

A still from the Romanian-Czech production *Imi este indiferent dacă în istorie vom intra ca barbari* (I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians) which won the Crystal Globe



## Warm greeting for historic Czech and Slovak films during impressive annual festival

by Peter Hames

The annual Karlovy Vary film festival – the 53rd – continues to set high standards not only in its coverage of Czech and Slovak cinema and the former Eastern European countries but also in its presentation of English language film. Lifetime achievement awards went to the American actor-director Tim Robbins and to director Barry Levinson.

In the main competition, Czech and Slovak cinema was represented by Adam Sedlák's debut film *Domestik* (*Domestique*) and Olmo Omerzu's *Všechno bude* (*Winter Flies*).

Sedlák's film was a stylistically ambitious but dour portrait of a would-be champion cyclist and the physical and psychological addiction that destroys both him and his marriage. The Slovenian-born Omerzu's third Czech film *Winter Flies* won Best Director award with its tale of two teenagers who 'borrow' a car and engage in a picaresque journey to the western Czech Republic.

The two boys are played by non professionals (they were still at school) and there was a nice balance between their interrogation by the police (an unusual casting of Lenka Vlasáková as the principal interrogator) and a sequence of unexpected but believable adventures.

The main award, the Crystal Globe, went to the Romanian-Czech *Imi este indiferent dacă în istorie vom intra ca barbari* (*I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians*), directed by Radu Jude, a powerful account of the staging of an episode of national history in Bucharest. Its female producer decides to go against tradition and feature complicity in the liquidation of the Bessarabian Jews by the Antonescu regime. Czech producer Jiří Konečný was co-producer of both this and *Winter Flies*.

The 'East of the West' competition featured two new Czech films, Tomáš Pavlíček's *Chata na prodej* (*Bear with Us*) and Beata Parkanová's *Chvilky* (*Moments*). In *Bear with Us*, a family gathers at their country cottage for a final weekend before it is sold. Based on family memories and anecdotes, it's a typically Czech film recalling works such as Ivan Passer's *Intimní osvětlení* (*Intimate Lighting*) and Menzel's *Na samotě u lesa* (*Secluded Near a Forest*). Plenty of family interaction with an all star cast that

included Ivana Chyliková, David Vávra, Jan Kačer and Judit Bárdos.

*Moments* is a low key portrait of a young girl living with her grandparents, who visits her depressive mother, a less than sympathetic father, and an uncaring lover. Convincingly scripted and acted, it depicts common enough situations, but was scarcely uplifting.

The festival opened with a tribute to Czechoslovakia's most famous film director, Miloš Forman, who had died earlier this year at the age of 86. There was an opening screening of his 1965 film *Lásky jedné plavovlásky* (*Loves of a Blonde*), followed by a concert of music from his films conducted by Libor Pešek. Pešek, of course, had collaborated with Forman on his abortive attempt to stage Smetana's *Dalibor* at the Národní divadlo (National Theatre) in 2000 (Forman had wanted to stage a cut version but ran into problems with the artistic director of the theatre).

Films from the history of Czech and Slovak cinema were much in evidence with enthusiasts remarking on the qualities of the digitally restored *Loves of a Blonde* and Jan Němec's *Démanty noci* (*Diamonds of the Night*) – the shadow of the 1960s 'New Wave' still much in evidence. There was also a restored version of Martin Hollý's *Signum Laudis*, scripted by the late Jiří Křižan (who, a few years back, memorably talked of his collaborations with František Vlácil at BFI Southbank).

There was a rare screening of the Karel Lamač-Anny Ondra silent film *Bílý ráj* (*Winter Paradise*, 1924), photographed by Otto Heller. Only four years later, of course, Ondra was to make four British films, including Alfred Hitchcock's *The Manxman* and *Blackmail* (both 1929).

Pursuing the British connection, both director Karel Lamač and cinematographer Otto Heller came to Britain at the outbreak of World War II. Lamač directed three films, including *They Met in the Dark*, starring James Mason, before completing his career in France and West Germany after the war.

Heller, however, became one of Britain's leading cinematographers, photographing Alec Guinness in *The Ladykillers*, Laurence Olivier's *Richard III*, and the Michael Caine thriller *The Ipcress File*, for which he won a BAFTA.

Looking back on the year's Czech and Slovak films, the highlight was probably Martin Sulík's Slovak-Austrian-Czech *Tlumočník* (*The Interpreter*), which I saw with an utterly engrossed younger audience (apparently breaking house records). Jiří Menzel plays a Slovak Jewish man who identifies the Gestapo officer who killed his family during the war and goes to Vienna in search of revenge. There, he meets the officer's son (played by Austrian actor Peter Simonischek) and the two old men (one aged 80, the other 70) visit the locations in Slovakia where his father had operated during the war.

An unorthodox road movie, the film is more about the relationship between the two men than what they discover, with many elements of humour. Martin Štrba's lyrical imagery of the Slovak countryside contrasts markedly with the realities of the Nazi and Slovak Nationalist past.

Jan Švankmajer's *Hmyz* (*Insect*), which he says will be his last feature film, has already had two British screenings, one at the Alchemy Film and Moving Image festival at Hawick in Scotland and another at Tate Modern. It's based on his script about a group of amateur actors preparing to appear in a production of the Copek Brothers *Z života hmyzu* (*From the Life of the Insects*). Švankmajer also introduces another level – the making of the film itself, complete with his dog being ushered off the set. I saw it at its Scottish premiere with an audience fully in tune with its mischievous – and indeed – iconoclastic spirit.

A third film that impressed me was *Nic jako dřív* (*Nothing Like Before*) by Klára Tasovská and Lukáš Kokeš, which earlier won the Best Documentary award at the Finále Festival in Plzeň. Scarcely a conventional documentary, it's a three part study of three working class teenagers in the border town of Varnsdorf, where they are set to 'graduate' from school, from which many are absent due to the need to work in part time jobs.

The directors chose their non-actors and then provided them with situations which they acted out in their own words. The result is a kind of Loachian authenticity combined with dramatic visualisation.