

Sydney Film Festival

Two young Czech filmmakers investigating real human experiences

Mustafa Rashid
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The Czech title of Jan Hrebejk's new film *Cosy Dens*, one of the two Czech films screened at the Sydney Film Festival, is simply "Pelisky" (pronounced Pelishki). There is no "cosy" in the title; the word itself already sounds cosy. In the case of this film, one's cosy den is one's home—a place where, by definition, one must feel belonging, where one must be accepted unconditionally.

The film, now showing on Australia's World Movies cable channel, centres on the lives of the neighbouring Sebek and Kreuz families, living in two apartments that were formerly a Prague suburban villa. As the film opens, it is Christmas 1967, only months before Soviet tanks rolled into Czechoslovakia. While the audience is aware of this event, the characters are not. They innocently carry on with their lives, unaware of the historical significance of their actions.

Mr. Sebek (Miroslav Donutil) is a loyal supporter of the regime, Mr. Kreuz (Jiri Polivka), a decorated World War II resistance fighter and Czech nationalist is staunchly anti-Soviet. The two men constantly argue and their wives try to keep the peace. The children regard the heated arguments as boring and predictable and attempt to get on with their lives. Mr. and Mrs. Sebek's contemplative teenage son Michal becomes infatuated with Mr. and Mrs. Kreuz's expressive and euphoric daughter Jindriska, who is more interested in the much cooler Elian, who has long hair, loves the Beatles and wears American boots.

Cosy Dens has been compared to the famous films of the "Prague Spring" generation of 1960s directors, like Milos Forman (*Black Peter*, *A Blonde in Love*, *Fireman's Ball*), Jiri Menzel (*Closely Watched Trains*, *Capricious Summer*, *My Sweet Little Village*) and Vera Chytilova (*Daisies*, *Fruits of Paradise*, *Story From A Housing Estate*). Incidentally, *Pelisky's* cinematographer, Jan Malir, has worked several times with Chytilova.

In the Czech Republic, where it has been an outstanding hit with the audiences, it has been promoted as a sweet, family film. In the West it has been called a black comedy.

While the film has the gentle, "cosy" ambience of classic Czech cinema, it is, however, far from a derivative nostalgia trip. Hrebejk's film may be set in the past, encompassing late 1967, the Prague Spring and ending with the Soviet invasion in August 1968, but it speaks directly to today's audience.

One character in the film, a Sebek family uncle played by the masterfully funny Boleslav Polivka, showers the family with gifts which he believes represent ground-breaking advances by "Socialist Science": plastic teaspoons from East Germany and unbreakable glasses from Poland. When put to the test, however, the teaspoons melt in the coffee and the glasses shatter on the floor. Like the uncle, Hrebejk's audience knows what it means to be disappointed by dreams.

Cosy Dens constantly warns of the danger of only seeing what we want, rather than what is. In one of the film's more poignant moments, the highly-strung Mr. Kreuz goes into an uncontrolled nationalist apoplexy when Jindriska dares to suggest that her mother's dumplings resemble Italian gnocchi, rather than the traditional Czech knedliky. Likewise when it is reported that Soviet tanks have invaded the country, at the end of the film, Mr. Sebek's illusions about the Soviet government are completely shattered and he suffers a nervous breakdown.

This is a vibrant, rich and exciting film. The people on the screen are alive, and it is obvious that the characters are relishing every moment. There is a sense of spontaneity and exuberance that fills every detail.

Sasa Gedeon's *The Return of the Idiot* is completely different. Frantisek, played by Pavel Liska, is a character inspired by Prince Myshkin, from Fyodor Dostoyevsky's 1869 novel; *The Idiot*. One could almost call the film a sequel to the book. Dostoyevsky described the character as: "...a positively beautiful one, in a moral sense...There is only one positively beautiful man in the world—Christ." Indeed Frantisek, like Myshkin, may be morally pure, but he is also humanly weak, and finds himself unable to cope when

placed in the middle of other people's lives and problems.

When we meet Frantisek, at the beginning of the film, he has just been released from the psychiatric institution where he has spent most of his life. The head doctor has explained to him that he should no longer avoid life, advice that Frantisek takes to heart. But on returning to his hometown, he finds that the relatives who have decided to provide him with accommodation don't really need him or relate to him as a human being.

After years of isolation, Frantisek cautiously begins to explore friendship, love and other experiences that previously had only been words to him. He finds himself involved in all sorts of complex personal conflicts, between family, friends and lovers. As he says himself at one point in the film: "I've only had first impressions. So far I've encountered everything only once."

First impressions are an important theme in the film, and Frantisek knows not to depend on them. Yet he is trusting, generous and hypersensitive, reacting physically to the more complex social problems of those closest to him. Apart from his epilepsy, Frantisek has frequent nosebleeds at critical moments, a reflection of his intense sensitivity to everyday social manoeuvring and deceit.

Liska plays Frantisek as a clown, with a wide-eyed stare reminiscent of Harry Langdon and a comic costume consisting of a pointy woollen hat and funny scarf. Gedeon's visual style is sparse and meditative. In fact, the first twenty minutes of the film is almost an essay on loneliness. Frantisek is always peering through windows and doorways. He closely observes everyone around him, catching people in their most unguarded moments, unaware of anyone but themselves.

Gedeon's film, a no less intimate work than *Cosy Dens*, has none of Hrebejk's exuberance. Hrebejk's film explodes off the screen like a Kandinsky painting, while Gedeon draws a minimal, fine pencil sketch. Hrebejk's film seems improvised, while Gedeon's is meticulously constructed. Formally, Gedeon is more audacious. He layers his images with numerous levels of action, using point of view and internal framing most effectively in his subtle transitions. Gradually and carefully Gedeon builds up a web of characters who find their lives overlapping irreversibly, without quite being sure why.

Both *Cosy Dens* and *The Return of the Idiot* are films by young filmmakers: Hrebejk is 33 and Gedeon 30. Both graduated from FAMU, the Film and Television Academy in Prague, and have collaborated with a mix of new talent and legendary names of Czech cinema. Both are filmmakers with something to say; both are concerned with investigating real human experiences, with nothing pretentious or showy in their films. And while both filmmakers use humour to

convey their message, their senses of humour differ markedly.

The Return of the Idiot seems at first to be more profound than *Cosy Dens*. Its measured rhythm and formally rich images, and the struggle of a pure soul with an impure, contradictory world, give it a spiritual quality. In contrast *Cosy Dens* might, at first, seem like a zany, quirky social comedy with some topical humour and a nostalgic 1960s soundtrack (including some painfully hilarious Czech interpretations of Western pop hits performed by one-time Eastern-bloc superstar Karel Gott, now something of a kitsch icon in the Czech Republic).

However, the depth of Hrebejk's message should not be underestimated. While he is quite consciously jogging our memories about the classic Czech films of the 60s, he is also reminding us of how important it is to understand history before we can move forward. This point is made very strongly in *Cosy Dens*. Hrebejk has nothing but affection for the characters, and he presents them without any anger or bitterness, but we do laugh at their misfortune for existing in the past, in an era that is gone. This era seems cute and comical. We live in the sophisticated 21st century and know better than those from the apparently naive and innocent 1960s. Or so we think.

Cosy Dens reminds its audience that the future might not be so very cosy, that despair might make us long for the past. Therefore we must learn about the past and accept it, without necessarily agreeing with it and certainly without cleaning it up for simplistic consumption. Not in the hope of going back to it, but to avoid repetition of some of the mistakes. It is this message, rather than the more obvious stylistic elements, that is probably the secret of the deep chord that *Cosy Dens* has struck with Czech viewers. It will be interesting to see what added meanings the film will have when seen thirty years from now.



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