

Jiří Trnka At BFI Southbank in April 2012

Throughout **April 2012**, **BFI Southbank** celebrates the work of the Czech animation pioneer **Jiří Trnka** (1912-69) with a retrospective season in this, the centenary of his birth. The so called **Walt Disney of the East**, Trnka was responsible for introducing the Czech puppet film to the world and, in doing, has influenced the work of the likes of **Jean Cocteau** and the **Quay Brothers**. The season spans the director's career taking in his wildly ambitious feature debut, *The Czech Year* (1947) that traces the passage of a single year in the Czech countryside, via two programmes of shorts, **Trnka Shorts for Children** and **Trnka Shorts for Adults**, adaptations of Shakespeare (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* 1959) and Hans Christian Andersen (*The Emperor's Nightingale*, 1948) and a very special Q&A with director, animator and protégée of Trnka, **Vlasta Pospíšilová**

Anyone described by **Jean Cocteau** as '*a magician who knows how to value childhood dreams*' is clearly very special indeed. The founder not merely of Czech puppet film but of Czech animation in general, Trnka is highly lauded both for the excellence of his own work and for his vast and continuing creative influence. **Jan Švankmajer** (*Greedy Guts*, *Faust*) worked at his studio, one of Trnka's colleagues taught the Quay Brothers puppet animation, and his associates **Břetislav Pojar** and **Vlasta Pospíšilová** produce stop-motion films like the **Fimfárum** series (2002-11) to this day.

Trnka first established himself as an illustrator and stage designer before co-founding Trick Brothers in May 1945. After a handful of cartoons he took a huge professional gamble by founding a dedicated puppet film studio and making a feature, albeit one comprising six parts that could be distributed separately if necessary. He needn't have worried: *The Czech Year* (1947) opened to an ecstatic domestic reception, not least because it was so proudly Czech from roots to realisation, just two years after the country emerged from Nazi occupation. Trnka developed and refined his art over the next decade, reaching a creative if not commercial peak with his sixth and final feature, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1959). He also adapted Hans Christian Andersen (*The Emperor's Nightingale*, 1948), Božena Němcová (*Prince Bayaya*, 1950), Jaroslav Hašek (*The Good Soldier Svejk*, 1955) and tales from the dawn of his nation's cultural and historical memory (*Old Czech Legends*, 1953), transforming them into exquisitely delicate, often wordless film-ballets, his puppets' complex vocabularies of gesture and movement effectively rediscovering what the cinema had largely lost since the silent era: a truly international language. Trnka's 1960s films were sparser and bleaker, culminating in his final masterpiece *The Hand* (1965), a heartbreaking portrait of the artist under totalitarian oppression that was the closest that Trnka came to his compatriot Franz Kafka's paranoid universe. Despite this late foray into explicit political criticism, the Czechoslovak Communist authorities honoured Trnka with a full state funeral when he died four years later.

Curated by Renata Clark and Michaela Mertová. Organised in collaboration with the Czech Centre London and Czech National Film Archive

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The Czech Year Špalíček

Czechoslovakia 1947. 75min. EST

The most ambitious and original animated project since Disney's *Fantasia*, Trnka's first feature grew out of a concept-testing puppet short, *Bethlehem*, which became the final segment of this six-part rhapsody tracing the passage of a year in the Czech countryside. Bringing folk legends, traditions, songs and dances to vivid life with the aid of superbly rendered puppets and ever-changing landscapes, it established Trnka as a world-class talent. Plus **Jiří Trnka's Puppets** (*Loutky Jiřího Trnky*, Czechoslovakia 1955, dir Bruno Šefranka, 23min, EST).

Mon 2 Apr 18:20 NFT2

Tue 10 Apr 20:50 NFT2

The Emperor's Nightingale Císařův slavík

Czechoslovakia 1949. 72min

A childhood fan of Hans Christian Andersen, Jiří Trnka drew on him for his second feature, which combined live action and animation. A lonely convalescent boy dreams up a fantastical world based entirely on the toys and objects surrounding him. Its porcelain Emperor, notionally all-powerful but trapped by tradition, is desperate to hear the authentic voice of the nightingale but is forced to make do with a crude imitation.

Tue 3 Apr 18:10 NFT3

Thu 12 Apr 20:50 NFT2

Prince Bayaya Bajaja

Czechoslovakia 1950. 87min. EST

Adapted from two fables by Božena Němcová, this was Trnka's first attempt at a full-scale ballad-driven epic, in which a tale of a poor country boy's heroic exploits (defeating dragons and rivals with the help of his mother's ghost in the form of a white horse) combined with greater psychological depth than he had previously attempted. It was visually inspired by Czech painters of the Gothic and Renaissance periods.

Thu 5 Apr 18:20 NFT2

Sat 14 Apr 16:00 NFT2

Old Czech Legends Staré pověsti české

Czechoslovakia 1953. 91min. EST

A partial return to the themes of *The Czech Year*, albeit with noticeably greater technical and conceptual sophistication (the puppets speak for the first time, a decision that took some soul-searching), Trnka's fourth feature adapts six legends dating from the dawn of the Czech nation. Historical realism alternates with elaborate fantasy, most brilliantly realised in the climactic battle, in which the newly established Czechs defend themselves against invading Lukanians.

Sun 15 Apr 18:20 NFT2

Fri 20 Apr 20:40 NFT2

The Good Soldier Švejk (Eps I, II, III) Dobrý voják Švejk

Czechoslovakia 1955. 88min. English commentary

Adapting Jaroslav Hašek's raucous satirical novel, and also bringing Josef Lada's equally famous illustrations to garrulous puppet life, posed Trnka one of his biggest creative challenges. Trnka himself felt that the final episode was the most artistically successful, but there's much to enjoy in all three, not least the way that the lackadaisical layabout Švejk's own self-serving anecdotes are realised through cut-out animation

Tue 17 Apr 20:50 NFT2

Tue 24 Apr 18:20 NFT2

A Midsummer Night's Dream Sen noci svatojánské

Czechoslovakia 1959. 76min. English narration

Four years in the making, Trnka's most celebrated film turned Shakespeare's play into a multi-layered masterpiece, drawing imaginative contrasts between its very different settings, and giving the 'rude mechanicals' a dignity that most productions deny them: Trnka clearly saw these humble craftsmen as kindred spirits. The puppet animation here reaches a peak of balletic perfection: it's hard to believe that Trnka didn't literally breathe life into his creations. \

**Followed by a Q&A with director and animator Vlasta Pospíšilová*

Thu 19 Apr 18:10 NFT3*

Sun 22 Apr 20:45 NFT3

Trnka Shorts for Adults

Song of the Prairie (Árie prémie, 1949, 23min) + *The Archangel Gabriel and*

Mrs Goose (Archanděl Gabriel a paní Husa, 1964, 28min) + *Passion* (Vášeň, 1962, 9min) + *Springman and the SS* (Pérák a SS, 1946, 14min) + *The Hand* (Ruka, 1965, 19min). Total 93min Five shorts spanning almost Trnka's entire filmmaking career, from the anti-Nazi proto-Spiderman hero of *Springman and the SS* to his last masterpiece *The Hand*, a powerful allegory of the artist labouring under oppressive censorship. *Song of the Prairie* is a lively tribute to the West, *Passion* condemns man's addiction to high-speed high jinks, and *The Archangel Gabriel and Mrs Goose* is a surprisingly bawdy take on a Boccaccio story.

Sun 22 Apr 18:30 NFT2

Fri 27 Apr 20:40 NFT2

Trnka Shorts for Children

The Merry Circus (Veselý cirkus, 1951, 12min) + *Grandpa Planted a Beet* (Zasadil dědek řepu, 1945, 10min) + *The Devil's Mill* (Čertův mlýn, 1949, 21min) + *The Little Umbrella* (Paraplíčko, 1957, dir Břetislav Pojar, 16min) + *The Midnight Adventure* (Půlnoční příhoda, 1960, dir Břetislav Pojar, 13min). Total 72min Despite his 'Disney of the East' nickname, Trnka was never primarily a children's animator, though there are several delightful exceptions. Czech folktales fuel his cartoon debut *Grandpa Planted a Beet* and the puppet-based *The Devil's Mill*, while *The Merry Circus* is a charming cut-out performance. The Trnkadesigned *Little Umbrella* brings toys to life after lights out, and *The Midnight Adventure* pits a wooden train against its electric rival.

Sat 7 Apr 16:00 NFT2

Wed 11 Apr 18:30 NFT2

NOTES TO EDITORS

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