

ely
film
society

august
2017

the
notes

coming up @ kings lynn

- ☛ Thursday 24th August
Film: **THE HANDMAIDEN**
- ☛ CLOSE-UPS EVENT
Saturday 2nd Sept 11-5pm
Day Course: The Films of
Audrey Hepburn
- ☛ SOCIAL EVENT
Thursday 14th Sept 6.30pm
Cinema Club's Birthday
Drinks & Nibbles in Crofters
- ☛ Thursday 14th September
Film: **LION**

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The Firemen's Ball

Miloš Forman, Czechoslovakia 1967

Czech title *Hoří, má panenko*

Script by Milos Forman, Jaroslav Papoušek, Ivan Passer and Václav Sasek

Jan Vostrcil Head of Committee
Josef Sebánek, Josef Valnoha,
Frantisek Debelka, Vratislav
Cermák, Josef Rehorek, Václav
Novotný, Frantisek Reinstein,
Frantisek Paska, Ladislav Adam

... Committee Members

Jan Stöckl Retired Fire Chief
Josef Kolb, Josef
Stanislav Holubec Karel
Josef Kutálek Ludva
Frantisek Svet Old Man
Antonín Blazejovský Standa
Stanislav Ditrich Waiter
Milada Jezková Josef's Wife
Alena Kvetová, Anna Liepoldová,
Miluse Zelená, Marie Slivova

... Beauty Contestants

Hana Hanusová Jarka
Hana Kuberová Drunk

After the success of *Loves of a Blonde* [1965], Forman, along with fellow screenwriters Ivan Passer and Jaroslav Papoušek, could not concentrate on their follow-up screenplay and so went to the north Bohemian town



of Vrchlav to hole up in a hotel and concentrate on writing. "One evening, to amuse ourselves, we went to a real firemen's ball," Forman recalls. "What we saw was such a nightmare that we couldn't stop talking about it. So we abandoned what we were writing on to start this script."

Could it have been any worse than

what happens here? Seemingly in real time a farce unfolds in the local Palace of Culture, as men of standing in the community undermine their own position, but also discover that the community has ways of undermining itself and them. What should have been a dignified occasion to honour a retired fire chief, becomes a race

to the bottom, but also in places a backhanded tribute to the robust attitudes of ordinary people.

Forman made the most of his visit to Vrchlabí by inviting locals to act in the film (it was a talking point locally for many years afterwards) to capture the unforced *maloměstácký* elements of provincial life. This explains some of the lack of polish in the performances, sidestepping the niceties of mugging to the camera as professionals would. Less apparent to the non-native speaker - it doesn't really come across in the subtitles - is the local accent and dialect, in which Czech abounds like any language. (My university-educated Prague friend found it sufficient to dismiss the speechifying of former Communist leader Miloš Jakeš with the lofty, "He speaks Czech like a dustman". Every nation has its quiet snobberies). It also helped to smuggle the snark and satire of the script past the authorities that Forman was filming on location out in the country, well away from the nosiness of the cultural commissars at Barrandov Studios in Prague.

A British audience recognises the dynamic of the hapless firemen's committee straight away: it's *Dads' Army*. Give a middle-aged man a uniform and he develops the ego to fill it; put him too near a woman and he either cringes or leers; give him a drink and it won't touch the sides on the way down. There's the bureaucrat, the sulk, the over-explainer, the plotter, the lecherous player... and above all, there's the thief.

Anything that's not nailed down on the raffle table gets stolen. This isn't to give away the plot, but the clever part is how the committee torture logic to breaking point when trying to bail out one of their own who is the only one caught - in the act of putting a prize back. "Everyone here is stealing while you just watch, you honest fool", scolds Josef's wife. If only she knew what was coming... "The good name of the fire brigade means more to me than my honesty" whines one firemen to make his ethical position quite clear; his colleague snaps, "you're just like Jesus Christ, always explaining

things to people." Meanwhile a house burns down in the town. All is redeemed! Honour can be saved! Except...

The Firemen's Ball was one of the highest-profile films to come out of the great liberalisation process dubbed the 'Prague Spring' but which actually ramped up in modest steps from 1965 as the Communist government attempted to wind back the worst aspects of Stalinism in Czechoslovakia and create "socialism with a human face", in Dubček's phrase. Windows opened to cultural developments elsewhere: have fun spotting the moment when the town band at the ball briskly renders the Beatles' *From Me To You*. It succeeded to the extent that renowned Italian film producer Carlo Ponti was able to back the film as a co-production and secure foreign showing rights (which equalled hard currency coming into the country, much appreciated).

The tone turned sour. Forman indeed showed the human face of socialism: people impassively watching for opportunities to bilk the system, with the committee resembling the Politburo and the old fire chief representing the last of old decencies (it is no accident that his flowing white moustache resembles that of Czechoslovakia's founding father Tomáš Masaryk). Put on a party, and they repay you by helping themselves to the drinks while gleefully watching the house burn down.

A year after the film was released, time was called on the new indulgence. East German tanks came across the border through Vrchlabí, leading an invasion in August 1968 that put the country back in cultural quarantine for two decades. The "restoration of order" (*obnovení porádků*) saw the film "banned forever". Ponti had already disliked the film and withdrew his backing, and the authorities used that as an excuse to pounce on Forman for "economic damage to the state" which carried a potential 10 year jail sentence. In solidarity, a coalition of French filmmakers including François Truffaut

and Jean-Luc Godard made good Ponti's money by buying out the overseas rights. Forman went to Paris to sign the deal with them, heard of the invasion, and quietly chose not to return. He and Passer ended up in Hollywood as directors, Forman not revisiting Prague until it was used as the location for *Amadeus* in 1984, with foreign money again covering his back.

MILOŠ FORMAN



born Jan Tomáš Forman

18 February 1932

Čáslav, Czechoslovakia

FILMS AS DIRECTOR

- 1963: **Kdyby ty muziky nebyly ; Konkurs** (Audition)
- 1964: **Black Peter** (Černý Petr); **Loves of a Blonde** (Lásky jedné plavovlásky)
- 1966: **Dobře placená procházka** (A well paid walk)
- 1967: **The Firemen's Ball** (Hoří, má panenko)
- 1971: **Taking Off ; I Miss Sonia Henie** (short film)
- 1973: **Visions of Eight**
- 1975: **One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest**
- 1979: **Hair**
- 1981: **Ragtime**
- 1984: **Amadeus**
- 1989: **Valmont**
- 1996: **The People vs. Larry Flynt**
- 1999: **Man on the Moon**
- 2006: **Goya's Ghosts**

NEXT MONTH'S FILM IS
BEFORE SUNRISE
(Richard Linklater, US 1995)
Monday 18 September

www.elyfilmsociety.com

www.meetup.com/ely-film/

meetup