

BOOK REVIEWS

All the Bright Young Men and Women: a personal history of the Czech cinema

by Josef Skvorecky. Translated by Michael Schonberg. Peter Martin Associates Ltd., in association with *Take One* magazine, first published the book in 1972 and sold out at \$8.95 a copy. It was reprinted in 1975 in hardcover, selling at \$12.00 and in paperback, at \$5.95, 280 pages. Illustrated.

There is something self-pitying in Czechoslovakian culture. There is a recurring feeling of passivity and helplessness, of missed opportunities and talents unused.

Think of the novels of Kafka, with all their internal torment – as if his characters inhabit an incomprehensible world. But it is not this incomprehensibility that gives Kafka's novels their peculiarly Czech quality: it is more the nightmarish sense that nothing can be done. Bureaucracy is accused as if there were no way of changing it. We are simply condemned, without trial, to be trapped in a castle of impenetrable irrationality.

Of course, there are historical reasons for this. Czechoslovakia is a small country made up of a number of different nations – Czechs, Slovaks, and Moravians all living together, along with (at least before the war) a large community of Yiddish-speaking Jews. It is also a country that for centuries now has been raped and mutilated by the larger countries surrounding it; yet the very similar fate of Yugoslavia and Poland has not produced the same tone of passivity in their art.

Why is this? What are the national characteristics that make the Czech nation different from the Yugoslavs and different again from the Polish? How are these collective differences manifested in their art, especially in their movies? These are the kind of questions that I personally, as a foreigner, would desperately want to be raised by any account of the Czechoslovakian cinema that might help me to understand it more intimately. But these questions are nowhere to be found in *All The Bright Young Men And Women*. In fact, there are no questions of a general nature at all.

Consider this notion of helplessness and then think of some of the films. Think of the wide-eyed passivity of Peter in Milos Forman's *Peter and Pavla* (1964), the charming victim of his employer, his parents, and even ultimately of Pavla; for by the end of the film, there is no sense that the future will hold any exciting solutions for them. Consider too the equally wide-eyed gullibility of the lovely Hana Brejchova in Forman's next feature, *Loves of a Blonde* (1965). She comes full-circle in her attempt, through a sweetly casual encounter, to find her way out of the shoe-factory that envelops her and which may well envelop her for the rest of her life. Then think of the young hero – again wide-eyed and handled with such sympathy – in Jiri Menzel's *Closely Watched Trains* (1966). He is so uncertain about his life and so humiliated by his first sexual encounter that he tried to commit suicide. And yet, really by an accident, he is elevated into a hero by the end of the film, a heroism which, through his personal qualities, he hasn't truly earned.

In these few films, made when the Czech "New Wave" was at its height, with no threat at that time of a Soviet intervention, there is still recurringly – although observed with tender compassion – a feeling of hopelessness, of passivity, of lives without a future. Nowhere is there a sense of dynamic energies in these films. Even their comedy seems to be the comedy of a race that accepts its basic inferiority, its inability to cope. Consider that beautifully comic long-shot that ends Ivan Passer's *Intimate Lighting* (1965): a group of friends gathered together on a porch deciding to toast themselves for one reason or another – but with glasses filled with by-now congealed egg-nogs! It is as if their real moment has passed. By raising these issues, I don't mean in any way to put the films down, nor, indeed, to imply a patronizing dismissal of Czechoslovakian culture. I raise them however, because I believe that if one sets out to write a cultural history of a nation, even if from a declared "personal" point of view, one must have some position that one is writing from or more insights that one is striving to convey.

Josef Skvorecky has neither of these. His book is largely an anecdotal account of the experiences that, as a



Martyrs of Love. Taken from *All the Bright Young Men and Women*.

writer, he has himself had while working in Czechoslovakia. But there is no real analysis of anything at all – either of the films themselves or of the conditions of production under which they were made. In fact, the book is anecdotal to the point of being gossipy, and personal to the point of Skvorecky being irrelevant. For instance, again and again, we are told how much Mr. Skvorecky admires beautiful women – an admiration I'm certainly not prepared to chastise him for but not one that helps my understanding of Czechoslovakian cinema!

Like many books of this kind, *All The Bright Young Men And Women* is probably most valuable for the interview material which, from time to time, it contains – and for the personal accounts of the few films that he himself has been involved in. Yet even here, the tone of the book suggests that he *should* have been involved in more of them, that had not the bureaucratic forces intervened with one project or another, he would be more established as a film-writer than he actually is.

All of this, while undoubtedly true, finally takes us back to the speculation with which I opened this review, to that tinge of self-pity, of passivity and helplessness, that seems, at least today, to be a recurrent aspect of Czechoslovakian art.

by Peter Harcourt

Peter Harcourt is Associate Professor of Film at York University and author of Six European Directors (Penguin 1974). He was responsible for setting up and organizing the Film Department at Queen's University and has lectured extensively in England at the British Film Institute, the London School of Film Technique and the Royal College of Art.

(continued from p. 20)

International Index to Film Periodicals 1974

Sponsored by Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film (FIAF). Collier-Macmillan Canada, Ltd. 1975. Edited by Karen Jones. 517 pp. \$27.50.

Ten years ago film researchers were starved for film periodicals. Libraries, film societies, and film buffs scrambled for each issue of every new publication before it went under. Then the film course baby boom rolled over college campuses everywhere and produced a great title wave of film periodicals that managed to survive beyond their first birthday. A second wave of publications, indexing these magazines, was inevitable.

Seven guides to film periodical literature have arrived in the last four years. The **International Index to Film Periodicals**, one of the first, is by far the most prestigious. Sponsored by FIAF, the international organization of film archives, it is compiled by 26 members throughout the world, including the Canadian Film Archives.* 1974 is the third year to be indexed. Currently, 80 film magazines are referenced, up from 63 in the 1973 edition. Periodicals added include *Jump Cut*, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, and *Variety* (film reviews only). The **International Index to Film Periodicals** is the only publication to index four Canadian film magazines, including *Cinema Canada* and *Cinéma Québec*.

Each article, review, or interview in the periodicals covered has at least one entry in the guide. There are 50 subject headings (Individual Films, Production, Distribution, History Of The Cinema, etc.). In addition, there are three cross-reference listings, by subject, author, and film director. In the subject cross-reference, for instance, under Canada, there are references to animated films, associations, conferences, distribution, film companies, film education, film history, film industry, government involvement, the Canadian Film Development Corporation, and the Canadian Filmmaker's Distribution Centre. Casual browsing through the cross-references can turn up interesting trivia. Gene Moskowitz, *Variety's* prolific film reviewer, wrote more reviews (112) than any other writer. John Ford had more articles written about his films than any other director.

The **International Index to Film Periodicals** attempts to catalogue only major references to a subject or film. Thus small but valuable references have been omitted. Users of film guides will regret these omissions, but as one who has had a hand in producing a film index, I appreciate how one must define an area to be covered in light of available resources. An index of any kind will always be greeted with "if only it included..."

The biggest competition to this FIAF volume is the file card service offered by FIAF. The index is really an annual cumulation of what FIAF has been putting out throughout the year on cards. The file card service has several advantages: they are mailed shortly after the periodical appears, sometimes arriving before the magazine if the air mail option is selected; they can be interfiled with previous years' cards; you can elect to receive only references to English language publications, about 32 of the 80 periodicals. Advantages of the annual volume over the cards are space savings (about 9000 cards a year), and price - full card service for a year is about \$350, the English language set is \$190, and the air mail option adds about \$40 to these prices. On the other hand, buyers of the card service could benefit from the purchase of the annual volume since it includes additional indexes and cross-references.

The **International Index to Film Periodicals** is an invaluable research tool to help you keep abreast of the sea of film information that has emerged in the last decade. Of course, once you have found where the article you want is located, there is still the problem of how to lay your hands on, say, volume 28, issue 12 of *Kinoizkustvo* and of where to get it translated. If only we had an index of...

by Austin Whitten

*Note: In May 1975 this task was transferred to the National Film Archives.

Austin Whitten is Vice President of the Toronto Film Society, a member of the executive committee of the Canadian Federation of Film Societies (CFFS) and Chairman of the Index Committee responsible for the CFFS Index of 16mm and 35mm Feature Length Films Available in Canada.

business world and her consequent estrangement from her husband, but ended of course with their eventual reconciliation and her return to domesticity.

The title reflected the mood of the period with its jazz babies, flappers and sundry emancipated women. Since 1919 at least ten films had been blessed with titles of this ilk: **Why Change Your Wife?** (by the legendary Cecil B. DeMille), **Why Leave Your Husband?**, **Why Announce Your Marriage?**, **Why Not Marry?** etc. Cazeneuve had already written the story for **Why Trust Your Husband?** and Ouimet knew a tried and true formula when he saw one.

The entire cast and crew were Hollywood veterans with the exception of Cazeneuve and Andrée Lafayette. From Quebec? Not at all. She was from France. Miss Lafayette had been brought to Hollywood earlier in 1923 to play the title role in what turned out to be a successful version of **Trilby**.

Production began in the fall and Ouimet was back in Montreal with the finished film before Christmas.

Why Get Married? opened at the Loews on Sunday, February 10, 1924, and the première was held the following night. The publicity did not hesitate to describe Miss Lafayette as "the most beautiful woman in all France" but it was more likely the name of Ouimet behind the production that ensured the Loews one of its best weeks. However, in wider release the film was less successful and it remained Laval Photoplays' only production.

A curious footnote: Scenes in which the hero is involved in some fist-cuffs - fighting off robbers in a railroad depot, and thrashing the sender of an anonymous letter - came in for a little trimming at the hands of Quebec's already cautious censors.

Ouimet then moved to Toronto where he remained for three years as the representative of the Van Buren Film Company of New York. Then around 1930 he returned to Hollywood for two years, but his activities were not connected with the cinema. Finally in 1936, after an unsuccessful attempt to turn the Imperial in Montreal into an exclusively French house, Ouimet left the film business just thirty years after the opening of the first Ouimet-oscope. □