

## Review: Czech film in 2020

**With the arrival of the new year, the time is here for taking stock and looking back at the most important events in Czech cinema in 2020.**

The ongoing worldwide COVID-19 pandemic had a considerable impact on Czech film industry in 2020. All the more important, however, we find it to review this challenging year and remember important events of the previous 12 months, which, despite the difficult situation, brought many positives in the area of production, distribution and international presentation of all genres.

Unfortunately, 2020 brought also sad news. Four outstanding personalities of Czech cinema left us last year. Ivan Passer, one of the figures of Czechoslovak New Wave and author of *Intimate Lighting* Ivan Passer, passed away at the age of 86 in January, followed by oscar-winning director Jiří Menzel at the age of 82, after a long-term illness complicated by the COVID-19 in September. Filmmaker and teacher at FAMU, Karel Vachek, who strongly influenced several generations of documentary filmmakers and made his mark on history as an author of large documentary opuses, died at the age of 80 at the end of December. Only at 54 years of age, another exceptional filmmaker passed away last year: Artemio Benki, a director and producer with French roots, whose *Solo* has in recent years travelled the world festivals. All three filmmakers left Czech cinema a legacy worth following.

### Czech films in cinemas

In 2020, 29 feature fiction films were made, from which 19 managed to get a cinema-release, despite of the spring and autumn closure of Czech cinemas. Possibly, the absence of new Hollywood films in cinemas contributed to the success of some of them, which reached the attendance comparable to “regular” years.

With the attendance of 312,000 viewers, the romantic comedy *Far Too Personal* by Marta Ferencová became the most successful film of 2020 among fiction features, followed by the sequel of a popular comedy from the wine yards of South Moravia *The Grapes 3. Charlatan*, the period drama directed by Agnieszka Holland, portraying Czech healer Jan Mikolášek, reached 250,000 viewers.

Out of 34 feature documentaries produced last year, 17 made it to Czech cinemas. *Caught in the Net* by Vít Klusák and Barbora Chalupová became a real phenomenon and its three various versions (the original one, *Caught in the Net: Behind School* and *Caught in the Net 18+*) have been seen by almost 560 000 viewers, which makes it the most successful documentary in the whole Czech history.

The second place, far behind *Caught in the Net* but still with the excellent attendance of 28,000, belonged to the music portrait *Meky* by Šimon Šafránek. The film following dramatic mountaineering expedition, *K2: My Way* by Jana Počtová, has attracted 13,500 cinemagoers.

Although no Czech feature animation made it to Czech cinemas during the summer liberalisation of the anti-COVID measures, the world premiere of Jan Balej’s adventure puppet film *A Colourful Dream* took place in a cinema and with audience - during Anifilm in Liberec, which was, as one of a few festivals of the last year, held in a regular physical way. Selected episodes from the series for children

*Hungry Bear Tales* by artistic duo Kateřina Karhánková and Alexandra Májová about culinary adventures of inseparable hairy friends Ned and Mishka appeared in Czech cinemas too.

Some films even made it to cinemas abroad. Following the festival premiere of *Charlatan*, several international distributors showed their interest and Films Boutique succeeded to sell the film to more than 15 territories, including USA (Strand Releasing), France (KMBO), Spain (Vercine), Great Britain and Ireland (AX1), Australia (Vendetta Films), and Latin America (Great Movies). *Shadow Country* was acquired by a US distributor too: the company is Menemsha Films.

*The Painted Bird*, internationally most successful Czech film of 2019 was, despite the complications caused by the pandemic, distributed in 15 countries, including USA (IFC Films), Great Britain (Eureka), Benelux (September Film Distribution), and Japan (Transformer). Ten more territories will join in 2021, including Canada (Raven Banner Entertainment) and Turkey (Bir Film).

### **International festival success**

The beginning of 2020 looked very promising for Czech cinema. In February, Berlinale, in its section Berlinale Special Gala, hosted the world premiere of Agnieszka Holland's *Charlatan*. The co-production drama *Servants* by Slovak director Ivan Ostrochovský from the environment of a clerical seminary in 1980s participated in the new competitive section Encounters, and Berlinale Retrospective presented the restored version of Alfréd Radok's war drama *Distant Journey*. Furthermore, Czech short animated film *Leaf* by Belarusian director Aliona Baranova was world premiered at the Generation section, and an experimental documentary *FREM* by Viera Čákanyová was presented at Forum.

When, after several months of uncertainty, the list of films selected for Cannes was announced, Czech cinema celebrated again, as the Lithuanian film by Šarūnas Bartas *In the Dusk*, with Czech Sirena Film as one of its six co-producers, was a part of it. The film's world premiere took place in the main competition of San Sebastian IFF in September.

The autumn 2020 belonged to period films and experienced filmmakers. Black and white drama from the end of WW2 *Shadow Country* by Bohdan Sláma made it, among just 50 films in total, to BFI London IFF which was held online. Czech cinema was strongly represented at Warsaw IFF, with, in the main competition, Martin Šulík's *The Man with Hare Ears*, which was awarded for the best direction, *Droneman* by Petr Zelenka, and the coproduction *Unidentified*, directed by Bogdan George Apetri. Special Screenings section presented *Shadow Country*, Slávek Horák's biopic about first Czech president *Havel* and Ondřej Trojan's comedy *The Banger*.

The beginning of 2020 was marked by a triple Czech documentary participation at IFF Rotterdam. The last film of Karel Vachek, *Communism and the Net or the End of Representative Democracy*, a portrait of an outstanding Czech filmmaker Jan Švankmajer by Adam Ol'ha and Jan Daňhel titled *Alchemical Furnace*, and *The Vasulka Effect*, co-produced by Radim Procházka in cooperation with Czech Television, were in the festival's programme. The documentary about pioneers of video art, Woody and Steina Vasulka, was later also successfully presented at the DOC NYC festival.

Thanks to the flexible reaction of documentary film festivals to the pandemic and their transition to online, several Czech films had a chance to shine during the following months too. Already mentioned *Caught in the Net*, radically breaking the hitherto taboo topic of online child abuse, was screened in the international competition of CPH:DOX. The same festival presented the documentary about epochal art project of a Danish artist *A Sarcophagus for a Queen* by Pavel Štingl.

Five films represented Czech cinema at Visions du Réel in Nyon. The artistic portrait *Traces of a Landscape* by Petr Záruba, produced by Alice Tabery (Cinepoint) was selected for the medium length films competition, while the second feature documentary of Martin Páv, *Wolves at the Borders* produced by Frame Films and *State Funeral* by Sergey Loznitsa, coproduced by Czech company nutprodukce and Czech Television, were screened in Grand Angle. Eliška Cílková's *Pripyat Piano*, produced by Gamma Pictures of Jindřich Andrš appeared in short films competition and Opening Scenes section premiered the short animated documentary *Space* by FAMU student Nora Štrbová. Two of the above-mentioned films, *Traces of a Landscape* and *Pripyat Piano* were also selected and screened later by Italian Festival dei Popoli.

The autumn festival season was dominated by the documentary debut of Jindřich Andrš titled *A New Shift*, which became the winner of the MDR Film Prize at DOK Leipzig and the Best Czech Documentary Film 2020 at the Ji.hlava IDFF (Special mention went to *Wolves at the Borders*). The documentary essay *White on White* by Viera Čákanyová scored in Jihlava's international competitive Opus Bonum section.

The successful autumn culminated by the participation of three films at Amsterdam's IDFA. Vitaly Manský's *Gorbachev: Heaven* coproduced by Hypermarket Film and Czech Television was screened in the festival's international competition, while in the competition of medium length films, Helena Třeštková presented in world premiere her time-lapse documentary about aging prostitute, titled *Anny*. Aforementioned short animation documentary *Space* by Nora Štrbová was screened in the Best of Fest section of IDFA.

In 2020, like in previous years, several Czech short animation films stood up to the international competition. The first months of the year still echoed the Student Oscar winning *Daughter* by Daria Kashcheeva and *Sh\_t Happens* by the directorial duo Michaela Mihályi and Dávid Štumpf from 2019. Both films were selected for the prestigious Sundance Film Festival and *Daughter* won the award for the best short animated film. *Sh\_t Happens* was soon after Sundance presented at one of the world most important short film festivals, in Clermont-Ferrand.

Four animated films also made it to Annecy IFF: *Way of Sylvie* by FAMU student Verica Pospíšilová Kordić, the coproduction film *Carrousel* by Belgian director Jasmine Elsen, an episode from already mentioned *Hungry Bear Tales* titled *Truffles* and a videoclip from the P/\ST music project to a song *Anxiety* directed by Alžběta Suchanová and Nora Štrbová.

Worth mentioning from the autumn film festivals is also participation of Martin Kukaľ's *At the End of the World* and Jakub Kouřil's *Watersprite* at Cinekid in Amsterdam or Alexandra Májová's *Washing Machine* in the short film competition of Black Nights FF in Tallin.

### **Film projects raising interest abroad**

A Czech project traditionally appears at the coproduction market When East Meets West. In 2020, it was *Ordinary Failures* presented by its director Cristina Grosan and producer Marek Novák (Xova Film). The makers won Pop Up Film Residency Award, thanks to which the director and scriptwriter Klára Vlasáková had an opportunity to work on the script for three weeks under the leadership of experienced mentors.

At the postponed coproduction market Sofia Meetings, film editor Evženie Brabcová together with the producer Peter Badač (BFILM.cz) presented her directorial debut *Backwoods*. Although Locarno IFF was cancelled last year, its industry program focusing on Asian cinema, Open Doors, took place

online – and with Czech participation: the project *Fruit Gathering* directed by Aung Phyo, developed in coproduction with the Czech D1film of Vít Janeček, won CNC Development Grant.

In November, the long-awaited feature project of Zuzana Kirchnerová *Caravan*, she prepares together with the producer Pavla Janoušková Kubečková from nutprodukce, was awarded at the closing ceremony of TorinoFilm Lab with €40.000 prize for production (TorinoFilmLab Production Award). Three Czech films will participate at Les Arcs IFF Industry Village, which was shifted to January 2021. The new project of director Michal Hogenauer, *The Last One Turns Off the Light*, developed by producer Marek Novák (Xova Film) is part of the Co-production Village selection, the new film by director Olmo Omerzu and producer Jiří Konečný (endorfilm) *The Bird Atlas* and Slovak-Polish-Czech *Applause* by Juraj Lehotský co-produced by Black Balance on the Czech side will be presented in the Works in Progress section.

Although many industry activities were due to the pandemic shifted to online environment, Czech documentary projects participated at several coproduction platforms and international workshops. Thanks to the cooperation of French Cinéma du Réel and the Czech Film Fund, *Every Single Minute* by Erika Hníková, following a couple raising their son to one day become professional athlete, participated at ParisDOC Works in Progress. The same project, developed by Jiří Konečný (endorfilm), was presented at Docs in Progress, within Karlovy Vary IFF online industry programme, together with *The Act of Life* by director Adéla Komrzý and producer Pavla Janoušková Kubečková (nutprodukce), dealing with the subject of death and how to cope with it.

Czech documentaries were visible also at the online market Marché du Film in Cannes. Haruna Honcoop's project *Olympic Halftime*, exploring the impact of the Olympics on the places hosting them was presented in HAF Goes to Cannes. The same project was presented at Sunny Side of the Doc, where the film's producer Vít Janeček (D1film), tried to find a coproduction partner.

Prague coproduction forum East Doc Platform, which managed to take place last year just before the strict anti-pandemic measures were introduced, is traditionally the place presenting numerous Czech documentary projects. Among awarded projects was formally innovative *Comfortable Century* by director Jaroslav Kratochvíl and producer Petr Polák, the Roma-partisan period drama *How I Became a Partisan* by debuting director Vera Lacková as well as *Celibacy* by Libuše Rudinská.

Five projects appeared at the renowned international documentary workshop dok.incubator, focusing on films in the stage of editing. Czech-Italian coproduction project *Brotherhood*, which was a part of international selection, already mentioned *The Act of Life*, Czech-Slovak *At Full Throttle* by Miro Remo, the joint film of Tomáš and Petra Hlaváček *Housing Against Everyone* and *The Most Beautiful City in the World* by the creative duo Matouš Bičák and Marie-Magdalena Kochová.

Two animated projects with the involvement of the director Martin Smatana, who made his mark by his film *The Kite* in 2019 - *Hello, Summer!* and *I Want to Know!* - were presented last year in Annecy at Mifa Piches market programme. The former is developed by the director himself, the latter together with the producer Peter Badač (BFilm.cz).

Even stronger was naturally the Czech participation at CEE Animation Forum, taking place online during Anifilm, hosting presentations of the feature special effects film *Fichtelberg*, the short film *Love, Dad*, the series *A Little Pilot*, *Ormhildur the Brave* and *Baldies*, the winner of the audience award, and *No Happily Ever After*, awarded by the main jury prize in TV series category.

The Czech Republic left its traces at Junior Co-production Market of Cinekid, where director Klára Jůzová together with the producer Martin Jůza presented their series project *Dinofables*.

## Supported films

The Czech Film Fund, in coordination with other professional organizations that take part in running the Czech film industry, quickly and flexibly responded to the situation caused by the pandemic and anti-pandemic measures, announcing several extraordinary calls. In total, this “rescue package” provided a total of €3.4 million to cover the worst period.

The first call, with allocation of €1.9 million aimed to support reopening of cinemas, with the primary focus on ensuring safe operation with respect to COVID-19, promoting Czech and European films, and other activities necessary to operate cinemas.

The second extraordinary call allocated €740,000 to support complete development of feature films, documentaries, and for the first time also television series created by independent producers.

The newly announced continuous call for the support of distribution doubled the allocation for various types of film distribution, to a total of €370,000. The Council of the Fund also approved the creation of €445,000 in reserves to be earmarked for previously supported projects that were endangered by the situation.

Later, in autumn, focusing on cinema owners and distribution and production companies, affected by the anti-pandemic measures, the Fund announced one more extraordinary call, with the allocation of €4.9 million.

### **The Czech Film Fund supported development and production of tens of projects.**

Among supported feature film projects in development was for example *Buko*, a new film by Alice Nellis, about an old circus horse and coping with old age, the family film by Tomáš Kratochvíl *Little Moth*, the black and white drama from the end of 1960s, *The Situation of a Priest* directed by the renowned director Ivo Trajtkov, and the new project of Olmo Omerzu, *Klára*.

The highest development support for documentary films was awarded to *History of Vietnamese Nation in Bohemia and Moravia* directed by Jaroslav Kratochvíl and produced by Veronika Kührová (Analog Vision). The second highest support went to the feature documentary of Greta Stocklassa *Blix* (produced by PINK), about a Swedish pensioner who, facing the approaching end, tries to cope with his political past.

Animated projects that received development support from the Czech Film Fund in 2020 include several short films by newcomers such as *About a Cow* by Pavla Baštanová (MAUR film), *Hun Tun* by Magdalena Hejzlarová (13ka) or *Trunk* by Marek Náprstek (Frame Films), as well as major feature length projects such as *Proud Princess* directed by Radek Beran (Luminar Film) or a feature-length sequel to a successful TV series *Kosmix: Secret Mission*. For the first time ever, the Czech Film Fund has supported also the development of animated series including *Dinofables* by Klára Jůzová (Krutart) already mentioned above or fantastic adventure series by Jan Čech, *Orf* (Kuli Film).

The Czech Film Fund’s Council decided to significantly support the production of the feature directorial debut *The End of the World* (€365,000) by Ivan Zachariáš, who made his mark as the director of TV series *Wasteland* and *The Sleepers*, the mystic drama *Arved* by debuting director Vojtěch Mašek (€423,000), Štěpán Altrichter’s third feature film *A Furious Beauty* about five generations of women in a peculiar family (€385,000) or the medieval comedy *Gregorius, the Chosen One* by Tomasz Mielnik (€481,000).

The highest documentary film production support of 2020 was awarded to Radim Procházka for his project *Wild Prague* in which the director Jan Hošek explores the world of animals where nobody would expect him to – in the centre of European metropolis. The film is a sequel to *Wilder than Wilderness* from 2017, Hošek wrote the script to, which was nominated for the best European documentary for children award. The Czech Film Fund's Council supported for the second time also Miroslav Janek's film in production, *Like Bees*. The reflection on the connection of people and bees is produced by Jan Macola (Mimesis Film). *The Investigator* directed by Viktor Portel and produced by Hana Blaha Šílarová (Frame Films), dealing with war crimes of the former Yugoslavia and their heritage, was one of the best evaluated projects among the supported ones.

Production support was granted for example to Jan Saska's short animated film *Hurikan* (MAUR film), feature film *Pearl* directed and produced by Martin Kotík (Rolling Pictures) or feature-length sequel to Slovak animated series for children *The Websters* prepared as Slovak-Czech co-production (13ka).

Creative Europe – MEDIA support was awarded only to three Czech projects last year: The children's film by Tomáš Pavlíček, *Don't Drink our Blood!* about a possible presence of vampires in a small Czech town, animated feature *The Precious Gift* directed by Lenka Ivančíková and developed by Animation People and Tomáš Eiselt's project *Norm and Gnomes*.

Eurimages, on the other hand, supported no fewer than nine Czech feature films - namely three contemporary dramas, *Saving One Who Was Dead* by Václav Kadrnka, *The Nightsiren* directed by Tereza Nvotová and *Victim* by Michal Blaško, we can look forward to in 2021, the period drama *Brothers*, inspired by the family story of director Tomáš Mašín, animated feature *Tony, Shelly & Genius* by Filip Pošivač and documentary *Every Single Minute* by Erika Hníková. In addition, the Eurimages support was granted to minority coproductions *Dry Land*, *SPAS* and *Chambermaid* as well.

### **The films awarded at home and abroad**

2020 brought a positive development also in the area of domestic film awards. The Czech Lion extended its competitive categories by The Best Animated Film, for animated films from 5 minutes of length, and The Best Short Film, for fiction, experimental and documentary films of 5 to 30 minutes of length (more about the nominations). The Czech Film Critics' Awards, added the new category for the best short film too – for short films up to 30 minutes of length (more about the nominations).

In March, the Czech Lion Awards 2019 were dominated by already mentioned period drama *The Painted Bird* by Václav Marhoul, which won 8 lion statues, including those for the best film, best direction and best camera. *Owners*, the satiric comedy by Jiří Havelka got three awards – for the best screenplay, best actresses and two best actor awards went to the road-movie *Old-Timers* by the directorial duo Martin Dušek and Ondřej Provazník.

The same film, *Old-Timers*, dominated the Czech Film Critics' Awards, winning the best film, best direction and best actors awards. *Owners* were awarded for the best screenplay and best actress and *The Painted Bird* for black and white camera of Vladimír Smutný, in the category Audiovisual Achievement of the Year.

Domestic film awards for documentary films, both Czech Lion and Czech Film Critics' Awards were dominated by a single film: *Over the Hills* directed by Martin Mareček and produced by Negativ, following a journey of father and son, planned with the aim to improve relationships of their divided family. In the beginning of 2020, *Daughter* by Daria Kashcheeva was nominated for Oscar also in the category of short animated films (next to Student Oscar the film won in 2019) and BAFTA Student

Award in the category of animation. The film was also awarded at home, by Czech Film Critics' Awards in Out of Cinema category and Magnesia Award of Czech Lion for the best student film.

To the fight for the Oscar in April 2021, Czech Film and Television Academy sent *Charlatan*, for which Agnieszka Holland received also the European Film Award nomination in the best director category. *The Painted Bird* was among nominated films too, this time in the best film category. Czech Republic succeeded in 2020 for the first time in International Emmy Awards, where the online series *#martyisdead* directed by Pavel Soukup from Bionaut production company became the winner in the short form category.

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