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All the Bright Young Men and Women, *Josef Skvorecky*.
A personal History of the Czech Cinema, Peter Martin Associates and in Association with *Take One Magazine*, Toronto, 1972. Cloth, \$8.75.

There are writers who give factual accounts; there are writers who give summaries, but the writer who gives warmth to his readers through the cold pages of print is the writer who gives pleasure. Skvorecky is such a writer.

Josef Skvorecky tells us immediately that this is not a work of scholarship. Cut off from the original sources in his homeland, he had to rely on his memory and scant sources of magazines and personal files supplied by friends. This approach works to the readers' advantage. What the book might lack in scholarship is well compensated by an abundance of charm and dedication. The urge to remember in a world that quickly forgets is the motivation for Skvorecky's book. Caught in a political world of rapid and violent change the men who gave their artistic life to the Czech Cinema could swiftly be forgotten. In the West it is expected that the totalitarian state will make the practise of art a dangerous thing for the artist. The irony of this acceptance is that the capitalist countries are not immune. When artists are "killed off" in the West by the market, there is little mourning. The memory of a Capra or a Vidor is preserved in museum retrospectives where, out of harm's way, they are studied and lost in academia. Skvorecky's efforts to keep his fellow artists' work alive will prevent the rot that the archivist seems determined to spread firmly over the works of the past. Scholarship, as Skvorecky shows, is not the answer. Life is in the film; not in the study of it.

Skvorecky has excellent credentials for the task he set himself. A Czech writer and a former member of the Czechoslovak Writers' Union, of the Central Committee of Czechoslovak Film and Television Artists, and an Executive of the Prague P.E.N. Club he has published novels, short stories and essays along with his considerable screen credits. His life and work in Czechoslovakia brought him in close contact and friendship with the artists he recalls in his book. Not only can Skvorecky create the friends and artisans he knew for his nostalgic look, but he has created himself as the writer of his own story. Chaucer's name comes to mind. Chaucer, as many great writers, did, by design or accident, bring himself as the human observer into his Tales. Skvorecky has accomplished the same - quite unwittingly. Writing of Gustav Machaty, the creator of the famous film, *Ecstasy*, Skvorecky observes that, "Being a youth by film possessed, he obeyed the calling of Hollywood and left for California as soon as the Great War ended". Somehow or other Skvorecky strongly suggests that the "calling" is divine and that the Great War was incidental to the purpose and intent of Machaty's life. The feeling exists that Skvorecky is sharing the call and that he too is "by film possessed" and that he understands. His comments on *Ecstasy* bring a superb personal touch to the reader. "... however cosmopolitan it might be in aesthetic principals and cast, its

lyricism continues an old Czech tradition." It is difficult for people in the West to view this film in this context. A service has been performed. The sensationalism of the film has passed and reading Skvorecky's remarks on the film and learning something of the background of its creation removes it totally from the pornographic into the lyrical-erotic where it belongs. Again this is where Skvorecky so beautifully informs and entertains the reader by his writing. After reading a page of his prose, the usual academic credentials are quite unnecessary. Like other great writers his prose style is his credentials.

It might seem odd that a Canadian publisher chose to present a work on the Czech Cinema when material on the Canadian Cinema is virtually non-existent, but **All the Bright Young Men and Women** is not a book written in isolation from the Canadian film situation.

After seeing and attempting to see all the films made in Canada a student of this genre might smile at the following remark Skvorecky makes on some Czech films. "People in the cinemas laughed at dramas and slept through comedies." These reactions were caused by the theme and treatment imposed by the officials who looked after film productions. As Canadian films are largely sponsored by funds from the government, the tendency to fall into themes that might be popular with the granters of funds or to the potential audiences should be avoided. One item that has crept and found a place in Canadian film is the folk singer who folk-sings his/her way through the Newfoundland landscape or the autumnal scene time and time again. It does not bring the relief of sleep or the escape of laughter, but boredom that can lead to violence. The National Film Board's films declined in the Sixties when the filmmakers became enamoured with the adolescent theme and high school drop-out cases. These themes no doubt were popular with the producers and it was one way for a filmmaker to make his film, but such films soon fade into oblivion. Don Owen made the definitive film on the subject. **Nobody Waved Goodbye** (N.F.B.) was a film of merit when it first appeared and it is still far superior to any film made under alternate financial arrangements. Today, when attending the cinema to see Clint Eastwood or Woody Allen, the presentation of a N.F.B. film is greeted with groans. Not because the film is bad, but the memory of the fluted autumnal effects are stamped into a generation of students who can now choose and pay to see what they want. The letters N.F.B. are just a reminder; they want to forget. They don't laugh (they don't give the film a chance) they don't sleep, they react with derision, anger and pain.

Milos Forman, who is known here as the director of his recent **Taking Off** and to others as the director of many great Czech films such as **Loves of a Blonde**, is the individual hero of **All the Bright Young Men and Women**. A Forman is much needed in the Canadian film world. Skvorecky's tribute to Forman is warm, objective and significant:

"Forman managed to preserve the type of humour, which is vicious, dangerous, concealed and explosive. He dared to do something for which he should not be forgotten... he hit the petty Czech citizen. He aimed at cowardice, apathy, football fanaticism, brutality, tap room philosophy..." Substitute a few items; add a few directions and the scene might be Canada. Where is the Canadian director who could turn the recent Russian/Canadian hockey events into a film that revealed Canadians to Canadians and faced off into meaning rather than into trash? The Czech Cinema produced such great works of art because the bright young men and women took themes and characters from the reality of the life about them. Perhaps the Canadian film often fails because the motivation of the writer and/or the director is to copy other

styles or to make something that is marketable. My Uncle Antoine (N.F.B.) and Nobody Waved Goodbye will survive because they were made out of the same reality that Czech films were made, i.e. the reality of life, not the reality of literature or film. Forman is also the hero of the Czech New Wave. He was the only director who created a school. Passer, Braun and Forman, "... resemble somewhat the mystery of the Trinity ... Forman's original vision was ... enriched and deepened by the sensitivity of his congenial friends."

Skvorecky's general statement about film is applied to Forman. It is a statement well made and worthy of remembrance. "Collective creation, which is one of the specific properties of the art of film, was realized in the co-operation of the trio." Forman is well known in the West by name. Skvorecky now gives the background of this man who can transmit what he is through film. It is a clear example of the concept that the quality of the director's integrity comes through the camera, the actors, the screenplay and the production and that it is impossible despite all efforts to convince the world through advertising and the like that this quality is present when in fact it does not exist.

This book should be read. It is not remote. It is not irrelevant. Film making is a political occupation. In the West it is tied to the capitalistic system. The lesson of the Hollywood Ten should convince anyone that there is danger in film making. In Canada we like to believe that it is not a political occupation. Yet films have been "deferred"; showings of some films have been held up, not because of the censor, but for the reason of political pressure. Then the public relations officers are at their best. How many films are being made on the real problems of Canada? How many films could be made? Skvorecky's book should be read because some one here might do as he did - remember. There is no convenient record of the efforts of our filmmakers at hand, i.e. a book. It should be written. Again it comes back to character and personal worth. There are few Skvoreckys in this world. I hope one can be found in Canada to do for it what Skvorecky has done for his country and for his fellow filmmakers in All the Bright Young Men and Women.



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