concerned, each of them is based on something that reflects their life experience, but they are also based on something that reflects their creative experience, which is inspired by, for example, drawing, painting, photography, that is, pictorial vision, the desire to capture the world in a pictorial way. Or literature, or theatrical experience. Theatre work, teamwork has some similarities to directing a film. It doesn't matter if that path to filmmaking is through watching movies or going to art school. For example, Lynch made Eraserhead in art school and then got other opportunities. He started assisting in making films and then started creating films that are interesting in some way. They're based on some kind of visual storytelling, but at the same time, of course, they represent some kind of philosophical and experiential stance.

Every one of those authors we remember came from practice or

school. In America, for example, for quite a long time one could study only up to the bachelor's degree. All those directors, the so-called "technicians" who came to Hollywood and became important, whether it was Scorsese, Coppola, Lucas, and all the five who went into film there at that time, had only the basics of the film school. You could only get a master's degree in theater directing or in the philosophy of art. So America, which is actually representative of the film industry in the best sense of the word – we can observe the development of film communication skills in the history of American film – they (Americans/America) didn't need a university film school back in the eighties.

The ontological nature of directing simply stems from the fact that to become any kind of author there is no other possibility than one's own knowledge and being. That's why I talked about the structure of life and how life is very much influenced by that. For example, Fellini's film is called *Amarcord*, and "mi ricordo" means "I remember" in Italian. For this reason, *Amarcord* has been considered by critics and historians to be a film of Fellini's subjective memories. The author himself rejects this in his memoirs and interviews, saying that it is a word that is like a wordplay, a slip of the tongue, a pun, a contradiction, and that his entire film is a contradiction. It's not about some memories of childhood, it's actually about a rejection of childhood, about putting oneself in opposition, about a situation where one has to reject what one liked in order to be able to move on.

Your life will always be reflected in the film, whether you want it or not, it doesn't matter. If Tarkovsky is doing *Andrei Rublev*, then the structure of his life is actually captured there. As if it's reflected in the film's narrative.

ADAPTATION, AMERICAN TRAGEDY

Speaking of adaptation or literary influences, it must be said that 80%

Shooting the film *Sleeping Beauty*

of film scripts are based on literary texts. From an adaptation of a story that is written. *American Tragedy* was also an adaptation of a literary work by Theodore Dreiser. Literature cannot be adapted literally, but it must be adapted with respect to the means of expression, into which we transfer it. In our case, television.

Why was it three-part? The first volume retold the entire basic plot of Dreiser's book. That is, we started with Roberta's death, the investigation of her death, and gradually developed the whole story. Clyde Griffith's meeting Roberta, the establishment of a love affair, Clyde's introduction to a distant cousin, Sondra, who is the daughter of the owner of the factory where he works as a poor relative.

And suddenly Roberta, who is hanging on to him, finds out that she is pregnant. Clyde, stressed, decides to get rid of her. Murders her. And this is detailed in the novel: where they checked in, where they were,

under what name, and so on. No one was supposed to know about them. We tell this story up to the point where Clyde is arrested and the investigation begins with him.

The second part of the narrative was the process. It was interspersed with flashbacks and recollections of particular events. There the whole situation was analyzed, step by step we follow how the murder happened. The flashbacks elaborated on parts of the story that we hadn't seen before and that had been glossed over. In the process of the investigation, we only showed what the police officers could see. We did not see the murder situation directly. In the second part, they present a reconstruction. How did he do it? He was supposed to show it, and in the process of showing it, he realized that he hadn't actually managed to kill her, that her death was also a play of some fateful circumstances.

And the third part captured the appeal process and sentencing, the philosophical ripening of the man, his coming to terms with death, with being executed in the electric chair. Everything takes place in the prison, and alongside that, we watch Sondra's gradual liberation from infatuation, and how gradually her wealthy parents try to cover it all up so that it doesn't come across as a failure of high society. So the main character wasn't a typical murderer, but he had to do time because he killed, he couldn't admit it, he couldn't come to terms with it. It's a deep theme.

When you have an idea, you have to find a narrative structure, a way to tell the story. Why did we tell it in three parts? What was the idea behind each part? How do you make dialogue out of a lot of pages, out of a three-hundred, four-hundred-page book that's full of a lot of ordinary, rather colloquial dialogue? What was interesting was that Theodore Dreiser wrote this as a Sunday supplement to the newspaper for the sequel. And you feel that a little bit. The structure of it isn't that artfully thought out. It goes after the action for a while, it's not always psychologically complete, but then it follows the relationships of the

characters, and that's very good to work with when you bring that into the structure of the film. The approach is a bit loose and you benefit from his vivid dialogues and descriptions of the environment.

CAST

A part of the actor's personality must overlap with the personality of the story. A part. That actor's personality can be different – even should be different. That's when it's most interesting, when he has a different face, but part of his inside matches the inside of the character. A part of him, a certain tone in him has to resonate with the hero. For example, when I cast Petr Čepek in *The Hired Clown* – an adaptation of Barč-Ivan's *The Long Way* – as a man who rejects God, who finds himself in an existential situation, he had to have that in him as well. From this point of view, the character is defined by its deepest tone, the most hidden feature that somehow defines it.

The cast makes the film concrete. Alongside, of course, the script is also becoming more concrete, the individual situations are being concluded dialogically as well. The whole acting ensemble can be built on stars and on the interpretation of their previous image. I'm very fond of the example of *The Corpse Burner* for this. *It* starred Rudolf Hrušínský, who otherwise played all lovable characters, and suddenly he's playing this perfidious man. What I'm saying is that the face was always well hidden in Hrušínský's case, Herz pulled it out of Hrušínský's subconscious for the film.

The casting, therefore, depends on the actor's specific qualities, his specific possibilities. Of course, if you cast an exclusive actress like Vilma Jamnická, then she, with her cackling voice and all those qualities, will seem like a mythical character. In *The Cart Full of Pain* they did call her Queen, but it had an ironic undertone. She was more of a sorceress of that place.

The most convincing are the actors in a contact situation. Sometimes they can't even repeat it afterwards. I used to think the more retakes the better. An actor is best at the first four, you can pick the best one out of them. After that it starts to decline, and if you want to bully him because you need seventy takes, then only somewhere around the fiftieth does he forget the mannerisms he's adopted and can be authentic again. Your film can work with any stylized external characters, but the actor has to be internally convincing, he can't be stylized.

Actor or non-actor? First of all – personality. Also an actor is a very complicated issue. If he doesn't have a personality, he is more difficult to work with than a non-actor. Of course we can say that they are expressive or that they are theatrically stylized, but they are not theatrically stylized, they are stylized the way the whole film narrative is stylized. You can already determine the manner of stylization under the opening credits. For example, *The Cart full of Pain*. A few bombs fall, the hero flees from the bombardment through a burning village. What words do you give him? Only explosions and I start an inner monologue. I start talking about fortune seekers in contrast.

The stylization of the film's narrative is encoded in all its components. Of course, also on the level of words. It requires that actor-director bond to, say, jointly decipher the way a character will speak, whether he will speak fast, slow, deliberate, stammering, mumbling, uncertain. Simply that means of expression of speech can determine whether it will be literary and stylized, or whether it will be completely authentic and littered with the noise of words that may say nothing but create the atmosphere of life. And maybe they hide something and the viewer discovers some hidden meaning.

I don't rehearse with actors, I read it with them. One can also rehearse, of course, but I don't always find it very useful. When we rehearsed, I always invented a mise en scène for them to learn how to speak in the situation. I didn't want the mise en scène to be exact, so

that they would remember it, but I would say, 'You're going to stand here and you're going to walk around, please stand and you can walk around a little bit, you can walk anywhere you want, I'm not restricting you in any way, I just want you to be able to walk around during the text.' You're going to walk on the gaffer's marks while you're filming, of course. ' Nowadays, everybody shoots intuitively, more or less randomly. The actor's action is filmed like a documentary, the camera is let go, the actor may be moving or standing, a cameraman circles around with a camera on his shoulders talking to himself: "Somehow it will pass if I make it dynamic. "

But it's questionable whether the scene needs dynamism or, on the contrary, calmness, whether it needs to make things static. Maybe it calls for some kind of exhalation of feeling, some immobilisation of the situation. These are just things that come up before the cameraman comes in and starts interfering.

SHOOTING

When shooting, you have to take advantage of the environment. This means that when you build the space of a mise en scène for a given situation, you try to take advantage of what the landscape offers you, of a natural formation: a cave, a lake, a road, a tree by the side of the road, and you try to capture them in a way that the viewer will be interested in and moved by them. This actually creates the energy of the image, which is meant to make a strong impression on the viewer.

I'm not saying that the most striking thing is the visual representation – the image, as all filmmakers say – the most striking thing is the sound, it's the most immersive, it gets into your ears even when your eyes are closed. It's omnipresent, it's pushing in the five-channel, in the seven-channel, in whatever. It is always more perfect and pressing on you from all sides. *Apocalypse Now* would be about nothing if it

Shooting the film *The Cart full of Pain*

didn't involve those fighter jets flying right overhead. Film is about the synergy of image and sound. This makes it superior to other arts.

During the shooting, I basically adapt the situation to the current atmosphere. For example, to the weather and those circumstances that I can't completely control. If it starts snowing and we're in a meadow in spring bloom, I don't stop filming. We have to shoot it. We have to shoot at least one scene with snow and cherry blossoms. We're actually lucky. I'll take a wide shot and capture a feeling or something. I'd be a fool not to shoot it, that way the unexpected expressive feeling will enter the film, just something to create a pause in the narrative, maybe just an exhale, a lyric.

Everything that leads to the completion of the film is for the benefit of the film. That the actor got sick? That you had to replace him? That you had to reshoot it? It doesn't matter. Even if you thought everything fell apart because someone in the shot is laughing differently than you

wanted, you might find in the editing room that this laugh is in some ways more interesting than your original idea. A director should have the ability to immediately react to all circumstances so that they play to the benefit of the piece.

You must have lived your film, you must have completed it in your imagination, but you are not making it according to this image. When you make it according to this image, you make a dead thing, you basically just schematically fulfill what you've written. That's not creation. A film is a journey, and all the obstacles are the path to the film.

And directing? When you have a talent for something, it makes you want to do it. You know how to draw, you have an artistic idea, so you draw and you get some feeling from the work, from the picture. When you can write – well, you write. Fellini, besides drawing sketches, wrote about 50 scripts for all kinds of films, for example for Rossellini. For Rossellini, he wrote *Rome Open City,* which is their best film together. The talent that you have allows you, for example, to convince an actor to run on the wall. And I have that talent in me. I've always been able to somehow lead an actor into situations that were corresponding to the narrative, to the visualization.

I've always aimed, in theatre and in film, for a highly captivating narrative. I didn't want to be boring.

POSTPRODUCTION

I've done a lot of television experiments. For example, we edited the whole film on a trick unit. It was called *The Hour Without Television*, it had two actors in it, it was shot in such a way that I was also doing shots from the ceiling of the studio, I was also shooting them while they were watching the controls, and so on. So there were all sorts of stuff, really. And there were all sorts of sinful scenes, meltdowns, intense scenes of married life, spanking. All in one hour, she turns off his TV,

where he's only watching porn, and wants to discuss their whole life, which has fallen apart, in one hour. And he tells her what all she's fucked up for him, that she's doing nothing but playing the piano. Well, how did we cut it? Because it was so complicated, I was slowing things down and speeding them up, just kind of shaping them in that editing room somehow.

For example, when we did the TV production *Roof of Escape*, we covered the studio to turn it into a military bunker. It was lit from the ground, some of the corridors had the ceiling covered with tracing paper, light shining through. It was filmed with a handheld camera-but there was no handheld studio camera then-so we took a reportage camera from a motorbike that was for the *Peace Race* bike race. It was 35 kilograms, and there was footage on the back, and it was 27 kilograms. The cameraman, Laco Kraus, had it all hanging on him and he took subjective shots with it. For example, the shooting, the subjective fall, all sorts of things that couldn't be done with big cameras.

In those things we did, there was a different form of storytelling, a different dramaturgical structure than in regular production. I think even Linda Aronson would have discovered even new possibilities there, what else you could do with narrative. The kind of things that she doesn't have in her book. Something was created in post-production. Another example, when I did the sitcom *The Teacher's Room, it* had 50 parts. It was a pity we didn't do more of them. It was Klimáček's text and it took place in one room, a box with two windows – just a studio... There was a picture of the founder of a private school, and then there was a water pipe somewhere or something like that. They gave us two cameras – and make fun! The way I came up with the way I shot it was that I set up the acting situation on two cameras, and I edited it in my head while I was shooting. I dictated the shot sizes to the cameramen, from who and to what to pan, how and when to pan out, and so on.

And in the editing room, I already knew what was going on. We were

editing on trick equipment, we were speeding up the entrances and exits, for example, two thousand times – suddenly the whole thing became a detail, you couldn't see the movement / non-movement, you could only feel it. And from the choreography of those raids, departures, and overshoots, the whole editing piece was created. And, of course, sometimes accelerations, decelerations, and so on were added to it. The whole movement was accompanied by musical-acoustic sounds that were like in a grotesque. They were recorded directly on the picture.

The editing process began in the morning at eight o'clock, the editor had it lined up, we worked hard all day, and by seven o'clock in the evening we had the edited part – it was about thirty minutes. And from that editing room, I went straight into sound post-production, where we first recorded one whole layer of sounds on it, then we put the jingles on. When they were dancing, we played all sorts of things that were popular at that time, well, just crazy stuff. And then it was recorded, overnight mixing was done. And by eight o'clock the next morning we had the thing done. And we could get on with the next part.

Post-production is a matter that is related to the theme and the particular structure of the narrative. If we wanted the narrative structure to dominate, we had to have a precise post-production plan. Many technologies were combined and fused. Film stock was used, a studio with big cameras was used, a production truck with clumsy cameras in real spaces were used. In *American Tragedy* we shot in the Koliba dance hall and in that dance hall we shot with a five-camera carriage. And in post-production, you had to put together a structure out of all these different technologies. Of course, the film footage had to be cut first, those had to be definitive, and then they were inserted into the whole thing in the electronic editing room. Everything had to be thought out in advance. It couldn't be put away like in a film in the editing room or in the mixing room. And that's why when film directors were doing

productions, they were cursing, they didn't know how to get it all ready.

Theater directors knew more accurately what to do – to make a whole. They were able to record the final result immediately.

ETHICAL ASPECT OF WORKING WITH AN ACTOR

I wanted all sorts of things from the actors, but I always liked them and I never hurt them, depressed them, or deliberately made them insecure. If someone wasn't good, I immediately said, "You know what, don't even try it, you won't do it, but we'll do it in such a way that nobody will notice. ' To put some of your own problems on an actor, that's ruthless. After all, you're in control, since you're the "all-director". I determined everything, every actor's every move. Everything. But I never imposed it on them.

I once got into a situation where I was doing arrangements in a theatre, in a rehearsal place, and I found out that it wasn't good. It was Mrozek's *Tango* – critics later considered it the best production of that play. I did it in Martin first in the rehearsal room, and there I found it all wrong.

I didn't say anything to the actors, I continued as if nothing had happened, I just re-arranged the whole thing gradually. They didn't even notice in the suggestive set-up how I gradually changed everything in the process. I didn't say we were doing it wrong, that I was going to arrange it differently, that we were starting over. But as we rehearsed, step by step, I changed everything, and by the time we got on stage, everything was fine.

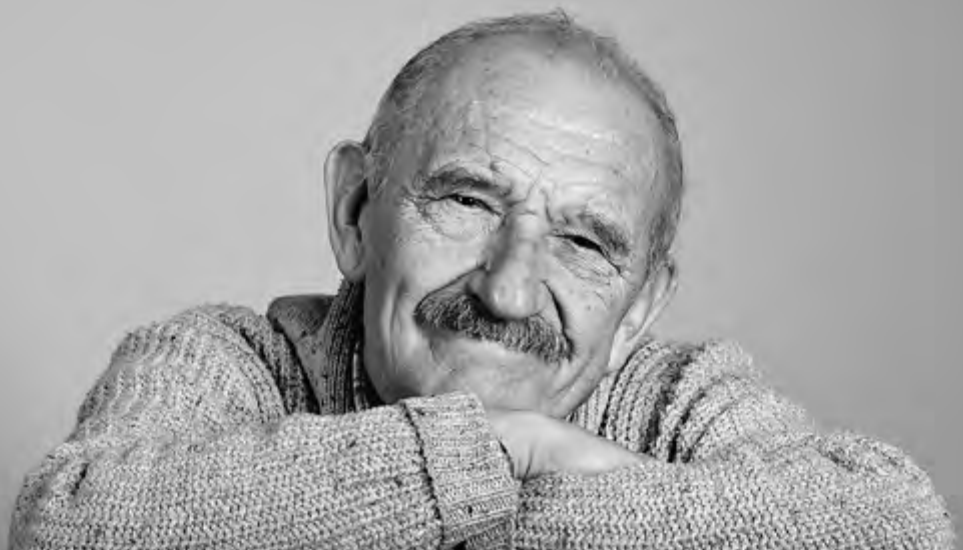
I couldn't have said: "You've mistaken me! "I could have said: "I was mistaken! " But it would have been useless, it was necessary to find a solution to the situation, so I gradually looked for it. But to burden an actor, no.

You have to assert yourself to the audience, to the authors, to the critics, and to yourself and... You know what? Actors will forgive anything, but they won't forgive failure. So even directorial bullies can be their good friends in the end, but when they're really friends, they don't have a personal conflict with each other. They only have conflict within the work.

Ethics is a complicated issue. You can only try actors to the extent you like them. I liked them. I even preach this idea that the actor you cast is the best, the most ideal he can be. No Nicole Kidman. If I cast Zuza Fialová, for example, she's better than Nicol Kidman. Period.

Here could be an end – but it isn't. For that, we must go back to the beginning. Each director has his own way and method of creating a dialogue with the viewer, and uses his own gifts to create a strategy for that dialogue. One thing is important to all of them. To understand the viewer's dreams and offer them to him through his film. That's the end.

led by Monika Mahutová



Dušan Dušek

January 4, 1946, Gbelce

Slovak writer, screenwriter, and teacher. He studied geology and chemistry at the Faculty of Natural Sciences of Comenius University, after his studies, he started working as a journalist for the daily newspaper *Smena* and *Tip*, and later for the magazine *Kamarát*. He published his first literary works in 1964 in the magazine *Mladá tvorba* and made his book debut with the short story collection *The Roof of a House* in 1972.

Dušan Dušek has systematically devoted himself to literature for children and youth, his books *Najstarší zo všetkých vrabcov (The Oldest of All the Sparrows*) (1976), *Pištáčik (The Chirper) (*1980), *Pravdivý príbeh o Pačovi (The True Story of Paco) (1980), Pištáčik sa* žení *(Little Chirper Gets Married) (*1985), *Babka na rebríku (Grandma on the Ladder) (*1987), *Dvere do kľúčovej dierky (The Door to a Keyhole) (*1987) have influenced several generations of young readers, and many of them have been published abroad.

He is the author of the short story collections *Poloha pri srdci (A Place near the Heart)* (1982), *Kalendár (Calendar)* (1983), *Náprstok (Thimble) (*1985), *Milosrdný* čas *(Merciful Time) (*1992), *Kufor na sny (Suitcase for Dreams) (*1993). He also experimented with kaleidoscopic structure in his larger prose works Teplomer *(Thermometer)* (1996), *Pešo do neba* (*On Foot to Heaven) (*2000), *Vták na jednej nohe (Bird on One Leg)* (2003), *Zima na ruky (Cold Hands) (*2006), *Holá veta o láske (The Bare Sentence of Love) (*2010), *Melón sa vždy smeje* (The *Melon Always Laughs) (*2013), *Ponožky pred odletom (Socks Before Departure) (*2016), *Strih vetra (The Cut of the Wind)* (2019), and *Potok pod potokom (The Stream Below the Stream) (*2021).

An important part of Dušek's creative output is his work for film,

television and radio. He collaborated with the director Dušan Hanák on films such as *Ružové sny / Rose Tinted Dreams* (1976) and *Ja milujem ty miluješ / I Love, You Love* (1980), he wrote the screenplays for Juraj Lihosita *Sojky v hlave / Jays in the Head* (1983) and *Vlakári / Commuters* (1988), and as a screenwriter, he also contributed to Martin Šulík›s *Krajinka / Landscape* (2000). His television work includes the films *Frajeri* a *frajerky / Boyfriends and Girlfriends* (1979), *Najstarší zo všetkých vrabcov / The Oldest of All the Sparrows* (1980), *Tajomstvá pod viečkami / Secrets beneath the Eyelids* (1990), *Prášky na spanie / Sleeping Pills*, the production *Obyčajný deň / An Ordinary Day* (1985) and an adaptation of Chekhov's short story Čierny *mních / The Black Monk* (1993). The radio play *Muchy v zime / Flies in Winter* (1992) which attracted an extraordinary amount of attention from abroad.

After 1989, he began teaching screenwriting at the Film and Television Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava and for many years was the head of the Screenwriting Studio. He is a member of the Slovak Film and Television Academy.

……

Thank you for coming, Mr. Dušek, for taking the time to chat...

As Americans say when someone says thank you, “You are welcome.” That's such a nice phrase. You are welcome!

I have a couple of questions. About screenwriting, but also about your work at the school. And then also about life in general and about creative work. So I'd like to start with a question that you probably get a lot, but kind of automatically have to start with. How did you go from being a chemistry and geology student to being a screenwriter and a novelist?

So, it's weird and strange. I sometimes wonder about it myself, although for me it is not so strange and weird. After studying chemistry at secondary school, I automatically wanted to go into chemistry... I applied to a science school, it worked out. At that time, the combination of geology and chemistry was just opening up. I liked that, I always liked rocks. But towards the end of secondary school, when I was about seventeen, my faithful friend Peter Glocko, who I was in the same class with, and I used to talk about reading, about books we liked, and we came back from holidays and found that we had both written some short stories over the holidays.

I know very precisely when and according to what I started writing. That summer I read Hemingway's short stories, and I was so caught up in it, excited by it, it seemed so easy... Hemingway always wrote clearly, distinctly, in short sentences. But as time went on... it turned out very quickly that it wasn't so easy, that appearances were deceiving.

We wrote something, we talked about it. Peter Glocko said there was no point in writing, but when he wrote a short story, it was better than mine. And so we continued, and one day when I was coming back from school, I discovered the magazine Mladá tvorba (Young Creation) near our house, where the Post and Newspaper Service booth was. That was another topic of conversation with Peter Glocko until we figured we should send our stories in. We did. They didn't write back. So we said, let's go there.

The editorial office of Mladá tvorba was on Gajova Street near the Blue Church. I remember, that we walked around for a good half hour, maybe an hour. Shall we knock? Or rather not? Finally, after overcoming our shyness and hesitation, we went in. In retrospect, I'm always aware that by opening the door to the editorial office, we found ourselves on that imaginary but also concrete threshold-when we crossed it, we actually took our first step into literature.

You've undoubtedly met a lot of other great writers in Mladá tvorba. Who was your first point of contact? Who was sitting on the editorial staff at the time?

There was – and thankfully still is – a great man, the poet Ján Buzássy, who took us in. He was willing to read our first writings and was very tactful and encouraging. I mention this also because he was later a role model for me in my teaching career at our school. So I have always tended to be more inclined not to say what is bad, but what is good and what is to be built upon. And this is what Janko Buzássy, whom I consider to be a kind of godfather of our generation, taught me. The generation which, apart from Peter Glocko, included the Lone Runners – Ivan Štrpka, Peter Repka, Ivan Laučík – or Dušan Mitana or Alta Vášová and Peter Zajac. Before us was a generation of authors we admired – Rudolf Sloboda, Vincent Šikula, Pavel Vilikovský, Tomáš Janovic, for example – we looked up to them and often discussed their texts. We thus gradually started our path in literature.

So you were a student of geology and chemistry and a budding writer at the same time?

At the very beginning of my studies, in September 1964, Peter Glocko and I published our first short stories in Mladá tvorba. At the same time as I was taking exams in geology and chemistry, I kept on writing and attending Mladá tvorba. That was one of the happiest periods in my life.

Until the Comrades abolished Mladá tvorba in 1970. With some fabrications, they branded the magazine as some kind of right-wing opportunism, accused us of groupism and I don't know what else. Normalization began and the magazine, in which we were free to write as we pleased, was no longer desirable.

After my third year, I told myself that I would drop out of school, because I was going to be a writer. But luckily my mom said that would be a shame, after all, perhaps that school... maybe it'll be good for you someday. To this day, I'm still grateful to her that I finished those sciences, that I had or have a college degree, because later on, this was the basic prerequisite for me to be able to teach at university at all.

After Mladá tvorba I published short stories in Slovenské pohľady or in Romboid, and later I tried to write something for children for the magazine Kamarát, the former Pioneer Newspaper, where I took over from Rudo Sloboda – as editor.

Gradually the number of texts grew, I published my first short story book *The Roof of a House,* and thanks to that I met the director Dušan Hanák, with whom I started writing the first script of our film *Ružové sny / Pink Dreams*. But that's another chapter.

You met Dušan Hanák. But how did it happen? How did your collaboration with this great director begin?

I was lucky. I was introduced to him by my friend, whom I have already mentioned, Dušan Mitana. And I must say that Dušan Hanák, like Janko Buzássy, was generous to me. After all, I knew almost nothing about screenwriting. Until then, I had written a single script with another director, Dušan Trančík, whom I knew from my childhood in Piešťany, we went to primary school together – and besides, our fathers were forest engineers, so we were close to each other, also in Mladá tvorba. Out of our friendship, we wrote a short script for television, which was never produced.

But I've always been fascinated by film. Just as I devoured books from a young age, so later I went to the cinema – whenever I could.

So it all started with the trio of Dušans: Dušan Mitana, Dušan Hanák and me. I took it as a good sign... Dušan asked if I had any ideas, but

I didn't have any. But after that, we met together from time to time and talked. And one day I realized that maybe he might be interested in a story. Actually, it wasn't even a story, it was more of a motive. My brother's classmate, a young postman from Bratislava, used to come to my house to borrow books to read. His name was Vojto. Every time he came, he would tell me stories from the postman's life, from delivering mail. And it seemed to me that he was the main character. That he was a person who, through his work, among other things, created communication between people. Postmen have always been more or less welcome, in those days they delivered pensions as well as mail – and with them good news, but sometimes bad news too, but above all, postmen have always known and know many people, their secrets, their stories.

I said it to Dušan and he was interested. At that time he had already been interested in the Roma community for a long time. So I came up with a young postman and Dušan suggested a young Roma girl. Suddenly we had two main characters that we could think of that could experience a story together. And since they are young people, what else could they talk about but love.

We started to meet regularly, we were thinking, looking for other motifs, other characters. We got in the car and drove to eastern Slovakia and went around the Roma settlements there for a few weeks. I offered my experiences from Záhorie, I had some Roma friends from my childhood there as well. After the sightseeing and preparations, we sat down and started writing. And in about a year we put the script together.

Is there anything that surprised you in the early days about being a screenwriter?

Thanks to Dušan, I actually learned that a script needs authentic material, authentic live dialogue. Preferably what someone else said, what is original, fresh, not too authorial. That it's really from life. And that's

Shooting the film *Jay in the Head* – Dušan Dušek, Juraj Lihosit in the middle and Vincent Rosinec

what Dušan taught me. He had whole notebooks of different notes, snippets of conversations, very true lines, and we would go through them and choose who would be the right person for which authentic line, for which character. I realized that it was actually such a "spring of living water" for the script. When I heard a good line somewhere, a good dialogue, a good story, I started taking notes, like Dušan. After all, that's what we taught you too, that you should keep a writer's diary. You never know when something will come to you, when suddenly a sentence that was said, say, on some other occasion or in some other context, will suddenly shine and enliven the whole picture.

And is there anything that you learned later that you wish you had known at the beginning?

Zuzanka, I learned the best way, by doing it. I've always told students

that it's the ideal collaboration when a screenwriter writes with a director. For a person who has a prose experience like me, writing a screenplay is something very different. And that's what Dušan Hanák taught me to distinguish. When I offered him something, he said: "Yes, that's good, but good for a short story, you can't film that."

As our favourite great screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière says: Film is written in images. That's one of the basic lessons for screenwriting. Something can be written in a nice sentence, but the emotion captured by the description is no longer easy to film. The latter can come – for example – by acting. Or by some kind of visual counterpoint. Or music. But of course, I was just learning at the time, and I didn't know that I was already supposed to know that. That's what I'm grateful to Dušan Hanák for, that he was willing to teach me, that our collaboration was so joyfully enriching for me.

You often say, and you've mentioned it now, that the collaboration between the screenwriter and the director is crucial. How would you describe the position of the screenwriter in the production? And do you notice any change from when you started?

For me, such cooperation has worked well, but it is not the rule. Of course, there are screenwriters who write without directors. Later on, I wrote a few scripts for television myself, and only after they were finished did a director take them on. And the fundamental difference was that while I was writing the script with a director, for example with Dušan Hanák or Martin Šulík, I was ninety-five percent sure that what we had written together would be in the film. Because the director, with his experience as a director, already sorts out the material when writing the script, and literary nonsense no longer goes into the script. The director, as a co-writer, no longer has the need to change it, because during the writing process, it's discussed many times what's go-

ing to be there and what's not going to be there. So finally, when the form is shaped, final, when the script is finished, the screenwriter has a guarantee that this is more or less how it will be in the film. There will always be some minor deviations from the script, because sometimes reality gives in, and sometimes it doesn't. I was lucky with *Pink Dreams*. When the film was made and my wife and I saw it for the first time in the screening room of the studios at Koliba, I had the feeling that the film was even better than the script we had written. So for me, it was a great experience and joy, the work was even more rewarding, the implementation of the script exceeded all my expectations.

Do you have a tip on how to make the collaboration between writer and director successful, or at least comfortable, fun?

An important prerequisite is that these people also fit together well. This is not just writing some sentences. I can say that with the directors I've written scripts with, most of the time we've talked about everything else, not just our script, and it's even happened a lot that we've talked about football, about whatever, about some completely different subject, and suddenly we realized that this is what we could use for the film. We didn't know a minute ago that it would lead us to something interesting that could be used. It's very nice when the work brings you closer together, you become friends – and that friendship is the best prerequisite for the work to thrive. It doesn't mean that we didn't argue at times and that one or the other of us didn't insist that this should be there and so on. But in the end, there was always a compromise, because there was no reason to argue, each of us had a point, and the argument always led to something, to some kind of synthesis. So, yes, there really was a kind of electrical induction. I was saying something that was completely out of the question, and it was maybe even completely embarrassing, stupid. But that person, that partner

of mine, that Dušan Hanák or Martin Šulík, suddenly remembered something, and thanks to that nonsense of mine, he suddenly recalled something that he wouldn't have recalled without it. And suddenly some unexpected motive emerged, a spark that could be used. So that spark skipping over each other, that induction, it worked so naturally there.

The amazing thing is that it stays with you. That even when the script is written, the film is made, you have the memory of a very pleasant friendship. Those meetings, those moments when we really discovered something, the joy of it. That's the beauty of the work.

You mentioned Dušan Hanák and the films you made together, and also the collection of material, which is very important in screenwriting. In these two films in particular, you did a very practical, focused, intensive search for material. Can you talk a little bit about those experiences?

For *Pink Dreams* we went to the east of Slovakia. We went to Roma settlements, visited and talked to local people. Always through friends who recommended us where to go and who to see. When you come with someone that these people know, there is more trust. The Roma people were warm, they cooked for us, they treated us, and suddenly we found out it was midnight, so we stayed there overnight. The scene in *Pink Dreams*, when Jakub the postman exchanges his shirt with Jolanka's father, was based on our experience. It's taken directly from the conversation when the gentleman was unbuttoning his shirt and was willing to give it to us. You can't make that up if you don't experience it. And if you made it up, I don't know if I would believe it, but when I experienced it, I believed it because it happened.

It was very interesting, sometimes even strange. They sent us to a headmaster of a school in one of the villages where the Roma children went, so he really knew them. We were waiting for him in the lobby of

the school, it was already in the evening, there was a light on at the door of the headmaster's office, so I peeked in.

The headmaster opened his desk drawer, took out a pistol, put it in his pocket, then switched off the light – and said we could go. That was strange, I was saying to myself, for God's sake, what does this mean. Nothing, nothing happened. That was the early 1970s, and our community, as now, was suspicious of the Roma, even to the point of refusing them. The villagers sometimes looked at us strangely. When we invited the National Committee workers, Roma women, very helpful, very nice, to the café for coffee, people looked at us strangely. But we didn't care. We needed to collect material from life and we were grateful for every willingness.

In *Pink Dreams* there is a wonderful character of Jolanka's grandmother. And we found that grandmother in a community right in Košice, they had houses there. We went into one of them – and there was this blind lady. That ended up being one of the most powerful moments in the film: her talking to Jolanka and peeling peas into her soup. The lady played it incredibly beautifully. It only came about because we went for the material that we were looking for.

What about the movie I love, you love*?*

When we were writing the script *I Love, You Love*, we went on night shifts to the Bratislava railway station, loading shipments into the carriages, so that we knew something about the work. People immediately detect every lie. It is seen by a person who knows more about it than you do, and will say: This is not true. This is the worst thing that can happen.

I once wrote a short story about football players. I based it on my father's experiences. In a story set during the war, I mentioned which player had what number on his jersey, I played with that motif. After

Shooting the film *I Love You Love* – Dušan Dušek, Dušan Hanák, cameraman Jozef Ort-Šnep

the story was published, I met the poet Milan Kraus, who stopped me and said: "I quite liked the short story, my colleague, you just have one mistake there." I say: "What is it?" And this poet, who liked football as much as I did, said to me: "Well, you know, in those days, football players didn't have numbers on their jerseys."

I didn't want to believe it. I told myself, after all, football players always had numbers on their jerseys. And I went home, I found photos from my father's youth, from his football games. They didn't have numbers. They didn't. I say this as an example. I was grateful to him. The average reader wouldn't know it, but he, because he'd been through it, knew it was a mistake. The collection of material will reward you by not making such a mistake.

You have also written about children and for children. For example, Jays in the Head *and* Commuters *with Juraj Lihosit*. Jays in the Head *was an adaptation of your short story. How is the adaptation of your own work done?*

It's probably easier to adapt another text than your own. That's what I used to do for television when I was a screenwriter. I found a nice short story, like *"Jug of Silver"* by Truman Capote, adapted it – and Ďurko Nvota directed it on television. I'll mention Carrière again, who said that we must forget the text. You have to read it and then put it down and write the script. That is also a very true lesson. You can, and must, use a character, you can use a motif, but it is not a literal adaptation, it is more of a paraphrase. Usually, the literary text serves only as a springboard.

Naturally, there are famous adaptations of literary works that stick to the text, but for me, the more interesting ones are those where the filmmaker makes a paraphrase of the text. It's normal that the director wants to put something of himself into it, so he chooses the material because it's close to his heart, his message, and he brings his emotions, his feelings, his vision, and that's how it develops. I didn't stick strictly to those texts either.

I did those two films for young people, *Jays in the Head* and *Commuters* with Juraj Lihosit, as you mentioned, and I consulted with him. When the script was finished, Juraj came in and wanted to put something of himself in there as well, and I totally respected that, because it was a contribution. For one thing, his filmmaking sense was in it, so some things were cut down or even dropped out because they were unnecessary. Both films are very loose adaptations of short stories that I'd written before.

Does a screenwriter's process change when they're creating for a younger

audience? And crucially, what are the key things to look out for when writing for children and young people?

The one thing I've always really focused on and tried to make sure to have there, whether in prose or in film, was humor. I wanted the kids to laugh occasionally, to have something to make them happy. To this day, I still like to watch and listen to two fifteen-year-old girls giggling in unison on the street somewhere. Because it belongs to that age. That's how they perceive the world. For them, everything is joyful, completely new, and I admire that and it excites me. They're discovering the world. There are never so many surprises afterwards as when one goes through puberty and is fifteen, sixteen, seventeen years old, and almost every day there are new experiences. Surprise is the golden crown of truth. Something changes, you suddenly perceive it completely differently. Something comes that you didn't know a second ago. Suddenly there is something magical. This is what I have been realizing and telling myself not to forget.

How can literature and film influence and enrich each other?

It's rewarding both ways. Cinematic language in prose can lead to a story becoming more lucid, faster-paced, more abbreviated, yet more imaginative, when words suddenly become actors and actresses on the screen of our imagination. I say that a bit hyperbolically, but with a little luck we can sometimes get lucky.

Did you find that a particular film experience influenced what you wrote afterwards?

Rather some kind of film idea. When I worked with Dušan Hanák, it worked in such a way that I offered something, it didn't fit in the film, but after a while, I realized that it might fit in the prose one day. He actually pointed out to me that there was a grain of something interesting in the idea, but it needed to be put into sentences. Something could grow out of such grain. In writing the book, I never knew how it would end. I was more or less waiting and hoping to surprise myself. As I was saying about the surprise: at a certain stage of the work, both the screenwriting and the writing, the material suddenly finds its own clothes. Suddenly you're surprised at how your subject matter has taken a completely new, unfamiliar path. So, farewell!

It lives its own life...

Yes, these are such nice surprises.

How was Krajinka (Lanscape) *created? How was the collaboration with Martin Šulík?*

So with Martin, it was really wonderful writing. Martin, to me, is one sunny person who jokes, teases people all the time, you can still feel that he is warm and good-natured, Martin is a rare person who knows how to please the whole company, to get us all excited, to cheer us up, to make us laugh.

We also met because we taught together here at school and we said we could write something together. That went on for maybe a year. And then all of a sudden one day, we got into it. We started meeting regularly. Martin used to come to our place in Prievoz, in the old gardens, and we'd sit there and think about what it could be. There are at least ten ideas in the computer that we never implemented. And final-

ly, we realized that it could be a short story film about a landscape, because we suddenly somehow had the most material for that. Something bounced off my prose, but it was mostly stuff that we had from friends or family. For example, the whole story about the beggar was told to us by Martin's father. There's also a short story in the TV version about two brothers who steal a plane and run away to the west. So that's an authentic story that we got at the airport from a flying instructor who told us. That's how we built the mosaic of mapping the landscape, creating a kind of plastic map of the territory.

I remember it as the most joyful job. I must say that Martin is still one of my best friends to this day. Almost every day we phone each other, we talk about what we've been through during the day. That's the gift of the job. I have a friend. I like his movies. Working together wasn't the end of our relationship – and without it, it certainly wouldn't have been as intense as it is.

I've come across some of your statements that you don't plan to write a script anymore, but that with Martin Šulík, you might still go for it. Is that still true?

My mom used to say, never say never, so I don't want to jinx myself. But I've more or less given up. I guess about ten years ago I thought I had a theme, and I said I'd write one more script. Martin was doing something else at the time, so it was left up to me to write it myself. And it was again a loose adaptation of one of my prose books, *Winter on Hands*, and I freely came out of that and made up a story about an art historian who writes a book about the great Slovak architect Emil Beluš, because I've always been interested in his work. Also architecture, I have a lot of books about architecture. In Piešťany, where I grew up, there are two really beautiful buildings by Emil Beluš, the Colonnade Bridge and the local post office building... Some of his buildings have

been neglected, they are deteriorating and disappearing. That seemed like a nice theme to me. Plus, some love stories of the hero and stuff like that. I wrote two versions of the script, it was very promising, it seemed to be coming to fruition. I said I'll write one more version, I felt I knew exactly how it should be. But at the same moment, it turned out that there was no money. By that time, Juraj Nvota, who was to direct it, and I were already casting actors, we had chosen locations, but suddenly the money was gone, it wasn't there, and there was no hope that it would ever come. I've seen it on television. It's never a sure thing that a script will turn into a movie. And that's what I always told students. When you write a short story, the work is done. But the script is just the beginning of the work. It's beautiful work, but you have no guarantee that it's going to be a movie. There are thousands of unproduced scripts everywhere. So I didn't take it lightly. I was a little sorry. Mostly I was sorry that I'd devoted a year of my life to it. And when I realized that I was over sixty years old at the time, I told myself that I didn't have that much time left to devote a year of my life to something that was not going to be anything in the end.

But if there really was a possibility, say with Martin Šulík, I would be happy. I would just look forward to it. So we'll see.

You have accurately fit into the next set of questions, which are about films that didn't happen. Often because of the time. And one of them was Heart Like a Fist*, which I think you were supposed to do with Dušan Trančík...*

I am astonished that you have this information...

And that film was never made. I Love, You Love *ended up in the vault for years. Are there any ideas or finished scripts that were never implemented,*

for whatever reasons, that you would still like to see in the cinema today?

I don't know if I'd like to see them in the cinema. You know, the script belongs to a certain time. It belongs to the time in which it was made. Even if you're writing a historical film, a historical theme, it's always related to the present. The script really ages very quickly, so I don't cry for the fact that some of those scripts weren't implemented. It's really nothing tragic. It's a normal symptom of our work.

But if I had to mention one of those scripts or themes, it would be the script that Martin and I wrote about the bakers. There was a bakery in Prievoz, near us, and still is, where we spent one working day from three in the morning. When the bakers do their first work, they put flour, yeast, water in the hole, the ovens are fired up, so that by five o'clock it is already baking, so that by seven o'clock the first loaves are already in the shop. At the same time, there is also a shop at the bakery. That seemed like a nice theme to us. It is not for nothing that they say that bread is our daily bread. We never overeat bread. It's the most basic of foods, and a very nice one. A loaf of bread is something wonderful. It naturally evokes the smells, the warmth and finally, the taste of bread is something very precious. So it seemed to us that this could be a nice film. But then somewhere along the line, it slipped away and we didn't have the luck to finish the script.

Still, it was not in vain. You know, the work was very nice. That we didn't make it, as they say nowadays, just – we weren't meant to. But the five, six weeks that we devoted to it were very enjoyable. When we left the bakery, we both got a loaf of bread. A decent fee. And a happy memory.

I've certainly written other scripts for television that haven't had the good fortune to be implemented. Conditions have changed, people, who were there before, left. There are many things like that... When you write a story in your notebook at home, you know that no-

Book publishing ceremony: *Three Scenarios* by Dušan Hanák – Dušan Dušek, Pavel Branko and Dušan Hanák

body else is going to influence you. But filmmaking is something completely different. It's a collective work. And the director always has the main say. I admire directors, it's a difficult profession, to have everything in your head and to make sure that everything plays together and ultimately leads to something that the film wants to say. For years I told myself that I would try to direct at least one short film, but the more I got into filmmaking, the more I restricted myself and told myself: Be happy to be there at your desk, writing a short story. You're not cut out for this.

Was there at least a short story about the bakers?

I may have used some of that motif. I already know... I wrote a short story about filmmakers, the screenwriter and the director write a sto-

ry about bakers in it, yeah, there's some of that in there. See, I'd forgotten about that, too.

Today's aspiring filmmakers have the freedom to create and have never experienced censorship and the locking up of films in a vault. But what does free creation mean to you?

Well, I don't want to be pathetic, nor do I want to say any big words about it, but when writing prose, I never cared if it ever got published or not. Of course, the ambition for the book to be published was always there, it's just that normalization were not normal times...

As you mentioned, our film *I Love, You Love* was in the vault for nine years just because someone said there weren't nice people. And that it's a nihilistic story. Yet it's a film about ordinary people, and its "putting in the vault" depended only on the decisions of unkind people. I don't want to go back to that.

When I submitted the manuscript of *A Suitcase for Dreams to* the publisher, they told me that I had to cut two stories from it. I said, okay, give them back to me, they won't be there. After '89, those stories came out in some other selection, in another edition. There's much more freedom in writing prose, you don't have to consider anything. In the worst case, it is not published. But when the finished film doesn't go to the cinemas, it actually doesn't exist. The short story is written, you can have friends read it, it can live. But a movie you don't see, actually, as if it didn't exist. So it's more challenging. For example, when we finished writing *Pink Dreams* and turned the script in to dramaturgy, someone said that the main characters have to have a wedding at the end. At that time, it was even state policy – the assimilation of the Roma population. But we knew that if we did that, we would bury the film. So we refused to do it, therefore the script was postponed for half a year, maybe even longer, and they kept asking for the two main charac-

ters to get married, so that it would be within the intentions of the policy of assimilation. It seemed that the film wasn't going to be produced because of that, but then some more enlightened dramaturg appeared and called us in to at least suggest that such a wedding between two ethnic groups was possible. We had minor characters in the script, one Roma clerk and one artisan, and in one dialogue we revealed that they had fallen in love with each other and that they were going to have a wedding – and the film went into production without the marriage of our protagonists. The sad and humiliating thing about it was that the decisions were often made by people who had neither the training nor the writing experience to do it; they were entrenched functionaries with a say in things they had no idea about, but out of complacency they felt that they were the ones to make the decisions for you.

Did you get a chance to see I Love, You Love *before it went into the vault?*

I remember that when the film *I Love, You Love* had been locked in a vault for several years, one day Dušan Hanák called to tell me that there would be a screening at Koliba. The director would let us see it, and we could call some of our friends. Before the screening, the director gave a speech. To this day I still regret that I didn't have a small tape recorder with me. In a drunken voice he spoke to us: "Well, I'll let you see it, this film, but I have to tell you that it will never get distributed. You know, we can watch some porn films at home, but we can't put them in the theaters." He classified our film as pornography. For ten minutes, he was ranting like that. Well, we sat there and waited, and finally he said, "All right, we'll let you in. So we could at least watch it. Then it was in the vault for a few more years.

That was the oppression. A week before the filming of *Commuters,* I was called to Koliba, that there was going to be a big meeting, we were sitting there with the director, the dramaturg – and people from the

studio management were accusing us that this film about children, fifteen, sixteen-year-old students, was anti-Slovak, that it was not rooted in folk culture, and all that kind of talk. So I said to myself that if it's not going to be filmed, at least I'll tell them my side of the story. I stood up and called their talk nonsense, using specific examples to try to explain that the script was based on observation of children and their world, that I had done my research before writing it, that there were authentic stories and dialogues in the script. Then I sat down and thought it was buried forever. But it turned out that there was someone sensible sitting there after all, I don't know who, he must have stuck up for us – and suddenly after a week, the film went into production. The uncertainty was devastating, it only took one person to decide about your year's work.

Back then there was money, but there were these restrictions. Today, that restriction is mostly just financial. Film is a really expensive art and it can't be done without money. You write a book, you just need one chair, one table, a pencil, paper. That's the minimum cost, but you can't make a film that way. Miloš Forman talked about it nicely in Martin Šulík's documentary *The Golden Sixties*. He said that if he had to choose between political or financial constraints, he would rather choose financial constraints, in short, there is no money, but not that someone is chopping off your ideas. I absolutely agree with that.

You started teaching at the Academy of Performing Arts after all this, only in 1993. In the 90s, however, film production in Slovakia stagnated significantly. What was the mood at the school when you arrived? Did the situation in the film world affect the school? Or was it an island of hope for Slovak film?

When I look back and when I talk about it sometimes with Professor Šulaj or with Martin Šulík, who is also a professor, or with another professor Marek Leščák, the situation was really not good. Koliba disap-

peared. This base ceased to exist and there were periods when only one Slovak film a year was made. I think that the rescue of Slovak film was really right at our school. The atmosphere here was always good, creative, there were always good students who wanted to do something, and as far as we teachers were concerned, we tried our best to offer you our knowledge and experience, whether from our own work, from Slovak or world cinema, but also from literature and other kinds of art. I don't want to sound pretentious, but I believe that if it weren't for our FTF VŠMU, film wouldn't be in the shape it thankfully is. Of course, everything could be better, but it could also be much, much worse. And that spirit of filmmaking and that kind of honest effort to do something meaningful and worthwhile has never been lost at our school. Because of that, that critical period was bridged.

What criteria do you think an aspiring screenwriter should meet? And can screenwriting be taught in school?

I always told the freshmen at the beginning: The first sentence I want to tell you is this: Neither I nor anyone else will teach you how to write. And the second sentence is that you have to learn it yourself. And the third sentence: You will learn it by doing it. By honestly trying to do it. The important thing is that you don't run away from it when the work doesn't go well, because that's part of the work, that sometimes it doesn't go well. It's exactly the same thing as asking Mr. Čapek: Mr. Čapek, how do you write? He answered exactly: With ass. That you sit at that desk, and even if one day, two days, one week, two weeks nothing comes, you will not run away and you will try again and again. I guarantee that if you keep at it, you will be rewarded. Suddenly an idea flies through the window, some little swallow, you write the first sentence, and so, just by doing it, by thinking about it, by not abandoning the work, by talking about it, both with your teachers and with each other,

by talking about books, by talking about films, by enjoying the fact that something is in the air around you, with a bit of luck, because luck is also important, you have the hope that you will actually do something. Screenwriting is as much a job as any other, that is, when you do something, you have to do it. That you commit yourself to that work. And you try to finish it.

What do you consider to be your most important role as an educator?

Perhaps what I have just said, to convince students that one should not give up. I've been there, the work will reward persistence. Only seldom do you get to experience such pleasure, people outside our profession probably don't even know – what it's about. That creativity that translates into concrete work and concrete product, that's living water. Something that will give your life meaning for a period of time or even forever.

The viewers and readers will also have an experience, a joy, an emotion from it. Because our work is always an offer, an offer to communicate. We don't always know what the response is, but sometimes when someone stops you on the street and says they've read something or seen something, suddenly you know it's reached some destination. The whole point of our work is human communication. An offer to talk.

Is there anything that you, in turn, have learned from your students?

Ah, so students are the best. I've always enjoyed it. Of course, some were more successful, some were less successful, but basically, I was always energized, I was happy with their every idea. When I saw that someone was really willing to put in the work, it made me happy. I enjoyed seeing their eagerness to do something, to enjoy something. Children and young people, they're the best people in the world. And I

took it as a privilege to be able to meet with you, with the students, and really it's a privilege because few of my peers and friends have that opportunity to learn something about how young people live, how they see the world. Thanks to the fact that we met at school – after all, we didn't always just talk about some curriculum – we also discussed some other, small things here and there. I always liked meeting you, I liked talking to you and I enjoyed listening to you. For me, it has always been very rewarding. I would even say that's the most joyful part of our work. A good interview is sometimes more than a good short story.

I'm interested in how you perceive the world, because I don't perceive it that way anymore, I'm long gone from that time when I was in my twenties. But thanks to you I have information about it and I appreciate having it.

I have to say that it was a privilege for us also to be able to meet you and talk to you.

That makes me really happy.

Do you have any advice for your teaching colleagues after so many years with students? What message would you like to pass on to them? Maybe to the younger, junior ones who don't have as much experience yet?

I have no worries, for example, Janko Púček, a great young teacher, a good writer, a joyful person, came after me. I probably wouldn't even dare to give him any advice, or anyone else, because it's not exactly transferable. But I do appreciate when someone has an approach based on empathy for students. I'll come back again to Mladá tvorba and Janko Buzássy: I felt that he came to me with graciousness, with an offer that I might find useful. And that's it. Both parties are equally

striving for it, trusting each other and looking for a point where they can meet, and nothing more is needed. Nothing more.

You have met a lot of interesting people on your journey, not only as a screenwriter. Who has left the biggest mark on you? Who was the person you would have loved to work with, create with, or even just debate with, but didn't have the opportunity to?

Perhaps I should mention my favourite Slovak writer Dominik Tatarka, whom I have met perhaps five times in my life. Once I was visiting him together with Dušan Mitana, we had some books published, so we went to bring them to him. He wasn't allowed to publish at that time, he was a dissident. I remember how jovial he was with us young guys, talking to us and encouraging us to write. How he went with us to the wine bar, we were coming down from Slavín, where he used to live, and as we walked along, he – a handsome and free fellow – between us, took us by the shoulders and led us down that slope like that. To this day, I love reading his books *Wicker Armchairs*, *Scribblings*, and *Navrávačky*. This rare man, to me a great writer, as if he was giving us some kind of baton. It may seem far-fetched what I'm saying now, but I'm still thrilled that we got to hang out with him. That's his sentence. He's got this little book called *I'll Stay with You A Little While Longer*. We were lucky. Then it happened again when he was sick and in the hospital. Dušan Mitana and I went to see him again. It was probably a month before his death, he was exhausted by illness. He gestured for us to sit down, each of us on one side of him as he lay on the bed, and he took our hands in his. And so we sat there with him in silence. And we stayed together. That's what stayed with me, too. I felt and still feel that I got something from him then.

You often mention Carrière, Fellini or other filmmakers who brought you to

film and before that to literature. But what about you and film today? Do you have contemporary favourites, inspirations, personalities or works? Somebody you think today's students shouldn't miss? A contemporary Fellini?

As I get older, I'm not nearly as eager film consumer (kinkár) as I once was. That's the expression of my mother, who was a "kinkár", and I probably inherited those genes from her a little bit. I used to be able and willing to watch three movies every day. Today, I can't even make it over a week. But just yesterday I was watching the *New Pope* series on TV and I immediately thought of other films by this director – we're talking about Sorrentino. You know, it's something so great. It may not be to everyone's taste, but I was blown away yesterday, every shot precisely composed, great cinematography, great actors. My soul rejoiced to see such beautiful images. I also admire his films *The Great Splendour* or *Youth*, they are fireworks of filmmaking art. Sorrentino fulfills precisely Carrière's dictum that a film is told through an image. There are great images. These are like the canvases of the old masters, it lives, it breathes, it has humour, it has irony, everything masterful.

I absolutely agree, it's my favorite too.

I'm not surprised. It comes from tradition. The great Italian masters, that hasn't been lost over the centuries, but it's been passed on to the films of Fellini, Antonioni, Visconti and other classics of Italian cinema from the 1960s – and now it has a successor in Paolo Sorrentino.

Is there something, a theme, a genre, a story that is missing in today's Slovak work, but you think it should have its place?

Zuzanka, I don't dare to answer that question. I think it is not important to give assignments, what should be or what should have a place. It is what is. And of what is, maybe suddenly something will be crucial. But we don't know. In my opinion, it cannot be defined or specified in advance. My experience, also in literature, is that the books that nobody wanted to publish, after a while became essential books. Take the works of Marcel Proust or James Joyce, for example, their books nobody wanted to publish at the beginning – and today they are the basic, breakthrough works of world literature of all time. It always turns out in the end what was needed and what is needed.

Have you ever had an author's horror of blank paper?

This is such a cliché, a terror of paper. Yes, the paper is blank, but you can always scribble on it, after all, it's not an untouchable thing. Sometimes I was really desperate about how bad the writing was going, and I'd say to myself, go for a walk somewhere, you can't do it, so don't do it. But at the same time, I was trying not to – not to run away. Don't believe in the horror of blank paper. So okay, today it didn't work, but tomorrow some words will be written there and that work will move on.

I will quote you from the book Writing the Story*, "No film has ever been made without conversations, controversies, and arguments. Fortunately." Can you think of an extremely fruitful, interesting, and creative argument that still sticks in your mind which contributed to the making of a film?*

I remember that I walked away from Dušan Hanák two or three times feeling offended when I didn't like something, and maybe he didn't like what I was offering either. It was never deadly serious, it was just such momentary misunderstandings. The friendship that was there, the cooperation, the equal interest in doing something, was a reliable driv-

ing force that eventually solved everything. It wasn't even quarrels, it was more that for a while you thought you had a great idea and the other person didn't get it, didn't like it. And maybe he was absolutely right. I think, in general, it's important to talk about whatever the issue of dispute is. Not to walk away from the argument, but to try to explain it, that's the only solution, not to stop talking. Don't stop. Many, many things would be solved if people were willing to talk about them.

How does a screenwriter's work on a film end for you? How does it feel when you see it in the cinema? Or even after years on TV or in state exams questions? And are you able to watch the films you've worked on?

I don't watch them till the end anymore. But I'll watch a bit here and there, especially to refresh my memory of that job. Suddenly, my mind flashes back to when we were sitting at tea or cooking a soup with Martin Šulík – and then this food appeared in *Krajinka*. Like when a fire is smoldering, you blow into it and a flame bursts out of the ashes. And it warms you up for a while.

So what is the end of a screenwriter's job? Is it only in the cinema?

The last dot is acceptance. When the work gets its response. That's when you can say – so now it's really done. It's a blissful feeling when it ends well, because it doesn't always end well. But that's the way it is with everything. But when something is successful, we rejoice.

Thank you very much for taking the time for this interview.

Thank you, too.

led by Zuzana Bílska

Dušan Trančík

November 28, 1946, Bratislava

Slovak director, screenwriter, and teacher. In 1970 he graduated from the Department of Composition at FAMU in Prague. As a student, he directed the remarkable short film *Photographing the House Dwellers* (1968), collaborated on a documentary about the student strikes and commemorative rallies after the burning of Jan Palach *Tryzna / Commemoration (*1969), and as a protest against the occupation he made his graduation medium-length film Šibenica */ The Gallows (*1968).

The beginnings of his work are connected with the Short Film Studio in Bratislava, where he directed on the documentaries *Robotník X / Worker X (*1970), *Vydýchnuť / Exhale (*1970), *Vrcholky stromov / Treetops (*1972). For television, he co-wrote with Elo Havett, Ján Fajnor and Vít Olmer in the journalistic magazine about young film for the young *Ráčte vstúpiť / Please, come in (*1974).

After his medium-length features *Oblaky-modriny* / *Clouds and Blues* (1974) and *Amulet* (1975), he made his debut at the Feature Film Studio with *Concert for Survivors* (1976). This was followed by *Winner* (1978), *Phoenix* (1981), *Pavilion of the Beasts* (1982), *The Fourth Dimension* (1983), *Another Love* (1985), *Weekend for a Million* (1987), the fairy tales *Seven in One Shot* (1988), *Mikola a Mikolko* (1988) and the Slovak-French co-production *When the Stars Were Red* (1990).

After 1990 he returned to documentary filmmaking. For Austrian television ORF he prepared the film *Short Memory* (1993), for Czech Television the travelogues from the series *Cestománia*, portraits from the GEN series, the series *Hádala sa duša s telom / Argued the Soul with the Body* (1997) and the independent documentary *Tisove tiene* / *Tiso's Shadows* (1996). His films *The Optimist* (2006), *A History Class* (2013), and *Bright Place* (2017) resonated with audiences on Slovak public tele-

vision. The last feature film by Dušan Trančík is the comedy *Winter of the Magicians* (2006).

Dušan Trančík is systematically engaged in pedagogical activities. He worked as the head of the Directing Studio at FAMU in Prague and at the Film and Television Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts. He is a member of the Slovak Film and Television Academy.

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You started as a film editing student on FAMU. How did you get to directing?

I started studying at the Film Faculty in 1964. At the Directing Department. There were eight of us in the first year and the department decided to reduce the number of students for cost-saving reasons because the film material was expensive in the second year. I was among the five who had to leave the department. The directing department had the sub-department of editing, so I took advantage of that. Jan Kučera, nicknamed „fajfka“ („pipe“), an exceptional personality and a good teacher, was teaching at the editing department. He knew how to talk about film language in an interesting and inspiring way, and I still lecture to students in this spirit. The seminar began by putting on the editing table, for example, Antonioni's *Eclipse*, pausing it at the first shot and saying: „So, let's analyze this scene for me! Why did the lamp go out? What does this shot entail? What is its contextual meaning? “ He wanted us to be aware of composition, camera movement, acting, frame composition. The lamp went out, one could see the dawn out of the window, so this shot in its compacted, minimalist form indicated that dawn is breaking. We learned to analyze the details of the shot.

I still stayed in touch with the Department of Directing. I used to go to Barrandov and observe Evald Schorm shoot film. He didn't shout, he didn't speak out loud. He went to the actor and said something quietly.

Then he went to another one and advised him something quietly too. It seemed as though the actors never knew, what he was saying to the others. It was such tactful directing. He never showed off, he didn't raise his voice, he didn't make dramatic gestures. He was really an introvert.

Gradually, I started editing films for ambitious students. Vít Olmer had an excellent studio, so I produced various editing versions in there. And then a group of filmmakers from Yugoslavia came to school – Karanovič, Zafranovič, Markovič, Goran Paskaljevič, later Grlič – and somehow we found our way to each other. I edited their exercises, we were friends, we were hanging out together in Prague's pubs. I was drawn to independent directing work. I wrote some ideas for a short film and sent them to my friend Peter Mihálik in Bratislava. He worked as a dramaturg in Short Film and he liked my scripts. I got support for my graduation film project there.

Was that Photographing the House Dwellers*?*

Yes. It was a para-document. I wanted to capture the paradox of Slovak reality through the family of worker Jozef Ďurek: People seemed to be better-off, they built big houses on their own, but they were worn out and tired. The film had a solid structure, the situation of photographing the family repeated in various forms, but I couldn't find a way to capture the passage of time at first. So I came up with the tiny mystifications that measured time: grandpa died, grandma died, the wedding celebration, birth of a child. There was a lot of room left for improvisation during filming. For example, during the wedding scene, one of the Roma musicians came to the camera and said out of nowhere: „This is a wedding, let's enjoy! Be happy, not sad.“ And he left. I didn't ask him to say anything, yet he had the urge to say it. Such things made the film unique.

Did you start filming short documentaries?

Every young director's dream is to make a feature film. But it was practically impossible back then. As can be deduced from my filmography, I did not get to feature film in the Koliba Studios until 1976. I shot the teen film *Clouds and Blues* for television before that and a drama *The Way Home* with Hungarian national artist Bulla Elma in 1975.

So you got into documentary out of necessity??

I don't know if it was a necessity. The documentary was then a starting point for young directors. I was lucky that the dramaturgs in Short Film treated me very empathetically. The decisive factor was Peter Mihálik. He gave me the chance to make the first documentary which was 444 meters long, I remember cutting the fifth meter to make it just fours.

I like that. And then in 1969, the film Tryzna (Commemoration) *was made. How did that happen?*

Tryzna za Jána Palacha (Commemoration of Jan Palach) is not just my film – three directors collaborated, the other two are Vlado Kubenko and Peter Mihalik. It's true that I initiated the film. Jan Palach was a student at the Faculty of Arts, only five hundred meters away from the Faculty of Film. After setting himself on fire, of course the students and we at FAMU too, started a protest strike, we slept in the corridors, we were overwhelmed with grief. It was a scary atmosphere. I decided to go to Bratislava and make a film about it.

I remember that they called a big dramaturgical meeting in the Short Film department, at which we discussed, what we were going to

Shooting the film *Winner*

shoot. And then some directors started to leave quietly. They didn't want to get involved, didn't want to burn their fingers. In the end, only three remained in the room. Kubenko decided to record the events in Bratislava, Mihálik in Brno and I went to Prague with cameramen Alojz Hanúsek and Jozef Müller. In Bratislava, I managed to shoot translator Zora Jesenská in Lumumbák – it was a dormitory. Slovak students were touched by the tragedy the same as students in Prague. Everyone decided to hold a commemoration of Jan Palach.

Was this film shot in secret?

No, there was still an interregnum in 1969. But one couldn't say that any of the reformers of the Prague Spring had the power. Císař, Smrkovský, Černík, Dubček no longer had power. They were summoned to the Kremlin and held to account; the political conflict with Moscow

persisted. It was about who would replace who and how the situation would develop after the occupation. In this hectic period, there was no one to ban filming.

But you are asking an interesting question: When did this breakthrough occur? We were still free to film *Tryzna (Commemoration*). The change came when I started filming Šibenica *(The Gallows*) in eastern Slovakia. Mihálik and Kubenko finished *Tryzna (Commemoration)*, I was no longer editing. I'm sorry for that too, I had a bad feeling that the music was overused, suppressing the authenticity and magic of the image. Standardization commissions were gradually appointed to assess the behavior of individuals during the occupation. When I got summoned, someone asked me how I perceived the commentary in the film, why I didn't change it. I told them that "... I didn't pay for extras on Wenceslas Square, the crying and the noise is authentic". They suspended me, but they didn't dismiss me. Kubenko got some kind of a ban, and Peter Mihálik was dismissed immediately. He became a film scientist and began teaching at the Academy of Performing Arts. At least this was positive.

And how did The Gallows *come about?*

I wrote the story at FAMU. It was a model situation. At the end of the world, high in the mountains, the villagers of a small settlement celebrate a christening. Suddenly two unknown men appear among them, looking for a carpenter. They want him to build gallows at the crossroads by morning. They dishonor the christening, destroy the celebration and bring an act of repression and violence to the settlement. It is unclear who will hang on the gallows, yet it will be there. I thought I'd testify a bit about that period. I wanted to make a film that would be like a record of a secret and forgotten event. We did a 16 mm black and white shoot to get the grain and desirable documentary authenticity.

I like to reminisce about *The Gallows* because it brought a nice ending. My editing teacher Jan Kučera always forbade me to shoot and said: "Trančík, edit and do not direct." And then when *The Gallows* was finished, we went around the festivals together: Pesaro, Manheim, and Karlovy Vary. He introduced me to Brdeček and said: "Mr. Brdeček, this is my student. This is my student; you know ?!" And in Pesaro, when I got a question about the film school in Prague, Kučera went ahead and told them in fluent French about the film faculty, the sub-department of editing, and praised my film. And we had Fernet together.

You mentioned the word authenticity. I feel it's the priority in your work. Is that right?

I believe that every director works with authenticity. He looks for it. It's like salt, you can't make a good film without it. Indeed, I wanted to capture life in action in my work as much as possible. It gave me energy while shooting. I also wrote some texts on authenticity and stylization in the film. I think that the documentary focuses on the analysis of the whole, that is, you choose from the whole everything that gradually helps you compile the image of the theme. The feature film is a synthesis of detail. And you must concentrate hard on the details to evoke authenticity, whether in the psychology of the characters or in the dramatic story itself.

What was the inspiration for shooting the film Treetops*?*

During normalization, there were massive interventions in the dramaturgy of the Short Film. The idea of "socialist realism" began to take hold. It was no longer possible to have a friendly conversation there.

Shooting the film *Another Love* – DuDušan Trančík and Alojz Hanúsek

Eventually, I was given the task of making a film about the socialist labor brigade. I went to the cement plant in Horné Srnie and saw the miners, who were called barábri in Italian – white miners – working hard. I liked the way they lived together and after work, they grew vegetables in their gardens and from time to time went out to have fun together. I came up with a joke: throughout the film, we would be accompanied by the off-screen, multi-voiced commentary of children learning about cement manufacturing at school. One kid is not paying attention and is reading jokes under his desk. The teacher asks him, “What's funny?” At that point, the cement manufacture stops. Everyone waits to see what the pupil will say. And he tells them a joke about a giraffe who came to the cafeteria and had a beer. And the giraffe from that joke suddenly appears in the quarry. It was a kind of a formal game to lighten up the ideologizing of the subject. Such a wink to the audience.

Today I see it as exhibitionism. I feel that a film should always be about substance. About direct things, direct feelings, direct people, honesty. That's the kind of film that impresses me more today. Today I want to go after the subject, I want to expose the deceit and the insincerity and not pretend that nothing is happening.

How did you choose the topics?

The theme plays an essential role in the author's life. In one interview I remarked that I don't want to make films just to keep the ball rolling. What I meant at that time was that the author has to be fully engaged with the subject, he has to live it and tell everything he knows about it and what bothers him. Only then can he make a good film.

In The Winner, *you cast a non-actor who was a real fist fighter for the role of an aging boxer. But there is only one boxing scene in the film. Why didn't you cast an actor who would learn to box?*

In *The Winner,* it was very important to choose the right actors, because the meaning of the whole film is hidden in the boxing match at the end. It's a rematch, a revanche after twenty years. Both guys have aged, gained weight, lost agility, and box a little differently than they used to, but their different views on life remained.

Several men in their forties who knew how to box but had never stood in front of a camera came to the acting rehearsals. Jaroslav Tomsa was a physically fit stuntman, boxer and also occasional actor. He had no fear in front of the camera. We bonded instantly and I was glad to have found him. It was worse with his counterpart. Jaroslav Pucher was a real policeman, a former boxer of the Red Star Bratislava, a tough guy, nobody could mess with him. In the final match, he was

about to get hit with a big punch that would knock him down, and his wife, who was watching the fight, would accuse Tomsa of wanting to humiliate him in front of the kids. Only Pucher didn't want to get knocked down after the punch. He didn't care about the meaning of the film; he didn't want to lose.

Therefore, I concluded that the desired loss was a moral victory for his opponent, a social outsider.

We shot on contact sound. At that time there were only noisy Arriflex cameras in the Koliba Studio available. When they were running, you could hear the motor. For most of the film, the post-synchro's were done. But in this case, it was impossible. They lent us a noiseless boxed camera from the Newsreel for only 24 hours. It was used for filming politically engaged reports. We had to plan everything precisely and it worked. The sound contact enhanced the authenticity of the boxing match. The sounds weren't added in the post-production; they were real body punches.

I reminisce about this movie, there were a bunch of great people there. Really great. I've been reminding students ever since that the most important thing in making any film is a good team.

One cannot disagree with that. On which film were you most surprised by the team you worked with?

You know, not all crew members read the script. Some of them are shooting only for a few days. They come in to do a specific job that they're booked to do. The makeup artist who is supposed to create the scar doesn't stay at the filming location all the time, his assistant is there for routine makeup work. Similarly, the pyro technician only comes to the shooting scene. And you need to motivate even those people who come for a moment. You need to sit with them, do your best to make them interested in your film.

The *Winner* was crucial for me in that regard. There I met good professionals and considerate people. I wondered if it wasn't the effect of that era. The seventies, that was normalization. People lived two lives: on the outside, they pretended that everything was fine, and then on the inside, they could speak the truth. Except, of course, the people of Charter 77, who protested openly. It was always said that people went to their country cottages so that they could talk openly, by the fire, without any listening devices, about what they really thought about the repressive regime. So I guess it was the effect of that era that the people who met on my film knew each other, trusted each other, and felt free when filming.

Another Love was a similar film. The cameraman Lojzo Hanúsek was important for me there. In Osrblie, in the village behind Brezno, the conditions were quite harsh: it was biting cold, but we experienced the amazing joy of doing something freely. Hanúsek was a sociable person, he was able to talk to the locals and I think that the creative atmosphere was also reflected in the film image.

In one interview you said that "my authorial world includes non-actors too, I was close to the documentary method of filming, to the authentic environment and the directness of the narration. I am a proponent of what is known in the history of cinema as direct cinema". How do you apply the principles of direct cinema to feature film?

I think it goes step by step. Gradually, as you create, you find your own way. You think about what you've shot, how you've shot it, you slowly progress, you think about each step. Not everybody has an idea of their own path. He's thinking, copying, looking for new ways and different stimuli. It's like on a hang glider, you have to get off the ground and fly by yourself. So the way to take off is practical experience, school films, lectures, conversations with classmates, workshops. You

think about where you're going to fly. Personally, I found the “direct cinema” stream creatively liberating.

In Another Love *you already work with professional actors, for example with Maroš Kramár. What led you to this decision? Why didn't you use non-actors like in* The Winner*?*

Maroš Kramár was still young, new, and fitted in very well with the actors from HaDivadlo and Brno's Theatre on a String. He himself was a student of JAMU, which means that a group of people who knew each other met on the set. There was a certain empathy and cohesion among them.

The big figure of that film was György Cserhalmi, a Hungarian actor who made many excellent films at the time. He worked with Miklós Jancsó, with István Szabó, and had great international success. I was expecting him to show it off. But György is a modest person, he absolutely got into the character. When he dressed up in costume and sat down in the pub with the guys, he absolutely fitted in there. He found filming in Osrblie a pleasant adventure.

The part of the acting puzzle was a man I found on Obchodná Street in Bratislava. I invited him for a glass of wine. We went to a wine bar called U sedliaka and there I told him that I wanted to shoot some film footage with him. I really liked his face, marked with lines of life. He lived modestly – hand to mouth, as they say – and he impressed me by being the inventor of some kind of soap. He immediately wrapped one for me. His name was Wilhelm Perháč, and people accepted him. I think he also felt very comfortable among us. Even five or six years after filming, he would still come to see me and ask if I had any other business for him in film. He was doing TV commercials and was enjoying it.

Shooting the film *Mikola and Mikolko*

That soap ended up in that movie eventually, if I remember correctly.

Yeah. I used that as a happy moment.

Do you like to bring things and scenes that you experience in real life into your films?

Every director, when he discovers something interesting and inspiring, modifies it a bit and transfers it to the drama he is making. But I'll come back to the people who were good to work with. I must mention the cameraman Vladimír Smutný, with whom I made *When the Stars Were Red*, and the architect Roman Rjachovský. You know, I was very happy to work on films that had a small crew. When there are few people

around you, it's easier to get along with them. Especially with documentaries, you have to be agile and shoot what you need to shoot.

So when you mention the documentary film, do you feel that the role of a documentary director and a feature film director is different in a way?

The role of the director in a documentary and a feature film is a little different. The documentary director must discover the problem in reality that interests him, and then he must not let himself get carried away from the subject, escape into digressions. In the course of filming, he receives a lot of information that he has to select. Like a dog, he goes after what is essential. He throws away all the facts that are not related to the subject or are only marginally related. Similar to how a cameraman looks for composition and removes elements from the frame that are unnecessary. That is the job of the director in a documentary, to seek out, obtain and record the facts relevant to the subject.

A feature film director works from a written script that already contains the basic dramatic structure. In creating the world of the story, he has to look for the most convincing details to bring this basic structure of the story to life. He should immerse the story in reality while bringing an element of coincidence into the story. But he too must constantly consider what is essential. Andrzej Wajda's remarks are instructive in this regard. For example, he never began filming with simple, transitional scenes, such as someone coming out of a house and walking down the street and going to the next house. He always shot the most difficult and important scenes at the beginning of the work. The actors became aware of the relationships, the motivations, the psychology in them, and through that, they found an approach to other situations. They realized what was essential for their character and the film.

And what is the same about the work of a documentary and a feature film director?

Both of these positions – documentary and fiction – are united by the desire to tell the essence of the subject. When working on a film, a director can make many mistakes. But some of them can be useful. When you're filming, you have the feeling that something has gone wrong, but in the editing room, you discover that you've captured something extraordinary. The important thing is whether you can recognize the value of that recording. How you grasp and process reality will affect the narrative value of your film. For some directors, it looks like they've jumped over a stream, and for others, it looks like they've swum across an ocean.

You've tried different genre positions in film. Fairy tales Mikola and Mikolko*,* Seven in One Shot, *or the comedy* Winter of the Magicians. *Did you learn something from switching genres, did it influence your way of storytelling?*

Whether this has affected the style of the narrative, I can't judge. In fairy tales, it's all about the most appropriate way to communicate with the child viewer. As father with a young son at that time – he was both my inspiration and my first audience. I didn't see the fairy tale as an escapist subject, even though it was obviously already boiling hot in society and the socialists were counting their days. The more important fairy tale of freedom had just begun, and how many knights there were then, both real and fake, we only know today.

Do you agree with the statement that the director is the author of the film?

Sure. The director is the author of the film. Of course, the writer and the screenwriter also have an idea of the future film, but the implementation of the text in the filming process is in the hands of the director. Random elements, the improvisation of the actors, the weather, that is, circumstances the influence of which the author of the text did not consider, enter into it. The director searches for authentic moments in reality, provokes and actually translates the literary text into the language of cinema. He imprints the film with a definitive form.

In your opinion, is an authorial manuscript something you actively strive for, or is it something that arises automatically?

It is an individual approach to the subject and we could find many common examples. But more important than the author's exhibitionism is how the filmmaker takes hold of the viewer and their emotions. I think of Alain Robbe-Grillet in this regard, who ignored almost everything in his literary work. The logic of the story, the chronology of time and the psychology of his characters, and by declaring that there is only an "author's manuscript", he canceled the relationships between content and form. Watch the films he made at the Koliba Studio. And although there is a great difference between his script and the film itself, one cannot deny his filmmaking. And a number of writers have had a similar experience – Pier Paolo Pasolini, for example, who made his literary text real with portraits of people on the street. But it's case by case.

In your book Notes on Film Speech, you write that you made sure that the language of the film characters was natural. It irritated you if the characters spoke in too formal, too standard way. Do you have a similar opinion today?

There is the standard language and then slang, argot, or dialect. Thus, the street languages. And when you're doing something authentic, if you're trying to capture real characters in a film, you're going to portray them with their distinctive language. You can't recast them or change how they express themselves because you would kill the most inherent thing in them.

This was a serious problem during the normalization period. Authenticity bothered the censorship authorities because a free man appeared on the screen. If there was some intimate dialogue in that authentic slang or argot, it was a reminder that there was another side of the coin. And they didn't like that.

You are an author who has encountered censorship in his life. Do you feel that censorship and restrictions can help in any way or do you just see them as a negative element?

I'm not one of the very well-known directors. I entered our cinematography at a time when it started to stagnate and when the great personalities of the Czechoslovak New Wave were pushed out of it. You can ask me: "If they banned you from filming in 1969 if you had suspension, why didn't you pack up and go abroad? Why did you start a dialogue with communist censorship? Why did you make the film *Treetops*, a documentary about the socialist labor brigade? Why did you do it?" I'm looking for an answer to that question. Supposedly, I didn't have the talent of Jasný, Passer, Forman, who had gone overseas. I stayed at home and tried to make it. Even Věra Chytilová stayed here and started filming *Panelstory*. She also started a dialogue with communist censorship. And she made it. Antonín Máša stayed here, Jaroslav Papoušek and several Czechoslovak filmmakers. Evald Schorm also had a lifelong experience with censorship. And that was my role model. I tried to pick up the basics of what I was missing from him. Towards

stylized film. I liked his school work *The Tourist* and then the films *Every Day Courage* and *Return of the Prodigal Son*. Those were the films that inspired me. If you have a pattern, even a subconscious one, it always impacts your life

My friend, the Czech documentary filmmaker Milan Maryška, was a Chartist and couldn't film. Czech and Slovakia were different worlds during the period of normalization. What could be filmed in Slovakia was not possible in Prague at all. There were much heavier and harsher sanctions. I didn't want to be completely excluded from that. I tried to make films that made sense even in those gray seventies.

And if you asked me a question – which I have not answered yet – whether that censorship had any positive effect, there is no answer to that. They took the camera out of your hand and said: "You're not going to film the things on the left; you're going to film that on the right." And you were trying to pull something human out of the object that they forced on you. To create something human. So you were being limited, but you also limited yourself at the same time; you were careful not to collaborate with this forced ideology. And whether you want to or not, it comes up in those films.

I was asking with respect to some of the creators of Dogme 95, especially Lars von Trier. I feel as if the limitations in some way enhanced his creativity. But those limitations are incomparable to censorship coming from the outside, right?

I have a pretty harsh opinion of those Trier's films. I think it's a kind of a pose. A film that I personally like is Breaking the Waves. That's a powerful film. But a couple of years after that he made a film about a blind singer called Dancer in the Dark, and I couldn't accept that. The Icelandic singer Björk plays a Czech woman in exile there, and when she dies at the end of the film, she sings an Icelandic song. That's incomprehen-

sible to me, she should have sung in Czech! Lars von Trier quickly got out of Dogme 95.

I have some more questions.

You know, I envy you your English experience, your opportunity to travel. If there was one thing I really missed as a filmmaker in those seventies, it was contact with foreign countries. The freedom, the opportunity to explore other worlds. It was the Cold War, and we had distorted ideas of what life was like in, say, England. We had illusions about how the world worked. And that world behind the Iron Curtain may not have been as easy and simple as it appeared to us.

The illusions you had about the outside world created the films?

Films, too. You know, I have one unique experience from the early seventies. When I returned to work after that suspension, I received an offer to make an ad on Dutch tulips and Czech glass for the Prague company Rapid. That ad was for the BBC and was 10 minutes long. Its name is The Story of the Seven Guild Masters after Rembrandt's painting at the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

I experienced contact with the Western world there and quite intense; because we filmed in the Netherlands for two weeks. And when you get to the Netherlands after a long pause and; furthermore, there is spring, blossomed tulip fields, and you can't imagine that the sea at Scheveningen would be cold, you consider that you could stay there.

But I came back; because when I imagined staying there, my heart sank. I was afraid I would lose things that inspired me and that I considered part of my identity.

Why did you decide to teach?

In the early 1990s, many of us got fired from Koliba. The Minister of Culture Snopko said: "Borders are open; go abroad and film there." But filming in another culture it is not easy. I started teaching in Zlín; then at the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava; I also taught at FAMU in Prague for a few years. Contact with young people is essential to me in this process.

I don't think I'm so good as a teacher. When something in the student's work irritates me, I don't beat about the bush and I point out the mistake directly. And the student often does not perceive it. I keep pointing it out, but he keeps doing his thing. And when he presents me with the job in a month, it lets me down that he didn't even consider my suggestions. But I have to admit, sometimes the new view surprises me, and it makes me happy if it brings some freshness. It makes me happy when young people succeed in something.

So how do you feel about the current young generation of directors?

The Film Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts has undergone a very dynamic development. I think a lot has changed for the better. But it hurts me a lot when I see how many young people go abroad and don't come back. I don't know if you've seen my film The History Class. Many Slovak high school students declare they want to leave in this film. Better job opportunities are essential; they hate our idiotic governments. Stupid political resolutions drive them out of the country because they do not provide social security. And that's what worries me.

Last question: You studied at FAMU when the most famous representatives of the Czechoslovak New Wave graduated there. Now you work as a

teacher at the Academy of Performing Arts, so I would like to ask you, what role does a film school play in the development of a director?

Talent is usually about 30% of success, but the rest is persistence and diligence. The faculty provides the student with the opportunity to try out several procedures. And that's important because experimenting; exploring different options; will give them confidence. Confidence to find their own way in film art.

Thank you.

led by Mário Antonio Liptaj

Jozef Paštéka

May 4, 1948, Žilina

Slovak screenwriter, dramaturg, director, and teacher. He studied film dramaturgy and screenwriting at the Academy of Performing Arts. Since 1972 he worked as a dramaturg for Czechoslovak Television in Bratislava. He wrote the screenplay for the television triptych *Adam* Šangala (1972), for the films *The Great Temptation* (1974), *Anonymous* (1980), and dramatized also a number of television titles, such as Ondrej Šulaj›s debut *Ako sa Vinco zaťal / How Vinco Got Stubborn* (1977) or the first television miniseries directed by Stanislav Párnicky, *American Tragedy* (1977).

After 1980 he started working as a dramaturg and scriptwriter at the Slovak Film Production in Koliba. He wrote the screenplay for Jozef Zachar's film *The Man Is Not Desirable* (1983), together with Milan Ležák he prepared the screenplay for Juraj Herz's comedy *Sweet worries* (1984), and he collaborated with Juraj Jakubisko and Peter Jaroš on the screenplay for *The Millenial Bee* (1983). He also contributed to other films by Juraj Jakubisko: the fairy tale *Pehavý Max a strašidlá / Freckled Max and the Spooks* (1987) and the tragicomedy *Sedím na konári a je mi dobre (I'm Sitting on a Branch and I'm Fine)* (1989). In 2002 Vladimír Balco produced his screenplay *Rain Falls on Our Souls* and in 2020 Peter Bebjak directed his drama *The Auschwitz Report*. He also collaborated on the screenplay of Štefan Uher's film *Mowing the Hawk Meadow* (1981) and as a dramaturg on films such as *Utekajme už ide / Hurry, he's coming* (1986), *Južná pošta / Southern Mail* (1987*), Ruský roman / Russian Novel* (1995).

He is the author of the libretto for the musical *Adam* Šangala, which was prepared by Jozef Bednárik at the Andrej Bagar Theatre in Nitra in 2003.

In recent years, Jozef Paštéka has devoted himself to directing. Among his documentary films, we should mention the portrait of the oncological surgeon prof. Juraj Pechan for the GEN.sk series. In 2010, he made his debut feature film with the comedy *A Corpse Must Die*.

Jozef Paštéka teaches film scriptwriting and dramaturgy at the Film and Television Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts. He is a member of the Slovak Film and Television Academy.

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Why did you choose screenwriting and film?

I grew up in a small town in Kysuce, where I was surrounded by a very harsh reality. We lived in a railway station. Fights, blood, drunks, it was all common. I even saw a man killed as a boy. On the other hand, my house was full of culture. My parents were teachers and my brother was an artist. I was a real bookworm and I was very eager to join the people of art and culture. I was terribly fond of going to the cinema. In the film club, I saw Carlo Dreyer's *The Passion of the Virgin of Orleans* with the very beautiful, impressive Maria Falconetti. They didn't play any music for silent films then. There were fifteen of us in the cinema, and at the end of the screening, I was alone in there. Nobody could stand it. On the contrary, I was chained to my chair, fascinated by the medium of the film.

I also loved the silent burlesques. After the show, I performed some of the scenes over and over again to my friends. I used to play Frigo or Chaplin. These sources foreshadowed my future as a filmmaker. I decided that I would go and study film, and so I did. You could say that Buster Keaton and The *Virgin of Orleans* were the stimuli for studying.

Your brother was a painter. You were not attracted to such a visual medium?

Yes, I also wanted to be a painter. In the fifties, my brother Milan Paštéka and his contemporaries founded the Mikuláš Galanta Group. They were progressive painters who rejected socialist realism. Vasil Biľak himself closed my brother's first solo exhibition in Cyprián Majerník's Gallery. Milan was a complete wretch then. He had nothing to live on, he came back home to Kysuce. He was banned at the very beginning of his painting career. I tried very hard, I painted, I drew, I sent my works to competitions, but my parents told me that one beggar was enough in our family. They had to feed him. Eventually, again under the influence of my brother, I began to write harsh sketches about the reality of Kysuce. At that time a small square edition was published – portraits of directors. One of them was Luis Buñuel. Buñuel fascinated me, so my first short script was "surrealist".

What exactly did he charm you with?

Great passion and foolishness, at the same time certain tension between faith in God and the desire for freedom. Overall, I liked his visualization and eroticism. Once at home in Čadca, after a screening at the cinema, they did a poll. They asked people what they found lacking in Slovak cinema. I said sex and humour! It was all in "Don Luis".

Buñuel formed a tandem with Carrière. Were you inspired in any way by this duo in the way they worked?

The script is a proto-text. Coal destined to burn in the furnace of creating. That's why it's a good idea for the screenwriter to start working with the director as soon as possible. Preferably from the beginning. Pairs of the same blood type are known. Both in world cinema and in our cinema. Bednár – Uher, Vichta – Solan, Leščák – Šulík. Then Car-

rière and Buñuel, of course. Reading Carrière is like reading the Bible for me. Wisdom, in the book *Telling the Tale, is* told in an entertaining and descriptive way. For screenwriters, I recommend reading Carrière among the many books on filmmaking. Moreover, the introduction is very accurately written by Miloš Forman. I will loosely paraphrase him. Screenwriting is a very specific art, the screenwriter is a storyteller who can dispute a drama without the slightest hint of theatricality. Literature is words, film is snippets of reality, screenwriting tends towards implementation. This is a fact. One has to make some itinerary or skeleton before one embarks on writing a script. It's good when he does it with a director. And then the screenwriter is on his own. The real values are created alone. That's when he needs to be able to kickstart a line of intuition in himself, let's say – the art of invention. The moment when the skeleton begins to fill with flesh.

Did you start working with directors in school?

I was a first-year student in the newly established Department of Screenwriting and Dramaturgy. The year 1966 was a relaxed time. Censorship was lifted in life, politics, culture... in short, a fantastic time. We also watched films of world cinema. Ladislav Kalina, Tibor Vichta and Peter Balgha decided to establish film education in our country. However, they only started with screenwriting, and that's why we, the screenwriters, didn't have directors as partners. Only then Jakubisko, Hanák and Havetta came here from FAMU. We kind of became their partners. Otherwise, screenwriters were lonely. But the time was still very gracious for us. Peter Solan, who taught us directing, once said: "Over the holidays I'm going to make a short story film out of your short stories!" At that time, there was an editorial department on television called Television film production. That was an amazing source of visual art. The film technique there was to make television films

that were adaptations of world literature. And they were hugely successful. Barabáš's *The Tamed* or Martin Hollý's *The Ballad of the Seven Hanged Men*. Tibor Vichta and Peter Balga were also generous teachers. In the third year, we did a film adaptation. And from the student scripts, they chose mine, based on František Švantner. In the group of writers of lyricized prose, he is the most prolific. He has mystery, drama and passion at the same time. I almost have the feeling that magical realism was with us, thanks to Švantner, long before Borges. Unfortunately, the implementation of my adaptation didn't turn out too well. But Television Filmmaking offered me other titles to adapt. I chose *Adam Šangala* by Ladislav Nádaši-Jégé. That was a real start for me.

I always kept in mind that the film was made as a fairground attraction, I really wanted to entertain people. There was a Bakhtin in the air at the time, a carnival atmosphere, something euphoric. From the beginning, I worked with Elo Havetta on this project. We prepared a triptych, now it's called a miniseries. Jégé was a naturalistic writer and his hero a simple man without psychology, juice, taste, smell. So I conceived an adventure plot and wrote an ironic commentary on it. The story began to get funnier, I added love and sex. Havetta and I lived together in an artists' home in Moravany. The television paid for it. We made up all sorts of crazy stuff in the script. For example, the scene where the cows cross the road with the antlers on their heads. Or there's a guy sitting in Beckov Castle with cobwebs and he says: I'm Ladislav Nádaši-Jégé and I'm writing it all down here! And about you too, Šhangala! So we had fun. Until one day Havetta came to me all tearful. They took *Adam Šangala*'s direction away from him. That was after the tanks came, the occupation. The golden times were over. A lot of things that were going on were over.

I also started the theme, *Nikola Šuhaj, the Robber,* with Jakubisko. We also made up a lot of ideas. For example, the scene where the kids play Nikola and he realizes he's famous before his bloody death. It all

came to a screeching halt. Television filmmaking was cancelled, a lot of people were fired, banned, expelled. But they were still interested in the *Adam Šangala* project. They took it over to a new editorial team, which finally decided to make it happen. In a modified form, of course. After that, television returned for good to filming TV productions in the studio. The end of television films in exteriors. My idea that I would write script after script and "get rich" vanished. (laughter). Then I was called up for compulsory military service. Fortunately, I went to Prague, where I had a fantastic year. I even wrote one script for Barrandov there.

In my opinion, Šangala in your form is the first Slovak action hero in a film. He is attractive, popular, brave. He simply has all the qualities of a blockbuster character. You have worked on many literary adaptations. Are adaptations more appealing to you than original scripts?

I can't quite say that they are more appealing. But they are certainly significant. Every screenwriter has some things they carry around in their head and prepare. But when an outside order comes in, maybe just an adaptation, that's when one's own plans get pushed aside. There are a huge number of films in world cinema that are adaptations of literature. Maybe even eighty percent. Literature hides even where you wouldn't expect it. Adaptation is an advantage for aspiring screenwriters. You have a finished story in it, a set of characters, even an idea. The screenwriter's job, in this case, is to rewrite everything into the language of film. Gerhart Hauptmann said that translation is like a woman. Either she's pretty and then she's not faithful, or she's faithful and then she's not pretty. Simply put, an untrue adaptation is more creative than a faithful one.

Of course, the classics are usually done exactly as written. And some adventurous blockbusters get filmed two or three, maybe even twenty

Shooting the film *A Corpse must Die* – Veronika Žilková and Jozef Paštéka

times. *The Three Musketeers* started in silent film and still serves as compelling material. Principally, when rewriting for film, the screenwriter has to disassemble the work like a clockwork on wheels and reassemble it in a new form so that it ticks again, but now in cinematic time. In doing so, there is usually a shift in space and time. If the story takes place in the past, or even in a completely different space, there is always a piece of the present, even through the personal testimony of the filmmaker.

There's an important thing to adaptation that I've always done and will always do as a professional, and that's collecting material. That is, if one is doing Chekhov, one reads all his writings. Even his letters to his wife. Because sometimes motifs from another short story can be useful to us in an adaptation. When working on *Adam Šangala* I had to study everything about the 17th century. Hungary was ruled by Protestants at that time, but at the same time, the Catholics were trying to

reintroduce Catholicism in the country. There were bloody battles between them, and with each nobleman, his subjects were converted to another faith. In addition, the Turks were also at work here. Well, our hero was in that crazy environment. I tried to learn everything. I even found out what kind of underwear was worn back then. The subjects wore none. However, this motif did not get there because of the era. Collecting material is something every screenwriter has to go through. While preparing the script for *I'm sitting on a branch and I feel fine*, I got to know the Berousek family, famous circus performers. In fact, the main character in the script is a comedian. That's why Bolek Polívka got the catchphrase: “So says the old Berousek”.

A literary adaptation is thus built from one's own experience, from the collection of material, and from the original artwork. How does it work for you with authorial scripts?

With original themes, one can be inspired by three things – an interesting character, an event, or an idea. In the case of an idea, it can lead you to what is called á la thèse. In practice, it's most often about a sufficiently remarkable character surrounded by frustrating circumstances. We capture the character at the most difficult point in his life. The character has to struggle not only with the events, but with himself as well. These are two kinds of tensions. The author of the original theme should have had a nose for suspense, evil, human suffering. Voltaire said that the greatest evil in the world is human stupidity. And it's true. Even at the bottom of the most terrible events in history. I have just recently finished writing the script for *The Auschwitz Report*. Those sadists in the camp were actually fools too – they fanatically believed the madman and his stupidity.

How do you build the story? Does the form or the idea come first?

The narrative, the building of the story can be different, linear, parallel, mosaic... There are many possibilities, but in any case, it must be interesting for the viewer. The filmmaker must capture the viewer's attention and lead him or her to the end of the plot and, if it is somewhat possible, indulge him in a bit of tension at the end, which is called catharsis. An intense emotion, a purification. In doing so, the question of truthfulness always arises. The question of the original discovery of truth. The author can never be objective. Already in the film *Rašomon* by Akira Kurosawa, for example, a crime is narrated where each of the participants tells his version. Even the murdered person testifies in court. At the end of the film, we don't know how it really happened. What is unique is how the objective picture is made up of subjective accounts. The mosaic way of narration composes the overall picture from original fragments. Sometimes it seems to me that this is the truest way, the closest to life.

A notable example of such a composition is Federico Fellini's *Eight and a Half*.

Everything is in that film. Childhood, dreams, sex, love, faith, the church, magic, parents, the many floors of human destiny. And it's really a depiction of the soul. The soul of a torn artist in crisis. The book was also the source for this film. Fellini's personal dream book, which he recorded under the influence of Carl Jung. For me, this is perhaps the best film of all world cinematography.

Does that mean that you like films where the importance of story and character intertwine?

That's the principle of most films. Also of the film *The Message*. The

main character and hero, Alfred Wetzler, doesn't talk very much, but there are terrible things going on around him. His strength lies in his silence, but in spite of it, people know how he feels. Noël Czuczor's eyes in the final scene are like a nuclear power plant. The ending of a film always contains everything. The message, the power, and the catharsis. It comes from the film's essence.

Catharsis, however, need not be present only in tragedy. It can also be found in comedy, if it is good. Gogoľ said that the main character in his comedies is laughter. In fact, laughter can impress a person as much as emotion. I have always wanted to do comedy, and since childhood, I have loved silent burlesque. I was particularly fond of sad comedians like Buster Keaton, Harry Langdon, Peter Sellers or Bourvil and Fernandel. Actually, Lasica was such a melancholy clown, too. Especially in the film *Hurry, He's Coming!* which I worked on as a dramaturg.

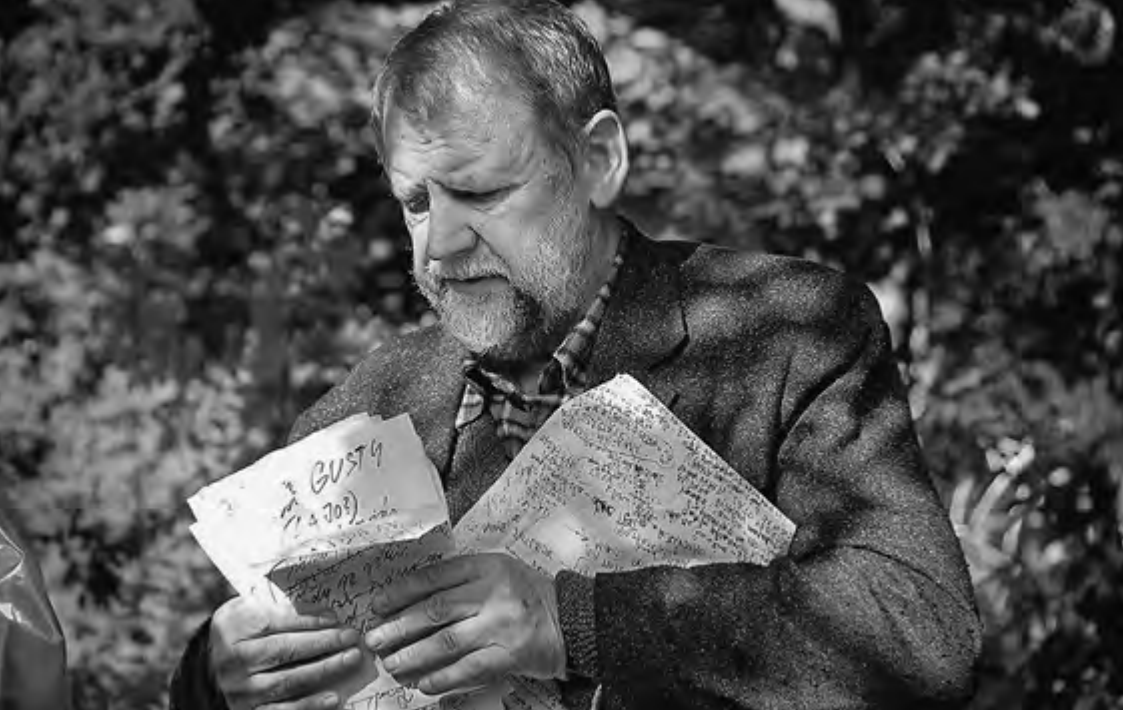
I have dealt with humor both practically and theoretically. Bergson's essay *Laughter* was useful for me. But the essence, I think, was captured by Mark Twain, who wrote: "The secret source of humor is not joy but sorrow." In addition to screenwriting, I've also worked as a dramaturg in television. A director there once said to me – I'm going to make a comedy now, I've had enough of serious stuff. He then made the actors grimace, laugh, and giggle in front of the camera. People watched and didn't understand where the humor had vanished. Everything was laughed off by the actors, they stole the audience's laughter. To make a good comedy, it's a real chore. From conception to meaningful detail. There's a finger gag in *Sweet Worries*. It's stretched out like a motif. The finger caught in the mailbox, in the door, the ring joke... It's quite difficult to make a gag chain like that. Inventing silliness comes easily, the sillier the funnier. But the viewer should say to himself when watching a comedy – this could happen to me. Then that's it.

Sweet Worries *is your original screenplay, written based upon your own experience.*

I had a co-author, Milan Ležák. As I mentioned, I spent a year in Prague in military service. My classmate lived in Prague and earned his living by going out at night to clean the hotel. I used to go there with him and that's how we got into the real hotel atmosphere. The backstage area of the hotel, the patisserie, the kitchen. The staff had a feast of uneaten food after the closing time. It was very inspiring. We wrote the script for Barrandov – Václav Šašek was supposed to be the dramaturg, Hynek Bočan was supposed to direct. But suddenly there was an "earthquake", as it happens in film, and the project dissolved. I returned to Bratislava and became a dramaturg at Koliba. A few years later, one of my colleagues went to a horror film festival in Argentina as a juror – and there he gave the text to Juraj Herz to read. He liked it very much, so then he filmed it. *Sweet Worries* is to some extent a commedia dell'arte. A poetic play that touches on contemporary issues. Emil Horváth is actually Pierrot.

Is it important for a screenwriter to experience the environment in order to write about it?

Definitely. And if it's not possible, because we can't physically be in the 17th century yet, then we need to study everything. Or at least try to. For the film *The Auschwitz Report*, for example, in addition to Wetzler's book, I studied documentaries, watched films, and read a lot of memoirs. Unimaginable atrocities, sometimes I even cried learning about it. I also talked to Holocaust survivors. A few of them still live here on Svoradova Street in the Ohel David home. I met Mrs Marta Szilárd there. Apart from the killings, the beatings, the perverted "doctors" –



Shooting the film *A Corpse must Die*

she spoke about the beastly hunger. They cooked them soup from cut grass, the potato peelings were a delicacy. I worked on the screenplay of *The Auschwitz Report* for about four years. I was completely captivated by the topic, I was immersed in it. And then the scope of the text was too big, of course, so it had to be cut. After that, I longed for comedy again and started working on it...

Is it easier to write comedy or tragedy?

Well... It's harder to make a man laugh than cry. It's easier to write the serious stuff, I guess. Anyway, when conceiving a story, each element in the structure needs to be considered in terms of two motivations. First – whether it works within the logic of life, second – what it brings

us in terms of storytelling. Dramatic story – the author at least has an inkling of where to go from here. Sometimes we know where the story is going at the beginning or in the first third. We know the conclusion and we're heading towards it. Edgar Allan Poe wrote an essay about the creation of the poem *The Raven*. He says that in the beginning, he had an ending: Nevermore! Comedy, on the other hand, requires a lot of details. You need to have a structure for humor, and you fill that with details that should be funny, at least internally. The dialogue and catchphrases are great, but they don't carry the whole. Comedy is definitely better written when two people are writing it. That's a bonus even with other genres. Everything goes easier when friends write the script together. It's easier to avoid mistakes in the situation and dull lines in the dialogue. I was only lucky enough to find this in *Sweet Worries*. In other cases, I consulted with the directors about the itinerary of the story, the skeleton, but I was already writing the script myself. Carrière and Buñuel, on the other hand, wrote together. Apparently, they had only one fight. Buñuel was on fire like a madman. He's made a lot of films, he's famous, and that's why he's right. But then he came to his senses and apologized.

As for the film The Auschwitz Report, *the collection of material was very deep and extensive. How can you detach yourself from so much information when your creativity has to come out? How do you approach the writing itself? What happens when you put down the books to put yourself into the story?*

It is a fact that at the very beginning you always have to overcome crippling fright and start – take the first step. I have it perfectly prepared, but when I am about to write the first sentence, I start somewhat hastily. I just write something down. Then I can move on, keep going and not walk away from it, on and on. I'll dig into it on principle.

During the writing of *The Auschwitz Report*, Alfred Wetzler became my brother. I lived with him, fell asleep and got up with him. I felt how cold he was. I looked at events with him and through him. I had the vision, all I had to do was ignite my intuition. The original plan still remained, but the ideas started to come on their own. The script evolves on its own. Well, not completely, because everything comes from your head, but it gains a certain autonomy.

There is a lot of literature and instructions on how to write a screenplay. It starts with Aristotle, goes on to Lessing, Freytag came up with the five parts of the drama, there is Syd Field, Linda Aronson. They all advise. But all this train of theory is actually to give us something to forget. In actual writing, we consciously forget all the insights, but they emerge from/in us unconsciously. Fundamentally, I think every good storyteller has in his or her psyche the desire to impress the viewer in order to awaken humanity and nobility in the midst of our god-forsaken world of egoism and consumerism.

Was this your intention with The Auschwitz Report *as well? To remind people of the right values?*

With *The Auschwitz Report* I wanted to express my sympathy for my fellow Jews and for all those who were persecuted. To express my opposition to all totalitarianism and bigotry of any colour – brown, red or black, and at the same time to revive the notion of bravery and heroism. Especially in these times when we live in relative safety and prosperity. I do not deny that even now, life is difficult and challenging. However, it would be good if young people could find in themselves a greater degree of empathy for the plight of people far away and in the past.

In my opinion, the film The Auschwitz Report *is mainly aimed at a young audience. The voiceovers in the closing credits attest to that.*

These were brought to the film by Peter Bebjak. He expressed everything that is in the air. Current. Politics is today and tomorrow and becomes history. The film tells of things en passant, though of course, there are themes that are clearly political. Some directors have programmatically done so from the beginning. Costa Gavras, for example... But let's leave the politics (laughs)

What is the main motivation for you in storytelling? Why do you pursue screenwriting? Do you want to entertain or uplift the human soul?

Both. Woody Allen replied that his motivation was money. But seriously. When someone is a storyteller, and they've been given that gift, it's also a kind of obligation. Back in the old days, some were peasants, others were hunters and protectors. And in addition to all of those, there was ONE who told them stories by the fire. For otherwise, they would have suffered. Perhaps the same one also painted the pictures in the cave. The storyteller supplied the mental nourishment. It's the same to this day. Art may not even evolve. The technique does, definitely, but art only changes. Storytelling is both a blessing and a punishment. In my case as a screenwriter, of course, I have the urge, the passion, and the desire, but I also feel an obligation. What am I going to do with all this in my head? It would probably burst. But film is a collective art and demands a lot of money, which is why I've seen a number of failed projects in my practice. So-called dead kids. These were situations where everything was available, but external circumstances, often political, thwarted the project. That is a terrible experience. One loses the will to live then. But it is said that true talent is also about the strength to stand up again after every fall.

What ideas, scripts have you not been able to implement in your career?

Those are regrets, ewww! Even at the very beginning, after Šangala, I wrote an adaptation of Andrej Platonov's short story – *The River Potudaň*. That one is very fragile and beautiful. It was to be directed by Vido Horňák. However, at that time they closed down the Television Film Production. That was the first project that was thwarted. Later came other, big, even co-productions.

We prepared Ladislav Mňačko – *This is what power feels like*. The director should have been Štefan Uher. We would meet regularly with Mňačko in Hotel Devín. His beautiful wife used to sit there with us and forbade him to smoke (laughs). Mňačko gave us the adaptation without a fee, a gentleman agreement. I handed over the text, Uher wrote the director's script, which was translated into English. We got a co-production partner from Sweden, he was the director of the Swedish Film Library. The director chose the Hungarian actor Károly Eperjes for the leading role, a similar type to Gérard Depardieu, an interesting fellow. And suddenly we found out that somehow the whole thing was off the table because Koliba hadn't signed any copyright contract with Mňačko. And a producer from Germany came to him and offered him about 10,000 marks. And the prospective big film vanished. After some time, Károly Eperjes came to Bratislava as the chairman of the jury for a film festival. He had the text in English and gave it to István Szabó to read. The Oscar-winning director liked the script and wanted to film it. By then, neither Uher nor Mňačko were alive. So we started looking for Mrs. Mňačko in order to obtain the copyright. She had moved to Prague, it was the Mečiar era, she had left Slovakia. However, after a telephone conversation with her, this beautiful lady fell down the stairs and had to be taken to hospital for a total endoprosthesis. We had it almost in our hands – it didn't work out.

I also wrote a war script based on Bohuslav Chňoupek's book *A*

Breaking of Seals about the French partisans in the Uprising – with the wonderful Colonel de Lannurien in charge. Martin Hollý and I have already had the director's script translated into French! And this project was thwarted in Prague. Koliba Studio was under the control of the Prague headquarters. “Not that!” said the then director of Czechoslovak Film, Jiří Purš, a member of the presidium of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia's Central Committee.

So those projects were thwarted because of politics...

... and because of money. We were preparing *The House on the Hillside* with Stanislav Párnický. In Belgrade we had already chosen the actors, the costumes were being sewn, everything was ready. And then the great Josip Broz Tito died. Everything collapsed because of the collapsed currency, the dinar devalued. Suddenly there was no money and our *House on the Hillside* collapsed as well. I have several more cases like that...

Have you experienced that the shooting was cancelled due to human failure as well?

Just mine (laughs). But no, such a thing hasn't happened to me. I've always worked with people who have gone into it with enthusiasm and a clear head. I don't remember any personal backstabbing. Nor any other sins.

Well, that's fine, because people are the most important thing in making a film.

When one starts working on a film, one chooses his fellows, his close ones. Sure, people will fight. But without interpersonal struggles, there would be no value. It's just a dialectical principle. Hegel was right about that.

Did you have a serious conflict with any of the directors while writing?

I won't tell! ... Yes, sure, but then we came to our senses, apologized, and continued as Buñuel.

How should be the conflicts between directors and writers resolved?

In a dialogue between a screenwriter and a director, the screenwriter cannot impose something on the director or insist on it. Because if the director doesn't want to, it means that he doesn't even know how to portray the motif. If they bump into each other too much in the process of creation, they usually let the whole thing sit for a while so they can come back to it. And they move on. The profession of screenwriting has discipline in it. Because others depend on our work. At a certain stage, it is not possible for one to hold grudges and keep others waiting. At least I have never done anything like that. Even when directing, I kept to the shooting schedule, even when I was losing my breath. I am, in short, a responsible person.

Have you always had the desire to direct or has it developed gradually?

Originally I wanted to study directing at FAMU in Prague. I was preparing for the entrance exams, I knew Sadoul's *History of Film* by heart, and then my brother Milan called me and told me that they were open-

Film premiere *The Auschwitz Report* – Peter Bebjak and Jozef Paštéka

ing a department of screenwriting at the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava. Moreover, we could be together, support each other. So I listened to him, forgot about directing, and became a screenwriter. The fact is that directors with a screenwriter's education know how to interpret a text better. The ones who wrote first, then directed. Woody Allen, for example. Also Milos Forman studied screenwriting and became a director. And he's one of the greatest people in the business, so I.... how old I am, do you know? (laughs) Well, I think I'll still be directing till I die, if not after...

So you're tempted.

Of course.

As an experienced screenwriter, what is the most important lesson you've learned from your directing experience?

The screenwriter is already projecting the film in his head as he writes it. On the frontal bone. He usually manages to write well and capture what he sees about seventy percent of the time. Then the director comes in, he takes it, and suddenly less than fifty percent of your original vision is left. And it's still good. That's the lesson. Everything is different. It's the same with directing. You arrive, everything agreed, from the space to the situation, the research is done. You're agreed with the cameraman, the actors. But every now and then something doesn't work, something changes. You break down at the beginning of the process, you want to go home. But then you address the problems and solve them step by step. He discovers that the result is good in the end, and God knows if not better compared to what was planned. In directing, it's important for the director to be able to say simply what he wants to do in this shot, in this picture. Otherwise, speaking of simplicity – Tolstoy says that at the bottom of every great work there is a simple idea, it just needs to be presented in an interesting way.

Your directorial debut is the film A Corpse Must Die. *What was lost between the writing and the final result?*

This question leads me to self-criticism, so I'd rather leave the answer to others. Of course, I am not happy with some things. One example is the inability to pay for the music I wanted to use in the film. Another misfortune was the lack of money for Hřebejka's cameraman Jan Malíř. So one compromise, another, a third. I still regret one particular sequence. In it, the rector's character walks out of the portal – and the delegation's limousines arrive in front of the university. Again, howev-

er, it was not possible to pay for the traffic to stop, so the counter-scene is filmed in a completely different location in Bratislava. This detracts from the film's credibility. However, these things were beyond my control.

Work can be very absorbing. Screenwriting is no exception. You yourself mentioned your fascination with the subject when you were gathering material. So how do you balance your personal life and your work as a screenwriter?

Writing a feature film script requires absolute concentration. Gathering material is one thing. I'm looking for all things related to the story, I'm pregnant with hope. But then I have to arrange to get away from it. Around me, on the table and on the floor, is a pile of notes, snippets, ancillary texts. There is music to go with it, distraction, playing the same thing over and over again. If you are taken out of it, that is murder, because you are living in your vision. And if, God forbid, it is necessary to do practical things – then to go back to Plato's cave takes a day, if not two. Getting going again is even more difficult than the beginning itself. But even returning to characters in a constructed space-time is all about practice.

Do you have a routine, a system when you create? Maybe an exact place and time when you write?

I don't do other things while I'm working on the script. I work and live long into the night. The more I work, the more I wake up. The darker it gets, the more I shine. It's very hard to get up in the morning. I overcome my physical and mental paralysis with water, by alternating showers. At the moment I live in the village and there I have a small

swimming pool with a temperature of about two degrees Celsius. I get in, the icy water kills me for a while, then I come back to life and I am very much alive again.

How did you get people to respect your work routine and not disturb you? Because a screenwriter sitting at his desk in the process of thinking doesn't necessarily strike everyone as a working person.

I have neighbours in the village who comment on everything. They chop, saw, chip and I write. They tell me that at least someone has to work. My relatives are all people from the culture. My wife is a film historian, my father-in-law was an actor and director, my mother-in-law is an actress, one daughter is an artist, the other a producer. They support me with love.

The green eyes of Simba the cat follow me as I work. She tells me all sorts of things and I take pictures of her. I have about a thousand portraits of her on my phone.

Can you rest?

My rest is practical life. I deal with a lot of things. From doctors to cars to housekeeping. Occasionally, I dig in and like a horse at the race – arrange as many purchases, meetings and events on that day as anyone else does in a week. This is how I rest. I'm very dynamic, so I love it.

Where do you look for inspiration?

Inspiration... I can't remember what it is (laughs). Hitchcock's quote comes to mind when I hear this question, “It is better to start from a

cliché than to arrive at a cliché after rewriting it many times." When one writes and senses a cliché, one should leave it well alone. The scenario usually has several versions. Sometimes too many. Everybody's into it and they want this and that. In the first version of the script everything is given clearly and sparkly – according to the author. He wrote it with pure energy and spontaneity. Then the so-called stakeholders read it, the scriptwriter has his objections, comments and requests. In the next version, he then tries to accommodate everyone. The result is usually a horse combined with a cow, a mishmash. Nobody likes it. Then the next version comes along, and in that version, there should be a synergy between the spontaneity of the first version and the helpful comments. These are the three basic stages of scriptwriting.

Writing a script is a long-term affair. How do you gain critical perspective on your work?

If you prepare enough, the actual writing process doesn't take that long. Critiques from close associates and close ones follow. However, the author himself needs to gain some time away from the work, to catch his breath and clear his mind, both to see his own mistakes and to discern what advice is good.

Sweet Worries, A Corpse Must Die *and to some extent* Adam Šangala *are comedies too.*

Rather, *I'm sitting on a branch and I feel fine*. There I also wrote specific humour for Polívka.

When you were asked what you miss in Slovak cinematography, you answered: "Humor and sex." In most of your films, both are present. So you've managed to fill the space.

You can count Slovak comedies on the fingers of one hand. At least twice I started to prepare a film with Lasica and Satinsky. Not once did it work out. *Dead Man Must Die* was originally a film for them. You could write a whole novel about the reasons why it didn't work out. I've done all kinds of things in my life. All kinds of genres. And I think I have a natural tendency towards irony and mild mockery. I feel that after World War II and the most horrific atrocities in the history of mankind, one shouldn't, paradoxically, make deadly serious films. One has to have a brave enough heart to still be able to laugh and move on. Even in the screenplay for *The Message*, I suggested a bit of levity in an ironic tone. Peter, however, didn't quite like this intention. He is a serious director. Although, he did tell me that he would still like to make a comedy. Bebjak likes to try different genres. That's where we're similar.

For many years you have also worked as a teacher at the Film and Television Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts. Could you mention the most common mistakes that students make when writing scripts?

I'm not ready for that question (laughs). Most often? Students underestimated the collection of material. It happened that they were calculating, constructing at the table, and they didn't know enough about the subject matter and material depicted. Occasionally they came out of it, as Czech colleagues say, as "fake jerks." Screenwriting should not be rocket science. One simply has to be diligent. When he bites into something, he has to really chew it and digest it. Then the script can

evolve. Cinematography has such waves. There are periods of great creativity, inventing, fantasizing. That's the Méliès branch. Of that lineage, I admire the great players who juggle themes virtuosically – Kurosawa, Quentin Tarantino, Pedro Almodóvar. His latest film, *Parallel Mothers,* is excellent sudoku, a school of screenwriting. And then there are the authentic waves, like the Lumières, cinéma vérité or neorealism, and these are heading towards documentary. At the moment we are more in this phase. But the documentary filmmakers, in turn, are moving towards fiction. They have a good foundation in empiricism. The most recent example is *Censor,* directed by Peter Kerekes. He has set an actress into reality. There is no risk of error in the collection of material in such works.

Is it better if people write about their own experience? There is no need for any collection of material.

Martin Buber says that there is a world of I-I, a world of I-You and a world of I-It. The last possibility is actually the Self and the World. In writing, one starts with the big I. Great directors also start with subjective films. Whether it's Polanski's *Knife in the Water* or Wajda's *Innocent Sorcerers*. Then the filmmaker moves on, into the company's backyard. Wajda's *Promised Land* is about something else entirely. The steps away from subjectivity and out of oneself are the natural evolution of the narrator. One always knows less about the external environment than one knows about oneself. Dominik Tatarka said that a short story is a character-situation-plot. That is, a character gets into a mess, things happen to him/her, and then somehow it all works out. It's useful for screenwriters if there are multiple characters in a story. The conflict is then more varied. But these are just irrelevant schematics. What I mean by all this is that one has to find the strength and courage to step out of one's bubble.

To get wet, dirty and bloody. All happiness depends on courage and diligence.

Do you still enjoy writing scripts after all these years?

Very. I named my graduate script, in a somewhat Chekhovian way, *The Disaster of the Harmonica Teacher in Town N, District N*. The story had a lot of defiance in it. I was like a dog that wanted to bite. I was angry at the totalitarian regime and small-town dullness. Today, I look for hope in life.

The way of life is very important for emerging artists. In fact, it is often the right routine that facilitates creativity.

When I was young, I used to drink a lot and do a lot of crazy things. But when I wanted to work, I left Bratislava and went home in search of more peace. There I could concentrate in a coherent way. Another thing is sleep. There are two kinds of people. One needs a lot of sleep, the other just little. Six hours was enough for Napoleon. Unfortunately, I'm not Napoleon.

Me neither.

led by Ema Nemčovičová


FILM BY PALO KOREC
WAITING ROOM
ARTILERIA, RTVS, FILMPARK PRESENT WAITING ROOM WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY PALO KOREC CINEMATOGRAPHY JÁN MELIŠ, ASK
EDITOR PETER KORDAČ SOUND JAN RAVASZ MUSIC ĽUBICA MALACHOVSKÁ ČEKOVSKÁ CAST ZUZANA SMEKALOVÁ, MONIKA NEKSOVÁ,
BARBARA SLANKOVÁ, ZUZANA KMEŤOVÁ, TIMEA HUSVETH, REGINA HUSVETH, SÁRA MIKLÁŠOVÁ, THEODOR DURMIK, MIŠKA MELIŠOVÁ
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Pavol Korec

July 1, 1958, Partizánske

Slovak director, screenwriter, and actor. In 1982 he graduated from the Department of Aesthetics and Art Sciences at Comenius University in Bratislava. He worked briefly as an assistant director of Feature Film at Koliba studio and then went on to study directing at the Academy of Performing Arts. After an internship at La Femis film school in Paris in 1992, he began making his own films.

His work programmatically balances documentary and fiction. In the short feature film *Journey to Paradise* (1992), he follows a young vagabond in search of illusory happiness. The television series *Propeller* (2000) maps life in various subcultures of Slovak youth. The Roma Holocaust is the subject of the documentary *To tá traťˇ* (2002) and the film essay *Desatoro / Ten Commandments* (2009) reflects on basic moral axioms. The feature films *Exhibits or Stories from the Castle* (2013) and *Waiting Room* (2015) tell about the lives and desires of people from different social classes. He follows the fate of our national football team, the 1976 European champions, in the documentary *The Finale* (2016), which he made with Dušan Milko. His television production *Under the Surface* (2001), analyzing the causes of the break-up of intimate family relationships, which caught public attention.

Pavol Korec is a long-time lecturer at the Film and Television Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts and is a member of the Slovak Film and Television Academy.

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When did you first discover the magic of film?

I come from Topoľčany. We had a cinema there called Cinema Topoľ

Topoľčany, a very original name. When I was about ten years old, they were playing Godard's *Crazy Little Peter*, I still remember the poster. From then on I started going to the film club on Fridays, four or five of us would sit there, and my relationship with film started to deepen.

When I graduated, I didn't get into college. I wanted to study sociology, but I wasn't accepted. I didn't know what I was going to do. And then my father took me to Slovnaft. There they gave me overalls and solvina (hand cleanser), and when I held it in my hands, I said to myself, damn, I don't want to work here and scrub my hands with solvina.

I thought about applying to film school, but the technology seemed complicated, so I got more into literature. I wrote short stories, I had some published, but I was still connected to film, I was always going to the cinema. Since there was no video, I often saw four movies a day. I applied to FAMU to study screenwriting, but I didn't get in.

I was a camera assistant to Mr. Fojtík in television, loading film cassettes, sharpening and so on. I learned a lot from him, he was actually my guru. In the early days, I also did a few things I'm not proud of – but I admit it. We were on our first or second shoot and I had to load sixteen-millimeter film into a cassette in a dark bag where I couldn't see my hands. Because we were in a hurry and I didn't have practice, the filmstrip fell apart. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't reel it back in, so I ripped off a piece of film and threw it away. I suffered for two or three weeks, afraid that if they found out, I'd be fired. If a camera assistant did that to me, I'd kill him. But nobody found out. I threw away something they didn't need.

After one year I was accepted to the Faculty of Arts and after graduation I worked in a feature film at Koliba for two years as a production and directing assistant. And there I met Professor Párnicky. I applied to the Academy of Performing Arts. Although it wasn't required for the entrance exams at the time, I managed to make a ten-minute film on sixteen mm film – and I was accepted.

Who do you think is the director? Is he an artist or just a kind of coordi-

nator of other professions and elements of the pre-camera reality, a conductor under whose baton the film magic is created?

On the one hand, it can be the author, the French have the term *auteur*, or it can be the *réalisateur*, or the filmmaker. They are two different approaches. The French New Wave came with auteur films. The directors created them from an idea, put their idea in the script, and then filmed it. The director-filmmaker gets someone else's script, transforms the substance, and makes a film. But he also needs to have an idea of how to work with the script, he must have his own concept. I have always been more inclined to the auteur principle, because I have written literature. But in fact, both approaches are equivalent. Many directors have made excellent films based on other people's texts.

I mostly write my own scripts; I've written only few of them with a screenwriter. It was advantageous in that I could discuss with him, he offered me other points of view, analyses of situations. A co-screenwriter can be important in an auteur film as well.

And another view. The director is the one who creates contexts, looks for contexts, finds contexts. When he makes a film about interpersonal relationships, he looks for contexts in them, either socio-political or psychological, it doesn't matter. He always has to set the story in precise concrete contexts. And I don't just mean the setting, but also the socio-historical situation or the emotional atmosphere that creates tension, influences the relationships, and leads, for example, to the characters not understanding each other. The director's work is a search for contexts of meaning.

When you work with somebody else's material, you also need to look for context. If you're given a script of *Hamlet*, you're going to look for ways to bring it to a contemporary audience so that they can understand it. So you're putting *Hamlet* or *Don Quixote* in contemporary contexts. Don Quixote, he's a universal character and he can appear even now in the 21st century. Even today there are people who live in

ideals and fight windmills all their lives. The contemporary Don Quixote may not read chivalric novels, but he fights for ecology, for example. Finding contexts is very important in the work of a director. When I'm working with somebody else's material, I look for something that I enjoy, something that interests me, and I want to highlight that. That's directing.

And of course, as Mr. Feldek once jokingly said, the director is the one who wears the hat, because he organizes the set and the production. He must be prepared, he must have the clarity, the idea of what he is going to shoot and how he is going to shoot it. He should have the energy: "This is what I want to do!" A director makes decisions all the time. His collaborators bombard him with thousands of questions every day. You're filming and a prop guy comes in, asks for a particular detail, and you have to respond. You explain, you defend, you clarify, because you're in charge. You argue with the cameraman about how you're going to set up the shot, who's going to be in focus, and you talk to the costume designer because you don't like something about the costume. By the time the shot is ready, you have to make dozens of decisions, refine a lot of details. Sometimes it takes an excruciatingly long time.

And here we come to the fact that directing is also a practical job. When you're writing a short story, you sit in a chair at home and write and scribble endlessly until you like it. You can't do that in film. On the one hand, the director is the one who comes up with the idea, and on the other hand, he's the one who creates the concrete image of that idea. He has to get along with all the production components, find the right way to implement his idea.

It's a practical job, but it's also subtly philosophical and a bit abstract. We look for the meanings we want to convey; we hide what we want to conceal. It's hard enough to talk about it theoretically, but the fact is that on set it's a practical job and one must prepare for it. One writes notes, or a technical script, another one keeps it all in his head.

It seems like an obvious thing to do, but Truffaut writes in his notes, "You would be surprised how many directors are not in control of their film while it is being shot." Every one of us occasionally shoots a scene and it's only in the editing room when we realize that's not how we wanted to shoot it: "Damn, that didn't work!" But sometimes, thankfully, it's the other way around. You lose control for a moment and suddenly it's amazing. The director is a seeker who occasionally stumbles and maybe finds a diamond or breaks his thumb.

Are coworkers important for a director?

Vojtěch Jasný used to say that a director must have around him seven brave, seven closest coworkers who help him implement his idea: a scriptwriter, a cameraman, a costume designer, a make-up artist, an architect, an editor, a composer and, of course, the actors. They have to take his side.

The director comes to the set in the morning, thinks about how he's going to shoot, looks for angles from which to shoot the scene, and so on. He walks around like a ghost, and when the other coworkers are arriving, he talks briefly with each of them, explains what awaits them, what they're going to do. The people he works with need to feel a sense of belonging, and the director should foster a creative atmosphere. It doesn't always work out well, of course. We all try to do it, but it only takes a silly little thing, one gets angry and it's the other way round. The trust of coworkers is hard to gain.

When I was at school, I worked as an assistant director to Mr. Balaďa on a film that was never finished – *Escape to Budín*, based on a novel by Vladislav Vančura. The new version was made only a few years later by Miloslav Luther. Mr. Balaďa was a bit irascible, he often quarreled with the crew. He told me: "You know; I need you to always take my side." And that's when I understood that in conflict situations he needed

someone else besides the cameraman to support him. My job was not to solve directorial issues, but to promote his views and to take his side. A director can't fight a film alone.

What is the importance of school for a director? How do you guide your students?

I try to guide students to find themselves. Of course, at the same time, we teach them basic craft skills, but if that's all we taught, a year's course would be enough. Nowadays, young people come to school very well prepared practically and technologically. We no longer have to teach them shot sizes and how to alternate them. My job is to help them find their own way.

I don't like trying to break them by telling them: “This is right and this is wrong.” If they just do what I want them to do, they will think like me. But they should be filming what they think. I try to develop with them the ideas they came to school with, because that's the only way they can discover their vision of the world. Even though sometimes I don't like it and I think it's bullshit. Sometimes it's me who is wrong. I would like to get them to think about things. And when they think, they will discover the content and the formal concept of their film. That's my role. To bring them to themselves, not to fight against them.

And something else is important – not to be afraid. Courage is important. The student will say to himself: “I have an idea, I'm going to shoot.” But then he stops: “Okay, wait! Won't that be stupid? I'd rather not do it, because I can't do it.” A young person should jump in headfirst. I think there are quite a few interesting films being made at our school, perhaps in some ways more interesting than in a professional environment. There are works coming out that are original in the way they tell a story and in the way they look at the world. The students are not yet under the sway of the “big cinema” system. And then when

Shooting the film *Under the Surface*

they get in there and start working on a “big feature”, they are making the same films as other filmmakers. Their exercises are interesting, original, and imaginative. Then comes the Bachelor film – a bigger budget, bigger crew, bigger responsibility, and sometimes the result is worse than those exercises. Responsibility is binding, and that's a pity.

One student made very nice films, I liked him. But his bachelor's film was like any other classic Slovak film. I asked, what happened? “Well the crew was there and they were telling me: You have to do it like this and you have to do it like that.” Suddenly he was lost in it.

They're all interfering in the young directors' job, after all, it's their graduate work too. The editors want it perfect, the cameramen want it even more perfect, and suddenly the new spark gets lost. When the responsibility falls on the students, originality is lost. But there are those who know how to keep their uniqueness. Recently, their graduate films have appeared in Cannes and at major festivals.

I'm sorry that some school work doesn't get to the audience and somehow gets lost. The films and their directors. It's not always true that the students we perceive as the best in the school will make films. In fact, directing is also the ability to make a name for oneself. A director has to fight for himself and his film, and he also needs luck.

Your work is diverse and varied. How do you choose the themes for your films?

The themes come based on an impulse I experience or a dramaturgy that appeals to me. Now I'm going to make a film called *The Aquabelles of Parndorf*, a documentary about five women who practice cold water hardening. And how did I come to the subject? The lady who's organizing it is a friend of my wife's, and she started telling us about it at our cottage. Listening to her, I realized that these women were rebelling against the way of life in their village in this unconventional way. They want to change it, and they are starting with a simple step – they are going out to do the hardening. The guys look at them and say, "Are you guys completely losing it?" It's actually a revolt. I came to this topic purely by accident, but I immediately saw the possibilities it offers. I liked Fellini and Godard at school. It wasn't until my final years that I discovered the documentary dimension of film, I was interested in Forman and the Czech New Wave. I filmed Kundera's short story "*The Hitchhiking Game*", but then I found out that real life is the most interesting. I'm interested in people and their relationships, that's the basis for me, that's the basis from which I start. I don't get into the political context, but I like to watch people searching for happiness, meaning in life, or something that fulfills them. That's when those characters are appealing to me.

For example, in the documentary series *Propeller* I wanted to show non-conformist people, seekers who created different urban subcultures. In the nineties they were disturbed by the changes in society and were trying to discover something new. Punks, graffiti artists. In the

documentary *Milonge,* the heroes are also looking for themselves, in *Waiting Room* ditto. They are people who want to fulfill themselves in some way. Each of us is provoked by something. That's why we're in the world, to search, because if we don't search, if we stop worrying, we stop being. That is simply the way it is.

What is your opinion on adapting someone else's script? Is it possible to work with a theme that the director didn't come up with himself?

When you get someone else's script and find your theme in it, suddenly it's yours. You turn that text into your own work. The narrative style you choose; the point of view you use. By the form you choose, you create a new context, you implement your own interpretation into the film. I made the TV film *Under the Surface* based on a script by Jana Janíková and I didn't change it very much. I wanted to implement it in an interesting way that would accentuate the main themes.

The director chooses the actors, influences the look of the costumes, the setting, and all of this creates his handwriting, even if it's someone else's script. He either agrees with what the scriptwriter wants to say, or he simply adapts it and makes it his own. It's not only what you want to say that's important, but also what you want to withhold. Because the film must also have a secret, something you are hiding that the viewer can discover. The author plays that game too.

Many students of directing don't want to work with screenwriters, they feel that if someone else were to create the script, the cornerstone of the film, their idea is compromised. Is this selfishness or is it a way to make better and more compact work?

I think the collaboration between writers and directors should start at

the school, but it can't be done by force. A student needs to find someone they get on with and sit in a pub and discuss their idea, because it's amazing to write a script with someone. You're discussing, you're arguing – that's the best and absolutely the most fruitful way of doing it. I think that a student should make at least one or two works with someone else's script. Of course, they have to believe the subject matter. When you don't trust the text and a complicated situation comes up, you don't know where to put the camera. If you understand the script, you can look for solutions, but if you don't believe it, you don't really care. You may not care. If one doesn't know what to do with the script, one shouldn't take it.

Did you have any film role models?

I was very influenced by the French New Wave. It impressed me with its freedom of expression. I like both Truffaut and Godard, they are completely different universes. Truffaut made spectator films, Godard made provocative films. But I also like other auteurs, like Resnais, who made stylized, intellectual films. And it was his intellect and his meaningful editing that fascinated me. I like Rohmer, he's pretty much forgotten. He analyzes relationships, his characters talk endlessly, but we follow them, gradually we begin to understand them and get inside them. It has strange poetry that grabs you and doesn't let go. And of course, I was definitely influenced by Fellini. His imagination was astonishing. I love *The Road*, it's a film that's not heavily stylized, but it's sensitively and delicately made, until it makes you sad. I like melancholy in film, tender things. Of course, I also like Fellini's great films, whether it's *Eight and a Half*, which is perfect in its form. I admire *Amarcord*, that one is funny. Even though I'm talking about melancholy, I like films that have humour.

Uher was one of the most interesting Slovak filmmakers. *The Sun in*

a Net is a naive but formally absolutely polished diamond. It was a blast, even when we were studying we were shouting at each other: "You stupid!" – a line from that movie. And of course, there is the important trio of Jakubisko, Havetta, Hanák, they made original, idiosyncratic films.

From the last few years, I really liked Lehotsky's *Blind Loves*, and I find the way of storytelling in Peter Kerekes' films inspiring as well. Interesting that these films are on the border between documentary and fiction. It doesn't work in fiction in Slovakia somehow. I wouldn't say: "This is for me!" You need to make a film that comes to Cannes or Rotterdam and everybody will say, "Jesus Christ, we haven't seen this before." Maybe we can do it when we break free.

In your work, you lean towards documentary. When did you start to feel the need to go in this direction and move away from feature filmmaking?

When I was in school, I had this idea that I was going to make absolutely stylized films. And then this thing happened, Slovak Television approached me, they needed to make a documentary quickly about sheltered workshops where disabled people worked. And when I started working on it and creating situations in which these people would show themselves, I said to myself: "Damn, this is very interesting. The authenticity that's created here is truer and more interesting than any stylization that I'm going to come up with."

In the editing room, I realized that some situations were actually almost acting scenes and that the documentary allows us to do things like that. It doesn't have to be just an observation, but we can put our own ideas into it that elevate it and take it to another level. Authenticity became important to me. I thought about it and I started making films that are in between documentary and fiction. I was led to it by a sheer coincidence.

Shooting the film *The Finale* – Pavol Korec, Ján Meliš and Dušan Milko

I made the film *Journey to Paradise* with Szidi Tobias. We dressed her up as a homeless woman and filmed a day in her life with a hidden camera. The plot was simple: Our heroine feels like she has found some drugs, she moves around the main station among real people and approaches them. For example, Szidi went to see a man who was drinking alone, and he asked her if she wanted something to drink. It initiated an interesting dialogue that sparkled and had authenticity and truthfulness at the same time. Not every actor can pull off that kind of filming, but Szidi was amazing. We were creating and provoking those situations on the spot. I had the core of the story written out, but what was going to happen, I didn't know. “Go there, please! Go get that guy! Sing here!” were my instructions. She had a transistor and she was singing a song, suddenly a railway man came up to her and started to chase her out of there. She started arguing with him. Well, suddenly these situations started piling up.

Then I made two more films like that with Szidi. I started experi-

menting with the possibilities of hidden camera and improvisation. In the film *Heatstroke*, Szidi played with Peter Bebjak. This time I didn't give them dialogue, I just told them what they should probably talk about. I shot them from terrible distances, they didn't really know where the camera was, how it was shot. I liked the long lenses then, the image took on such softness. In the third film with Szidi, I combined stylized situations with authentic moments. I made a quasi-documentary about a woman who sues a man because he robbed her of her dreams. In theory, you can sue anyone for anything. I interspersed the story with testimony from a psychologist, a lawyer and a sociologist. The lawyer even told me that we can't spin it like this because there will be a lot of lawsuits. The absurdity was already in there.

Well, suddenly such experiments ended, there was no money in television. But by then I already kind of knew how to capture authenticity. I started making documentaries, like *Propeller*, where we looked at youth subcultures, and we spent about a year with them. We went to different events with them, and it was interesting because we were discovering communities that weren't being talked about anywhere. Some were into drugs, others were into unconventional activities. Authenticity was slowly creeping into my films.

In the feature-length semi-fiction documentary *Waiting Room*, young girls appear in the first part. I managed to cast girls who were totally authentic, they didn't perceive the camera. I told the casting director Ingrid Hodal that I was looking for people for a film that was a bit strange. And she tells me: “I know some interesting girls, but one is on drugs.” And that made me alert, because I'm very fond of outcasts, that's my deviation. I became interested in the girl. First, we had to get in touch with her mom, because she was only sixteen. When we met and started talking, I thought it was amazing. All I had to do was pull out the camera and film. She was not shy, she opened up, let me in and we shot her scenes like a feature film. I didn't give her lines, I just shot what she was making up.

The intersection of authenticity and stylization of form was interesting in these films. It could have been done more consistently, but unfortunately I didn't make as many films as I would have liked. I also had a script for a feature film that I wanted to shoot that way, but it didn't work out. I'm sorry, because if I had continued down this path, who knows what would have been made. Gradually I found a method of working with the real environment without looking for political contexts.

After the premiere of the documentary *Exhibits or Stories from the Castle*, which takes place in a retirement home, many people reproached me for not talking about how society does not take care of the elderly. But I'm not that interested in these things. I'm more attracted to intimate things and the inside of a person. Society is twisting and turning – you can see it even now.

It's a subject for absurdist comedy rather than drama. I'm interested in human destiny, human search, belief in something. The soul of man.

Could you reconstruct the process of creation?

First you have an idea. Then you write the script, you build the scenes and images, you imagine how they will look. I write a literary script as if it were a technical script. Jean Claude Carrière says: "One sentence, one take." I already know at this stage how many shots the picture will have. I don't make the technical script very detailed anymore. With those improvised films, I found that when I wrote the perfect technical script, I completely exhausted myself. I didn't feel the need to improvise while I was shooting, I felt that the script was just right.

Today I know that if I don't have everything written down, I am subtly insecure and become a seeker. I am well prepared, but at the same time, I can improvise. On the other hand, improvisation is always a risk. It can happen that you come to the editing room and you don't quite have exactly what you need.

During the preparation, you have to assemble your crew. Reach out to the cameraman, the sound engineer, the costume designer, the architect. You start doing auditions, looking for locations in which the story will take place. I like sightseeing and discovering environments by photographs, by paintings, by art, by color. I enjoy it because I love the visual arts. It's amazing. You're traveling in a car with a cameraman, maybe even a scriptwriter, talking about the film, and suddenly the story starts to emerge. That's beautiful. In a real environment, you get new possibilities that you can use.

Of course, you work differently on a documentary than you do on a feature film. You shoot environments that are real, you don't change them, you want to keep the truth in front of the camera. It happens that even when working on a feature film I discover an environment that I like, so I don't change it very much, I prefer to look for interesting shooting angles. But sometimes you're forced to build the set in the studio, to create the environment ad hoc.

The human contact is nice. A director should like the people around him. Sometimes he's grumpy with them and scolds them, but the fact that they create a community at work that wants to make something, that's a miracle.

The preparatory work takes time depending on how the project is funded. It takes a long time to raise money. If there is enough money, it goes faster. In preparing the *Finals*, the documentary about the 1976 European football champions, everything went terribly fast, but some projects drag on slowly.

How do you assemble your crew? How do you choose your individual coworkers?

You have to find a producer who doesn't just want to make the film, but who wants to keep working with it. Their motivations are differ-

ent: they want to see themselves in the spotlight at an A-list festival or they want to make money. The producer has to be involved in the film because he enjoys it, sees its potential, and believes in it. You should be in constant contact with him, looking for the best way of film production. It is important to reconcile his and your idea of the future film. He should be a person with whom you get along.

I choose individual professions according to their abilities. It is best to work with the best, but it is not always possible. You have to have good sound engineers, a good costume designer, an architect, a prop designer – I know a little bit about that because I was a prop designer at Koliba.

I choose a cameraman not only according to his ability to compose, but also according to whether I can trust him to shoot the way we agreed. The cameraman is your eyes. I like it when the cameraman himself is behind the camera. I don't quite understand why in the American system he has a camera operator and he just sits at the monitor and controls the light. Of course, you have to discuss with him and not be afraid to go into conflict, often it's beneficial. The director will say: “It's good!”, but the cameraman insists: “We must do it again.” Then you look at it in the editing room and wonder what bothered him so much. It doesn't matter. But the cameraman is bothered by the shot, he asks why you didn't use his version. But I just know that when my wife watches films, she doesn't care much about the technical quality, she's into the story, the narrative. For me, if the viewer starts to deal with technical perfection, the problem is elsewhere: in the actors, in the dramaturgy, in the fact that the story has no mystery.

A film crew is a collective that has to work. During a long shoot, nervousness, tension, arguments can arise, and that's bad. Some directors are fine with that, but I can't concentrate under that kind of pressure. I need a creative atmosphere when I'm working. A director has to keep his idea of what he wants to say.

Post-production is my second favourite phase of directing. I love

sitting in the editing room. Recently, it's become popular among students to edit their own stuff. Years ago, that just wasn't possible. They were editing film material, there had to be editors and assistant editors. The atmosphere in the editing room was much more cheerful and the discussion more creative than when a person sits there alone lost with his images.

Do you like filming? What do you find important during filming, what do you look out for?

The filming itself, it's a whirlwind that will sweep you off your feet. It's an adrenaline rush. But there's no need to be afraid of improvisation if it's prepared. The night before shooting I think about what I'm going to say to the actors, where I'm going to put the camera, what situation I'm going to provoke. If you don't have it ready, the crew is waiting for your decision. You always have to say something. Either: "It's good!" or "It's bad!" or "Let's fix this!" And when you don't know what to do, you say, "Pause."

Schorm – but also Menzel – was said to pretend to the crew as if he needed help. He knew exactly what he wanted to achieve, but by feigning uncertainty, he provoked his collaborators into creativity. Maybe that's a good tactic, but I can't play that insecurity. A director is a bit of an actor and a bit of a manipulator – each in a different way. I often find myself shouting at someone and then turning around so they don't notice I'm laughing. You can't let the crew's attention wander on set. I hate lunch breaks when I'm filming, I don't need to go to lunch. Of course, I understand people need to eat, but I know that after a break they come back groggy and it takes forever to get the work going again.

I don't like directors who want to show their authority and status by aggressive shouting – it's not in my nature. If it helps their work and

gets them results, so be it. It's a matter of upbringing and morality. I'm all for cooperation. Each of us will arrive at a result in a different way.

How do you work in the editing room?

The editor is the first viewer and dramaturg who will review the footage for you. They are the first eyes. They'll tell you, "This is crap!" or they'll say, "Okay, let's make something out of it!" The important thing is that you have a discussion partner. You may have an idea of what it should look like, but the editor may organize your material differently.

You should have a fundamental vision ready before you start filming. In *Son of Saul*, for example, Nemes shot particular situations from the point of view of the protagonist, often capturing his semi-details from behind, and we saw the environment in blurry detail. And this visually distinctive concept influenced assembly. But it may be that the editor can't cut the material the way you envisioned it because it doesn't work.

I enjoy working in the editing room, I love the endless arguments around shots, which are sometimes annoying but other times fruitful. Of course, towards the end, when you have the material rough cut, you need a dramaturg to look at it and tell you both that you're wrong.

In the editing room, we can really push the film forward. Godard did it brilliantly, he worked with the material absolutely freely. It's hard to be free in the editing room when you've written it, shot it, and have a fixed idea about the film. But a free man looks at the material and says to himself: "Okay, this is how it should be, but this is even better." In the editing room, you don't have to be afraid of new techniques or solutions. Not to be afraid is important for all directing. Sometimes it may work when you're not being afraid of being unconventional or a complete mess.

Shooting the film *Keep Smiling* – Pavel Řezníček, Ágnes Gubíková and Pavol Korec

What about film music?

Every director uses film music differently. Some films based on documentaries – for example, the works of the Dardenne brothers – are without music because it is said to distract, create emotion and lead to inaccurate interpretation. I don't think so. Good music creates a mood, which is important to the impression of a film. You come out of the cinema and you have a feeling that was also created by the music. Of course, music should be used sparingly, the more sparingly you use it, the more interesting it is.

For example, in the film *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, the* song *Raindrops are Falling on my Head is* used in the scene where Paul Newman rides his bike. I assumed it was still playing there, but it's only in that one scene. However, it stays in your ears forever and establishes the basic mood of the film.

I like it when the music just hints at the atmosphere and suddenly gets lost and doesn't force itself. We once did a film docudrama of the angels for a Christmas program. A dreamy neo-romantic sequence. The dramaturg brought Nino Rota's music from some Fellini film into the editing room. I didn't like it. “What are you crazy, we're going to play Fellini's music?” And she insisted that I put it on. And suddenly it was as if Fellini or Jakubisko had made the film. Suddenly the music completely lifted the shots to another level. The music created a real Christmas nostalgia.

I don't like it when the director tries to melodramatically emphasize and highlight ideas with music, then I feel that he's forcing me something. Relationships between characters, quarrels, love scenes, are situations that don't need to be commented on with the music.

In his manifesto Dogma 95, Lars von Trier accepted only such music that comes from natural sources in the image. It seems to me that it's such a small deception. Music is omnipresent in our lives. Young people have headphones and are surrounded by music. You walk into a department store and music is blaring everywhere. A film without music may not be truer. If we want to make a really sonically authentic film, we have to put the music in.

How do you work with sounds?

I try to create a separate layer out of the sounds, in a way also a kind of music. The important thing is to record authentic sounds in real life. When I'm filming, I ask the sound engineer to record what is sonically interesting in that particular environment. Those sounds can then be put into different levels and a sound dramaturgy can be created from them.

Godard's method – any of us can try it – is that in the editing room he assigns different sounds to the image, thus creating a score of

sounds. Even during the dialogue, he puts in the mooing of a cow and so on. It's such experimentation. When you project an image without sound, and you don't hear the dialogue, and you see a character just walking on the ground, it can create completely new meanings, and you can support them with sounds.

To what extent does technology influence the director's work?

It used to be shot on film. It was expensive, we only had a limited amount of material. Today, new technologies have brought freedom, we can do as many retakes as we want, we just need a more powerful computer. But it boils down to the fact that directors don't have to prepare rigorously, they tell themselves: “Let's do it again. We'll do it differently on the spot.” In the old days, we had to have it all figured out, we could only do so many 4 to 5 retakes, and if it didn't work, we had to use an imperfect shot.

Today on set, directors sit in front of big screens and watch what's being shot. I like it better when I'm somewhere in front of the camera and I'm looking at live actors, feeling them, sensing them. I don't like the current TVs with sharp images. I like a cinematic image that is softer, as if it had a soft veil. I don't like to sit in front of the screen, even though today I can't do otherwise.

Technology is moving forward, we all have to adapt to it, there is nothing else left. We are constantly looking for ways to maintain authenticity in front of the camera. With a small video camera or a small camera, we can get almost anywhere and the shot is good. With old technology, we had to light crazily, now you can work with natural light and it's also amazingly artistic. We're freer.

Cameramen want the picture to be absolutely perfect, but there's no need to fall for them. Sometimes it just doesn't matter if it's perfect. What matters is what it's about, whether it interests me, and

whether it will be exciting for the viewer. Often times the subtle imperfection of the image is more interesting than the absolute perfection they're insisting on. The viewer perceives the story, and whether or not they are interested in the narrative does not depend on the brilliance or the image.

Cynical filmmakers refer to actors as a kind of "raw material," the same as, say, the text of dialogue or the furnishings of a set. An actor's quality is, in their view, merely a reflection of the director's quality. To what extent is an actor a full-fledged artist with his or her own creative input?

The choice of the actor is important. It is best if you find someone who meets all your requirements, and you do not have to speculate. Many directors say that if they cast well, they have forty percent of the job done. The problem comes if you pick wrong, and it doesn't work when you're filming. That's a huge problem. Tarkovsky used to say that in this case, you don't need to shoot the actor, you need to shoot the background.

There are directors who consider actors as their tools. Bresson tried to gain the authenticity of their expression through austerity. The actors didn't live the situation, they were like puppets. He told them:

"Just do this! Now move! ' He exploited automatism in their actions, depicting them in primal, stripped-down situations. But if one is making a film built on psychological persuasiveness, one cannot command the actors, "Do this!" but must work with them to find the inner truth of the scene, the plausible motivations for the action.

The way of working with actors is individual. You have to find a person with whom you get along and who understands your subject. The question is – I've also experimented with this – whether the director should give the actors the script, Forman didn't give them the texts, he played the roles for them during rehearsals, he told them the dia-

logues, and then they repeated them. Tarkovsky also didn't give the actors a script, trying to work on the truthfulness of the actors' speech. He felt that when an actor knows the text, he is not authentic, he is playing a set intention or idea. For example, a female character is having a happy moment and a few moments later learns that her son has died. Tarkovsky argued that when an actress knows what is coming, she will not play the situation completely truthfully, because it will foreshadow the content of the following scenes. According to him, an actor is authentic when he does not know what is coming. Even in life, we don't know what will come next, we act the way we feel right now.

When I made films with Szidi Tobias, I didn't give her scripts. And I still do it now, I don't give the actors lines, I just tell them how I imagine it. In our production conditions, you can work that way for short films. You don't get actors for long films. Even Tarkovsky had a problem with that, some actors didn't want to work with him: "Is he crazy?"

In acting, what applies to all films – it has to have a mystery. I think it's important not only what an actor shows, but also what he hides. The viewer has to discover his secret, he has to understand what he is hiding and why he is hiding it. You can find this process in all kinds of art. The spectator interacts with the work because he is looking for the meanings that the creator has hidden there.

Can the film make a difference? Or is it just a means of enriching the spirit and cultural enjoyment? What is the position of film in contemporary society?

Is it possible to change the world through art? Are we making film to change society? I don't know the exact answer. The cognitive function of art is important. Film also tells us about something we don't know and don't realize. For example, it shows suffering in many parts of the world. But often it flies through festivals and leaves no response, it

doesn't create huge pressure for change. I think that in the sixties Godard's and Truffaut's films were influencing life, changing the way young people looked at how society worked. But whether film can change anything today, I don't know.

Is the film just Aristotelian mimesis and merely a reflection of what's going on around us? Or does it allow us to get behind the mirror to the inside of a person and can show us their inner attitudes and feelings? For me, film is not just a simple mirror, a reflection of just our outer world, but helps us get beneath the surface of situations. It should not only talk about social issues, but also about personal ones. The art began with a caveman making a handprint on the cave wall. What was he trying to say? "I was here. I've lived here. I'm leaving something behind." Film, visual art, music – all art is such an imprint, a message about us. "We lived here like that." We talk about ourselves, what we know, what we realize, and in doing so we shift thinking. Maybe someday someone will come along, look at this and say: "Oh, they were thinking about these things."

Are you thinking of the viewer when filmmaking?

Quantum physics says that things only exist when they interact with each other. There are elements that only exist in interaction with another element. To paraphrase, a movie only exists in interaction with the viewer. It has to touch him, it has to say something to him. On its own, it doesn't exist. It only comes into existence when it interacts with me and I with it.

Young filmmakers very often encounter production, technical or human issues, sometimes they feel they should call it quits. How to cope with the inconveniences inherent to this work?

The filmmaker must be happy with the filmmaking. I always enjoy watching new and new films, discovering what they come up with, what they say, and how they say it. I'm sitting in a coffee shop with my wife and she asks me, “What are you looking at these people for?” And I'm staring at them, watching what gestures they make, what they say, trying to remember what they say. I enjoy watching this world, the weather, the way some girl turns around, the way she laughs and flips her hair. I started making films to capture moments like that. But I'm also fulfilled by literature and visual art. That's what gives me a sense of purpose in life.

Today, anyone with a mobile phone can take a video and put it on the internet. It is difficult to get through the image smog and find something really interesting. Cinematography should cultivate people, show them that film is not just what they see on Facebook. Years ago we read a book in philosophy class and there was an American scientist who said that in the future we will think through images. At the time, we thought that was nonsense, but now it's true. Children don't read much, they get to know the world through images, through television or through the internet. Our task is to cultivate those images.

Art is always a bit spiritual. Spirituality is in things, when they don't have it, they are empty, they lose one dimension. Because spirituality is something like revelation. And a good painting or a good film are revelations. I don't mean that in a religious way, I think of spirituality in the sense of some excitement, a thrill, something that enriches us in the spiritual realm. Man has both a rational and a spiritual dimension. Without that, it can't be done. Tertullian says: Credo, quia absurdum est. That is: I believe because it is absurd. I cannot rationally claim that it is true. There are some things you can only believe. At the level of our knowledge today, spirituality and rationality are simultaneous.

When students ask me whether to stick with film and whether it all makes sense, I have one answer for them, “You have to believe in what you're doing.” From time to time one tells oneself that it doesn't make

sense. But then he asks himself the question: “What would I do?” When you find some other thing that you enjoy as much as film, then go there. But if you don't, then you have to persevere and overcome the obstacles. Film is almost like a religion to me. I love it and I hope to be involved in it for a long time, but if I lose my faith, I'll probably sit down and write short stories. I always think that's better than going to work at Slovnaft.

led by Tomáš Šrámek

Peter Bebjak

September 1, 1970, Partizánske

Slovak film director, screenwriter, producer, and actor. After graduating as an actor, he was admitted to the Film and Television Directing Department at the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava. He graduated in 1999 with the short feature film Štefan.

In 2001, he was at the establishment of the production company DNA, which from the beginning focused on television production. After the documentary series *The Biggest Criminal Cases in Slovakia* (2006), he worked as a director and producer on the crime series *City of Shadows* (2008), *Condemned* (2015), *Behind the Glass* (2017, 2018), *Dr.* Ľudský (2017) and the historical series *Slovanians* (2021).

For Czech television, Peter Bebjak directed the series *Kriminálka Anděl* (2008), *Mordparta* (2016), *First Department Cases* (2016), *Specialists* (2017), *Justice* (2017), *Gendarmes from Luhačovice* (2017), *The Actor* (2020) or *Ninety* (2022).

At the same time, he worked as an author. His dance titles *Darkroom* (2007) and *Voices* (2010) attracted interest. His debut in fiction cinema was *Apricot Island* (2011), an intimate drama about the love of three men for one woman. This was followed by *Evil* (2012), *The Cleaner* (2015). Audiences enjoyed the extraordinarily successful films *The Line* (2017) and *The Rift* (2019). In the drama *The Auschwitz Report* (2020), he depicted the escape of Alfred Wetzler and Rudolf Vrba from the Auschwitz concentration camp. The television film *Jozef Mak* (2021) is an adaptation of the novel of the same name by Jozef Cíger Hronský

Peter Bebjak teaches at the Film and Television Directing Studio at the Academy of Performing Arts and is a member of the Slovak Film and Television Academy.

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Why did you decide to study film directing?

I studied three years of puppetry and three years of acting at the Academy of Performing Arts. I studied it simultaneously for some years. The decision to study directing was determined by the social situation at the time. Actors didn't have jobs and I was thinking about going to FAMU in Prague. But at that time, the study program was opening at the Academy of Performing Arts, and Braňo Mišík – my classmate from acting – made me apply and give it a try.

So it was a spontaneous decision? Didn't you want to be a director from the age of five?

No, no, not at all. I've always enjoyed acting and performing more. I used to recite, act in theatres or dance in folk groups, ...and like every aspiring actor, I wanted to be famous. But when I was finishing acting studies, there was nowhere to perform, there were no acting jobs. There was no filming, the situation in the theatres was bad.

Looking back, do you think you made the right decision?

I think I made a good decision because I've been doing something I really enjoy.

And acting?

Acting is now a hobby. Once every five years someone will think about me. But now I have a completely different approach to acting – it's not

such a personal thing for me, I don't have to prove to everyone that I'm a good actor, it doesn't determine anymore whether I get another job. I enjoy acting and I also approach the creation of a character more freely.

And what is directing for you? What do you find most fulfilling about it?

When something special comes about. The script is a given, but for me it just works as a basic skeleton. It's not a mantra that I have to follow exactly. I take all circumstances into account when I work. The space I'm shooting in, or the costumes and props. Or the situation offered by actors in rehearsals – everything can change from how it was originally written in the script. And suddenly something different – maybe better – will emerge. That's what I enjoy so much.

Do you have a specific memory, an example of when this happened?

It happens with every film – unless it's a made-to-order affair. Then you're basically just an administrator, sometimes you even have a storyboard drawn up of how you have to shoot the scene. Unfortunately, that kind of work also happens in the directing profession. But otherwise, what you're asking about happens with every project. There's something like that in every one. In *Apricot Island*, for example, it was the scene when Peter Nádasdi sings a song on the table in the rain, and he expresses his inner feeling about the unhappiness he is experiencing this way. Or in *The Line,* the scene in the garden when Tomáš Maštalír is talking to Žeňa Libezňuk, Kristína Kanátová is singing a song in the background, and naked Milan Mikulčík is chasing his comrades. This is also something that was created on the set.

And have you ever fallen for a feeling that didn't turn out fine in the end?

A director is a person who works on a script on a daily basis. Not only when he writes it, but also when he thinks about it – about the characters or about a scene, about how it will look, how it will be shot. He's playing it over and over in his head, so that when that moment of change, of happy accident, occurs, he's actually in perfect control of the script, and he should be able to decide what's in favor and what's not in favor of the film.

So it hasn't happened to you yet. Because I've already fallen for a situation on set.

It's also a matter of experience. I see a difference in whether someone shoots a lot or not. When you make a film once every five years, you work differently than when you make a film every day and do two or three projects a year. Then you have a natural confidence, you're much more confident in your decision-making, in how you judge the material and how you can guess what's going to come up. If you work with certain people more often, you have an idea of how, say, an editor will approach the material. You trust him because you know he's going to pick the best retake for the particular scene. The moment that looks great to you on set may not be that good in the editing room. Suddenly, you may find that another take was much better.

So is there an ideal shooting pace that you think a director should keep?

It doesn't exist. You can only do one project per year. You can have this cycle that you shoot every other year. But you prepare. You're always in

Shooting the film *Apricot Island* – Peter Bebjak and Martin Žiaran

some kind of working process. It can happen that you drop out for five years. You want to work very much, but you don't have the opportunity. It's individual. But the important thing is to believe in yourself. And you get that confidence by working.

I have the opposite feeling – I trust myself less and less.

That doesn't mean it won't change. There are a lot of things that affect it. Not just what happens on set, but the whole preparation, the way you communicate and handle things with your collaborators. It's also important what kind of response you get to your films, how you perceive them, and most importantly, how your inner circle perceives them. And how much you care about it.

Is audience success important to you?

In my opinion, it is not important. But you have films that are legacies, I would say. They have a kind of educational character – whether from an aesthetic, emotional or artistic point of view. And then you have those mainstream, audience successful films. Those ultimately have a bigger impact. The ideas that are conveyed in them and the way they are executed influence the taste of the viewer, because our work is perceived by the audience mainly through mainstream, through television, through soap operas that are the largest part of what the audience watches. And based on that, they form an idea of what art is. If you raise the bar a little bit, you suddenly shift their view of art.

So when you make a film, do you also think about the viewer? Do you make any compromises for his sake?

I make films the way I want to make them. If I'm making for television, the producer there always wants the result to be appealing to the audience.

What is the difference between working for television and working on original projects?

The difference is freedom and liberty. It depends on the producer. I've worked on TV projects that were terrible because there were too many people involved and nobody wanted to take responsibility. It started with casting – everyone wanted to cast someone else and it made me crazy. It's easier if you're working with a producer who isn't subject to TV standards and ratings requirements. Then it's his decision. And the

ideal is when you're your own producer. You're only accountable to yourself. Over time, you make a name for yourself and if you're considered successful, you can afford more. But when a flop comes along, everything immediately collapses and you can start all over again.

Which project did you feel most at ease with?

Mostly with feature films. By having them produced by my own production company, I knew what I wanted and how I wanted it. I could do what I saw fit with the material because I was responsible for the result.

On the other hand, wasn't there some financial restraint?

I see the director not only as an artistic visionary who shapes the idea and is responsible for the artistic result, but also as a manager. He has to think about how to manage time, space, what he can afford and what he can't. Unfortunately, we don't have the luxury of being able to wait for beautiful light, and when it doesn't come we just pack up and wait for it the next day. That is not possible at the moment because the budget is uncompromising.

You have to make reasonable compromises, make room for what matters to you. You make a deal with the production that you're not going to pay for three rigs and light a helium balloon when you're shooting at night, you will make it easier. You find the images that don't matter to the story and you cross them out. You create the conditions so that you have the time and space to do what's essential and necessary to the film.

Based on my previous films, I've developed a certain freedom in those decisions as well. I have an agreement that whatever I do with

the script, the producers won't interfere. It's my decision and I take responsibility. As soon as they stop trusting me, the collaboration will fail.

Where does a director's work begin and where does it end?

That's the question. You have directors who are the authors of the theme. You have directors who collaborate on scripts. You have those who get the script and somehow try to grasp it and reinterpret it. And they have different creative approaches during the execution as well. It's very individual.

So where does your work as a director begin and end?

Even if I have a good idea, an idea of my own, I'm often not able to write the script myself. I don't have the capacity or the skill. I can't write good dialogues. I make remarks and notes about what should be there, how the situation should develop, and most importantly, what it should be about, what the audience should read out of it. And then I get a screenwriter to collaborate. I don't see him as a person who only rewrites what I think. For me, everyone I work with is a co-creator. That means they can inspire me in some way or help me articulate what I want to say. They might come up with an idea that is much more powerful and interesting than mine. Or maybe his idea can help me see things from a different perspective. And it's not just the scriptwriter, it's the architects, the costume designers, the makeup artists. Anyone who enters the process and offers me their take on the subject. It's up to you how you engage them, how you can explain your idea to them. But it's always interesting to wait and see what they offer you.

This is also true in the editing room. I used to be the kind of director

who, as soon as he finishes filming, sits in the editing room and picks every shot. He goes through everything, puts it on, and basically just the editing technician makes the cut. Now, I like it when that first version of some scenes or film is done by the editor himself. Of course, before that we talk about how the whole film should look like. What its atmosphere should be. What the pacing should be. And then he grasps the material himself, he doesn't have to respect my notes from the set, he can create new contexts, a new way of retelling the scene. And it can be better than my original idea. So, I'm very happy to collaborate with all professions.

Do you still work with the same people? Or do you change the crew according to the type of project?

I choose people with whom I get along both personally and professionally. That way, when we irritate each other at work, it's usually beneficial. I have a couple of basic professions that matter to me: cameraman, assistant director and editor. Those are important to me. And then, for example, also the music composer. I have my favourites, it's not such an effort to explain things to them. Because in music you have to know the terminology. If you don't know it, then as a layman you're explaining music in the way of "I want there to be a dudududuh" and you come across as a jerk. When I have a musician who understands what I'm trying to say with these sobs of mine, it's easier to communicate.

The cameraman and I create the visual concept together, thinking about how we're going to shoot, what the film will look like. I often work with Martin Žiaran also because we can look for new ways together. I don't like to repeat something I've already done many times. I need to discover something that we will enjoy. Something new, something we have to learn, something we have to look out for. Martin was

Shooting the film *The Line* – Zuzana Fialová, Peter Bebjak and Tomáš Maštalír

incredibly annoying to me on the project *Justice*. When I explained to him how I imagined it, he said: "Okay, it's like this, but let's think about how we can do it differently. ' And that was just what I needed, so that I wouldn't go into some conventionality that I had been taught to do. Because the limited time and space that you have when you're shooting somehow forces you into the convention. And by working together really often, we can inspire each other and push each other or find new approaches together.

The same applies to the assistant director. He's the closest person to me, the one I'm always communicating with, the one who organizes the set, the one who handles the preparation of the shooting for you. And he works with the extras, makes second plans. That's a very important thing for me, because I don't like extras who are just people walking around with no emotion. I like when the extras have their meaning.

But it's interesting to see how other directors think about it. That's why I accepted the offer to star in Honza Hřebejka's film *The Teacher*, because it's rare that you get to see another director on the set. I was interested in how he handles the text, what is sacred to him, what is not. He was trained as a screenwriter, and he was also a scriptwriter, so he changed the script and worked with it as it worked for him. He could completely turn a scene around and shoot it with a completely different meaning.

Does this way of working appeal to you?

It's good to see it. But it is not right to do something that is not natural to you. It may inspire you in some way, but if you don't know how to work with the script this way, if you are afraid that such a radical change will disturb your concept – then you'd better not do it. It's about that confidence you have in yourself.

Have you ever been given a finished script that you just turned into a movie?

I can't do that. At least I don't know how to do that. In a way, I always have to appropriate the script. I must understand it, I must find something in it that is special to me, that is mine. Then I often hear that I've somehow stolen the script. But it's not stealing, I'm just reading it differently than the scriptwriter imagined. Because suddenly the little details that weren't emphasized in the script are more important to me, and I wanted to bring them to the forefront. I always need to feel like I can take liberties with the script. I don't want to be given a storyboard that says exactly what I can shoot. I don't want to be just a coordinator who checks if what's been written has been shot.

And the original idea in your films always comes from you?

The Line, for example, is a script by Peter Balko, which Wanda Adamík Hrycová introduced to me. But it underwent many changes. And that was the type of text that we started shooting in February and in March a completely different script was created. We shot a couple of scenes with a different actor in the lead role, and then the whole line, which was supposed to be the lead line, was thrown out. The whole script was rewritten and edited. It was the line of a policeman who comes to the east and falls in love with a policewoman there whose father mysteriously died at the border. It wasn't necessary at all.

How does the director work from the script to the final form of the film?

The initial idea is important. For me, it's always the first scene. I'll give you an example for *The Cleaner*: There's a narrow street across the street from the house where I lived, and there was a family that had some five or six children. I used to see this mother taking care of them, and on weekends you could hear terrible screaming coming from their apartment. And it was not just the woman screaming. That was a completely different kind of screaming, not like when you scream at somebody because they made you angry. It was fear. I could hear those little kids defending their mother and screaming.

Those were terrible weekends. But then all of a sudden it died down and I learned that the woman killed her husband.

And that was the initial impulse. I wondered what would happen to those children. Because all of a sudden that little group of kids would go into an orphanage because the father was an alcoholic and the mother would go to jail. What was important to me was how one event would affect a person's life. The main character in *The Cleaner* didn't

choose his life, circumstances chose his life. The fact that the mother killed her abusive husband. That was the primary idea – how such an act changes a person's character and thinking. What kind of person can grow up in an orphanage? I love that kind of intimate openness, and when it's so true, so honest, it's irresistible.

At what stage of the idea do you start writing the script?

When I have created some images. When I know exactly what they will look like. The first image – a child is washing the ground, we don't know what he is washing yet, only then we see that it is blood. We get closer, we see legs somewhere in the corner, a lying figure, and suddenly someone pulls it away. The mother comes, stands there and looks at it. I knew the first picture would look like this. It was the main idea for me. But inspiration can come from anywhere. It can be music, a newspaper article or an overheard story. Things like that will form the basis, the skeleton.

I like the characters. I create the main characters, the circumstances that can shape them, and most importantly for me – the character must have a goal. The character must have the drive to achieve something. And another important thing – the story must be interesting. It needs to have a mystery to keep the viewers on their toes. And that's the essence of working on a screenplay.

It's different when I adapt someone else's script, when I "steal" it for myself. There I enter it more as a dramaturg. I look for possibilities and ways. I want to make a film that I can stand behind, not just the screenwriter.

Has it ever happened to you that you couldn't complete a project you really wanted to?

It happened many times, especially in the beginning. There were scripts that I thought were great, but the grant committee didn't like them, they didn't think they were as strong and interesting as I did.

Do you want to go back to any of them?

If it can't be pushed a third time, there's no point in pushing it. Those people on the committee don't change that much, so why are you going to propose the same script for ten years and occupy your mind with it. You're going to be working pointlessly on something that can't pass. But that doesn't mean I won't come back to it at some point.

So in ten years you might come back to it again?

Yeah. But I'll have to rewrite it again, it'll be a different script. Sometimes you redo a film in progress, though. You suddenly find something's missing in the rough cut. You need to either finish it or edit it, reshoot it. I know directors who reshoot all the time and a lot. If Kubrick can afford it, why can't we? Well, because of finances. But if there are opportunities, they should be taken.

Is there such a thing as a good and bad script?

That's a very personal thing, because what is a bad script from your point of view might be interesting from someone else's point of view. But let's be honest: Yes, there are badly written scripts. They're trite, unbelievable, poorly constructed. But once you're interested in the script, you know how to work with it. I'll give you one example. There was a student, a foreigner. He was studying at our school and decided

to make a film that would win at festivals. He watched all the films that had won something, and he created this kind of essence out of the things that he thought worked. And that film of his never won anything. An interesting film has to be unique in how it grasps some kind of an issue. Or unique in that it tells a story in a new, original way. Suddenly it's extraordinary in form or atmosphere in something, and yet it can be very simple and plain.

And have you turned down any scripts that were then well filmed by someone else?

Things like that happened, but then I didn't see the final work.

How do you cast the actors?

I know the actors in Slovakia and I can imagine in advance who I would enjoy working with. Of course, there are also characters that you do casting for. Casting is basically to test if the actors are compatible, if they get along, if they provoke each other, tease each other, if it has the right chemistry and energy that you need to get into the film. Screen tests are important to see if the viewer can believe them. In the Czech Republic, it's a little bit different. There I need to see the actor and talk to him. There's a difference when someone sends you some video that they shot themselves, or when you see and find out how they react to your suggestions.

When casting, it's important that the actor first plays the character as he or she perceives it. Of course, he must be given background information. And then it's important to see how he can vary and change his attitude when you explain your idea to him.

Has your choice of an actor ever backfired on you? Good screen tests and it doesn't work on set? Or a good actor but a complicated character?

I don't remember, I may have repressed those memories. But it can happen, for example, that an actor gets some kind of block and is not able to tell you the text. That can't be explained. It's the director's fault when the actor fails. And it's up to you which way you get out of it. The first mistake you make is that you cast him. And then another: when you see on set that it's not working, you must not push it. You have to find another way, a new way, because otherwise you won't help yourself. For example, you can stop shooting for a while. But that's difficult, because interruptions are costly, and unfortunately there aren't many finances in a film.

What if you need an actor for a visually specific character?

You have the option of looking somewhere abroad. But you have to count with dubbing. I believe in some intuition or some coincidence. When I started working on *The Cleaner*, I had an idea of the actor who was going to play the main character. And then I couldn't agree with him on silly things like finances. Then Hanka Wagner, a Czech actress, suggested Noël Czuczor. And suddenly I said to myself: Why haven't I seen it? Sometimes you get an impulse from someone and it can work. In the beginning, I didn't even see Tomáš Maštalír as Krajniak in *The Line*. He was originally supposed to be played by Ňusi Bárta, and he would have given him a different character, it would have been a different character. Tomáš imprinted his idea on him, but what I liked about it is that the character is now a masculine man, which gives him strength, but it also has a subtlety to it. That kind of vulnerability that he hides, but can also show it. That was important to me.

Shooting the film *The Auschwitz Report* – Peter Bebjak, John Hannah and Rasťo Šesták

What is the biggest problem in making films in Slovakia?

Time. This is a money-related thing. You can make a film in a couple of days, but that limits the creativity, we don't have time for it. Because when you shoot one picture a day, you have time to look, to try. But when you have to shoot seven or eight images, you don't have the time or the space to evolve and transform the situations in front of the camera. Or to get more shots in the editing room.

That's why those so-called technocratic directors have an advantage. They pay attention to the precise composition and precise movement of the actor. For them, the visual aspect is more important than the emotion that the actor creates. But I'm a director who likes exactly that play with the actors, so I try to have the time to create something new with them.

So the most important for you is the emotion that the film leaves you with?

Yeah. For me, what's important is the emotion, the authenticity, the truthfulness of the acting. So that when you watch it, you believe it. And then it's important for me that the story is understandable. People like stories from childhood. You like to listen to fairy tales because they carry a message. And that shapes you. In your subconscious, it forms some rules that you should follow in life.

What qualities should a good director have?

It is individual.

On what basis do you choose your students?

According to the works they have done. But even there, you can't be completely sure how authentic they are and how much help they had. What matters are the assignments and exercises they work out during the admission procedure. They have to analyze a film, write a short story, direct an etude. You can tell how creatively that person thinks. And the most important thing is the personal interview, when you form from their answers and their behavior a comprehensive view of the future director, their thinking, their maturity, and how they perceive film.

And have you ever been disappointed by the selection?

If that person was accepted, he or she had to impress the committee

with something. But beyond that, we have no control over how he or she decides to use their potential.

The opposite has also happened to you. That someone you wouldn't have picked later excelled?

I'd love to see it happen, but it depends on the individual person. An educator can influence a student to some thirty percent. The rest is the student's work and the influence of the team he or she is working with.

When you don't compromise for the audience, is the audience success of your films just a happy accident?

That's a magical thing in a way. If I take my first three films – *Apricot Island*, *Evil* and *The Cleaner* – I think 40,000 people saw them all. Then *The Line* came along, and that changed it. There were an awful lot of factors at play. The subject matter, of course. But whether the audience comes to the cinema on the first weekend is a matter of marketing. They have to know about the film. And none of those films before had that luck. There was no money and we didn't know how to do it.

With *The Line* Wanda had Tásler and Kandráč make a song, and that song *Sokoly* (*Falcons) became a* hit that brought together two different communities of viewers and listeners. Into this came the festival in Karlovy Vary, and since it was the silly season in the summer, it was written about. Coincidentally, I did my coming-out to the media at that time, and my private life began to be exposed in the public space. All the dots somehow connected. It was amazing to see people standing in line outside the amphitheater waiting to buy a ticket.

But a lot of that stuff I personally wouldn't do. I would never have picked *Sokoly* as a song. I found it terribly primitive – but it actually

helped the marketing a lot. I would never have made a poster like that. When I first saw the trailer, I thought I was going to explode. The author probably shouldn't have gone into distribution because he is too involved.

Do you know what I've figured out in these few years? There's nothing worse than nobody knowing about your film. It's terribly frustrating. You dedicate three years of your life to something nobody knows about. It's wasted work. That's why I stopped doing theater. I was in a play when I was still at school, we rehearsed for six weeks and performed it only three times. And the third time was only because our colleague, who organized the whole thing, bought tickets to have it performed. If you don't have good marketing and people don't know that your film was made, there's no way it's going to get to them.

That's why now, when we're preparing *The Auschwitz Report* for distribution, we're trying to get the word out about the film, and once it's in cinema, it's up to the audience to decide whether they want to see it or not.

In your opinion, should a film respond to the current social situation or should it capture what is universal and timeless in a person?

Both. Everything. Films must capture what's happening in society because it's an important message for the next generation. So that they can see how things were, how people lived, how people thought, what relationships were like. But let there also be such films that carry timeless themes.

You're more of which type?

It depends on what I'm working on. In The *Cleaner* we captured Brati-

slava at the time when construction started around the bus station. It's the last film that captures the old Bratislava bus station in its original state. It records Petržalka, where the characters live. It was socially attuned and perhaps it captured the reality of that time. But the story is inherently universal. It's about loneliness, about trying to exist for someone, to exist with someone.

What is your relationship to genre film?

Every film is a genre. Even social drama is a genre, it's just a deal with the viewer. I like films that have more than one genre in them. Because even in life you experience hilarious things, you witness tragedy, you experience action. Life is diverse, and I like that.

It's popular now, mixing genres.

But a lot of people don't think that's right. That it's not a clean film. Why not? Fortunately, films like *Parasite* are being made that can convince them. I really like it when it goes to extremes.

Lately, you've been associated with genres like thriller or crime.

You're always inclined to do something. When we first started working for TV, we needed to find a niche and we came up with a series *called The Greatest Crime Cases*. These were fiction reconstructions of 20th-century cases that resonated in society. They were based on police files, so the way the narrative was told was a bit technocratic. When we read the letters of these murderers, where they described themselves, their lives, I realized that your neighbour, your sibling, your

brother could become a murderer at any given moment. But what was the path to that? Sure, there are tumultuous situations, but even the tumultuous situation comes from something.

I was shocked to learn of a man in my neighborhood that killed his mistress and then killed himself. It happened here, near the school. And then you are completely stunned because you know the man, you know his wife, you know his children and you know his background. And you would have never guessed that he was capable of such an act. Something must have accumulated, something must have influenced his thinking that he did what I consider to be absolutely meaningless. What must be going on in a man to be able to take the life of someone close to him, what must be going on in him to kill himself, what are his thought processes?

So it wasn't some Monday when you said to yourself that from now on I'm going to start making genre films?

No. *The biggest criminal cases* worked and people watched them. So we took the liberty of preparing the theme for the series *City of Shadows*, because crime dramas weren't really being made in Slovakia until then. They were on Czech television, but they weren't very successful either. We needed to convince television that it could be done decently under our conditions. They were afraid it would be embarrassing, so we shot four scenes – finding the crime scene, the autopsy, the interrogation and the action scene. Suddenly, that idea of ours took shape, and the people who made the decisions saw how we wanted to do it. They gave us the green light and it worked. For the Czech market, we made *Crime Department Angel*, which was actually the same thing in Czech. And that put us in a box – when they needed somebody to do a crime drama, they called the people who knew how to do it.

Fortunately, there are always other projects in between. *Apricot Is-*

land, for example, is a melodrama. It was a comeback to what I did at school – I loved magical realism back then. I'm from the countryside, and even the first scripts I wrote that never got any support were from the countryside. But at the same time, I wanted to make an urban film. Out of that desire came *The Cleaner*. I was thinking about what can affect a person's life. I was in an orphanage for a year and a half as a child. A year and a half is enough for a person to form some kind of bond with his parents, with his mother. These are the things that you suddenly miss. Does it affect you? I wondered further how it would work if I didn't get back to my family. I wasn't an abandoned child, but, unfortunately, my mother had some kind of stroke during delivery. And because I have four other siblings, she was unable to care for me. Four other siblings were dependent on my father, so I was basically put aside. And that's the issue: How does a little thing like that, an event like that, change a person's next life?

And that's the theme of some other things I did, for example, the miniseries *Justice* or *The Actor* for Czech TV. Even there, the main character didn't choose his fate, it was determined by the fact that his mother was convicted of collaboration and his father died in Tobruk, which was seen as a betrayal in the communist society. Suddenly he has the label of a public enemy and is struggling to survive. He wants to live his life the best he can.

What are your favourite films?

I like Kubrick's movies. All of them. Every film is a different genre, a different approach. *Shining* is a great psychological horror film, and not just psychological, it goes into totally trashy stuff. And then *Barry Lyndon*, and that's the perfect historical drama. Kubrick was meticulous in form, exploring his own ways of shooting.

Do you have any secret heartthrobs that we don't know?

One of my favorite movies is *It's Only the Wind*. It captures the intimate lives of the main characters over the course of a day. You know that tragedy is imminent, you wait for it to come, when it comes, how it comes. That was amazing.

Did you have no idea as a student that this is what you wanted to achieve in your directing career?

When you're a student, you want your film to be a success at a festival. But over time, you find that some things are more important to your personal life than chasing something fleeting. Because then what? You can start making purely art films that might resonate somewhere, but few people will see them. On the other hand, they are very important, they push the boundaries of film as an art...

So no Oscar or anything like that?

These are fleeting things. They may be important for your next job, but they won't change your character or your thinking. They will help you get money, get some advantages over your colleagues. You have the certainty that your project will be supported because you have accomplished something.

What else would you like to achieve in your life?

I'd like to still enjoy it. I wouldn't want to burn out. I wouldn't want to

do my job as a duty. I would want to quit without being told: “Oh my God, you should quit already, it's terrible what you're filming, it's not watchable anymore. ‘That's not what I want to come to, and I hope I'm self-critical enough to recognize that.

led by Hana Hančinová

Marko Škop

June 25, 1974, Prešov

Slovak director, screenwriter, and teacher. He graduated in journalism from the Faculty of Arts of Comenius University in Bratislava. In 2001 he graduated from the Department of Documentary Film at the Film and Television Faculty at the Academy of Performing Arts with the film *Roma House*.

Initially, he was mainly engaged in non-fiction work. The film *The Feast of the Lonely Palm* (2005), which he made with Juraj Johanides, is a tribute to director Elo Havetta, an original representative of the Czechoslovak New Wave. In the documentary *Other Worlds* (2006), he returned to his native Šariš to record the impact of globalization processes on the lives of people from different social classes. The following film, *Osadné* (2009), depicts the inhabitants of a small village as they try to revitalize a forgotten region in the east of Slovakia.

In 2013, Marko Škop entered the field of feature film and directed the TV series *Therapy in Croatia*. His feature debut *Eva Nová* (2015) is a psychological study of an alcoholic trying to reconnect with her son. His film *Let There Be Light* (2019), an analysis on the causes of right-wing radicalization of society, resonated with audiences at home and abroad.

Marko Škop produced and co-produced on films of his colleagues' *Blind Love* (2008), *New Life* (2012), *Miracle* (2013), *Bába z ledu* (2017) and *The Crusader* (2017).

He worked as a teacher at Comenius University. He is a member of the Slovak Film and Television Academy.

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What is film directing in your opinion?

Film directing is the idea of a cinematic representation and then the management of what happens in front of the camera, behind the camera and in post-production, how to try to capture the idea in the best possible way. When I started studying, I got to Krzysztof Kieślowski's autobiographical book *Kieslowski on Kieslowski*. He said there that a director is a person who helps everybody. That's such a pleasant aphorism. On the other hand, you could say that a director is a person who is helped by everybody else. Directing is creating with co-writers. The director is at the top of the hierarchy of the crew, everything is based on his idea, and everything comes back to him in creative teamwork with other people.

Can a director's work be separated from his private life or is it intrinsically linked to it?

I can separate it, or at least I think so. I'm not a director in my private personal life. It's true that if I experience an interesting situation or hear an interesting sentence, I'll start thinking about it, maybe even write it down. But I don't approach life a priori as a director. I think that each of us has several “selves” and it's good if they fit together. The profession of film director is just one part of me, which I came to more or less by accident. Of course, whatever one does, it gets under one's skin. What he does professionally also influences his other selves. But I don't think that a director is also just a director in his essence.

The question was directed to the very close intertwining of film and reality. For a director, life is the starting material for his work.

I agree with that, of course. But probably not every situation you experience or see resonates within you. You don't "film with your eyes" from morning till night. When you really see something, you know exactly that it is important to you because it is related to your inner vibration. You say to yourself: "This interests me. This shows me some reflection... Oh, this is another insight into what I'm thinking about." And of course, that's what's happening to me.

Don't you feel that the situation of the film director is summed up by the story of the French actor Talma, who suddenly realized at his father's funeral, "Oh, this is what a man who loses a parent looks like." Even in a moment of the most personal loss, he looked at the world through the prism of his profession.

I see in this a very important human quality, the ability to look at oneself from a distance. But this example already seems to me a bit like a professional distortion. Maybe some people have that, maybe you have that and it helps you to work, but I would probably be afraid if I got into such a state. I think too much professionalization can flatten a person.

I see it as an increased sensitivity to reality.

Any kind of artistic work that aims at interpreting the world requires an increased sensibility. It is one part of the talent. But when I was young, I had no distance at all from myself and the world, and perhaps that was when I was most intuitively perceptive. We're doing this interview for students of directing, and I don't think it's a good idea to suggest that they should experience themselves and life only as a point of view on film.

When I was eighteen years old, I never dreamed that one day I would have the chance to make films. For me, it came gradually. I studied journalism, I went to the cinema, I went to festivals, I liked contemporary films, and in film clubs I began to discover what is now called the golden fund of world cinema. And because as a journalist I was working with reality, I said to myself: "Why didn't I apply for a documentary?" I was just curious. Otherwise, curiosity is also a good quality for a filmmaker.

What qualities do you think a director should have?

He should be attentive to the world around him, but also to his co-workers. He should probably not be too submissive and, conversely, not extremely aggressive. Everything is a question of moderation. If a budding director is too soft, he may be overpowered by expressive collaborators. For example, a cameraman who starts pushing only his vision may become the director instead of you. Or sometimes a prominent actor takes the reins and suddenly it's something else, it's not your film anymore. And if the director doesn't have clarity, he may not even realize it. The director has to defend and implement his idea.

A broader view is not a bad thing when creating contexts and links. The more the director has gained – both by digging within himself through inner reflection and from what has already been created-, the more interesting material he can have. During the corona pandemic, I finally read Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. It is a masterpiece in every aspect. In my forty-seven years, I am constantly amazed at the unbelievable depths and breadths to which a brilliant creator can go in introspection. And at the same time, Proust's vast cultural insight and education is behind it. But if I had started reading it earlier, say when I was eighteen, I'm sure it would have resonated with different things than it does today. Maybe I would have had an even greater experience of it

and completely different impulses. Everything has its time and every action its moment. There's a huge amount around us already spoken, displayed, created, and it can all be inspiring.

Did you have role models? Were you influenced by any of our directors?

Probably the greatest influence at school was Dušan Hanák, although I was not in his class. He was significant not only for the authority of his work, but also for his views and attitudes. He only said a few sentences when evaluating films in the end-of-year exams, but I always had something to think about, and some of his ideas have stayed with me forever.

Martin Slivka taught us the basics of film language. Even the elementary things, and those are so important. The meanings of shot sizes and their connections, for example. It's a pity he didn't publish the scripts from his lectures. Perhaps he thought it too trite and silly to talk about seemingly obvious things, but those meetings with him gave me a lot.

The encounter with the films of Miloš Forman and also Juraj Jakubisko were interesting. The first film I saw from him when I was still a high school student in Prešov was *I'm Sitting on a Branch and I Feel Fine*. That was an experience that stayed with me for a long time. I was very disturbed by Elo Havetta's film *Celebration in the Botanical Garden*. There were scenes in it that I later dreamt about. It's actually like ten films in one. We watch something that is a film within a film, then something else consumes us for a moment with its authenticity, only to have Havetta shoot it off in a completely different direction a moment later. Paradoxically, it's that playfulness and fragmentation that creates wholeness here.

Tolstoy considered it a fallacy that a work of art forms a whole because it tells the story of one person or takes place in one setting. In his view, what makes a work whole is the personality of the author, his attitude to the subject matter. In our case, the director. How do you choose your themes?

Depending on what I'm interested in right now. And that changes, evolves over time. Of course, I've also made films that weren't original: for example, charity spots, I made a TV series in Croatia about the work of a psychotherapist called *Therapy*. These are things that come from the outside. But the original films were always related to what I was interested in at the time. I can't work like other directors on several of their own projects at the same time. I always work on just one, often for many years. I drill down into it and look for the best way to portray what I want to tell.

Are you keeping an author diary?

No. But I have a plethora of various papers and notebooks with notes. You know what's interesting? When something really remarkable happens, I remember it. But I definitely write down a dialogue, a sentence, a precisely worded line, whatever I like. That's where the exact word order is important.

Your first films were documentaries. What does a documentary mean to you?

The most common question I get from journalists is: “What's the difference between a documentary and a feature film?” I realized that the key word for explanation is “mostly.” So: a documentary depicts

Shooting the film *Osadné* – Peter Soroka, Ladislav Mikuláško, Marko Škop and Fedor Vico

mostly real people who are mostly presenting their own views of the world in front of the camera, doing mostly the activities they do in real everyday life, and is filmed mostly in the environments in which they actually live.

The feature film works mostly with fictional characters, mostly portrayed by actors, the situations we observe are mostly modelled and take place in settings mostly adapted for the needs of the film. But in practice, the two approaches overlap and mutually enrich each other. The biggest difference I see between them is in the method of reportage. Documentary reportage captures something in the here and now, an uncontrolled event that will never happen again. A similar event can be reconstructed in a fiction film, but the spark of the real and the surprising cannot be so convincingly replicated.

And to your question. Thanks to documentary, I learned what film is – from the creative and practical implementation side. In all possible

aspects. How to approach a subject, how to formulate it to bring something to the viewer. Through what and how to tell the story. How to work with image and sound. I understood that the collection of material is very important for a documentary. Often the main protagonist or protagonists of the film are the biggest focus of that material. Even before filming, you're meeting them, getting to know them, gaining their trust, but at the same time fine-tuning your idea of the subject and how you're going to portray it. That's what documentary film taught me.

But your documentaries are not of a reportorial nature. They have a carefully worked out structure, and you have often worked in them using the method of reconstruction.

I think it was a gradual discovery. My first feature documentary, *Other Worlds,* had a lot of reportage moments in it. I learned a lot from it and gained valuable experience on how to capture a situation or change the action in front of the camera. With the second film, *Osadné,* I modelled it more on my own idea. This was also reflected in the amount of material used – with *Other Worlds*, more material was shot than with the more composed *Osadné*. It had to do with the subject matter and also with the fact that with *Osadné* I had a more precise concept of what and how I wanted to say about a small person in a big world.

I find it interesting that both films started from a small regional setting and yet they are indicative of a broader movement across society and perhaps Europe as a whole.

For me, *Other worlds* were also a question of my own identity. Who am I? What am I? Where do I come from? These are the most basic

questions one has, and I wanted to answer them in the film. Šariš, but also the whole of Eastern Slovakia, is a little Babylon. I am a Šarišan, I grew up among the Ruthenians, there were many Roma living around, and in the past there was a large Jewish community with a strong culture in Prešov. In the past, every fifth citizen of the city was Jewish. And I was curious what was happening to this diverse community, to this Babylon, under the pressure of globalization.

The first task was to find representatives from each community. For example, I knew Mr Lazorik from Krivjan, where my parents came from. He used to go to my grandmother's house for ethnographic research and I was a bit afraid of him as a child. He emanated an incredibly strong energy. I knew he should be in the film. And I was looking for others; I wanted the chosen people to represent ethnic, religious and generational diversity. In each story, I was looking at what had faded, what had changed from the past, what was happening today. With the young people, I was curious to see how they perceived their existence in the local and also large global area, in the world of the television screen. Of course, I knew I had to find a way to frame the material. Where should these people meet? The decision was made/the choice fell on Šariš Castle, from there they looked down on their country. They had it in the palm of their hand.

Are you just an observer or do you also provoke situations in front of the camera?

Sometimes yes. For example, the situation when Mr. Lazorík goes to look for those barns, of course, happened at my instigation. He kept showing me precious photographs of places that no longer exist, that have disappeared or been destroyed. So I told him: “Let's go with those pictures and see what's there now.”

In my opinion, the basic situation of the film Osadné *is also based on the author's provocation.*

I was watching the evening news on television one day, and suddenly there was a mayor from a small municipality in that huge European Parliament building, telling us how he felt there. It was a report about the fact that whole groups of tourists were visiting the institutions in Brussels. I started to look into it and found that it was a mass affair. Each member of EP can call about a hundred people a year for a tour.

I decided to find a small village in Slovakia with an interesting mayor who would travel to the European Parliament. I was looking for a protagonist for the clash of local and big politics. Through Jarka Sisákovová, an actress from the Alexander Duchnovič Theatre in Prešov, I found out about Osadné. She told me that they have a mayor who has been in office indefinitely, and that there is a very active, young Orthodox priest there. I went to Osadné and, while collecting material, discovered that they had a hiking trail there, supported by European funds. It occurred to me that an MEP was coming to visit the village to inaugurate the trail – and that was the starting point. A modelled situation, to which the protagonists then authentically reacted.

And how did Fedor Vico, the witty commentator and glossator of the story, get there?

I brought him there. I wanted to give the film an extra polish. In addition to illustrating the theme of the assimilation of Rusyns and Ruthenianism, its specific humour was also important to me. I guess it worked.

Why did you start making feature films?

I've hit what I would call an ethical boundary. To put it simply, in a documentary, the director may inadvertently hurt people in front of camera. Enter their lives. In a feature film, the filmmaker is working with fictional characters and is free to manipulate them without hurting anyone.

You are not only a director, but also a screenwriter and producer. Basically a lone runner. How do you check the correctness of your decisions when choosing a topic?

I haven't made a lot of films and I probably won't make a lot of them. I've made each of them for different reasons. For example, with *Eva Nova*, my daughter was born, a period of my life ended, and I was under the pressure of responsibility for a new person and I started thinking about work versus family conflict. And about the consequences of life choices for our close circle. Actually, with this film, I created such a memento for myself, so that I would never betray that child and hurt him.

For the second feature film *Let There Be Light*, for example, I also wondered whether we had not, under the pressure of our own visions, missed something, whether we were missing something; I was interested in the blind spots in our lives. And I also wanted to comment on the rise of right-wing extremism, which I personally have great reservations about.

For both fiction and documentary films, I always try to do an honest job of collecting material, studying the literature and consulting with expert collaborators who can go into a lot of detail or come up with something new that you didn't know or hadn't seen before. When I was preparing *Eva Nova*, I would go to an alcohol rehab facility, meet with older women who would tell me their stories, and then I would translate a lot of the details of their lives into the script.

Shooting the film *Eva Nová* – Emília Vášáryová, Ján Meliš and Marko Škop

Or with *Let There Be Light,* I visited the "Gastarbeiter" and was inspired by their family constellations. We also filmed in the house of an Orava family. That closet with those military things, those weapons, that was really in their bedroom. I didn't make that up, that's how they had it. Basically, I try to verify the truth of the statement by confronting it with reality.

Do you take your texts to screenwriting workshops or consultations?

I think that's a good thing. I would recommend it especially to young aspiring filmmakers. They can get a lot of interesting insights, new impulses, other perspectives at these meetings. Those consultants are mostly professionals for whom this is also a creative work. Of course, one must not succumb to everything, one must be able to choose from

the solutions offered what moves one and discard what goes against one's intention. By the way, I do such consultations myself from time to time.

Do you collaborate with a dramaturg when writing the script?

For me, all the collaborators who help in the script writing process are very important. And the dramaturg is definitely the closest. I've worked with two of them on feature films so far, Zuzana Liová and František Krähenbiel. Zuzka is exceptional in the way she can name what can be deepened and internalized in a story. She imagines situations and often suggests an excellent dialogue. Fero has a tremendous sense of sujet, of the movement of energies. He knows what to emphasize and what to suppress. How can it all be combined. With both, it's a very empathetic, subtle, ant-like, yet hugely beneficial mirroring of the script.

In your opinion, is there a difference when working on your own and someone else's script?

You have to break into someone else's script. You have to find a relationship with it. You can express your vision more strongly through casting, for example. When I started filming the series *Therapy* for Croatian television, there were already several versions around the world. The key here was the casting of the main character. In the Israeli original it was a fat older gentleman, which I personally found very appealing. Elsewhere, they opted for more familiar sex symbols. In Croatia, we went down the road of an ordinary man with thinning hair, the guy-next-door type, and we cast a good theatre actor.

How do you choose actors?

For the main characters, it is essential for me that the person has the appropriate nature, inner radiance and the ability to portray the character. And then, he is also important to me as a visual type. Types are, of course, important for me in minor characters, where I also cast non-actors. Anyway, it's quite an interesting subject these day players. Poor guys, suddenly they're walking into a film production in progress, among people who already know each other professionally and are matched up. They find themselves in a new environment and you want them to play something exactly right. Sometimes it's just one line, but for a director, working with them is harder than maybe working with the leads. They don't have it easy.

The director Martin Hollý liked to cast well-known and good actors in small roles. He argued that they could create a distinctive character even in the supporting role and bring their entire acting past into the film – the viewer would more quickly place them somewhere.

I can't quite imagine a young debutant persuading a well-known actor to go to the other side of the country to play the small role of a receptionist for him. It seems both unnecessary and expensive. But I understand what Martin Hollý was trying to achieve. It has its own rationale.

It is a method from another time and space. How did you come to cast Emilia Vášáryová as Eva Nová?

I got to know Ms. Emilia during the production of the DVD documentary *Blind Loves* of Juraj Lehotský, where she read the audio commentary

for the blind. We had the right chemistry. Sometimes that happens – you meet a person and you find out that it's a match, that you understand each other. I told her about Eva Nová's story while I was still writing the script. She was my favourite.

I've done casting or acting rehearsals with many actresses. I said to myself: "It's your first feature film and you're not going to get anything for it by approaching all the actresses of that age. All of them that come to mind." As a documentary filmmaker, I didn't know many of them personally, I had no personal experience with them. I sent them the script and kindly asked them that if they were interested, we could meet for an acting rehearsal. And Ms. Emilia came out as the best fit for me.

She accepted the role at a difficult time in her life, after the death of her husband, costume designer Milan Čorba. I think filming helped her a little bit to cope with the loss, she had to concentrate from morning to night on hard, concrete work. Ms. Emilia is an actress with tremendous charm and experience... She accepted that she would have to show that devastating destruction of her personality both inside and out. She knew it would be very difficult. I asked her to trust me. She was a great support to me throughout the filming.

When you were writing Let There Be Light*, were you thinking of Milan Ondrík? Did you know you were going to cast him in the lead role?*

Yeah. After the great experience at *Eva Nová* – he was a great partner of Ms. Emilia – I knew I wanted to work with him. I was convinced that he would carry the story on his broad shoulders, that he had a great variety of different acting positions in him. I even named that character Milan in the script already.

Did the fact that Milan is from Orava play a role?

No. That was just a coincidence. Sometimes in life such synchronicities happen. For example, in the script, the main character's wife is called Zuzka, and by coincidence I later cast Zuzka Konečná in this role.

What is important to you in preparation for filming?

For me, preparation is key. I studied documentary, and there you work differently – with a smaller crew, you improvise more, it's easier to find solutions during filming. A feature film is a team production with a lot of co-writers and I try to discuss all the details of the implementation with them beforehand. I try to be receptive to what they offer, I listen to their ideas and we find our way together in unison. For example, with costume designer Erika Gadus, we name and precisely select the costume for every scene, trying to figure out all the details. And if something doesn't fit during the filming, we can come to the costume room and improvise, improve little things. But then it's a nice stress-free job, there are no more cardinal things to deal with.

Acting rehearsals are important to me. I rehearse with the leads till it makes sense and we have somewhere to push it.

Do you just read the text, talk about it, or rehearse individual scenes?

We are also rehearsing. I have a small apartment, but quite a spacious living room, and that's where we rehearse the more substantial, challenging scenes. I need to see the actors in the situation, I'm curious about their movement, their gestures. Between rehearsals, they have time at home to think it over, to process it more, and then at the next

meeting, they offer something more or different. It helps them and me. During rehearsals, I check that the dialogue sounds natural. If I hear something that doesn't work, I suggest they change it a bit, or I give them a straight rewording, or they suggest something new themselves. So we build a basic floor plan during rehearsals and then we just adapt it to the real space as we shoot.

The most important thing is that during this process the actors understand who they are playing in the film and how their character will manifest itself in the whole and then in the individual scenes. Rehearsals are also beneficial as discussions to see if we really understand each other, because you are never completely sure if the other person understands you. Similar to the protagonists in a documentary – you need to open up, give them as much trust as possible and earn their trust back.

When the basic starting points are clear, then we look for the "scene temperature". I don't know what others call it or how it is taught in schools, I use that term. In the beginning, the actors say their lines, but they don't perceive each other yet. It's a natural process of searching how to go from each other. Gradually we come to see where and how a look, for example, can be important, what the point of a pause is. How long it should be. Where the emphasis is in the line, where the emphasis is in the response to the partner. The actors are storing it all up. Then sometimes a month goes by, a long period of time, but by the time they come to shoot, we're already further along. They've got it worked out, I've got it worked out, we're reminded of the basics and we keep fine-tuning the subtleties.

Do you prepare a precise visual concept beforehand or is it born gradually during the shooting?

I'm going to talk about feature films. With cameraman Ján Meliš, we

always set a basic key of how we will shoot the film, and we try to keep it within the stylistic unity. For example, with *Eva Nova,* there is not a single camera movement except for the ride in front of Ms. Emilia, in front of her face. We wanted to keep it clean and create a sense of stuffiness through the coolness that will emanate from the image.

With *Let There Be Light,* we tried a different approach. The protagonist gradually learns the truth about his family, things that have been kept hidden come out of the darkness into the light. So we said: "Let's play more with contrast. Light and shadow." And in building the mise-en-scene, we decided to follow the character who is dominant in the picture, and never to pan from one actor to another.

I never prepared the technical script in advance. For me, the storyboard is not important at all. I understand that it's necessary for an action film or for a stunt scene, that it's important for a commercial, that it's absolutely essential for an animated film, but I've never drawn a storyboard. Janko and I write the footage directly into the literary script. But we don't slavishly follow it when we're filming.

Janko has his own point of view, he often brings visual solutions, I enjoy that, but I keep my eye on the meanings. For example, I know that we have to start a scene with a detail. I want to see the hero's eyes, to be in his shoes, to feel what he's going through. Maybe sometimes we'll miss a nice shot that might be there, but for me the content, the meaning, is key.

Aren't you preparing multiple possible versions for the editing room? Don't you shoot some details in reserve?

I also shoot mastershots, but I don't cover the whole situation from all possible angles. I don't do "macarena" – from left, right, top, bottom.

Shooting the film *Other Worlds* – Ján Lazorík a Marko Škop

Do you use one or two cameras?

One. In TV production, two cameras can speed up the work, but I shoot films on one. We only used two in *Eva Nova* in the scene where the son drowns his mother in the garden pool. We were worried about the downtime, because before each retake Ms. Emilie's hair would have to be dried. We wanted to shoot the dive underwater in one take. We rehearsed the choreography of the whole situation, got ready and ran it on two cameras. One shot the detail, the other the whole situation.

Do you look for a place to shoot in the real world, in a place that has a past, or do you prefer to arrange the environment according to your own ideas?

It's probably a combination of the real and the imagined. I haven't worked in a studio before. With *Let There Be Light*, we rented and repainted the whole house from the inside. And they built scaffolding on the outside, which supports the importance of the makeshift nature of the main character and his family's existence. In *Eva Nova*, the connection to the garden was important to us. We wanted to see the pool through the window. We might have found a more interesting house with a better-designed interior space, but what good would it have been if it didn't contain important views of the garden, and conversely, views from the pool to the house in the background.

Do you like filming?

Yeah. Of all the phases of working on a film, I probably enjoy shooting the most. It's such a meticulous and at the same time very lively teamwork. As Marek Leščák says: "The devil is in the details. "And there is always something to improve. For example, in that final pool scene of *Eva Nova* – we've already talked about it – Milan Ondrík tells me: "Now I could dive under the water and keep my eyes open while I do it – look at that." And when he pointed it out, I got scared. It was terrifying. Milan was thus supporting the immense pain his character feels towards his mother. It seems like a small thing, a microcosm of some kind, but I think it helped the film's conclusion a lot.

Such things bring all the creative ingredients. For example, in one scene of *Let There Be Light*, Milan Ondrík goes to a couple who have lost their son. The scene was meant to take place in a cramped dining room to emphasize the tense atmosphere of their encounter. And the architect Palo Andraško suddenly says: "And wouldn't it be better to open up the space behind them, so that you can see that the house is empty? That the boy is missing? And don't we put lights on the window to reinforce the information that it's Christmas? An empty house at Christmas." That

kind of counterpoint made the scene more powerful. Little moments like that happen a lot during filming, and I'm grateful for them.

Are you in the editing room from start to finish or do you let the editor work independently?

Here it might be good to say that there is a big difference between editing a documentary and a feature film. František Krähenbiel's contribution to *Other Worlds* and *Osadné* is enormous. Increasingly, the name of the editor appears in the credits of documentaries alongside the name of the director – and deservedly so. A film is born anew for the third time in the editing room, especially for a documentary. No matter how meticulously you have prepared the concept, the film only gets its final form in post-production, with a significant authorial contribution from the editor. For feature films, I choose the best shots myself. Even the rough cut I do myself, I put the scenes together, I test how they work. If I have any doubts, I go to my wife Marina, who is a trained editor, and she gives me feedback. Fero gets his hands on the rough cut, which is of course longer, and he can look at it with a clean, fresh, objective eye. His great contribution as an author is how he can fine-tune the "movement of energies". If there's a problem with a scene, of course we go back to the footage and try other options. Fero is uncompromising. He patiently lengthens or shortens each shot, patiently adds and subtracts. We edit for quite a long time. I'm always surprised if someone goes to the cinema two months after the shoot with the film. That's an unimaginable thing for me.

When you're lining up a rough cut yourself, don't you miss the distance? Don't you feel like the editor will discover opportunities in the material that you might miss?

I lose perspective when I'm writing the script rather than in the editing room. That's when I'm so immersed in the story and the subject that I can block myself out. It helps if I start doing something else. What I can't proceed with, I let it be for a while and come back to it later. It's then a great joy when that block is overcome. Dramaturges help me a lot in the writing process, that's when the different perspective, the distance, is probably the most important thing for me. Even in the editing room blocks can come, we can have arguments, but Fero and I have known each other for so long and so well that today we can get over it quickly.

You use a minimum of music in your films. Why?

Music is perhaps the most beautiful art form. But I haven't used it in feature films. Because of the purity of the sound. Music always brings a new stylistic tone. I tried putting ambient music on some scenes and it didn't work. Or to emphasize the character's experience, I used something like Buddhist Oom, but very quickly I found that it was better without it. It unnecessarily detracted from the perception of reality.

With sound designer Jan Čeňek we try to create the sound atmosphere through real sounds. We work with such subliminal subtleties. When Eva Nová walks around the apartment, you can hear her slippers shuffling sometimes, and that sound emphasizes the feeling of loneliness. Or when we wanted to complete the feeling of tension during a conflict, a lawnmower sounds from outside the window in the distance. But gently. And sometimes coincidence helps. In *Let There Be Light*, there is an intimate confession of Milan in bed, and the micro-port, a sensitive microphone that Milan had on his chest, picked up the beating of his heart. We realized that it beautifully works, so we subliminally mixed it in. The viewer doesn't even realize it, but he feels the rhythm. We're very subtle with the sound.

It seems to me that your films are getting more and more serious. The humour that I liked in your documentaries has somehow disappeared from feature films. Have you thought about making a genre film?

It has to come by itself. I can't imagine that I would start to write a comedy on my own. But if someone offered me an interesting comedy that I could find myself in, maybe I would do it. And you?

I'm always trying to make a comedy, but it always ends up as a psychological drama. Do you have a relationship with genre film? There are directors who reject genre division, claiming that it results in the predictable convention.

I make auteur films, auteur statements, but in a discussion about *Let There Be Light,* someone called it an Eastern European western. I wouldn't have thought of it, but I like it! The naming of genres is for the sake of understanding. If a viewer goes to the cinema, they should know what they're going to see. I don't like it when distributors mislead in an advertising campaign for a film. They entice people to see one thing and then show them something else. It should be played fair, otherwise we lose trust with the audience.

You used the term auteur film, what do you mean by that?

I consider a film to be an auteur film if the author's vision of the world and his interpretation of it are strongly reflected in it. Proust has a beautiful passage in *In Search of Lost Time* in which the protagonist is asked about Dostoyevsky by his love Albertina. And Marcel, who doesn't prefer the Russian writer much, replies to her that the dark

side of the heroes appears so often in his novels that it has created a reality. If that world repeats itself, it becomes reality – says Proust. The room in which Raskolnikov killed the usurer and the room in which Myshkin found the murdered Nastassia Filippovna strike us as very similar, even though they are completely different rooms. Proust himself repeats variations on the same motifs throughout the novel through his vision – it is his reality. Haneke, for example, is a typical director-author from this perspective. When you watch his films – however different the stories are – in each of them you discover Haneke's reality. Or Almodóvar. He'll make a comedy, a melodrama, a drama, but it's always his "Almodóvar" reality.

We live in a fast-paced and dynamic era. In recent decades, the position of cinema has also changed significantly. What is the purpose of cinema today?

Reflection. Also having fun, of course. I think it's very important to have diversity in cinema. Let there be a variety of types of films – commercial blockbusters, historical blockbusters, comedies, horror films, but let there also be auteur statements. It's good when something disturbs us as well as entertains us. It makes us think.

I'm more attracted to films that reflect on life, not fables about life. In them I can confront or identify with something. I feel that they give me more impulses, that they push me. I don't read red library books – although some directors can make nice films based on them – I prefer to read literature of a different kind. I know I'm in the minority, but that's just the way it is. A certain type of literature, music, visual art interests a certain type of people.

And for you personally, what is the meaning of film?

When I was a kindergartener, my cousin took me to the Tokajík cinema to see the Russian fairy tale *Finist the Bright Falcon*, and to this day I still remember how the images shone on the screen, how fascinated I was. We used to go to the cinema with my friends from the block of flats, we went to see everything. It was probably no coincidence that in college I got into a group of people who went to a film club. I love film. It's always been that way, and it probably always will be that way.

led by Martin Šulík

Ivan Ostrochovský

November 12, 1972, Žilina

Slovak director, screenwriter, and teacher. He studied film and documentary production and theory at the Film and Television Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava, where he graduated in 2004 with a documentary about a natural disaster *The Wind* (2005).

In creative tandem with Pavol Pekarčík he made the films *Lesser Evil* (2004) and *Uli Biaho* (2006). *Ilja* (2009), a portrait of the composer Ilya Zeljenka, transcended the boundaries of the traditional documentary and became a reflection on the meaning of art in human life. In 2013, together with Pavol Pekarčík and Peter Kerekes, he directed the feature-length documentary *Velvet Terrorists* (2013), which captivated audiences at home and abroad with its unconventional form. Ostrochovský's interest in the taboo events of our history is apparent in the television documentary *Garda* (2015).

He made his debut in feature film with *Goat* (2015), in which he ingeniously combined the creative processes of documentary and feature cinema. In his following work, *The Servants* (2020), he depicted the struggle for religious freedom in a totalitarian regime.

In addition to his work, he has produced and co-produced his colleagues' films Nesvatbovo (2010) and *Až do mesta* Aš / *Made in Ash* (2012), *5. október / October 5th* (2016), *Hotel Dawn* (2016), *Nina* (2017), *Varga* (2017), *Punk is Now!* (2019), *Modelár* (2020) and the film *Censor* (2021), in which he also participated as a screenwriter. For television, he initiated the documentary series *Celluloid Country* (2011), *Photographers* (2015- 2016), *Musicians* (2015-2016), which he created as producer, dramaturg, and director.

Ivan Ostrochovský teaches documentary filmmaking at the Acade-

my of Arts in Banská Bystrica. He is a member of the Slovak Film and Television Academy.

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How did you get into film?

By chance. My father was a butcher, my mother was a haberdasher. According to my father, only my grandmother, who used to decorate the church during the holidays, had artistic sensitivity in our family. At the age of fourteen, I had all kinds of illusions about life, I longed for an adventure and I applied to a military high school. But my fantasies of an exciting life quickly dissipated. The army in socialist Czechoslovakia offered everything but adventure, so I quickly disappeared from there.

Studying film was actually a virtue out of necessity. The universities weren't very interested in military high school graduates. Someone tipped me off that art schools don't base their decisions on academic history, that talent is the deciding factor. For a while, I thought about going into scenography because I enjoyed drawing, but that didn't work out, so I decided to try film studies.

The film world was unknown to me. We had a film club in Žilina, and because I was inexperienced, my friends tricked me into thinking that if I wanted to go there, I had to take the entrance exams. Of course, it wasn't true, there were no entrance exams, but I didn't really know anything about it, so I believed them. They brought me books on the history of film and said that if I read them, they would take me into the club. When we walked into the cinema and they saw how nervous I was, how scared I was of these exams, they started to laugh and I realized I had fallen for it. It was a great prank that made me at least a little bit more aware of film history.

One other strange thing happened at that first show at the film club. They were showing Kieslowski's *The Double Life of Veronica* and

the main character looked exactly like my then girlfriend. That film is about twin sisters, one living in Poland, the other in France, and they live parallel lives, similar in some ways, different in others. When I was looking at the screen, I had the feeling that it was another joke and that my friends had made a film in which my girlfriend was playing. I understood that the film might be more related to reality than I thought. It was an experience that reshaped me and I became more interested in cinematography.

Where did you start, what have you managed to shoot and which are your favourite projects?

I started out in documentary and my first film that someone noticed, because we were at a festival with him, was *Ilya*. It was a simple portrait of the composer Ilya Zeljenko, but it worked quite well. I realized that in documentary, the emotional layer is important to me, not just the facts. That was different from filmmakers like Martin Slivka, who taught us. Because the world has changed. For them, the educational layer was still very important. Years ago it was difficult to get information, but today this layer is not important because everything is available on the internet. I no longer had to explain where Ilya Zeljenka was born and what his life was like, because you can find it in a second on your phone. So it was more important for me to convey an emotion to the viewer, so that he would want to find out more about the subject. That stayed with me, I think the emotional layer is very important in the film. And that's why my transition to feature film was actually easy.

After *Ilya,* we made the *Velvet Terrorists* with Pavol Pekarčík and Peter Kerekes, and with them we got to Berlin. And at the same time, I was shooting *The Goat*, which is my first feature film. Some people think it's on the border between documentary and fiction, but I don't

see it that way. I guess it's because Peter Baláž, who plays the main character, is a boxer, he has the nickname Goat, and some of the facts of his life overlap with the story of the film, so people tend to connect the dots. Then we made *The Servants* and I wrote the script for *The Censor*, where I'm also a producer.

So what is the difference between a feature film and a documentary in your opinion?

The basic difference between a documentary and a feature film is de facto formal. Something appears to the viewer as a documentary because it meets the conventions of a documentary – handheld footage, off-screen commentary. And there are also the conventions of fiction film; you look at the film and you don't think about whether this is a real, concrete person who has lived the film's story. You just accept the conventions and the formal play. You either choose to use the attributes of a documentary or a fiction film in your perception.

For example, the story-like narrative is also understood more as an attribute of a feature film. So, for example, Marienka Rumanová had a story with a strong dramatic plot in the documentary *Hotel* Úsvit, and some viewers had the feeling that they were watching a feature film. And because the story was a bit blunt in *Goat*, some people perceived it as a documentary. But for me, it's a feature film because the main character asks questions that her predecessor, Peter Baláž, would never have asked. The story and its moral dilemma were brought there by collaboration with screenwriter Marek Leščák. Peter's reality is much harsher and more banal. The problem he deals with in the film did not exist in his life at all. And besides, anyone who knows him knows that the character is not him at all. He's actually cheerful, funny, chatty, and not the brooding character who is solving a moral and existential problem. After screenings, we often get asked what's real and what's made

Official photo for the film distributional premiere *Velvet Terrorists* – Pavol Pekarčík, Ivan Ostrochovský and Peter Kerekes

up. It wasn't until we went to dinner with the curator at one festival and he saw how Peter was acting that he acknowledged that it was a fiction film and not a documentary.

Our intention was not to show what his life is really like. Against the background of the environment in which he lives, we brought about a theme that was distant to him. But because he knew the life of the written character well, I decided to use him as an actor even with his acting limitations. Because of what he's been through, the audience has a stronger empathy for him than they would have for a young Labuda tanned as a gypsy. They wouldn't have believed him.

And this is the Slovak reality, you choose the less bad of two bad decisions. You don't choose between the ideal and the bad. There is always a hidden problem somewhere, and the important thing is to realize it and work with it. For example, I didn't use music in *Goat* because I didn't find any that I liked. In *The Servants,* I spent a year looking

for it. It's just that our environment is poor. And that's the main thing one has to think about here.

Do you think the emotional layer of the film is the thing that makes people interested in it?

I don't know what people care about in movies. Since 3000 people go to my movies, I guess I don't know. I don't think about what people are interested in.

But, of course, you can't help but think of the viewer. The success of cinematography is based on the fact that it presents myths or a metaphor for reality. One type of film problematizes reality and the other type idealizes it. When you show how nice the world can be because people like each other, the audience likes to come to the cinema because their actual reality is more complicated. The second type of films problematizes relationships, shows the complexity of the real world, and logically there is less interest in that type of cinematography.

So could filmmakers be seen as modern-day mythmakers? Or what place do you think cinematography has in our society?

Everyone has to answer that for themselves. But I don't think anyone goes to school and starts making a film and asks themselves what cinematography means to society. At the end of the day, we make films because we enjoy it and we don't have to put some social mirror in front of ourselves. We are moving on very thin ice. Obviously cinematography cannot fundamentally heal society, it only raises some questions, some problems. But to pretend that cinema is a mirror of society is probably an exaggeration.

But you make films for some reason.

I'll go back to what I was saying about those two types of films. Either you make films to give people hope, to make them realize that even when life is complicated, it can be defied. Those are the films that people go to the cinema to see in masses. As naive as they are, I like to watch them too. But when I thought about whether I could make them, I had to answer the question of whether I was a good storyteller. And it looks like I am not. Even if I wanted to make a film like that, I don't have the skills.

My strength is more in visuals, in creating images, and so I have to use the tools that I know. My films are also based on the social situation and the cultural tradition of the area, but I don't think it's good to make films for a social order. For example, because the audience is asking for comedy. Miloš Forman made comedies and he didn't make them because he was told to: "This would be good for the film market." He just had an idea, so he did it. Our producers lament that we don't have good comedies, but you can't solve that artificially, on demand. Films spring from how people perceive the reality around them, what books they have read and so on.

Maybe because I come from a documentary background, my films have a kind of appeal. It's a residue of the fact that I also see film as a documentary about the era. And it's hard to volunteer for this minority part of cinema because not many people go to see this type of films.

And do you go to this type of films?

Yes, but there are far fewer of these films in cinemas than commercial comedies, so proportionally I see fewer of them. And I honestly can't imagine anyone going to movies that only problematize reality every

Shooting the film *Servants*

day. That would probably make him snap. We need diverse cinema. I think the kind of films that I make will always have a place because there's always some part of the population that wants to think about what's going on with society or what should be going on with society. I don't know now whether it's five percent or ten percent, and it doesn't even matter. What is important is to keep this part of the population fit. Because whenever times have been bad, during the Second World War or during communism, there have been only few people willing to stand up against injustice. It wasn't the masses who go to that reality-idealizing movie. But it was those people who can problematize reality.

So you think that's the kind of people who watch your films?

I can't imagine who else it could be.

The term "director" means different things to different people. Historically, it has also been viewed differently. What does the term mean to you personally?

I don't know what the historical interpretation of that word is. I guess it means something different in every cinema. In the American production system, the producers are more involved in the director's responsibilities than we are. I don't see my position in a world or historical context because I don't know much about it. I know, give or take, how films are made in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. But I don't think of it that way. I've always understood directing as solving specific problems that arise. Since my profession as a director is almost always combined with my profession as a producer, the two professions are a little bit merged for me.

Are you always also a producer on projects you work on as a director?

Always. Maybe only with small documentaries for television I wasn't a producer. I never thought I would direct feature films, so for me the content of a director's work is this: You have a subject matter and you have to figure out the best way to translate it to the screen.

Two things in particular helped me. The first is that I made a documentary with Vladimír Strnisko about how to prepare a theatre play. And there I saw how a director can think. He simply follows common sense – the actor does something and he corrects it if he felt that a person would never do it in that situation. That's probably the most basic feeling I have in my head. I'm dealing with what the character would or wouldn't do at any given moment in the film. That doesn't mean the characters have to behave logically, but you always have to be aware that if you choose something illogical, there's going to be a conflict in the viewer's head.

Because I started out in documentary and I was never trained to make fiction, I always worked within the logic of documentary. I did everything myself. Because most of the time I didn't have the money to pay people for all kinds of positions. Even now that I have a little bit more money to make films, it's stuck in my head that I have to do it myself. For example, I'm making myself an architect. Because I enjoy it, but mostly because I think it's very important considering the final form of the film. Of course, I'm also talking into the camera work. I have a very specific visual idea of what I want the film to look like. I don't think the cameraman is going to figure it out for me – that he's going to read the script and tell me the best way how to shoot it. How it's shot, I think, is the director's job. To be honest, I'd prefer to shoot my own films. But it would just be too much trouble.

Are there any components of film work where you don't have it like that? Any professions that you gladly leave to others on the crew?

It's not about whether I like or dislike something. I need to be in control of the important components of the film, like the camera and architecture, but I also enjoy it. Sure there are a lot of better architects and cameramen, but I love doing it and I don't know why I would deprive myself of it.

Maybe it comes from our Slovak reality. Because there is no choice of twenty brilliant cameramen or architects. I don't feel that our filmmaking industry offers so many possibilities. But mostly, I'm used to working like this. I don't even think of looking for someone. It's only when I realize I can't do something that I start looking for a person to do it for me. But as long as I'm able to do it myself, I don't see why I should call someone.

And concerning scriptwriting, do you see it the same way?

Hard to say. I've been working with Marek Leščák since my first feature film and I can't even imagine doing it without him. Writing a script is a different type of work. Intuition plays a big role in camera work, costumes and architecture. But working on a script is very much a construction-pragmatic work. And that's where a partner is a good fit for me. And maybe it's also about habit. I'm used to working with Marek, and the idea of doing it differently makes me wonder why.

And could you imagine not interfering with Marek's work at all?

I can imagine it, but it probably won't happen. Marek also doesn't write scripts alone, he always collaborates with the director. He probably needs that too.

So do you always work this way, with the same people all the time?

I don't think of it that way. I work with the same people because they're good. Working with them is important to me. But, for example, on *Servants* we called Rebecca Lenkiewicz, an English scriptwriter, because we believed she would bring something new to our work. The film world is less distant now than it was when we started. Nowadays it's no problem to call in a French cameraman or a Hungarian editor. But that doesn't mean that working with our filmmakers is a mistake. I think it's interesting because it differentiates our work from what's being produced elsewhere in the world.

So you don't change the crew according to the type of project. That this

team is good for this genre, another for a slow visual film...

There are no geniuses in Slovakia for horror films or for this or that genre. I understand your question, and maybe I would if we had a lot of genius people here who know how to do different genres well. For example, nobody in Slovakia has made a good comedy. So if I decide to do it, for example, I'll end up calling Leščák and those people I always work with.

But everything I'm saying here is not a guide on how to make a good movie. This type of talk must not be seen as a recipe. By coming out of documentary, I have invented my own way of directing films. And it is not good or bad. It's just most suited to what I want to do within my capabilities.

I think it's interesting to learn about different ways of directing.

But it's naive to think that you're going to look at six profile interviews, pick one of them, and do that. From film to film you're solving a different type of problem. The only thing that helps you is knowing that you've solved the previous problems somehow, so hopefully, you'll solve this one. It's more about self-perception. And it may be that you don't solve it. The feeling of a first-time director, that you're insecure and you're worried if you're going to mess it up, can also be experienced by someone who's on their fourth film.

So you don't think any aspect of directing can be taught?

It can be taught. By making your own film. You fail. The world doesn't come crashing down. And you'll make fewer mistakes on the next one.

Shooting the film *Censor* – Ivan Ostrochovský and Peter Kerekes

In your opinion, the theoretical part of education doesn't make much sense?

It makes sense to make films at school. That's where you understand what you're good at and what you're not. When you get hysterical and when you run out of energy. I feel like there's not enough discussion in teaching about what one experiences while making a film.

Eighty percent of school films would turn out better if students were taught that the biggest problems often appear near the end of the work. When you don't have the energy or the money, and you find that a third of that film should be redone. And nobody's going to do it. Everybody just gives up on it because nobody's guiding those students to do it. It's easy to be a director when you've got money, you're relaxed, and you've got a hundred people running around. But when it's

getting close to the end and everybody's had enough, that's when you have to make the right decisions. That's art.

So some advice might be that you don't need to be afraid of redoing?

I've seen a lot of movies where it's been redone, and it didn't help anything. It's not in the fact that if we start redoing, we'll all have cool movies.

You've always redone your films?

Yeah. I have this method that when I'm filming, I always tell myself that it's no big deal because I'm going to redo it anyway. It's just a rehearsal. The stress factor goes away and then I'm willing to change the scene because I feel like we're just playing. Maybe it's just an anti-stress tool in my head. I guess you can't do it on purpose, because even a placebo only works until you don't know about it. In college, finding out what your head is lying to you about is absolutely the most important thing. We all want to make it more comfortable and faster, and one has to learn to resist that.

In your opinion, are there any personality prerequisites for making a good film?

This is the kind of question that doesn't actually bring anything. Imagine if we had a concrete answer to that. So only two-meters tall who had a difficult childhood will be accepted into film school because they're supposed to be good directors. Anyone can be a good director under some circumstances. Maybe the only exception I would say is

that someone who has a schematic view of the world cannot be a good director.

Maybe schools should pay more attention to what kind of person the student is, rather than what kind of director they are. Any interesting person can make a good director. We think that if students watch films and think about the shots, that will make them a director. What's important is that that a student gets a view of the world while they're studying that's new, inspiring, or brave in some way. What you choose to shoot is the least important. It is much more important to find an interesting approach to reality than to find a good costume designer. It's useless to learn how to use a ride if you don't know what you'd use it for.

How you approach actors. You often work with non-actors. Is it a philosophical or practical decision?

Both. It depends on the circumstances. With *Koza (Goat),* I couldn't imagine who could play a forty-year-old gypsy boxer in our environment. And the question was whether his trainer should be an actor. We tried about three, and it looked terribly artificial.

The second thing is that I want to play with it, and it's hard to do that with those professional actors because they don't have the time or the desire or they don't understand it. Now we're going to do a film with Aňa Geislerová, so I sat down with her and explained to her thoroughly how it was going to work and if she was willing to go through with it. Because when you don't have a partner in an actor, you can't work. And then, I don't know how to do much with those actors because there is no way how to find this out, so I cast more typologically.

Where can one learn to lead an actor?

You probably have some actor's direction classes on feature directing. But I've never thought about how to lead an actor. So I naturally cast my characters typologically to guarantee at least some level of clarity in the film. We used to joke at school that Slovak films always have the second and the third layer, but they don't have the first. We didn't fully understand the basic motivations of the characters, why they do what they do.

I've always been bothered by the over-emotionality of our actors. I originally thought it was the fault of the actor or the director. But it's often a script problem. We can't write scripts in such a way that you can understand a character's emotion without the actor having to show it explicitly. When you watch a movie with Robert De Niro, he's not even crying or throwing a fit, but it's evident from the story whether he's happy or sad because his dog died. Whereas in a Slovak film, the death of a dog is automatically followed by crying.

I will now go back to what we said at the beginning. If I wanted to describe my directing method, it's important for me to establish the theme and the emotion of the film at the beginning of the work. In my case, the important question is whether what the film is about is good or bad. And that question has a hidden emotion in it. I only start making a film when I have resolved that emotion. And it takes me an awfully long time to find it.

Now, when we were shooting the camera rehearsals with Aňa Geislerová, I wasn't just looking to try out the camera, but I was hoping to discover the emotion that would be the key to what was going to be done. With *The Servants,* we'd been searching for that for maybe three-quarters of a year. And suddenly you know you want to put a shot in there of still trees at night. It comes to you as an emotional rather than a rational solution. For me, that's the most important thing. Because the story can change a hundred times, but just to better convey that particular emotion. That is superior to everything.

And do you have a recurring emotion in your work? If so, what would you call it?

I don't know if I have, and I don't even ask that question. You want to rationalize the feeling, and you can't. Maybe it's even harmful.

A certain irrationality is vitally important in creation. And that's the problem that when we talk about film education, few people want to admit that irrationality is a big variable in the process of work. Because it would make that school meaningless. I tell students not to copy good films because there are so many irrational moments in them that they can't replicate. At one point the actor had to act well, the light had to shine well – there are about two hundred such elements, and they all had to come out right. It's just that the actor raised his hand at some point, and if he'd raised it a little differently, it wouldn't have worked the way it's supposed to. How does one learn to do that? Obviously, you've got to have a well-constructed story and all that. But still, something has to happen that you can't control. And you can't mechanically repeat after someone.

But the positive thing is that when the right answers don't exist, it's relaxing. You don't have to speculate and you just do as you feel. Unexpected circumstances sometimes go against you and you have to learn how to deal with them. Scarcity is sometimes a good helper because you have to come up with unconventional solutions. I like to compare it to military theory because even there you have given things – number of soldiers, type of equipment, terrain. You know what your opponent is likely to do, and those are the conventions. If you can't counter that, then you have to come up with something the other guy wouldn't even think of. And even in the film, you're trying to turn the constraints to your advantage.

Whether you're a general at war or a director on a film, you try to minimize the space of irrationality and try to keep things under con-

trol. You want to have as much information as possible, you want to be as prepared as possible. You can let go of the reins a little bit and it might get you something. Or you're going to drag them down as much as you can. Both options can be right. Personally, I think you have to combine them – you have to be in control and at some point, when you understand that it's taking on a life of its own, you have to let it go. For example, with an actor – you need to explain well what to play and how to play it, but when you see that he's doing it a bit differently than you wanted, then you have to let it have its own life.

I have always made all decisions intuitively. And I think that's what happens in science, too. Somebody intuitively felt that something was going on, so they wrote a theory, but it took five hundred years to prove it.

Intuition is when the brain does something that doesn't translate into language, but into our actions. It's done on the basis of acquired experience. It does a billion operations, it can't break it down into sequential steps because you'd spend two weeks on one decision. It gives you completely rational information in emotional form.

And do you have any advice for young filmmakers, maybe from a producer's perspective?

You have to keep track of what's going on in the film environment. If they want to get financial support, they need to know what has been filmed here, what themes have been opened up, how they have been handled, then maybe they will bring something new to cinematography. But that's just the first step. That will bring them somebody who will talk to them. But it doesn't mean that they're going to give them money to make a film.

As a creator, are you supposed to force yourself to do a theme just because it's new?

That's not what I'm saying. But you have to have an overview of what's on the market. To be able to say what your idea can contribute to cinematography. You should know what makes your idea specific. And specific doesn't necessarily mean exceptional or successful. But producers and grant committees shouldn't feel that you're going to do something that's already there. There are different people on the committees, and you're not supposed to accommodate them, but you have to be able to explain to them why the film is important or interesting.

There are no clear answers. And that makes it scary, but also liberating, because we are all on the same starting line.

led by Hana Hančinová

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