International Film Collection


**Facts**

1969 banned, re-released 1990, Czechoslovakia, 96 minutes  
Director: Jiri Menzel  
Based on the novel by Bohumil Hrabal; Screenplay by Bohumil Hrabal and Jiri Menzel.  
Producer: Karel Kochman  
Director of Cinematography: Jaromir Sofr  
In Czech with English subtitles

**Themes**

Political oppression, sub-cultural relations, love

**Summary**

The film opens in its main setting, a giant, industrial scrap yard where the workers—a professor (Vlastimil Brodsky), Pavel Hvezdar, a cook (Vaclav Neckar), a dairyman (Vladimir Ptacek), a lawyer (Leos Sucharipa)—seemingly pointlessly sort junked metal, performing manual labor as part of their re-education. The men cast longing looks at the women, who are housed separately and put on separate work details. And the women return encouraging glances. The main duty of the guard, Mr. Angel, is to keep everyone focused on their mind-numbing tasks. But despite the environment, Pavel falls in love with Jitka. Though living literally within a prison, they decide to marry. Pavel is released while Jitka is still in the penal camp. The bureaucracy, however, finds a way for them to marry—in separate locations and by proxy. When Pavel later visits the camp, Mr. Angel is sympathetic. He has recently been married to a Roma girl, who, for reasons that mystify him, refuses to consummate their marriage. He sets up the possibility for Pavel and Jitka to have a short time alone in one of the yard’s abandoned shacks. Meanwhile, a number of prisoners have been disappearing from the re-education camp for being insufficiently re-educated and patriotic (according to the standards of various low-level politicos). When a government dignitary arrives and the inmates must stage a welcoming parade, Pavel asks the embarrassing question of where the prisoners have been taken. As a result, Pavel is forced to join the dairyman and the professor in what turns out to be the uranium mines. The last scene of the film shows the three of them in a group of miners descending into a very dark mine shaft.

**Cultural Context**

The Film as Comedy
The film does have many humorous moments, such as Mr. Angel’s chasing his elusive bride around their small apartment or the bureaucratic wedding by proxy or the comically depicted longing of the men and women—resulting (in one episode) in a couple’s not so comic lovemaking through a fence. But the film is a “comedy,” most directly, in its adhering to patterns of the genre of comedy.

The story revolves around humans finding love in a hell. Traditional elements of comedy, in this genre sense, are two people in love; barriers to that love; perseverance; and the lovers’ ultimate union, a union that simultaneously enlarges the community’s sense of who it is and what it is about. Here, Pavel and Jitka are hindered in their courtship by the camp’s rules, they eventually come to an understanding despite Mr. Angel’s mild vigilance, and their sincere affection overcomes the initial coyness of the group of women and any reticence of the club of men. The subplot of Angel’s own marriage, with its attendant frustrations, enlarges his sympathies to the point of this guard’s being a co-conspirator in Pavel and Jitka’s attempted consummation of their marriage. Thus, the “human faces” coalesce as a community against a repressive Communism, represented by the pudgy, careerist camp trustee (Rudolf Hrusinsky), the simple-mindedly enthusiastic Pioneer leader, and the senile Party dignitary.

But the element of comedy is muted and finally ironic: before their marriage can be consummated, Pavel is separated from Jitka when he is sent to the mines, a harsh sentence from which many people did not return or returned so sick they could only die, and the important bifurcation of the community, that between those who hypocritically rule by taking others’ freedoms and those who are their victims, has not been resolved and remains essentially what it was at the beginning of the story (as the political situation was to remain essentially the same from the time of the film’s making until twenty years later).

Communism

The film is set in the early 1950s, the darkest days of Communist entrenchment and of the Stalinist period for Central Europe. Later, conditions improved, leading in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s to “Socialism with a Human Face” and in 1968, when the film was in production, to the “Prague Spring,” where freedom from dominance by the Soviet Union seemed (briefly) attained. In August the Soviets sent their Warsaw Pact tanks and army to crush opposition to their hegemony. The rumbling of the tanks coming into Prague at night is reproduced in many Czech films, including The Unbearable Lightness of Being (1988). There followed a period of “Normalization,” a crackdown on the anti-Soviet, anti-Communist dissidents. Larks on the String debuted briefly in 1969 but was almost immediately shelved by the authorities for twenty years. Hrabal and Menzel had difficulty finding work in the 1970s as a result of this clear attack on the Stalinist period. In 1990, after the November 1989 fall of Communism in Czechoslovakia, the film was shown in the Berlin Film Festival and won a Golden Bear and thereafter became generally available with film festival appearances and then in video format.

The two inter-titles at the beginning are not always translated. The first says: "After the February Victory, the working class definitely seized power and became the leading strength in the state." The “February Victory” refers to the Communist take-over in Czechoslovakia in
1948. (In 1946, in the country’s first post-War parliamentary elections, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia received 40% of the votes. They ruled in coalition and began securing control of key ministries. State Security, which had been under Party control since 1945 and had acted as an illegal authority against Communist Party opponents, was legalized in 1947. Such continued measures finally brought non-Communist ministers in the government to resign in February of 1948. Under pressure from Moscow, President Benes appointed all Communists in their places. For all practical purposes, the Communists had orchestrated a coup and had secured complete power. On April 11th, the Foreign Minister, Jan Masaryk, son of the first president of the First Republic and a last possible leader of any opposition, was found dead under his ministry office’s open window. In the May 30th “elections,” voters had a “choice” of different Communists for each office. Benes resigned on the 14th of June, citing health reasons. His successor as “premier” was Klement Gottwald, also the elected chairman of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. Antonín Zopotocký, mentioned in the film, became prime minister.) The second intertitle says: "The detritus of the defeated classes were conscripted into the working process in order that they might atone for their former membership in the bourgeoisie through honorable work."

In contradistinction to the mutedly humorous elements, the film is also a sharp satire of the Czechoslovak Communist regime. The moral, life-loving, and physically and intellectually vibrant prisoners—interned for trivial reasons, the women, for instance, simply for attempting to flee the country and its oppressive government—are forced to work within the dirty and mind-numbing scrap yard. The opening shot with its giant smokestack spewing pollution above the wasteland of scrap metal is emblematic. The convicts are not only forced to work by the guards but to give up their mental freedom as well since to express an honest opinion is to be liable for deportation to worse incarceration. The jailers are hypocrites. They are more interested in parades and propaganda than in genuinely improved production. The character of the dairyman who really knows his business but is in prison illustrates the point, especially by contrast to the inept production planners who have taken over his operation. More visually, the trustee enjoys having poor young girls undress and bathing them. He tells himself and others that these procedures are part of his “cleanliness campaign.” Because of his political power, no person concerned in the situation would dare to resist his prurient desires.

Officialdom takes no notice of the illicit desires of the trustee, but it smoothes the way for Mr. Angel’s questionable relationship and hinders the relationship of Pavel and Jitka. Each of these effects are traceable to the corrupt government. The two marriages become another way of showing how the regime has twisted the good and usual (Pavel and Jitka’s relationship) and encouraged the questionable and unusual (Mr. Angel and his girl friend’s relationship). This government’s attempt to construct society on artificial bases will be as botched as the aquarium that is brought for cosmetic purposes into the propaganda short being filmed at the beginning of the story: this artificial environment, too, is so ineptly conceived and maintained that its water is muddy beyond what any fish could tolerate as livable.

Another of the film’s contrasts comments on the privileges of those in power supporting Communism and the hardships of those outside dissenting from Communism. Mr. Angel’s position even allows him to present his bride with a new apartment on her wedding night, a contrast to Pavel’s mother’s dark and cramped apartment, which the audience is allowed to see
partly because it is the place where Pavel would have probably been forced, at least initially, to house himself and Jitka, had he only been allowed to live with his new wife. Pavel’s mother’s apartment is small and inadequate even though she is a worker par excellence (whom the government ought to be serving above all) in her job of delivering coal to houses by basket.

Communist Party slogans are scattered throughout the yard with ironic effect. In order, some of them are as follows. “Why wouldn’t we be cheerful when we work for ourselves?” “Buckling Down and Getting Ahead.” “Productive Work.” “Work is a matter of honor.” “Our Commitment: Higher Work Productivity.” “Iron, Blood, Five-Year Plan.” The shack in which Pavel and Jitka planned to consummate their love appears from the sign that is posted on it to have been used for veterinary examinations, suggesting how the most important of human and social relationships has been reduced to the level of mere animality by the regime. The banner that welcomes the dignitary in the ceremony toward the close of the film reads “Joyfully working. Joyfully living.”

**Intercultural Conflict**

The marriage of the camp guard to a woman of different ethnicity is a prominent feature of the story. How it functions for different viewers is more complicated.

On the one hand, there are clear incompatibilities and misunderstandings between this couple, yet the state sanctions their union, whereas, for Pavel and Jitka, who come to a complete and devoted understanding, the state discourages theirs. Since Communism was ideologically ethnically blind, Czechoslovak Roma benefited under Communism in its policies of full employment and housing for all. When Roma did move into public housing, stories highlighting their cultural difference circulated in the form of their lighting fires for cooking in kitchens already provided with ovens and stoves. The film verges on participation in the circulation of this marker of difference in Angel’s fiancée’s fire in the bathroom. The misunderstandings between the guard and his new wife seem to extend even to the most significant aspect of marriage for a young couple; she does not consummate their marriage on their wedding night after a drunken, musical evening. Consequently, the easy official marriage of a couple whose relationship is fraught with cultural difficulties makes a contrast with the state’s discouraging attitude toward a couple whom the audience is to consider perfectly and obviously right for one another. This view relates (to reiterate) to the film’s satire of Communism: the regime is not only misguided; it seems to have things reversed.

On the other hand, whatever bureaucratic privileges Mr. Angel may have enjoyed, he has used them to pursue an honorable love (in contrast to the trustee). There also seems to be a hint of rapprochement or at least an acceptance of the odd situation as Mr. Angel’s chasings of his wife become less frantic.

In this aspect, optimistically read, the two marriages that are the core of the film’s action show, again appropriate for the genre of comedy, that love has at least hope of conquering all—both cultural difficulties (in a state-approved marriage) and governmental difficulties (in a culturally synchronous marriage).
The two marriages, thus, can be seen to complement each other in making the above points. However, it should be noted that the endogamous versus exogamous contrast drawn in the preceding paragraphs is further complicated and partially erased by the reason given for Pavel’s “re-education”: he refused to work Saturdays “for religious reasons.” The comment constitutes a barb against (ideologically atheistic) Communism’s denial of religious freedom; but it also constitutes the relationship of Pavel and Jitka, who is not obviously Jewish, as likewise exogamous to some degree by the standards of some traditionally religiously and more so culturally Christian Czechs. (By “culturally Christian” is meant, for example, the singing of Christmas carols even by those who do not belong to any Christian church [in a country whose percentage of avowed atheists is the highest in Europe] and so on.) In this respect, the film is about the attempt of men and women simply to get along with and enjoy each other, regardless of ethnicity or religious orientation, though the difference that is most productive of relationship difficulty in the film seems to be ethnicity.

**Hrabal and Menzel**

*Larks on a String* is based on a work by Bohumil Hrabal (1914-1997), arguably the best-loved Czech writer, and is captured on film by the most prominent Czech director Jiri Menzel (b. 1938). *Closely Watched Trains*, again based on a Hrabal work, co-scripted by Menzel and Hrabal, and directed by Menzel, won the Oscar for best foreign film in 1966. The same contributions were made by the two to the 1980 film *Cutting It Short*.

Hrabal’s writing is often autobiographical. In his youth he lived with his father, a manager of a brewery, where he got to know his eccentric uncle Pepin (the background and characters of *Cutting It Short*). Just before the war and shortly after it he held several jobs on the railroad (*Closely Watched Trains*). After the war he finished his law degree but worked as a manual laborer in the Kladno scrap yard (*Larks*). He became a writer by profession in 1963. Although loved by his readers, he is briefly satirized by Czech exile writer Josef Skvorecky in his novel *The Miracle Game* as being indecisive in his solidarity with dissidents.

Menzel studied at the Prague Film Academy from 1957 to 1962. He has directed more than 20 films and had more than one credit per year as an actor from 1964 to 1994.

**Viewer's Guide**

Questions to consider while viewing this film (and a few notes):

1. What is your impression from the opening panning shot?

2. What elements of hypocrisy can you detect in the people in charge?
3. Among the Communist Party slogans scattered throughout the metal yard is “PRODUKTIVITU PRÁCE” (“Productive Work”). When you see this sign, what are the workers doing?

4. Notice how these political slogans compete, in a sense, with the quotations by the professor—a quotation from Kant, for example. One of the political prisoners reads a poem dedicated to Jaroslav Vrchilcky (1853-1912), a poet who was criticized by the Communists who demanded socially useful art. (Columbia Encyclopedia on Vrchilcky: a poetic virtuoso, produced nearly 85 volumes of lyric verse, much of which is sensual and affirmative. His literary influence was great, and a school of young poets formed around him. He taught world literature at Charles Univ. in Prague.)

5. The filmmaker who has come to film the re-education of the workers has the Czechoslovak Communist newspaper, Rude Pravo (“Red Justice”), under his arm.

6. The Americans are characterized as imperialists at this time partly because of the Korean War.

7. For the propaganda film being shot at the beginning, plants and an aquarium are brought in, presumably to give a “homey” feel to the background. What do you think of this sequence?

8. Note the phrase “Who’s that?” repeated three times in the movie, once by the man from the Workers’ Union, once by the Pioneer leader, and again by the visiting Communist dignitary, each time preceding an arrest. It is ambiguous whether the dignitary, so clearly in his dotage, even asked the question in order to finger Pavel for arrest. The phrase has become such a sign that Pavel is arrested regardless of whether the man intended it or not. Collectively, these three sequences suggest the importance of not-getting-noticed that prevailed so markedly in Communist countries.

9. When the dairyman is arrested just before entering the scrap yard for his morning's work (after he has complained that the raising of production demands was not done in consultation with the workers), we get a scene of the trustee looking through the gate, presumably at the car driving the dairyman away. The circular sign on the gate reads, "For your safety." The trustee had been proud of the dairyman. What do you think his look is meant to convey?

10. How is the trashing of the metal typewriters significant?

11. How is the trashing of the metal crucifixes significant?

12. The men have an argument about whether some news was about Iran or Iraq. At the time there was a controversy about Iran:

1951-1953—Iran passed a law sponsored by the nationalistic (soon to be prime minister) Dr. Mossadeq to nationalize Iran’s oil, at that time under British control. The British, enraged by the threat to their oil concessions, froze all of Iran’s Sterling assets and took their case to the International Court of Justice. The Court ruled in Iran’s favor. Undeterred, the British placed a total trade embargo on Iran and enforced it with their navy, leading to the collapse of Iran’s economy. Citing the threat of a communist
takeover, British Intelligence and the CIA sponsored a coup to topple Dr. Mossadeq's government. In the midst of the coup, the young Shah, having thought the plan had failed, left the country. Shortly thereafter, Dr. Mossadeq's government was overthrown and the Shah was put back in power. (Source: http://www.mage.com/TLbody.html.)

Is the professor out of touch with current events?

13. What does the scene where the women and men warm their hands over a fire in a barrel suggest?

14. Note that the Communist dignitary is so dottering that he can't even stay on the red carpet that has been laid for him. What sort of comment does this characterization make?

The dignitary says "If only Bozena Nemcova were here to see this." Nemcova collected stories of working rural people and turned them into tales. Her novel The Grandmother suggests the joys to be found in simple lives. The Communist dignitary’s comment assumes that Nemcova would be pleased and is intended to convey the idea that Communism has made a happy life for working people. The ironic meaning could be that the film itself chronicles the true lives of people in 1951, and if Nemcova could see these lives, she would be disheartened. Columbia Encyclopedia on Nemcova (1820-1862): "novelist and storyteller. She developed the regional tale, which she enhanced with an original prose style. Her work provided escape from a wretchedly poor and unhappy life. Her best-known novel is Babicka (1855, tr. The Grandmother, 1891), a simple, moving portrait of Czech village life."

Resources


Contains a black and white picture of Hrabal and Menzel in consultation, page 90.
“Skrivanci na niti.” IMDb [International Movie Database].
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0064994/?fr=c2l0ZT1kZnx0dD0xfGZiPXV8cG49MHxrdz0xfHE9TGFya3Mgb24gYSBTdHJpbmd8ZnQ9MXxeD0yMHxsbt01MDB8Y289MXxodG1sPTF8bm09MQ__;fc=1;ft=22. December 1, 2006.


Contributer

Marshall Toman received his doctorate in American Literature, in which subject he has lectured in the Czech Republic in 1997-98 on a Fulbright grant and again in 2006. He is a member of the Board of Directors of the Czech and Slovak Cultural Center of Minnesota and a professor in the English Department at the University of Wisconsin—River Falls.