

Annual sidebar offers chance to check out local films

Cóilín O'Connor

With three foreign-language film Oscars to its name, not to mention several internationally renowned directors such as Miloš Forman, Ivan Passer and Jan Svěrák, Czech cinema consistently punches above its weight in the global movie industry.

It's therefore natural that KVIFF is proud to promote local movies with its Czech Films 2008-2009 sidebar, which gives audiences a good overview of the country's recent cinematic output. This includes films that have done well at the box office, such as Jan Hřebejk's *Shameless*, but the festival also presents work that might have slipped under the radar.

"We screen films that have been popular with Czech audiences, but we are also showing films that were only in cinemas for a short time," says festival programmer Lenka Tyrpáková. "This gives those who missed them the first time a chance to catch them."

Besides local filmgoers, the Czech Films section is also intended to give members of the international film industry a chance to check out what is coming out of the country at the moment.

"We try to select films that could be successful at foreign festivals and which could be of interest to foreign distributors, buyers and so on," says Tyrpáková. "On



Bohdan Sláma's *Country Teacher*.

the whole, we do try to present Czech films in all their variety."

Films still to be screened in the section include František Antonín Brabec's *May*, a visually impressive adaptation of "Czech Byron" Karel Hynek Mácha's epic masterpiece of the same name. The original lyrical poem, about a tragically complex love triangle, is something of a national treasure in the Czech Republic and was considered "unfilmable" until Brabec bravely stepped up.

Vacláv Marhou's *Tobruk* is also inspired by a literary classic, American writer Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*. Marhou has used elements of the U.S. Civil War novel's musings on bravery in the heat of battle to

relate the story of Czechoslovak soldiers who fought against Rommel's forces in the Libyan Desert during World War II.

English Strawberries is also based on historical events. Vladimír Drha's film tells the tale of a young couple, whose nascent love affair is disrupted by a Soviet soldier who deserts his unit during the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. (This film raised a few eyebrows at the Moscow Film Festival last month.)

Following on the success of his award-winning *Something Like Happiness*, Bohdan Sláma's *Country Teacher* is likely to be one of the more popular features in this category. Sláma has carved out a reputation for himself as

a purveyor of quirky, character-driven dramas and his latest film is cut from the same cloth. Pavel Liška stars as a homosexual teacher who moves to the countryside for some tranquility, but finds escaping his complicated past more difficult than anticipated.

Marie Poledňáková's *You Kiss Like God* (starring KVIFF president Jiří Bartoška) is an entertaining look at the absurdities and complexities of middle-aged love, which was a big hit at the Czech box office.

Vít Pancfř's *Sister* is a highly experimental adaptation of Jáchym Topol's inscrutable cult novel *City Sister Silver (Sestra)*, which features a strong performance by non-professional actor Jakub Zich and music by Topol's brother Filip from the popular Czech band Psí vojáci.

Besides giving local audiences a second chance to catch domestically produced films, many are also attracted by the opportunity to discuss the works in specially arranged after-show talks.

"We invite directors, producers and people involved with the films to their screenings, because this is probably the only opportunity audiences have to ask the filmmakers about their work," says Tyrpáková. "It's one of the unique features of Karlovy Vary." Naturally, all discussions accompanying the films have English interpreters in attendance. ■

FACES



Ondi Timoner

Eagerly awaited Spanish actor/director and Hollywood star **Antonio Banderas** is expected to make an appearance at the festival today. He is in town for tonight's screening of his romantic drama *Summer Rain*, set in his native Málaga during the 1970s. Italian actress **Laura Morante** is expected to arrive today for the screening of her film *The Dancer Upstairs*, which features as a part of the festival's Tribute to John Malkovich. Other people in town for screenings of their films today include director **Marie Poledňáková** and actresses **Nela Boudová** and **Kamila Magalová** (*You Kiss Like God*), director **Vít Pancfř**, actor **Jakub Zich** (*Sister*), director **Jana Ševčíková** (*Gyunri*), directors **Ása Blanck** and **Johan Palmgren** and protagonists **Harri Raatikainen** and **Anders Wieslander** (*Anders & Harri*), director **Christian Sønderby Jepsen**

(*Side by Side*), director **Ondi Timoner** (*We Live in Public*), director **Vladimír Paskaljević**, producer **Milan Tomić**, actor **Goran Jevtić** and actress **Jana Milić** (*Devil's Town*), producers **Marie Queffeuou** and **John Engel** and director **Tom Geens** (*Liar*), producers **Ignacio Rey** and **Gaston Rothschild**, actor **Ezequiel Tronconi** and actress **Ana Allende** (*La Tigra, Chaco*), director **Jan Švankmajer** and producer **Jaromír Kallista** (*Conspirators of Pleasure*), director **Rebecca Cammisia** (*Which Way Home*), and director **Xawery Żuławski**, producer **Jacek Samojłowicz** and actresses **Anna Prus** and **Maria Strzelecka** (*Snow White and Russian Red*). Director **Alan Rudolph** and producer **David Blocker** are here for today's screenings of *Love at Large* and *Trouble in Mind*, two films of five that feature in the Forum of Independents – Tribute to Alan Rudolph section. ■



Tom Geens

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KVIFF pays homage to living legend

Will Tizard

Perhaps the best known Czech filmmaker in the world, Jan Švankmajer, is a surrealist, animator and advocate of *l'art brut* who declines to call himself a filmmaker at all. His painstaking, low-tech methods have won over and inspired others for over 40 years and his 33 films range from bizarre black-and-white shorts to full-length features starring the country's top performers. "He's one of the best-known Czech artists abroad, along with perhaps Jiří Menzel," says KVIFF Artistic Director Eva Zaoralová. "So we decided last year to do this tribute to him."

Indeed, respected British animators the Brothers Quay have paid tribute to the diminutive and reclusive Prague artist, who has nevertheless agreed to appear at the fest. (He still lives in the gallery cottage he's had for decades on the hill behind Prague Castle.)

British writer Neil Gaiman has also cited Švankmajer's work as one of the inspirations for his book, which was adapted in 2009 into the disturbing but compelling global animation hit *Coraline*.

In KVIFF's tribute to the master, in which his 1997 film *Conspirators of Pleasure* will screen, festival programmers point out that even during the period when Švankmajer was banned from working in his home country, his films traveled the world, winning awards regularly. That caused him no little amount of trouble from the authorities, who, although they could never



Jan Švankmajer's surreal *Conspirators of Pleasure*

put their finger on exactly what might be counterrevolutionary in these nightmarish flights of fancy (in fact, they didn't understand them at all), were nevertheless deeply suspicious. It may well be that the national cultural treasure was saved by the fact that the sale of Švankmajer's films abroad brought foreign hard currency into the country while promoting the excellence of Czech cinema.

Like many of the greatest Czech filmmakers, Švankmajer rose to the art via the theater, a tradition that's very nearly sacred in Bohemia. The craft of puppetry specifically appeals to him and always has. Their shadow is long and often chilling in Švankmajer films, which may incorporate them as a child's playthings or as fully independent beings on the same scale – or a much greater one – than flesh-and-blood actors.

A major early influence was Emil Radok, for whom Švankma-

jer operated the puppets in Radok's film *Johannes Doctor Faust*. Radok also offered to oversee Švankmajer's first independent films, *The Last Trick of Mr. Schwarzwald* and *Mr. Edgar*, helping him to overcome the film authorities who didn't want anyone who had not studied at Prague's film academy, FAMU, to get behind a camera.

As seen in *Conspirators* (and many of his other films), Švankmajer possesses an obsession with food. He has said that much of that stems from his childhood days in which his parents, worried over his small size, sent him to a special camp to help him fatten up. Thus, when meats dance about in 2005's *Lucacy*, they are only the most recent incantations of gourmand-friendly scenes in older films like *Conspirators*, which features every form of sensory thrill-seeking, often involving bread and fishes. ■