

Film / Photography

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The Richness of Czech Cinema

Bert Rebhandl in conversation with Ivan Jachim, director of the film festival **Finále Plze** that shows annually all the feature films made that year in the Czech Republic, about the developments of the film scene in his country, its political origins and the involvement of the private economy.

1968 is regarded as a decisive date in post-war history, the entire world looked towards Washington, Paris and Berlin where students were demonstrating against the Vietnam War and the generation of 1945. The world, however, also looked towards Prague where the Communist Party had permitted a "spring" that was then coldly ended by the Warsaw Pact troops. The Czechoslovakian cinema had made a significant contribution to this new mood of change.

Directors such as Vera Chytilova (*Sedmikrasky/Daisies*) were celebrated at international festivals. One consequence of the 1968 movement was the film festival **Finále Plze** that undertook an attempt to make the "new wave" of Czech cinema known also in its native country. After only three years **Finále Plze** was banned and it was only following the Velvet Revolution that it was able to start operations again in 1990.

What function does it have in the new Czech film scene, we asked Ivan Jachim, the director of **Finále Plze**. "After 1989 the cinema in the Czech Republic experienced the greatest upheaval since 1945. Following the German occupation everybody had been in favour of nationalisation but film thus came under the influence of the Communist Party and the ideological authorities. After 1989 only the private sector survived along with one single central state institution for the promotion of filmmaking."

In this typical "post communist" situation **Finále Plze** promotes the richness of Czech cinema by showing every year all the feature films made during that year and, more recently, also documentaries in two categories, shorter ones less than 30 minutes in length and longer ones, "Naturally, it is left up to the producers whether they wish to show their films at our festival and thus expose them to competition, but generally speaking most of them take part.

In addition we organize discussion, give an overview of student filmmaking and organize historical programmes on anniversaries and focal themes." The "new wave" classics, highly regarded by film critics are little known in their own country as Ivan Jachim regrets. "The banned films of the 1960s crop up very occasionally on television. Precisely because the generation of those who grew up in the 1990s does not know these films they are generally a great success at the festival." Other great traditions of Czech cinema have been abruptly ended. Are there successors to artists such as Karel Kachyna, the great director of

children's films?

"The industry for children's and young peoples cinema was very strong in the 1960s and 1970s. Unfortunately this is no longer the case and the films that are now made in this area are generally very commercial." And what about animation films? Finále Plze has dedicated a major programme to the grand master of this genre, Jan Svankmajer. "This particular form of surrealist art, such as made by Jan Svankmajer and his wife Eva, is most probably gone forever.

But there are still discoveries to be made, I am thinking here of Michaela Pavlátová or Aurel Klimt." However the heart of a film culture remains the full-length feature film. Ivan Jachim sees it as his task to discover new talents early on: " The state supports cinema in a very unsystematic way. This has led to the fact that an entire series of artists of the middle generation has practically vanished. But there are young people that manage to make films under the most impossible conditions. They and the directors that have already been able to establish themselves, such as Sasha Gedeon or Petr Zelenka, make real cinema d'auteur.

" Like in Austria and Germany television is involved to an important extent in the production of film. "After the dismantling of the state film economy in 1990 it was by and large cinema that helped rescue Czech cinema. Recently, private television is becoming increasingly involved in film as a producer. Under these circumstances a radical independent cinema remains the exception."

Finále Plze is a festival for the film branch and for the native public. It thus differs from the international festival that is held annually in Karlovy Vary and which includes Czech film only as a section in its internationally oriented programme. "It is clear that we offer a better overview", says Ivan Jachim in defending the identity of "his" festival.

"This year we will remain true to our principles. New films must engage in this confrontation. It is important that they be seen by international guests, who can assess them from a vantage point outside our local interest groups. In the future we want to strengthen our central European ties by showing interesting films and inviting filmmakers from neighbouring countries."

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