

**ely  
film  
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**latest news**

Tickets for the silent show **THE KID BROTHER** in the Cathedral can be claimed from the Cathedral BoxOffice ONLY (NOT Burrows Bookshop as has been thought) on production of your EFS membership card. Non-members pay £10. It starts at 7.30pm.

We have four new members! Great news, but we want and need more. Get your friends to come along, and spread the word.

# Closely Observed Trains



## Jiří Menzel, Czechoslovakia 1966

**Bohumil Hrabal** ..... novella (1965)  
**Bohumil Hrabal and Jiří Menzel**  
 ..... screenplay

**Václav Neckár** ..... Miloš Hрма  
**Josef Somr** ..... Hubicka  
**Vlastimil Brodský** ..... Zedniček  
**Vladimír Valenta** ..... Max  
**Alois Vachek** ..... Novak  
**Ferdinand Kruta** ..... Uncle Noneman  
**Jitka Bendová** ..... Maša  
**Jitka Zelenohorská** ..... Zdenka  
**Nada Urbánková** ..... Victoria Freie  
**Libuse Havelková** ..... Max's wife  
**Kveta Fialová** ..... The countess

Too much history can get in the way of assessing Czech cinema. At the time *Closely Observed Trains* was made, the arts in Czechoslovakia were undergoing a period of optimism as the Communist regime relaxed its 15-year grip on cultural and social matters in a bid to revive a struggling economy

and put the worst of Stalinism behind it (the 1965 New Economic Model). Film, always approved of by Lenin for its brisk modernity and propaganda power (not least abroad) became fashionable again and a generation of young film makers made their way through the state film schools and into the relative stability of state-underwritten film production: Miloš Forman, Jiří Menzel and Věra Chytilová are the best known outside the country, but a slew of other names (such as Juraj Herz, Jindřich Polák) are now reappearing through the archive reissue programme of Second Run DVD.

There were still limits to what films the Party found acceptable. Domestic comedies were fine, war films that vilified the Nazis could never go wrong, adaptations of classic novels did well. The challenge was often to

sneak in challenging material under the radar, something the directors of all the Communist countries became very adept at, right up to the great implosion of 1989.

Bohumil Hrabal (1915-97), who made his international reputation as a writer on this film's success (it won the Best Foreign Language Film Oscar in 1968 among other awards) was not much liked by the authorities. He worked as a railway labourer during WW2, while Czechoslovakia was occupied, and his experiences of seeing German freight trains plodding through Nymburk to and from the Eastern Front led to the writing of *Closely Observed Trains*, which ticked sufficient patriotic/comic boxes to be taken up by Barrandov Studios. Originally Věra Chytilová asked to direct it but later gave up: given that she promptly made the exotically colourful and provocative

*Daisies* (also 1966 and an equal classic), and her briskly feminist stance, one wonders what her version might have looked like.

The film works largely by trading on a Czech talent for insouciance and keeping out of the way of trouble, most familiar from the novels of Jaroslav Hašek (*The Good Soldier Švejk*). In a wayside station - the actual location is Loděnice, a sleepy town not unlike Soham, halfway between Prague and Plzen - the staff include a lecherous and lazy guard/porter (Hubicka) and a station master obsessed with getting a tailored uniform to match his doomed hopes of promotion. Hubicka chases the flirty telegraph clerk, pigeons crap everywhere, levers are occasionally pulled, and the local countess loftily parades round the station yard on her horse as though the Habsburgs had never gone away.

Into this cheerful indolence arrives Miloš Hrma, a gentle moon-faced youth wishing both to make a career in railway operation and to lose his virginity. Part of the railway's appeal lies in fellow traffic apprentice Maša - except that he stands on the platform watching helplessly as she trundles back and forth as a freight guard, waving as she disappears into the steam again and again.

Hubicka latches on to this unrequited romance and attempts to take Miloš in hand, both tormenting him (*Tell me about your girl*, he repeatedly murmurs) and offering advice. Courage screwed to the sticking place, Miloš attempts to seduce the willing Maša but suffers the humiliation of premature ejaculation. A visit to a prostitute in Prague fares no better and he attempts suicide which also fails.

Sly smut is also a Czech speciality, and while Menzel isn't a patch on Miloš Forman in showing the appeal and ridicule of lechery in Czech films of the period, he provides a great counterpoint of indoor passion that neatly wrongfoots us at crucial moments.

For outside on the tracks, the war is still going on. Every time a train crawls through, trouble arrives with it, and the grim reality cannot be dodged forever. The title refers to special trains of military *materiel* which were



**Jiří Menzel and Bohumil Hrabal in 1966 during filming**

**I was drawing near to the curve of the track; already the twelve hooves of those dead horses were visible in the distance, jutting towards the sky like the columns in the cathedral crypt at Stará Boleslav. I thought of Masha, and of how we met for the first time, when I was still with the track superintendent. He gave us two buckets of red paint and told us to paint the fence round the entire state workshops. Masha began by the railway track, just as I did. We stood facing each other with the tall wire fence between us, at our feet we each had a bucket of cinnabar paint, we each had a brush, and we stippled away with our brushes opposite each other and painted that fence, she from her side and I from mine.**

**There were four kilometres altogether**

**of this fence; for five months we stood facing each other like this, and there wasn't anything we didn't say to each other, Masha and I, but always there was this fence between us. After we'd painted two kilometres of it, one day I'd done just as high as Masha's mouth with this red colour, and I told her that I loved her, and she, from her side, had painted just up to there, too, and she said that she loved me, too ... and she looked into my eyes, and, as this was in a ditch and among tall goosefoot plants, I put out my lips, and we kissed through the newly painted fence, and when we opened our eyes she had a sort of tiny red fence-pale striped across her mouth, and so had I, and we burst out laughing, and from that moment on we were happy.**

to be checked by staff for sabotage, and only an insider can take action against the Nazi war effort tramping imperiously over Czech soil. A futile but noble gesture is called for, and Miloš has managed to build quite a reputation in that area by now...

Two years after the film's release to great acclaim, it was the Soviet Union's turn to parade weapons across the landscape. The Prague Spring, a further wave of liberalisation, provoked a military invasion and a period of "Normalisation" which took particular offence at artistic challenge. Hrabal was banned from publishing in 1970, Menzel was similarly turfed out of Barrandov for directing *Larks On A*

*String* in 1969, and *Closely Observed Trains* became a symbol of good intentions and almost the last Czech film to be seen abroad for some years. The Oscar Award in 1968 was as much a political gesture of solidarity as a reward for art, but even now, with the remainder of the Czech New Wave films unprecedentedly available to us, its position is secure and its merits as a tragicomic story undimmed.

**NEXT MONTH'S FILM IS  
HIGH NOON  
(Fred Zinneman, USA 1952)  
Monday 20 October**