

Otomar Dvořák: ČERNÝ VŮL AND POČÁTKY

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It's an interesting feeling when after decades I once again entered the Lažanský Palace in Prague on Smetana Embankment, on the first floor, where the Academy of Performing Arts is located. It had changed a lot, with the addition of computers, photocopiers and more English, but some places remained the same as they were in my student days, and the atmosphere of the corridors with their notice boards and messages was familiar. Even the screening room evoked a bit of nostalgia in me. In the frosty evening it was filled with students who came to watch the two-hour documentary THE BEGINNING AND THE LION by my colleague Ondřej Vavrečka.

I was captivated by the film. Even the way they made a virtue out of necessity, how the students filmed on expired film stock from the sale (they used a lot of it) for austerity reasons. The graininess, the color smears, the faded and unsharp image seemed to add another dimension to the immediate, unedited statement. The essence of the work was a collage of observations and statements of various people, through which the inquisitive author tries to get an answer to the question: Where does the Beginning lie for us? What are the roots of our nation's spirituality? The answer is sometimes wise, sometimes ridiculous, absurd or embarrassing. It is a grotesque of observations that suddenly culminates in a powerfully poetic parable, which is then irreverently dropped by a confrontation with another scene. Yes, it's life itself that rolls off the screen. The multitude of insights is organized along an axis made up of two elements: the magical figure-eights of the years in Czech history and the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, which is not just an alphabet, but its signs carry meaningful parables and are at the same time individual intersections in the graphic construction of the sefirot tree, the tree of life. These Hebrew letters divide the film into individual subtitled chapters.

The author went to Říp with a congregation of mystics, with cavers to the cave in Bull Rock, with the astronomer Grygar to the ancient battlefield of Turský Pole, with me to the Forman pub Black Ox... A philosopher, a priest, a village old lady, a digger, a metallurgist, fishermen, a young intellectual, songwriters, an esoteric. The author and his friends get on a bus and go to the village of Beginnings to see if there is a real beginning here. Behind the beginning there is a spring, the Virgin Mary's well, but also Balko's hell. And the shoes are already a hole. Our guide throws them with gusto into the pond where the beginning of the springs is... Or is the beginning on the mystical Mount Rip? At Vyšehrad, through which we are guided by a disabled man in a wheelchair? We ascend to the sky in a balloon and descend into the depths where there is only darkness and water. The fence is lined with inverted cups, Palach's bust has a wreath of sausages around its neck, the centre of the world is actually a folding parasol over Prague. There is a playful poeticism here; despite the caustic splashes, this is not a cruel image, rather the wandering of a fascinated traveller through the amazing labyrinth we call the Czech nation. At the end of the film, the sun rises among the bizarre hills of the Bohemian Central Highlands and a young intellectual accompanied by a dancing girl sings a debauched song with his guitar about how philosophy is bullshit...

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