

Věra Chytilová



Forman was not the only one to bring up the problems of international cooperation in those days. They all knew about it — Chytilová, Němec, Passer, Brynych, Jasný. . . . And they were all aware of the double-edged sword that such cooperation presented. On the one hand, it offered an opportunity to obtain better working conditions, better film material, better technology, to open the door to the world for Czech and Slovak films, to escape the danger of provinciality, and finally to improve their personal financial situations. But on the other hand, all of them knew that foreign co-producers, or at least most of them, were not guided by an interest in what constituted the basis of the Czechoslovak film miracle: the artistic uniqueness of Czechoslovak film, that which was specific to it because it was bound up with the peculiar Czechoslovak experience. For most of them, this small Central European country presented an opportunity to get talent and production facilities much more cheaply than they could elsewhere. Of course, in order for all that to pay off, those talented people and their film industry would have to produce merchandise that would more or less fit into the slot machine mentioned by Jiří Weiss. And that would be the end. Without any tanks, without any police, without any censorship. An end that would undoubtedly be far more pleasant, true, but that is another matter.

The establishments in film and the state were immediately more than willing to support this sellout. It would have meant an influx of foreign currency for the state treasury, and the comfortable liquidation of the uncomfortable film rebellion. But the motion picture press, the critics, and above all the Union of Czechoslovak Film and Television Artists stood opposed, striving to avoid the exploitation of an underdeveloped country and its cinematography. They sought a system of equal partnership, one that would bring to Czechoslovak film artists the advantages of international cooperation, but at the same time would enable them to continue on the path that had brought them worldwide recognition.

The Soviet occupation resolved this controversy. For

most of the talented representatives of the young wave, barred from work in film, the sale of their talent to foreign producers through the auspices of the state provides the only prospect of doing creative work.

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Věra Chytilová came to film comparatively late in life, and after many detours. She told some of the story in her film The Ceiling, her graduation project at the Film Academy. But she did not tell it all.

The Ceiling was a mature work of art which later was shown throughout the world; and it was distributed at home with another of Chytilová's films, A Bagful of Fleas (about the problems of adolescent girls in a boarding school for apprentices). The exceptional sound track of The Ceiling is unfortunately untranslatable. The film is a bitter documentary about the female lot and the maturing of women, the path to true emancipation. In the mid-sixties, the film was shown in France. During the discussion that followed, someone in the audience stood up and said, "They shouldn't make that kind of film. It undermines people's faith in socialism. If that is the way it really is, then none of it is worth it all." How to answer him? People want to be deluded. Everywhere, always. They are afraid of the truth. But can we live with it? Věra Chytilová always thought that we could live only with the truth. Her consistent efforts at unmasking illusions and disclosing myths caused her films frequently to be labeled cynical — the universal human defense against the truth.

The Ceiling tells how Chytilová began to study architecture, how she dropped out in the name of womanhood. She was strangely beautiful and she even worked as a model, until she finally settled down as a script girl in a film studio. That was where she made up her mind that film was to be her life's work. To break through her "ceiling." The studio could have helped, but it didn't. It refused to recommend her for admission to the Film Academy; it refused her a scholarship. But Věra Chytilová is, and ap-

parently always was, incredibly obstinate. She took the tests without a recommendation, she was accepted, and she battled her way through. She finished school at an age when others were already teaching, but the Film Academy isn't like other schools, and it is probably just as well. The studio never forgave her for achieving her goal against their will. They were never very fond of her. But she didn't ask for love. Just that they let her do her job.

Chytilová made three feature films. She carried home the Grand Prix from the International Film Festival at Bergamo in the autumn of 1967 for her film Daisies. She had already won the Mannheim Festival award with the film Something Different. And later, in 1970, the award of the Chicago Film Festival for The Fruit of Paradise. After 1969, nothing. She wasn't even allowed to do the classics. She wasn't allowed to work for foreign producers, either.

In 1972, a militant feminist film festival was held in New York. A Chytilová film was there too. I asked whether any of the organizers were interested in the story of one of the world's leading women directors. They sent their greetings — in writing.

The truth is always specific. For example, the truth about militant solidarity ending at your own doorstep. "Simply the truth," as Věra would say.

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Chytilová was sitting on the floor; her eyes had a malicious gleam.

What are you doing?

That's like asking what I am thinking. Whether I think that work has become impossible. I'm catching it from all sides, but I still have trouble believing it. I am exhausted from all the commotion with Daisies; and in the meantime, Ester Krumbachová and I have finished another script; and then, along comes Bergamo. So I

haven't been able to follow through and see whether it might not be better if I didn't work at all. And not just me. A lot of things look like nothing, like ordinary obstacles, all sorts of nonsense. But they're not. When you look back, you suddenly see all the energy they robbed you of, all the time, and how little got done in the long run. Not much at all. And what for?

I'm terribly envious of people who work themselves to a frazzle. I'd probably be happiest if I were in a constant rush and a constant tizzy. No, I'm not unhappy, not at all. At least I have more time for my family. I don't want to be sacrilegious. I have my other world — I'm not like Jaroslav [Kučera, her cameraman husband] for whom work and private life are inextricably intertwined. His work penetrates into everything. With me, it's not quite like that. But somehow, film work ought to be set up so that, except for a short break needed for a rest, a person would go smoothly from one film to the next. But apparently everything else is more important than that, even if it sometimes looks as if things were being done toward that end. But of course, they aren't. One wages a constant, eternal struggle with external conditions for the opportunity to work. So I work and work and make new attempt after new attempt, and suddenly I realize that I am constantly concealing from myself the alternative of possibly giving it all up. Maybe we're all washed up, but we just don't know it yet.

So now we are working toward the realization of a script that Krumbachová wrote, partly with me, but mostly on her own, and most excellently. It's the first script that I really like, through and through. [The Fruit of Paradise — the film was completed in a Czechoslovak-Belgian co-production in 1969, and represented Czechoslovakia at Cannes and elsewhere, e.g., Chicago.] And yet, both Ester and I realize that a real film cannot be written. A film is the interdependent operation of many factors; and even though we are aware of them all, and we consider them from the outset, the only ones we can include in the script are the ones that can be expressed verbally. And there are only a few of those. As soon as the literary advance work on a film gets to a certain stage, you have to start working on the film itself. There are always some shortcomings, some mistakes; but in art it is hard, frequently almost impossible, to decide in ad-

vance what is a mistake. Only a very few people in the industry understand that a person needs to be trusted, and needs simply to be given the chance to work. The people we respect the most are those who may have their doubts about us but still, ultimately, understand that doors have to be opened.

First, you must liberate yourself from your own prejudices. The most important thing is getting beyond yourself, trying not to work on something familiar, but rather trying to penetrate further. You don't really begin working creatively until you are at a point where you don't know, where you are finding out. Each step forward involves an immense amount of strenuous effort. And along comes all the auxiliary ballast. I know, for some people jumping hurdles and clearing obstacles is a challenging shot in the arm; but that leaves very little time for what is really important.

The need to liberate yourself. . . . That isn't true just for the creative process, either. You can confirm it when you look back at various situations you have experienced: how much more penetrating your view can be from a distance.

It has been a year since we finished working on *Daisies*. My daughter Terezka has grown a head taller. We'll probably use her as our yardstick: one film, one head, and then a break. Last year we didn't take a vacation, nor the year before, nor this year — all because of *Daisies*. They kept saying, "tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow. . . ." Until finally you see that everyone has left town, having told you "tomorrow." And there you sit, like a disappointed lover, and wait. You sit and wait for one year, two. The time eats away at you. What do you do? Nothing. And for every day in your calendar there is a long list of vain hopes.

What is your experience with work for a foreign producer?

When I used to hear about somebody who was ruined by joining forces with a foreign producer, I didn't really understand. It seemed as if it should all be a matter of the contract. Nobody can force me into anything that doesn't suit me. And besides, I always thought that socialist cinematography should constantly bear in mind the liberation of creative effort that is lacking in capitalist production. Because this is difficult to formulate in a contract, if

one doesn't happen to be a lawyer, I told myself that it would probably have to be expressed in a language that producers are accustomed to speaking in: money — that is, to ensure our own freedom by means of their investment, for which no guarantee would be given from our side. If someone wants us to put in some truly creative work (and I don't think we sign contracts for any other kind of work), then he has to give us his confidence; and in no case can he expect to have the right to correct or alter our work — because that someone must want to give his confidence to a person whose only responsibility and obligation is to be true to himself. True to himself, would you believe, even if he is being offered a lot of money.

One producer claimed that that was what he wanted, and nothing else. But in a little while he began to worry about his money, and he changed his mind. In the middle of work on the script, he began to urge us to pursue his commercial viewpoints, saying that he naturally wasn't depriving us of our artistic goals, because, he said, making a film that will bring in a lot of money, why, that is an art! But we showed our lack of character. We were naughty and disobedient and underhandedly made up our minds not to disappoint his original faith in us: we finished the script our own way.

When I was in New York recently, they came to us to say that there were people who were seriously interested in my work. First they introduced me to a man who was supposed to be the American manager of Czechoslovak Filmexport [the state firm responsible for all foreign business with films] and was to arrange all the negotiations. I discovered that this job had been in existence since 1956, without any results whatsoever, not just insofar as production goes, but even with respect to distribution. When we expressed our surprise at his confidence when he had accomplished nothing so far, we were told that there had been certain obstacles in the past, but that these no longer existed. That surprised us even more; but all the same, nothing happened. The obstacles apparently still existed.

Another producer invited us for a most expensive lunch at the most expensive restaurant on the most expensive street. There I found out that if I accepted his offer, I would be completely free: the only thing he wanted was that I shoot a film of something by

Karel Čapek and cast one famous actor in it, and, finally, that his wife write the music for the film. She was present, and there and then she launched into a song that she had already composed for the film. I understood two words in it: "Karlovy Vary, Karlovy Vary." In short, it was just too much freedom for me to handle.

The only thing to do, here or anywhere, is to work with people who really love film, movie fans. If such people were to vanish and film became subject to other points of view, then it would be equally impossible to work here. Even here there are many people in and around motion pictures who are not interested in film and don't know anything about it. I once said, if you recall, that I don't want to make film my livelihood. Boy, did I catch it for that! Even my colleagues made fun of me.

But of course, I didn't mean that I didn't want to get paid for my work. I only meant that I don't want to accept just any job at all costs. But I was foolish to say what I really thought. As you see, I don't do that anymore.

And what about the script that you just finished?

That's complicated. It's hard to talk about. I'm always afraid that I will oversimplify. The working process transforms things; and then if someone looks for the end result in the original explanation, there can be misunderstandings. You do change with time, you know; and your work changes along with you. The end result that you are aiming for is a certain image at the outset, a fairly vague image, because we never know what the reality of the end result will truly be, because we can't know how the process of arriving at that result will transform us, and how this transformation will transform the end result itself.

Generally speaking, the film is about the unequal struggle between a man and a woman. And over it all is the question of the ability to accept the truth — whether a person would actually be capable of living with the ideals he advocates, capable of deserving them. It is much easier to fight for truth than to live with it. Ester Krumbachová quotes Robinson Jeffers' poem about Ferguson, a fellow who screamed for truth but was in fact incapable of accepting even a glimmer of it.

I recall once being present at a discussion in which you were trying to convince someone — I think it was Evald Schorm — that it will never be right unless he starts consistently working with nonactors.

I really like hearing people quote me, because I never remember having said anything, and, for the most part, I may not even believe what I said anymore. For instance, what you just said: I'm not the least bit convinced that one shouldn't work with professional actors, and I'd like to try it myself some day. But when it gets right down to it, then actors sort of spoil things for me; they get in my way. As soon as I visualize them in the film, I know in advance what the thing will look like, and I don't want to know. It's like having all the outlines traced out in advance.

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