

Sydney Film Festival 2001

An ironic look at some reluctant heroes

Divided We Fall, directed by Jan Hrebejk, script by Petr Jarchovsky

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12 July 2001

This is the first in a series of articles on the recent Sydney Film Festival. World Socialist Web Site correspondents viewed over 30 films during the 15-day festival and in forthcoming reviews will comment on some of the more significant works.

Sydney audiences voted Czech-produced *Divided We Fall* the most popular film at this year's festival. Directed by 34-year-old Jan Hrebejk, the film, which was produced on a shoestring budget of \$US650,000, is an interesting tragi-comedy that demonstrates how simple acts of individual compassion and goodwill by ordinary people challenged the ruling Nazi authorities in Czechoslovakia during World War II.

Based on a novel and script by Petr Jarchovsky, it tells the story of a young childless couple—Josef Cizek (Boleslav Polivka) and his wife Maria (Anna Siskova)—who decide, reluctantly at first, to provide refuge to David Wiener (Csongor Kassai), the only surviving member of a local Jewish family.

The film opens with a momentary flashback to happier days in 1937 when the Wiener family employed Josef and the film's other main protagonist, Horst Prohaska (Jaroslav Dusek). Four years later, under Nazi occupation the entire Wiener family have been expelled from their home and sent to Theresienstadt concentration camp. David Wiener somehow manages to escape. Desperate and on the run, he returns to the town and bumps into Josef late one night. Josef agrees to smuggle the emaciated young man past some Nazi army officers and take him to his apartment for what turns out to be a two-year stay.

"You wouldn't believe the sorts of things such abnormal times cause normal people to do," Josef tells his wife at one point. But as *Divided We Fall* progresses, these abnormalities become more paradoxical and perilous. Life for the Cizeks, who have not previously concerned themselves with politics and whose decision to protect David Wiener was made on personal rather than ideological grounds, is fraught with danger. If Wiener is found in the apartment, the Nazis are likely to execute the Cizeks and the rest of the neighbourhood.

Josef and Maria are simple people with many character foibles: Josef is moody, a little lazy and opportunistic; Maria is loyal but naïve and deeply religious. Once they commit themselves to protecting Wiener, however, these somewhat hesitant individuals reveal a high degree of determination, ingenuity and self-sacrifice.

Hrebejk captures Marie and Josef's unassuming heroism, the all-pervasive fear and suspicion in the town and the undercurrent of hostility of most of the local residents to the Nazis, who murdered between 200,000 and 250,000 Czech Jews, or more than three quarters of the country's Jewish population, between 1938 and 1945.

In one disturbing scene, Wiener explains to the couple how concentration camp officials ordered his sister to bash his mother and father to death with a baseball bat; and how his parents begged her to do

it, believing that this would guarantee her survival. The film also briefly alludes to the state sterilisation of Gypsies and other horrors committed by the fascist regime.

Without diminishing the seriousness of the subject, *Divided We Fall* also involves a series of amusing situations to capture the complex and contradictory manoeuvres the couple is forced to employ to protect their secret guest. In fact, these comic incidents, and convincing performances by the cast, particularly Boleslav Polivka and Anna Siskova, heighten the underlying tension of the film.

Horst Prohaska, a boorish and stupid man who has thrown in his lot with the Nazi authorities, provides some of the film's more unpredictable moments. Having previously been employed by the Wiener family, the Czech German now works for the state, requisitioning property from Jewish families. Prohaska is attracted to Maria, and regularly visits the apartment unannounced. He brings food and other luxuries to win her attention but Maria is thoroughly repulsed by his ham-fisted overtures.

Prohaska becomes suspicious that they are hiding something or someone in the apartment and decides to test out Josef's political loyalties by offering him a job requisitioning Jewish property. After some conflict the couple decides that Josef should take the job and thus deflect Prohaska's suspicions. This, however, raises more contradictions and brings them into conflict with their neighbours who believe that Josef has become a Nazi stooge. In one of the more droll scenes, Prohaska instructs Josef on how to develop a subservient and loyal facial expression in order to maintain good relations with the Nazis. Josef listens carefully but can only manage an unconvincing pained expression.

Angry over being rebuffed by Marie and still suspicious that something is going on, Prohaska decides to take revenge by demanding that the couple take in the German official occupying the Wiener home. The official has lost all his sons in the war, including his youngest—a teenager—who was sent to the Russian front. His despairing wife has committed suicide and he has suffered a stroke. Prohaska demands that Marie and Josef look after him. The only way the couple can stop this is by claiming that Marie is pregnant and that they will need their spare room as a nursery. Unfortunately, Josef is sterile so their houseguest is called upon to resolve the dilemma in what becomes his repayment to the childless couple who risked their own future by protecting him.

Marie's pregnancy advances against a background of successive German defeats in the east and elsewhere. Fear and suspicion heightens in the war's dying days before Russians troops in alliance with the Czech resistance take over the town. Josef and his wife now face accusations by the neighbours of being collaborators. While this is resolved when Wiener eventually emerges from the apartment and the child is safely delivered, the tension and comedy in *Divided We Fall* continue right up until the end.

Divide We Fall is by no means a flawless artistic work. Hrebejk, who studied screenwriting and film directing at Prague's prestigious Film Academy, has been well schooled in the bittersweet and ironic films made in Czechoslovakia during the 1960s but he seems to drift out of his depth when called upon to deal with more complex drama and political events. He resorts, especially during some of the more climatic moments, to stop-motion cinematography, a technique which can be created in digital post-production or by shooting at 20 frames per second rather than at 24 and is used to heighten tension. This is used too often and becomes a distraction.

A more obvious weakness is the rather tidy ending in which all the protagonists—Prohaska included—are reconciled and their immediate survival guaranteed. For those familiar with the war in Czechoslovakia and the bitterness engendered by years of Nazi occupation, this is somewhat forced and unconvincing.

Hrebejk has ventured into a demanding genre that blends light comedy and tragedy in dealing with what is an emotionally charged subject. He draws his humour from the often contradictory behaviour of people acting under extreme pressure while at the same time highlighting some of the horrors of Nazi rule. The film is not a black comedy or a docu-drama and does not attempt to provide a detailed historical accounting of the dark days of Nazi occupation or the role of various political actors.

It is, however, an important and at times moving film that will hopefully encourage its viewers to examine the issues raised by this complex period in greater depth. *Divided We Fall*, is well worth seeing. Unlike Roberto Benigni's much publicised but somewhat trite *A Beautiful Life*, Hrebejk's film will probably not get the widespread commercial release outside the Czech republic or the international film festival circuit that it deserves.

Jan Hrebejk's first feature *Big Beat* (1993), about the arrival of rock 'n' roll in Czechoslovakia in the late 1950s, was followed in 1996 by *Where the Stars Fall*, a children's television series. *Cosy Dens* (1999), Hrebejk's next feature, was an intelligent comedy about two neighbouring families in Prague just before the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. The highly successful feature broke Czech box office records, playing for 12 months in the republic's cinemas.

Hrebejk spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* in Sydney during the festival.

Richard Phillips: How was the story of *Divided We Fall* developed and what attracted you to it?

Jan Hrebejk: I cooperated very closely with Petr Jarchovsky and Petr Sabach during the development of the *Cosy Dens* script, my last feature film. But with *Divided We Fall* I had little contact during the script development stage. When I was given the completed script it was entirely new to me but I was very touched and I liked the mixture of humour and tragedy, which seemed just right. I really wanted to tell this story and believed that audiences would be surprised and affected in the same way I was.

RP: Was it based on a true story?

JH: Not completely but the central motives are true. In other words, it was about a real family who had hidden someone and who pretended to collaborate with the Nazis in order to cover this up. The second true aspect was the birth of the child at the end of the war. So the script came out of the merging of these two separate stories.

RP: Has anyone else attempted to present this sort of story? There must have been countless examples of such heroism.

JH: Certainly. Probably closest to *Divided We Fall* is *The Shop on Main Street*, a very famous Czechoslovak film, the first one to win an Academy Award in 1966 and one of the best films ever made in my country. Although my story is different, the genre is the same.

RP: There is a fine line between comedy and trivialising the important subject matter you deal with *Divided We Fall*. How do you achieve that balance?

JH: That's true. When we were creating the film, Petr Jarchovsky sent

some of the scenes for verification to a famous Czech author who lived through this era. He told us that some of the absurdities produced at this time were so large that none of the scenes we devised could surpass those produced in real life, so we were encouraged.

It is difficult though because there are no special techniques or recipes, so I had to rely on my intuition and a lot of discussion. I also work with a team of people that I have known for a long time and who are very critical.

When I was cutting the film I would show each stage of the work to them and we discussed each aspect for hours and there were also many arguments. It is not always so important what other people say about your work but when creative people that you hold in high esteem make criticisms you become more rigorous. Before the final cut we also screened the film to young people to gauge their response and I believe this helped too.

RP: But how conscious of this history are young people in the Czech republic?

JH: It is hard to know but all the facts of this period are readily available—there have been many documentaries screened on television and there is literature at hand. It is difficult for me to speak about those who may be 15 years younger than me. It depends—some are aware of it, others aren't.

One difficulty is history has to be simplified to some extent in order to compress it into a film and while this irritates many people the audience cannot be ignored. My concern is to make sure that the idea and the story is human and truthful in its message. If I can produce a serious artwork that turns people to these questions and look at them more closely for themselves then I will have succeeded.

RP: What was the most difficult artistic aspect of the film's production?

JH: The hardest part was to create the mood of the period, particularly towards the end of the war. As the war dragged on and Germany started to lose, many people began to realise that the war was going to end quite soon. So, on one side, hopes rose about the end of the war but the cruelty within the country became worse and worse. In fact, most of the civilians who were killed in Czechoslovakia lost their lives in 1945 in the closing days of the war. As today's audiences watch the film they know that the war is going to end but the challenge for me was to make sure that they knew that the fear lasted until the very last moment—that the situation got worse and worse until the end.

RP: The publicity notes for the film speak about people becoming heroes against their will. Can you comment on this?

JH: This definition seems to have been created by the film's public relations department. *Divided We Fall* is very ironic but it is a call for tolerance. I also want to explain that simple and decent human behaviour can, in the right circumstances be heroic but these circumstances are always more complex than they first appear. Although the film is set in my own country, these issues are universal.



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