

## Normalization and Normal Life in the Films of Ladislav Smoljak and Zdeněk Svěrák

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(6500 words)

There was probably no worse time for the Czech film industry than the repressive period known as normalization – lasting from 1969 to 1989 – when some of the country’s best directors were no longer able to make films and the rest were limited to harmless themes and styles. One of the few bright spots of the time were a series of films written by Ladislav Smoljak and Zdeněk Svěrák.<sup>1</sup> Having gained fame through the Jára Cimrman Theater, the two collaborated on eight films between 1974 and 1987, marked in the words of the film critic Andrej Halada by “humanism, a gentle tone, and intelligent humor.”<sup>2</sup>

What makes these films particularly interesting is that they are among the few that give us a glimpse at the workings of the communist system in an era that Václav Havel has called post-totalitarian. The system was still repressive, but citizens could at least lead somewhat normal lives. Smoljak and Svěrák’s films focus on these daily lives, on the nuts and bolts of the country’s culture, which the Czechs call *realie*. They thus provide an ideal introduction to Czech society in the seventies and eighties.

This essay has three aims. For those unfamiliar with either communism or Czechoslovakia, the analysis of these films will introduce them to habits and customs taken for granted under Czech communism. The authors ground their films in the concrete details of everyday life, in the sort of minutiae that natives often neglect to describe because they are so obvious. The first goal of this essay is simply descriptive. It is to translate and preserve a slice of life that would otherwise be unavailable to non-Czechs.

The second aim is to construct a new picture of the period of normalization. Normalization has most commonly been represented in two ways. One plot line emphasizes the battle between a repressive state and a small handful of dissidents. The other, best captured in Havel’s essay “The Power of the Powerless” focuses on the mass of greengrocers who compromise their beliefs in order to get along. The films here portray characters that fit into neither of these categories. They do not attack the regime. They do not exactly live “in truth.” But they are not just cowards. They do try to do what is right and live according to their own morality. They follow Masaryk’s example of *drobná práce* – the little work that makes the world a livable place.

The third goal of this paper is to rehabilitate the reputation of these films. Czech film critics were and continue to be ungenerous to the work of Smoljak and Svěrák. Precisely because of the harsh repression during the period, Czech film critics tended to judge films by the degree to which they

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<sup>1</sup> Svěrák may be better known as the author and star of the Oscar-winning *Kolya* and the Oscar-nominated *Obečná škola* and *Vesničko má středisková*. It may seem unusual to focus on screenwriters rather than directors. There are two reasons why this focus is called for. First, under Czech communism films often originated in so-called tvůrčí skupiny (creative groups) in which screenwriters and dramaturges played a key role. Directors were often chosen as an afterthought. Second, constant battles against “formalism” under communism meant that directors had little freedom to put their artistic stamp on a work. Censors further made sure that they always stuck closely to the screenplay.

<sup>2</sup> This essay only deals with six of the eight films. The remaining two are based on the authors’ Jára Cimrman Theater which I have described in the essay “Cimrman, Mystification and Nationalism”. The screenplays to all of these films (the source of the dialogue quoted here) can be found in *Filmové Komedie: Osm Scénářů od Zdeňka Svěráka a Ladislava Smoljaka* (Hradec Králové: Kruh, 1991). The quote is from Andrej Halada, *77 českých filmových komiků*, (Praha: Brána, 1999), p.19. Halada goes on to say that Smoljak and Svěrák were the only authors of original comedies during the period of normalization.

attacked the system.<sup>3</sup> Critics were effusive in praise of films that smuggled in Christian imagery or portrayed the nomenklatura in an unsavory light. Because of their lack of political engagement, Smoljak and Svěrák were often judged to be lackeys of the regime. I want to argue that this was not the case. I believe these films are better seen as trying to restore people's morale and point the way to a better, more honorable society.

They show us that it was possible to achieve much even under the harsh conditions of the seventies and eighties. While most films retreated into fantasy or low-brow comedy, Smoljak and Svěrák give us a picture of society grounded in real details of everyday life. And they do not shrink from the unattractive aspects of life under normalization. In fact, they use parody to point the way towards a more humane future. And they put all this in an attractive, humorous package.

Smoljak and Svěrák first collaborated on the film *Jáchyme, hod' ho do stroje* (Joachim, Put Him into the Machine, 1974) which became the most watched film of the seventies with not quite three million in paid admissions.<sup>4</sup> It follows the life of the timid František Koudelka who moves in with his dog-loving aunt to start work at a foreign car repair shop in Prague. The plot follows František as he learns self-confidence and wins the girl of his dreams.

His tool for doing this is a *kondiciogram* (conditiogram) that he receives from a new-fangled computer (the machine of the title). The *kondiciogram* charts František's good and bad days. As the machine's operator tells him: "An arrow means success. A period means failure. A zero is deceptive. And watch out for a cross! That's a critical day!" With the help of his kondiciogram František chooses the 27<sup>th</sup> of the month as the day to settle accounts with his domineering aunt, his rival in love, and a number of other unexpected obstacles.

The punch line comes when we find out that František received the wrong *kondiciogram* and has accomplished everything with nothing more than his own will. The unstated subtext, of course, is the bankruptcy of the communist ideal of a scientifically planned society. This message, however, is cleverly hidden in the midst of František's slapstick adventures.

One of the main subplots focuses on František's new job at the car repair shop. When he first shows up for work (which his aunt has arranged for him through personal connections or *protekce* in Czech lingo), he sees an employee being dragged away by men in white coats. His new boss warns him that every three months an employee ends up in the psychiatric hospital for taking bribes. They make so much money (ten times the average salary), they do not know what to do with it. This unrealistic premise allows Smoljak and Svěrák to poke fun at the epidemic proportions that bribery had reached under communism. Consider the following scene as the boss Karfík teaches his employees how to refuse bribes.

(On the door hangs a sign: "DO NOT DISTURB. ANTI-BRIBETAKING COURSE")

Karfík: And now give it a try. Růžička is the customer and Mañas the repairman.

Růžička: Good afternoon.

Mañas: Good afternoon, Mrs. Růžička. Here it is, all ready.

Růžička: Thank you very much. And if you wouldn't be insulted, here's an extra hundred.

Mañas: I would be insulted, Mrs. Růžička. We get paid a monthly salary here.

<sup>3</sup> A prime example is Záborský's *Dům pro dva*. As his later films proved, Záborský's talent was highly overrated. Cf. Jan Lukeš, *Orgie Střídmosti* (Praha: Národní Filmový Archiv, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Svěrák's first screenwriting credit was for the film *Kdo hledá zlaté dno* (1974). The film, which was Jiří Menzel's return to filmmaking after a long ban, is normally seen as communist propaganda. Recently film critics have begun to view it more generously.

(*Růžička and Mañas notice that their boss is talking to the porter and isn't paying attention, so they try to carry on outside the script.*)

Růžička: And how about some cinder blocks, Mrs. Mañas? You wouldn't happen to need a few of them?

Mañas: (*Turns to Karfík*) Excuse me, boss.

Karfík: Wait a second! (*Turns to the porter*) That's scandalous. Koudelka left during working hours. (*Turns to Mañas*) What do you want?

Mañas: If I can take cinder blocks.

(*The other mechanics debate whether cinder blocks are a bribe or not.*)

Mechanic 1: Cinder blocks are obviously a bribe.

Mechanic 2: Why they're nothing but a lot of junk all stuck together.

Karfík: No cinder blocks! Continue. (*Turns to the porter again.*)

Růžička: Listen, Mrs. Mañas, I've been looking at your teeth and I think you should stop by my office and I'll pull them for you. Free of charge, of course.

(*The mechanics laugh.*)

Karfík: What is it now?

Mañas: He wants to pull out my teeth.

Růžička: But I'm not giving him anything. I'm taking something from him.

Karfík: Bribery through barter! Unacceptable! (*Turns to the porter*) And what are you sitting here for, Prouza, if someone can just up and leave whenever he wants?

Though readers may be surprised that a film referred so openly to corruption, we should remember that conditions had changed over the course of the communist experiment. Cultural products from the fifties expressed all conflicts in black and white terms in order to persuade citizens of the ultimate victory of communism. By the seventies, when people had been convinced that there were no options but really existing socialism and enthusiasm had given way to routine, the strategies of the cultural commissars changed. Now artists were allowed and as we shall see even encouraged to take swipes at the system provided they pointed the way forward. The style of the criticism also helped. Rather than attacking bribery outright, the writers smuggle it into a gag. What could not be achieved in drama, could be stated in comedy.

*Jáchyme* owes its popularity not to this criticism, but to the sympathetic František, portrayed by the folksy comedian Luděk Sobota, and his hilarious adventures. The early seventies were one of the most dismal periods in Czech culture as thousands of writers, actors, and academics were thrown out of work in the post-invasion crackdown. The result was not only a lack of films worth watching, but also a general societal malaise. By identifying with the hapless but lovable František, *Jáchyme* was one of the first films that allowed people to feel good about themselves again.

The authors followed this film with probably their best work together. *Na samotě u lesa* (*Seclusion Near a Forest*, 1976) takes on the phenomena that more than any other characterized normalization: cottaging. After suppressing the Prague Spring and society's attempts to gain a measure of freedom for itself, the regime was compelled to offer a substitute in its place. The main substitute was easier access to consumer goods. Not just pork, but also dachas in the countryside.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> According to Leff, "By the late 1980s, Czechoslovakia ranked second in the world in the number of summer cottages per capita; as much as 80 percent of the population had access to a cottage through their extended families...As the saying went, a Czech's first job is his cottage, and his second one is the job where he makes the salary to pay for the cottage." Cf. Carol Skalnik Leff, *The Czech and Slovak Republics: Nation Versus State* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), p. 53-4.

Citizens for their part were eager to acquire cottages. The humiliation of the Russian invasion, a dead cultural scene, and the closing of the public sphere meant that people were eager to turn inwards. Socialist industrialization had also taken its toll on the urban environment – the air around cities like Ostrava or Ústí nad Labem had become a health hazard – making weekends outside the city more attractive. The result was that Friday afternoons became legendary for traffic jams on the roads leading out of the city.

It is in one of these traffic jams that *Na samotě u lesa* begins as the Lavička family heads to the highlands to look for a cottage. They find one that fits the bill, and the seventy-year old owner, the sturdy farmer Komárek, seems unable to keep up with the rigors of country life. The Lavičkas decide to rent a room in his cottage for the summer and thus become first in line to buy when Komárek sells his cow and moves in with his son in Slovakia.

During their weekends at the cottage, the Lavičkas come into contact with a variety of cottagers. The Zvons, for example, have bought an old mill and turned it into a virtual museum complete with a working water wheel and authentic sacks of flour (filled instead with sand). Another neighbor, the Kokeš family, has entered into a transaction common at the time: they bought a cottage complete with its elderly inhabitants who have the right to stay there until they die. Mr. Kokeš, however, has taken the initiative in forcing them out by digging a ditch in front of the doorway and relocating their toilet to a nearby hilltop.

Lavička, played by Svěrák, takes the exact opposite tack and befriends Komárek and the other natives. His problem is not with Komárek, but with his wife who cannot stand the damp cottage, the fleas that their children pick up, and the presence of Komárek. Ultimately, Lavička brings his physician/friend out to determine how long Komárek has left to live. The verdict: He'll be here longer than us. In the end, however, things turn out for the best. Lavička and the doctor save Komárek's life and the Lavička family reconciles itself to life with a new grandfather.

As in all of Smoljak and Svěrák's films, this one also contains numerous references to Czech *realie*. The pedantic but sympathetic Lavička, for example, explains to his children the tradition of *klekání* or evening bells (which in fact turn out to be empty beer bottles). After the death of a local resident, he describes to his children how every Czech picks a favorite song, usually a traditional folk tune, to be played at their funeral. Even more modern traditions, such as the bureaucratic hassles required to buy a cottage (stamps are needed from the land register, the geodesic office, the collective farm, the local national council, the regional national council, the financial office, the agricultural office, and a notary) are given space.

The message of the film is respect for nature, tradition, and one's fellow man. Though the regime provided numerous opportunities for exploiting others – and the film makes these opportunities very clear – things here turn out for the best when characters act honorably. The message is understated. As the future director Karel Smyczek remarked at the time, “laughter changes into a grin and then you realize that you don't feel like laughing at all.”

If *Na samotě u lesa* is the duo's strongest film with a typically Czech mixture of laughter and tears, their next film *Marečku, podejte mi pero* (Mareček, Please Hand Me a Pen, 1976) returns to the lighter mood of *Jáchyme* and is one of the most eagerly watched today. Most Czechs can quote from it by heart. The plot revolves around a factory foreman, Kroupa, who has to go to

night school to be qualified to run the soon-to-be computerized shop floor.<sup>6</sup> The comedy is accessible but intelligent with father-son roles reversed and the father in danger of failing out.

The film falls neatly into the Czech tradition of school-based comedies, and this one introduces foreign viewers to a number of classroom habits in the Czech lands.<sup>7</sup> Two of these, probably most unfamiliar for Americans, are the frequent spot oral quizzes and recitations from memory. Another is the public grading: students are told their grades out loud in front of the whole class. A phenomenon more specific to communism was the annual contest among classes throughout the republic to see which could collect the most scrap iron. (Two night-school students try to persuade the nerdy Hujer that they have found an old locomotive that would put their class on top and win him a brand new bicycle.) Again the authors drew on their personal experience. Both were originally teachers, Svěrák of Czech and Smoljak of mathematics.<sup>8</sup>

The plot of the film is driven by the conflict between Kroupa and the ambitious Hujer who is eager to his job as foreman. Hujer is a typical geek (thanks to the film the name is now a synonym for geek) who takes night school far too seriously, bringing the teacher a bag of fruit before each class and studying diligently for exams. He also represents a parody of the power-hungry communist. In one scene he stands above the shop-floor and proclaims: “This is beautiful. I’ve got you all in the palm of my hand. I see everything.” In the end, of course, Hujer’s book-learning is no match for Kroupa’s common sense.

If cottaging and adult school are things that Western viewers can imagine, the search for housing under communism was unique in world history.<sup>9</sup> Much of the population lived in state-owned apartments which could not be bought or sold, but only exchanged for other apartments. As a result, moving out of your apartment meant either having connections in the communist party or searching out another tenant to trade with. More inventive (and desperate) tenants discovered the possibility of a complicated series of swaps. This is where the film *Kulový blesk* (Circular Lightning, 1978) begins as the organizer of one of these swaps, Dr. Radosta, holds court.

Radosta: Sorry, everyone, I got held up on the number six, but I do have all the authorizations. (*Takes a file folder from his briefcase, puts it on the table, and adds a roll of paper he has been holding under his arm.*) Are we all here? Is anyone missing?

Woman: My husband unfortunately had to...

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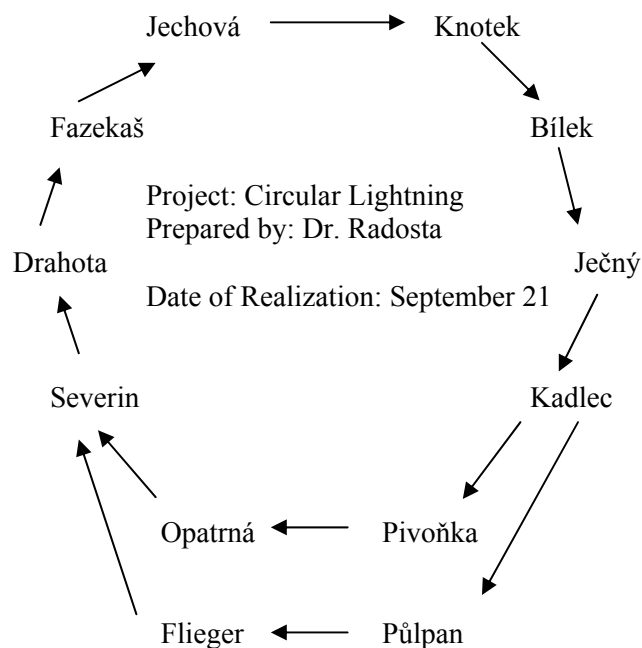
<sup>6</sup> Night school for adults was common in communist countries. As Eyal et al. write, “As Stalinism relaxed into the reform communism of the 1960s...it was not enough to be of humble origins and a Communist Party member. If you wanted to hold on to the job you were promoted into during the revolutionary period, you went back to school to get proper educational credentials.” Cf. Gil Eyal, Ivan Szelenyi, and Eleanor Townsley, *Making Capitalism Without Capitalists* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> The best known are *Škola základ života* (1938) and *Cesta do hlubin studákovy duše* (1939) based on novels by Jaroslav Žák. Another is Svěrák’s telling of his own school years in *Obecná škola* (1991). See also Olga Nytrová and Václav Strachota, *Študenti a kantoři aneb Hvězdy českého filmu za školou* (Praha: Format: 1999).

<sup>8</sup> The film’s title refers to the habit of one senile teacher who always refers to the student sitting in front of his desk as Mareček. Svěrák chose the name of one of his former students who had always disrupted class.

<sup>9</sup> Even before the communist putsch, the apartment search had been a theme in Czech art. One of the most popular films of 1947 was Bořivoj Zeman’s *Nevíte o bytě?* (Have You Heard About a Flat?) which describes the housing shortage after the war. For a look at housing under the first republic, readers may also want to consult *Dům na předměstí* by the humorist Karel Poláček (translated by Peter Kussi as *What Ownership’s All About*).

- Radosta: That doesn't matter. Mainly that one of you is here. (*Points to a chair.*)  
 Jechová! Have you been to the Knoteks'? (*Jechová nods.*) Did you see the apartment? Satisfied? Excellent. Knotek and Bílek – in contact?
- Knotek: Yes, we looked it over and it's fine for us.
- Radosta: Good...Let's take a look at a diagram of the whole plan. (*Puts a diagram on the wall.*)



- Radosta: Friends, this is how the situation looks. Everyone has his own place and his own job. The whole thing is going to happen fast, all at once. That's why I call it Circular Lightning. Yes, if anyone doesn't understand, they should go ahead and ask...
- Man: Excuse me, could you repeat the phrase before? I didn't understand the name.
- Radosta: Circular Lightning. It's the code name.
- Man: (*Nervously*) But this is all within the bounds of the law, I hope?
- Radosta: Of course. The name is just for our internal use.
- Fazekaš: (*The head of a large gypsy family*) Don't worry about it. We'll just get our things together and go. Right, Eržika?
- Radosta: Fazekaš! How many times do I have to explain to you that this is a 12-exchange? It's no take the blankets, children and go! Do you know Professor Plišek? An academic. The state prize for physics. An honorary doctorate in Munich.<sup>10</sup> And so on. And do you know his greatest piece of work? He said it himself. A 10-exchange. Organizing it took half a year and then a year of convalescence. And we've got two more exchanges. If we pull it off, we'll be the only ones in the country. And maybe the world....
- Drahotu: I don't understand the diagram. The Kadlecs' are going where?
- Radosta: Friends, on the designated day this circle is going to close, right? And the Kadlecs are getting divorced so they end up in two separate flats. Fortunately, a

<sup>10</sup> In the film, this is changed to Reykjavik.

- wedding between Opatrná and Flieger makes up for that. In other words, starting with Severin the chain connects and everything gets back on track.
- Flieger: If you don't mind, doctor. Since you already mentioned it, I'd like to invite everyone here to our wedding. It's on May 22<sup>nd</sup> at the Nusle Town Hall.
- Radosta: Right, it's good that you reminded me. I've changed it for you, because you have to get married before the move. So, whoever wants to come to the wedding, it's not on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, but the 19<sup>th</sup> of May. And it's not in the Nusle Town Hall, but in the Žižkov Town Hall. Understood?
- Flieger: But that can't be. My friend is driving in and he took the 22<sup>nd</sup> off from work. We don't have time to change it.
- Radosta: I'll take care of it.
- Flieger: And the music's already ordered.
- Radosta: I'll take care of everything....
- Knotek: (*Internal monologue*) I read 286 advertisements. I responded to 165. I looked at 32 apartments. 29 people looked at my apartment. I have a wife, two children, one room, and a kitchen. I want a bigger apartment. And so I got onto this mammoth merry-go-round of Dr. Radosta.
- Radosta: This is the biggest project in the history of moving.

Knotek, played by one of the era's biggest stars Josef Abrham, is the everyman whose internal monologues accompany the trials and tribulations of the twelve-exchange.<sup>11</sup> For example, he has to serve as best man at the wedding of two exchangers and repeatedly has to bribe one participant to say in the exchange (she needs a washing machine and a coal cellar closer to the apartment). After several such encounters Knotek remarks: "The worst of it all is that a person has to communicate with people with whom he has nothing at all in common."

Indeed, the film gives us an inside glimpse at several curiosities of housing under communism. One is the divorced couple forced to turn their single apartment into two separate apartments. Another is four family members living in a single room. "Our family is suffocating here," says the mother. Easily the best off are the gypsy family who camp outside even before the exchange starts. As Radosta comments, "When it comes to moving those people are the most reliable." While this may all seem too critical of the socialist system, in fact citizens had become so used to these processes that it was almost as if they were making fun of the weather.

The drama climaxes on the day of the big move as everyone has to move out and then move in with perfect timing. First, the always-hesitant Mrs. Jechová gets cold feet, threatening to unwind the entire exchange. Knotek's monologue hits the mark: "And here it is. The biggest project in the history of moving ends in the kitchen of Mrs. Jechová." More seriously, one of the exchangers, Mr. Bílek, is found dead. Though he has signed all the necessary forms, the law says that the exchange is not legally binding until he moves into his new home. The organizer Radosta thus decides that "Mr. Bílek is going to die in his new apartment." In the end, everything turns out for the best, leaving Knotek to add the final period: "A nice apartment. I'm not going to want to move out when I get old."

While *Kulový blesk* could be dismissed as simply ratifying the status quo, I believe that it is better seen as ratifying the struggles of individuals to do their best in difficult circumstances. Like their Jára Cimrman Theater, the film is an ode to Czech cleverness, to zlaté ruce – the golden hands

<sup>11</sup> For more on Czech actors, see *Hvězdy českého filmu I-IV* (Praha: Fragment, 1998) and Pavel Taussig, *České filmové nebe* (Praha: Brána, 2001). There are also celebrity biographies of just about every major (and minor) Czech actor.

that have enabled Czechs to get by any obstacle set before them. It suggests that humanism and morality allow one to survive in an immoral time.

The film *Trhák* (Blockbuster, 1980) takes the same approach as *Kulový blesk* but now applies it to the filmmaking process under communism, taking us from the script's approval to the final product. The film opens with the school teacher Jiša arriving at Barrandov, the main Czech film studio. He has been summoned there to discuss a script he submitted. The first scenes go like this:

Scene 2: In the Elevator

Elevator Operator: You don't work here, do you?

Jiša: No, I wrote a film script.

Elevator Operator: And what's it about?

Jiša: Well, it takes place in a little village. I lived there for a long time...

Elevator Operator: And is it going to make us laugh?

Jiša: Well, there are some light moments, but mainly I want it to be truthful, straight out of life.

Scene 3: In the hallway of the Barrandov studio

*(Jiša walks down a long hallway along next to a costumier and helps her by carrying hangers with historical costumes.)*

Jiša: I worked there as a teacher and rural folk seemed to me simpler, more sincere. And I wanted to show that in the film.

Scene 4: In the waiting room of the story editor's office

*(The secretary snacks on yogurt and leafs through her appointment book, largely ignoring Jiša.)*

Jiša: Really it's an ordinary, simple story, just like it is in real life.

*(The doors burst open and a purple-faced man bursts out of the story editor's office.)*

Jiša: *(Quickly stands up and approaches him)* I'm Jiša.

Šus: Not interested!

Moucha: Come on in.

Scene 5: In the story editor's office

Moucha: We're going to film it.

Jiša: Really?

Moucha: It's already in production. Everyone's wild about it. That was the producer who was just in here.

Jiša: Really?

Moucha: Of course, we decided that it has to be a glitzy epic musical spectacle. In short, a blockbuster.

The hero of the film within a film is Ticháček who arrives at small rural village as a messenger of agricultural progress. He is welcomed by the local national council and sets to testing his new invention: the use of explosives for spreading manure. He also falls in love with the local schoolteacher who only realizes that she loves him as chunks of cow dung rain down over her after the big explosion.

This is all, of course, a masterful parody of socialist realism whose heroes found happiness in building a communist paradise. The humble Ticháček (the name itself means quiet one) could easily have starred in an agitprop film from the fifties. Indeed, a small child asks his teacher, "Mr. Ticháček is a hero, isn't he?" (We also see the director casting child actors by having them

recite this line.) Of course, the fact that he is a hero for moving dung and that the idyllic village is actually a stage set undermines the whole premise.

Besides cleverly satirizing socialist realism, again using humor to avoid the censor, the film takes a poke at the film industry under normalization. In contrast to the relatively humble films of the Czech *nouvelle vague*, the seventies saw a move in the direction of big, expensive productions. It is thus no coincidence that the entire film depends on a huge explosion. The producers also decide to turn Jiša's simple story into a musical with the characters, played by pop music stars, breaking into song at every available opportunity.<sup>12</sup>

What may surprise viewers is how well the authors' descriptions fit American reality. Consider the following discussion among the production team during shooting.

“We've got problems with the budget. Building this village has ruined us. Now the director wants to blow up half of it.” “Not half, but that explosion has to be there. What we don't need though is to pay for a hotel room for the screenwriter so that he can pester us every day on the set.”...“Send him home. I don't care. Just so that you find a way to save some money on the explosion.” “What matters to me is that it's glitzy, but at the same time a pure Czech film.” “A blockbuster.”

It might not be a stretch to say that the explosion is the communist equivalent of Cameron's sinking of the Titanic.

The lack of money, however, means that the production suffers. The director has to splice in scenes from other films, including *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. When a story editor notices that a funeral procession features the actor playing the dead man, the scene cannot be reshot. Instead the scriptwriter has to think up a way to explain it – the second man is the deceased's identical twin. The big explosion has to be shot by three cameras just in case two of them do not work.

Surprisingly, filmmaking under that most repressive of regimes – Czechoslovak normalization – seems to have much in common with Hollywood filmmaking. This is not to say they are the same. Except for a brief period, Hollywood did not ban directors and actors and is not averse to criticisms of the establishment. Yet, normalization did borrow one important element of the Hollywood formula: it tried to make mass-entertainment that titillated the senses, appealed to deeply ingrained values, but required absolutely no thinking.

Smoljak and Svěrák's films avoid these traps. Though they have in common with Hollywood an emphasis on strong plotting – almost a rarity in Czech film – they never descend into gimmicks or showiness. The drama always rests on characters having to make important decisions, decisions that affect themselves and others. The message is a humanistic one, but with enough strings attached that it is not pure sentiment.

The two screenwriters' final collaborative work (in film at least) was produced just before the Velvet Revolution. It is this film, *Nejistá sezóna* (Uncertain Season, 1987), which gives the clearest glimpse into their own lives by describing a season in the life of the theater to which they devoted most of their artistic energy. In 1969, the two had been among the co-founders of the

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<sup>12</sup> Musicals have always been popular in the Czech lands. The four most watched films of the sixties were all musicals. The nineties has also seen a musical boom in Prague's theaters. Right now the city is home to at least a dozen productions of foreign and domestic musicals with more on the way.

Jara Cimrman Theater that features plays devoted to a fictional Czech genius from the turn of the century. It soon became and still is the most popular theater in Prague, though it was never a full-time job for any of its participants.

The film gives an accurate portrait of life in their theater and tells us something about the lives of all artists under really existing socialism.<sup>13</sup> It begins with the company moving out of the theater where they had previously performed. Why? Because the theater is being converted into offices: “This year’s harvest yielded a lot of bureaucrats. We’ll need more offices and fewer theaters.” They move into an old dilapidated theater on the outskirts of Prague because all of the better theaters are being used as storehouses. Their fans, however, still manage to track them down: “Gentlemen, there’s a line out front.” “For oranges?” “No, for you, you idiot.”

Most telling are the theater’s struggles with the authorities. As they move into the new theater they are told that they have to put together a new show by the end of the year. The reason: the next year is an anniversary (of what is unclear – it could be the Russian Revolution, the Czech putsch, the founding of the Czech Communist Party or any of a thousand other events) and there’ll be no money for anything but anniversary-oriented pieces. They have to do all this despite the fact that all the members of the company have full-time jobs and can only rehearse for a couple of hours between quitting time and their evening performances.

Before they can settle down in their new theater they also need the approval of the District National Council. The Council initially sends its members to observe the performances incognito and report on them. (The actors try to pick the Council members out of the audience. They’re the ones not laughing.) When the trial month is over, a meeting takes place between the authors and representatives of the Council. It goes like this (Svěrák’s character is named Rybník and Smoljak’s Kydal):

- Inspector: Look, comrades. You yourselves certainly know that you’re a problem company. We don’t have to persuade you of that. You know just as well as we do why you had to leave your last theater.
- Kydal: We don’t know why.
- Inspector: Come on now.
- Rybník: We really don’t know why. We were told that they’re turning the theater into offices.
- Inspector: Look, we’ll put it this way. Your theater simply doesn’t meet our current cultural political demands. You fulfil a recreational function. People laugh here, especially young theatergoers. My children, for example, know you better than I do. They like it. But you write about the old Austrian Empire and we need a company that expresses itself to today’s world.
- Kydal: If I may. But we also express ourselves to today’s world. Otherwise people wouldn’t be laughing...
- Inspector: Look, comrades, we followed the public’s reaction. Don’t deny that people here find all sorts of meanings...
- Kydal: You know, Rybník and I have spoken about this many times. We’re not at all happy when the audience attributes something to our texts that’s not there. In fact, it’s proof that at that moment we don’t understand each other. But why is that? Because right now in Czechoslovakia there’s no real satire, no political cabaret. If there were, people wouldn’t look for an allegory in every sentence.

<sup>13</sup> For a more complete history of the theater by Zdeněk Svěrák, see *Divadlo Járy Cimrmana: Dodatky* (Praha: Paseka, 1993). I have translated this history into English.

Vice-Chair: You see, comrades. And what did we ask for? For satire.  
 Manager: Positive, constructive satire.  
 Rybník: I don't know. I wouldn't want to launch into an analysis of the term positive, constructive satire. Who knows if there isn't something irreconcilable in joining those concepts. We don't know how to do that kind of satire and it doesn't even attract us. We simply think that what we're doing is useful.

What may be surprising here is that this late in the game, the authorities were still insisting on political engagement. The conventional wisdom says that by the seventies and eighties, the regime had given up on expecting enthusiasm and had settled simply for co-existence as in Kadar's famous phrase "He who is not against us is with us." Slavoj Žižek claims that the last thing the communists wanted was for citizens to act out communism; according to him that would destroy system.<sup>14</sup> Yet, at least in Czechoslovakia, this is precisely what the authorities did want.<sup>15</sup>

Though the company survives the vetting of the National Council (only because Prague 10 has 160 000 inhabitants but lacks a theater), they also have to get their new play approved by the dramatic arts agency. This involves a closed performance for a group of functionaries who have been forbidden to laugh. When they gather for the inevitable discussion, the authors are again reproached for lack of political engagement. "Let's say when you're talking about the expedition to the mountains, why couldn't you, for example, on the way there see a construction site with a worker who is leaning on his shovel during working hours and isn't working. And there it is!"

The functionaries also insist on a primitive form of political correctness. Thus, one member of the District National Committee objects to the line "A warm beer is worse than a frigid German." "What if Germans come to the performance? They would be offended. If I was in Germany and I heard "a frigid Czech," I would be offended." The authors' objection that Germans do not attend their theater and would not understand the play is of no avail. Similarly, they run into trouble when the character of Death is in a hurry to take care of his victim because "There's a brawl right now at the Swan Pub in Tanvald and that gypsy has been running around the bar for half an hour with a knife in his back." They are advised to replace the gypsy with a horse trader because there are too few of the latter left to offend.

Because the film is full of ordinary conversation among members of the theater, the authors have the opportunity to air a number of personal grievances about society under communism. The first is the misuse of language. Svěrák and Smoljak continually remind their colleagues that: "On stage we have to use good Czech. That was true for Tyl [a 19th c. Czech dramatist] and it's still true today." One of the actors is so incensed by hearing radio announcers speak about the "victory of Lendl" that he writes an angry letter to the authorities: "I'm an old man. When I cross the bridge of Charles on the way to the Theater of the Nation to see [Smetana's] Wall of the Devil, I'll reconcile myself to the fact that you've won. But I warn you, it will be a victory of Pyrrhus, formerly known as a Pyrrhic victory."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> This may have been true in the more liberal Yugoslavia. Cf. Robert S. Boynton, "Enjoy Your Zizek!" *Lingua Franca* 8:7, October 1998.

<sup>15</sup> A recent theatrical review ends with the following words: "In the program, Petr Markov puts forward a thesis about the cold war and Usama bin Ladin. It's hard to believe what one can find in Chevallier's delightful satire of hypocritical bourgeoisie. Perhaps the author got confused about the date and thought that he had to prove to the censor that the piece was politically engaged." Jana Machalická, "Socialistický muzikál znovu na jevišti." *Lidové Noviny*, December 10, 2001.

<sup>16</sup> Svěrák currently hosts a television program devoted to the Czech language entitled *Diktat* (Dictation). For a complete account of the deformation of language under communism, see Petr Fidelius, *Řeč komunistické moci*. (Praha: Triáda, 1998).

A second is the decline of craftsmanship. The country has always been proud of its artisans, referring to their “golden hands”. Svěrák, however, several times describes his encounters with the new breed of craftsmen. One shows up at this house and leaves his tools there. “I’ve had his bag for three months...Do you understand? A bag with his tools which he needs to do his work.”

That a film like *Nejistá sezóna* could be made at all under Czechoslovakia’s repressive regime is something of a miracle.<sup>17</sup> But as Svěrák remembers, by the late eighties (the film was made in 1987) the regime was afraid to ban anything. Apparatchiks already saw which way the wind was blowing and had started to cover their tracks. Nevertheless, the film ends on an uncertain note. As Smoljak and Svěrák leave the theater after their premiere they run into members of the certification commission. They are told to “Go have a good time. [Your friends] are waiting for you. They’ll be another opportunity to talk some more.”

That, however, was communism’s last breath. On November 17, 1989, a planned parade got out of control and sparked protests leading to the regime’s fall. The entire world that Smoljak and Svěrák had faithfully portrayed vanished. Bribes largely disappeared from daily life. Real talent became more important than mere diplomas. Film and theater were freed to pursue whatever themes they wished. Even the tradition of weekend cottaging soon mutated into visits to hypermarkets in the suburbs.

Nevertheless, the films they made in the seventies and eighties are important testimony to an era that most Czechs have quickly forgotten. Their achievement is singular in a number of ways. Most obviously, the films are well-written with intelligent jokes and sympathetic characters. In an era, when filmmakers preferred to take the easy path of fantasy or slapstick, Smoljak and Svěrák took on the lives that people were actually living.<sup>18</sup> As the repressive normalization regime forced the vast majority of citizens into ugly moral compromises, these films gave them realistic examples of people trying to wend their way through these dilemmas.<sup>19</sup>

In each film, the main character – the hapless František, the nature-loving Lavička, the grumpy Kroupa, the everyman Knotek, the earnest Jíša, and Svěrák and Smoljak themselves – struggles to do the right thing. To not hurt others, to live morally. And they do so by fighting against the bureaucratic system of communism. Pavel Taussig writes, “They stand up for the weaker and less powerful, towards whom their more ravenous fellow citizens are inconsiderate. They urge us to forbearance and tolerance.”<sup>20</sup> Havel might not say they are living in truth, but they are not in a completely different moral universe.

Communism has been described as a system that made activities people usually take for granted into difficult challenges. In these films, these challenges are accurately portrayed. As Pavel Taussig puts it, “They drew material for the majority of their films from their own life experiences and knowledge. That’s why their effort to give a truthful account is so palpable. ...They reveal the charming – happy and touching – expressions of Čapek’s ‘ordinary life.’”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> The film even includes a pointed reference to the Muslim fundamentalists who burned the library of Alexandria.

<sup>18</sup> See my “The Other Face of Czech Film”.

<sup>19</sup> Though few Czechs had the courage to follow Havel’s exhortation “to live in truth,” many were able to act decently and positively in the limited space the regime allowed. Both Smoljak and Sverak, for example, signed the anti-Charta condemning Charta 77, but they did so only to be able to continue their theater which they felt gave citizens something of undeniable value.

<sup>20</sup> Pavel Taussig, “O Národní Charakter Filmového Humoru” in *Filmové komedie*, p. 188

<sup>21</sup> Taussig, p. 188.

But this is an ordinary life full of challenges unfamiliar to Westerners making their documentation of it all the more valuable.

Indeed, they get so close to Czech life that Taussig goes on to remark that “Language barriers and a distinctive national mentality mean that only Czechs can really savor the film humor of Ladislav Smoljak and Zdeněk Svěrák in all its layers and meanings.”<sup>22</sup> There is some truth in this assessment. The films I have described here are not usually available abroad in subtitled versions. In this essay I have provided a gloss for some of the details, but I have skipped many scenes whose translation would require arduous explanations.

Humor is one thing that I have not mentioned so far, though it unites almost all of the scenes I have cited. For Czechs, it is probably the prime attraction of these films. It may be a surprise that in the oppressive years of normalization comedy could take root. Yet, it was precisely comedy that could restore some of the self-confidence the country had lost after the Russian invasion. It was the only genre too that could accurately capture the small absurdities of the late communist system. An era given the official label ‘normalization’ could only attract comedic writers with a sense for life’s ironies.

In sum, these films provide an important eyewitness account of the life of Czech culture during one of its most difficult eras.<sup>23</sup> That Smoljak and Svěrák not only detail this era, but also make light its pretensions only add to their importance. Though working under arduous conditions, the duo managed to find a way to smuggle in what was important: that some ordinary Czechs still managed to live their lives with grace, honor, and humor.

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<sup>22</sup> Taussig, p. 189.

<sup>23</sup> The writer Ludvík Vaculík argues that in some respects the ‘normalized’ seventies and eighties were even worse than the Stalinist fifties. Cf. *A Cup of Coffee with My Interrogator* (London: Readers International, 1987).

**Films Written by Zdeněk Svěrák**

<i>Year</i>	<i>Czech Title</i>	<i>English Title</i>	<i>Director</i>	<i>Box Office</i>	<i>Cinema Magazine Rating (0-100)</i>
1974	Kdo hledá zlaté dno**	Who Searches for Gold	Menzel	158103	30
1974	Jáchyme, hod' ho stroje*	Joachim, Throw Him into the Machine	Lipský	2928609	90
1976	Na samotě u lesa*	Seclusion Near a Forest	Menzel	981135	80
1976	Marečku, podejte mi pero*	Mareček, Please Hand Me a Pen	Lipský	2062306	80
1977	Ať žijí duchové!**	Long Live Ghosts!	Lipský	1153983	60
1978	Kulový blesk*	Ball-Lightning	Podskalský/ Smoljak	453690	60
1980	Vrchní, přehni	Run, Waiter, Run	Smoljak	1533393	80
1980	Trhák*	Blockbuster	Podskalský	984662	50
1982	Jára Cimrman ležící spící*	Jara Cimrman, Lying, Sleeping	Smoljak	627030	50
1983	Rozpuštěný a vypuštěný*	Dissolved and Drained Away	Smoljak	457638	50
1983	Tři Veteráni	The Three Veterans	Lipský	1185079	90
1984	Co je vám, doktore?***	What's Wrong With You, Doctor?	Olmer	404004	70
1985	Vesničko má středisková	My Sweet Little Village	Menzel	4428556	100
1987	Nejistá sezóna*	Uncertain Season	Smoljak	249448	70
1991	Obecná škola	The Elementary School	J. Svěrák	1040135	100
1993	Život a neobyčejná dobrodružství vojáka Ivana Čonkina	The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Čonkin	Menzel	134298	60
1994	Akumulátor I**	Accumulator I	J. Svěrák	390412	70
1996	Kolja	Kolya	J. Svěrák	1346000	90
1997	Lotrando a Zubejda	Lotrando and Zubejda	Smyczek		
2000	Tmavomodrý svět	Dark Blue World	J. Svěrák		

Source: Václav Březina, *Lexikon českého filmu*, (Praha: Cinema, 1996).

Note: \* = written with Ladislav Smoljak. \*\* = written with others.