

The Buffalo Film Seminars



October 16, 2007 (XV:8)

Jiří Menzel *Ostre sledované vlaky/
Closely Watched Trains* 1966 93 minutes

Directed by Jiří Menzel
Written by Bohumil Hrabal (also novel), Jiří Menzel
Produced by Zdenek Oves and Carlo Ponti
Original Music by Jirí Sust
Cinematography by Jaromír Sofr
Film Editing by Jirina Lukesová



Václav Neckár... Trainee Milos Hrma
Josef Somr... Train dispatcher Hubicka
Vlastimil Brodský... Counselor Zednicek
Vladimír Valenta... Stationmaster Max
Alois Vachek... Novak
Ferdinand Kruta... Masa's Uncle Noneman
Jitka Bendová... Conductor Masa
Jitka Zelenohorská... Zdenka
Nada Urbánková... Victoria Freie
Libuse Havelková... Max's wife
Kveta Fialová... The countess
Pavla Marsálková... Mother
Milada Jezková... Zdenka's mother

Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film

JIRÍ MENZEL (23 February 1938, Prague, Czechoslovakia) has directed 26 films and acted in many more. Some of the films he directed are *Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále/ I Served the King of England* (2006), *Zebrácká opera/The Beggar's Opera* (1991), *Konec starych casu/The End of Old Times* (1989), *Postriziny/Cutting it Short* (1981), *Promeny krajiny/Altered Landscapes* (1974), *Zlocin v dívčí škole/Crime at the Girls School* (1965), and *Domy z panelu/Prefabricated Houses* (1960).

from World Film Directors, Vol. II. Ed. John Wakeman. The H.W. Wilson Company NY 1988

Jiří Menzel (February 12, 1938—), Czech film and theatre director, scenarist, and actor, was born in Prague. He is the son of Josef Menzel, a journalist who became a children's author and then turned to writing

scripts for puppet plays and films. Menzel has a twin sister, Hana, and says "I weighed only three pounds when I was born, so everything I accomplished afterwards is to my credit." Menzel's father had a large library, "so father's library and mother's sense of humor made of me a film director." Alan Levy, in his *New York Times Magazine* article about the director, says that "Jiří Menzel was—and still is—a bookworm," most of whose films are reverent screen versions of books "by the Czech authors he learned to love in his childhood and teens."

Menzel's other adolescent interests were the movies, the theatre, and girls (though he was handicapped in pursuit of the latter by nearsightedness and acute shyness). His first ambition was to become a ship's stoker and his second to be a theatre director. "Film was never enough for my dreams," he says. "And cinema was a place where *couples* went and sometimes made love—but, for me, a place where, if I reached for a girl's hand, she wouldn't let me." However, he was rejected by the theatre faculty of the Prague Academy of Arts and Music and, after a year's experience as a "general errand boy" in television, he joined the Academy's film faculty, FAMU, to study directing.

When Menzel entered FAMU in 1957, he struck Vera Chytilová as "a very young boy with his mouth open expecting something....But even then he was incorrigibly lazy." Evald Schorm, another older contemporary at FAMU disagreed, maintaining that Menzel simply "lived on another wavelength from other people...a boy who received his genius from the gods." Comparing himself with these two—who both preceded him as major and controversial figures in the Czech New Wave—Menzel says that "philosophically we

stood for something—we had the same opinions about morality, about sex, about politics. We looked at many movies together, and we liked the same things. But later when I saw how differently we worked, I realized that there are no eternal truths—only personal ones that you put on the screen in the way that you know them to be.” From the veteran director Otakar Vávra, one of his professors at FAMU, he learned that “a director should never have an inferiority complex”—and decided that he would “try not to let mine show.”

Menzel remained at FAMU until 1962. He served as Chytilová’s assistant on her graduation film, *Ceiling* (1962), in which he also appeared. And on her first feature, *Something Different* (1963). His own diploma film, *Umrel nám pan Foerster* (*Mr. Foerster is Dead*), was finally completed in 1963; it is a medium-length piece comparing three different life-styles. By this time Menzel was working on army newsreels by way of military service (1963-1965)—he says he “gradually rose to the rank of private and eventually was promoted to civilian.” He was still in the army when, along with Chytilová, Schorm, Jan Nemeč, and Jaromil Jires, he was invited to contribute to the New Wave omnibus film *Perlicky na dne* (*Pearls at the Bottom*, 1965), based on stories by Bohumil Hrabal.

The story Menzel filmed was “Smrt pana Baltazara” (“The Death of Mr. Baltisberger”). It had been inspired by the death of a young German motorcycle racer during a Czech Grand Prix in the early 1950s, but concentrates not on this tragedy but on the reactions of the spectators—especially a family of fanatical race-goers who plant themselves at the most dangerous corner, reminisce about their love affairs and about great races of the past, and wait hopefully for disaster. The director himself appears as a nonchalant bicyclist who gets caught up in the race.

Menzel’s “beautifully visualized” film was the most admired of the film’s five pieces. In this auspicious debut, as one critic wrote, the essentials of his style were already evident—“a static camera with the subject head on, a scene almost empty at first, imperceptibly filling as the sequence progresses till it is full of ironic unobtrusive detail. It is typical that though this film was about the crash and death of a motorcycle racer, when the riders appear he uses overexposure, telescopic lens and slow motion as the bikes come over a hilltop straight at the camera. Instead of roaring sound there is only music on the soundtrack”; it is as if “the Angels of Death are coming to claim Baltazar.”

Another omnibus film followed, *Zlocin v dívčí škole* (*Crime in a Girls’ School*, 1965), in which three detective stories by Josef Skvorecký are filmed by three different directors....

Before this triumph, Menzel was better known as an actor—he had appeared in films by Schorm, Chytilová, and others, as well as in his own movies. He had also retained his interest in the stage, and during the mid-1960s became involved with various Prague theatres, especially the famous Semafor, where the sardonic song-and-dance men Jiří Slitr and Jiří Suchý maintained the theatre’s reputation for daring political and social satire. In 1966 Menzel had his first success as a theatre director with *The Devil From Vinohrady*, a satirical comedy at the Semafor.

Menzel’s next film was *Rozmarné léto* (*Capricious Summer*, 1968), adapted by the director from a novel by Vladislav Vančura and photographed in Eastmancolor by Menzel’s usual cinematographer, Jaromír Šofr....and the camerawork reminded reviewers of both Jean Renoir and his cinematographer nephew Claude. It won prizes at Karlovy Vary but failed to repeat the financial success of its predecessor.

Menzel’s first full-length feature followed, *Ostre sledované vlaky* (*Closely Watched Trains*, 1966). “It was an attempt to look at the war from another angle,” he says, “because most films, whether they mean to or not, glamorize the war. War is a very attractive subject.” Adapted by Menzel and Bohumil Hrabal from the latter’s novel, the film is set during the German occupation at a little country way-station where coal and ammunition trains roar through *en route* to more important destinations. The hero is the adolescent Milos (Václav Neckár), who is just beginning his career as a trainee at the station (and is fitted out with a new uniform by his adoring mother like a young prince at a coronation). Once at work, he dedicates himself to a diffident but unremitting attempt to lose his virginity. His seduction of a compliant fellow-worker is ruined by overeagerness, and a psychiatrist (played by Menzel) suggests that an experienced older woman might help him overcome his sexual problems. Meanwhile, his sense of inadequacy is exacerbated by the effortless success of assistant station master Hubicka, an obsessive lecher who rubber-stamps the bare buttocks of one of his conquests. Milos is driven to a suicide attempt before he meets the generous and understanding older woman he needs. She is an activist in the resistance, and endows Milos with a bomb as well as his manhood. Milos uses both to blow up a German munitions train and is casually shot dead.

According to Liz-Anne Bawden, “Menzel’s first feature attains a sure balance between comedy and sadness; he had wanted to use a comic happy ending, but Hrabal persuaded him to retain the novel’s tragic conclusion. The film is outstanding for its kindly, perceptive view of human foibles; never lapsing into sentimentality, it knits a range of recognizable characters into a narrative which ranges from hilarious to touching.” Another critic has drawn attention to Menzel’s mastery of brilliantly selected visual details—“After Milos’s failure in bed, a bomb wreaks havoc on the town; the scene is quite surrealist in feeling with a sharply focussed, upright hatstand upon which a hat swings, the center of a scene of light grey desolation. The station master’s wife strokes the stretched neck of an ailing goose as Milos asks for advice on his inadequacy...A display of primitive paintings refers to ‘The house of Joy,’ Evald Schorm’s episode in *Pearls at the Bottom*...The film is full of details that seem at first gratuitous and finally fall into place in the complete scheme.” *Closely Watched Trains*, which won the Grand Prix at Mannheim in 1966 and an Oscar as the best foreign language film, was internationally one of the most successful Czech films ever made (though in the USSR it was condemned as being insulting to the Czech resistance).

In the spring of 1968, returning to the Semafor theatre, Menzel directed *The Last Hospital*, a black musical comedy satirizing the national health service, written by and starring Suchý and Slitr. According to Levy, “the theatre, the Czechoslovak revolution and the Russian invasion—these were the elements that combined to change young actor-director Menzel into a deeply engaged man.” In the fall of 1968, introducing *Capricious Summer* at the New York Film Festival, Menzel told the premiere audience: “I must say that my country looks different now from this movie. Culture and freedom of spirit are the only strengths my country still has.” A few weeks later he disrupted the Locarno Festival by walking off the jury when Russian, Hungarian, and East German entries were considered for the Grand Prix—an action which brought an official apology from the Czech ambassador to Switzerland.

Zlocin v Santánu (*Crime in the Nightclub*, 1968) was released in Czechoslovakia at about the same time. Menzel had involved his theatre friends in this movie—Suchy worked on the script (with Menzel and Skvorecky), Slitr provided the music, and both had major roles, while Menzel repeated his performance on the tightrope.....

Whether or not to give this mournful comedy a happy ending had been much debated but, Menzel said, when the Russian tanks rolled into Prague, “we knew the ending we had was the right ending for now”—it has the two men on the gallows singing an endless soporific song about “the country on the other side of the barbed wire, where the meadows are fragrant and green.” A messenger carrying a reprieve note is moving slowly towards them—and a paid assassin is moving swiftly to intercept the messenger. Alan Levy calls this “the perfect political metaphor for present-day Czechoslovakia: still singing with a noose around its neck, and the end just a little in doubt.” Though Menzel called this “a picture I prefer to forget” and most critics agreed it was the clumsiest of his films, it was one of the most popular in Czechoslovakia after the Russian invasion.

Skřivánci na nitě (*Skylarks on a String*, 1969), based on a group of stories by Hrabal, and starring Vera Kresadlová, is set in an industrial town during the period of the so-called cult of personality, and deals with relations between factory workers and a group of political prisoners assigned to work with them. The first film Menzel made after the Russian invasion, it was promptly banned and has never been released. Though the few that have seen it praise it highly. Menzel found it expedient to return for a time to theatre directing and in 1969, according to Levy, he had “three sold-out hits on the boards in Prague: a ribald revival of Machiavelli’s *Mandragola* [which he staged also in Stockholm and Israel], a highly musical comedy, and an amiably barbed revue.” He also produced several pop concerts. Tension eased gradually during the 1970s and the directors of the New Wave—or those that remained in Czechoslovakia—were in some cases allowed to resume work in their talent-starved industry.

Menzel himself was obliged to denounce the “errors” of the New Wave before he could make films again and was also pressured to return his Oscar (but did not). He paid his dues to the regime with *Kdo hledá zlaté dno* (*Who Seeks a Handful of Gold*, 1975), a rigorously orthodox exercise about a young man who rejects the blandishments of his girlfriend, who offers capitalistic graft as well as herself, in favor of the sterner satisfactions of honest labor on a dam construction site. This worthy offering was followed by a much more characteristic piece, *Na samote u lesa* (*Seclusion Near a Forest*, 1976), a gently ironic comedy contrasting the values of a middle-class Prague family in search of a



vacation cottage with those of the old peasant who agrees to sell them his house and land. It received the Silver Hugo at Chicago in 1976, and prizes at Mannheim, San Sebastian, and Gabrovo. In the same year Menzel was also widely praised for his performance in Vera Chytilová’s *Apple Game*, where he played a philandering doctor.

The director’s return to form was confirmed by *Báječní muzi s klkopu* (*Those Wonderful Movie Cranks*, 1978), a “charming and often very funny” tribute to the early days of Czech cinema....

Asked if he intended to go on setting his films in the early 1900s, Menzel replied that he was in fact more interested in current events, “but I lack the courage to write a story about the present time. That would demand the cynicism and cold blood of a surgeon.” In Josef Skvorecky’s view, these were precisely the qualities on display in Menzel’s next film, *Slavnosti sněženek* (*Snowdrop Festival*, 1982), which Skvorecky described as “a remarkable portrayal of... ruthlessness and voraciousness... a scathing satire on ‘really existing socialism.’” Most critics would not have gone so far. Adapted from a novel by Hrabal and set in contemporary Czechoslovakia, *Snowdrop Festival* offers a panorama of rural life, complete with bickering couples, rustic eccentrics and a gently paternal policeman who deflates the bicycle tires of drunkards to prevent accidents. The central story concerns the rights to a wild boar that was chased from one village into another. While Vincent Canby in the *New York Times* said the picture was “full of the sort of understated humor and rueful feelings that are representative of all of Mr. Menzel’s films,” the *Village Voice* suggested that the “mood of underlying resignation” must be similar to the situation of the filmmaker in Prague.

Venicko Ma Strediskova (*My Sweet Little Village*, 1985) is also set in a small township, but contains more explicit social criticism, particularly with regard to Czechoslovakia’s acute housing shortage...The film was nominated for an Oscar.

The Czech critic Jaroslav Bocek describes Menzel’s world as “one of sought-for and dreamed-up joy.” At first he seems “a pleasure seeker, sensualist and epicurean,” but, in fact he offers “more a dream of sensuality and a game of pleasure seeking....Play and dream are Menzel’s powerful creative source of energy....Menzel feels that reality lacks joy and playfulness and tells us about them in order to complete reality...[but] at the same time he is aware of the fact that one can only play and dream on the borders of life today, privately and alone, aside from the overall march of history.”

Of the members of the Czech New Wave who remained in their country after 1968, Menzel and Chytilová have been the most successful at continuing to work, and on films that are distinctively their own. Menzel, Hames maintains, is not a moralist or a formalist like Chytilová. His comedy draws instead on the surrealist tradition and on the amiably subversive disorder of *The Good Soldier Schweik*, and it is informed by a generous humanity—in *Closely Watched Trains*, even the German soldiers are allowed their moment of comic pathos. “We all know that life is cruel and sad,” Menzel once said. “What’s the point of demonstrating this in films? Let us show we’re brave by laughing at life. And in that laughter let us not look for cynicism but rather reconciliation.” Diffident about his own achievements, he nevertheless deplores the violence and nihilism of much contemporary work. “For me film is not a way of making a statement, achieving self-realization, or changing the world; it’s simply the way I make a living. But at the same time I do my best, if at all possible, to make this living without sacrificing my self-respect, or my respect for life....I’m not terribly proud of my

films, but of one thing I can boast: for nine features I've needed only two corpses."

Alan Levy wrote in 1969 that "with his straggly beard and his sad eyes not quite masked by thick trifocal glasses...Menzel, the crown prince of the Czech film renaissance, looks like a half-hearted Middle European attempt at a hippie. Thanks, however, to his bobbing gait and shy, tremulous smile, the effect verges on the Chaplinesque." Menzel is said to be spectacularly accident-prone, liable to half-blind himself while sweeping the floor, and to break ribs when he tries to fix the television aerial. These qualities, and some aspects of Menzel's sense of humor, suggest someone a little like a Czech Woody Allen. And it is said that, for all his superficial clownishness, Menzel, like Allen, knows and gets exactly what he wants on set, even though his approach is the opposite of dogmatic: "As soon as you strive too hard for anything, you destroy it," he says. He claims to be a non-smoking, abstinent bachelor.

[The above entry was written in 1988. A present October 2007 google yields a very beautiful wife, Olga Menzelová-Kelmanová, and two children.]

from 1001 Movies You Must See Before You Die. Ed. Stephen J. Schneider, Barron's, 2003, entry by Philip Kemp.

With its bittersweet humor, lovingly observed detail, and ruefully affectionate humanism, *Closely Watched Trains* stands as the epitome of the cinema of the Czech New Wave. It was Jiri Menzel's first full-length feature and, like much of his early work, was adapted from the writings of the Czech novelist Bohumil Hrabal. The relationship between the writer and the director, was exceptionally close and cordial; Menzel, accepting his Oscar for Best Foreign Film, attributed all the credit to the novelist, whereas Hrabal always maintained he preferred the film to the original....

The theme—though freshly and beguilingly observed—would be conventional enough were it not for the setting: A sleepy backwater railroad station during the last years of World War II. The war ever present but at first largely disregarded, gradually comes to overshadow events, adding layers of complexity and tragedy to Milos's story. By approaching this period (generally depicted in earlier Czech cinema as an era of heroic struggle against the Occupation) from an oblique, ironic angle, Menzel's intention was to deconstruct the heroic myth of war "because most films, whether they mean to or not, glamorize the war." *Trains* doesn't deal in heroes: Hubicka is for more concerned with his amorous adventures, than with his contribution to the Resistance, for example, and Milo gets involved largely by accident.

Likewise, nobody is demonized: A group of German soldiers, wistfully eyeing a train-load of pretty nurses, are no strutting fascist beasts but lost, homesick youngsters, and the pro-Nazi collaborator, Counselor Zednicek (Vlastimil Brodsky), is more fool than villain, accompanied by pompous music on the soundtrack that ridicules his Wagnerian pretensions. A side-glance at the Soviet domination of Czechoslovakia is never insisted upon, but would certainly have been picked up by domestic audiences at the time.

The spirit of the *Good Soldier Svejk*, embodiment of the Czech genius for smiling insubordination and dumb insolence, hovers over the film—never more so than in the station staff's straight-faced response to Zednicek's explanation of how the Wehrmacht's retreat on all fronts is in fact a brilliant tactic to ensure victory. Like Hasek's classic novel, *Closely Watched Trains* blends comedy, tragedy, and farce, eroticism and satire, naturalism and absurdity, into a highly idiosyncratic and beguiling mix. And,

thanks to Brabal, Menzel let himself be persuaded not to soften the novel's tragic ending.



Roger Hillman, "Closely Observed Trains," *Senses of Cinema* 2002

Jiri Menzel's debut film was based on a freshly published novel by his countryman Bohumil Hrabal, who also collaborated on the script adaptation. The film came at a heady time when the Czech New Wave was attracting much attention, not least at international festivals. *Closely Observed Trains* itself won an Oscar for best foreign film. Beyond Menzel, the name to survive is Milos Forman, whose *The Fireman's Ball* (1968) was very much of a piece with the film under discussion, and who then of course went on to great success in Hollywood with *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) and *Amadeus* (1984). But headier still was the progressive liberalization in most areas of culture, and indeed in Czech public life in this period. This all changed with the suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968 (events reworked in Margarethe von Trotta's *The Promise* [1994]).

Seemingly belying its title, the film's setting is a backwater station which trains nearly always skip as a stop. But gradually the real sense of this title becomes clear, referring to the German trains that were given priority passage through occupied Czechoslovakia to carry munitions and troops during World War II. And finally that meaning is in turn subverted: the last train is indeed closely guarded, leading to the death of the central figure, but not before his own close surveillance is rewarded. Given his own family background, the heroism behind his act grows from what seems an unlikely base (right down to his grandfather who tried to stave off the German advance by hypnotizing a tank, which promptly flattened him). We see only lovable but bumbling Czech provincials in the film, who seem to have worked out a private arrangement of holding the War at a comfortable distance; old-world, charming people who are ultimately rather self-indulgent. But all this proves illusory, and we're left with an unexpected act of heroism, which largely occurs off-screen. There is no Hollywood foregrounding of the individual here; instead the after-effects of the explosions resonate across the screen and through our own historical consciousness – this is what it took to disable the closely watched trains and the whole system that relied on them running on time.

Throughout the film an equation operates between sexual and political liberation (this is the converse of the markers attaching to sexual decadence in post-war Italian films). Czech sensuality is counterpointed against Nazi repression; the former finally triumphs, though with 'le petit mort' having been literally, lastingly realized. Despite the film's understated imagery and its restrained tone – Hrabal's novel features far more pointed anti-German comments – death has been a prevailing motif, from the corpses seen on one

train, to Milos' attempted suicide (in what seems to be a particularly Eastern European mode of action, reminiscent of Tomek in Kieslowski's *Short film about Love* [1986], and the ending of Mikhalkov's *Burnt by the Sun* [1994]). Destruction too has been prefigured, in the sudden bombing of the photographic studio in Prague. Nonetheless, set against the little intrigues and petty destinies of the bulk of the film, Milos' death is a shock, revisiting an earlier sense of a lifestyle bumbling on indefinitely without major interruptions or dramatic turning points.

The strongest satire is directed not at the Germans, but at the absurdity of Nazism's local adherents, as when their main local representative explains German military maneuvers at a time when the real War is unwinnable. Earlier in the film this same figure arrives in a rail car and is forced to make his own strategic retreat along the single track, all this to chords from Liszt's *Les Préludes*, the signature tune used to accompany German radio news of victories on the Eastern front. The equation of sex and politics is cemented when this same tune mock-heroically accompanies Milos' victory over his premature ejaculation. Altogether the film is an ideal example of the interplay between history at a personal level with the larger historical framework: Milos' sexual breakthrough riskily parallels his political maturity, and mirrors that of his nation, it would seem. It is certainly difficult for us not to read the film's subtext as referring to the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in the filmmaker's 'present,' not just that of the Nazis in the film's actual setting near the end of WWII. After Milos' suicide attempt the camera picks out a poster, no doubt mounted by the local quislings, which defiantly proclaims the Soviets will never get Prague in their clutches.

The historical sweep implied by the film is suggested, but never documented, by its low key approach. Freshness of characterization is matched by turning the miniature *mise en scène* and drama into microcosms of struggles on the world stage. Behind the visuals there is a magical world of wonderful tinklings, of flashing lights and seemingly self-generating signals, all reflecting the operation of the railroad, before their full significance is revealed. A further recurring sound effect is the lovely old clock, a vestige of bygone Hapsburg glory, which at the end almost operates as a metronome to the explosions, having bided its historical time. Just like the underground patriotism of the Czech people, in this strikingly understated film with its bitter-sweet humour, its earthy imagery, and its unassuming heroism.

Richard Shickel, for Criterion

In the late Sixties, when Czechoslovakian films burst upon the West, they seemed something of a miracle. They were small in scale. They were typically about ordinary, unglamorous people, who were generally regarded with a humorous and humane eye. They were also different in tone from other national cinemas that had earlier caught our attention—Italian Neo-Realism, for example, or the French New Wave. There was a wryness about them, a gently stated sense of the absurd, that reminded us that the Czech national epic was—uniquely—a comic one, Jaroslav Hasek's *The Good Soldier Svejk*.

We were frequently told that *Svejk's* sly subversions of the warrior mentality represented the best that a small, geopolitically unfavored nation could offer in the way of resistance to its surrounding bullies, and we were glad to see that the work of a new generation of filmmakers—their attitudes formed during the Nazi Occupation of World War II, sharpened by the Stalinist dictatorship of the post-war period—confirmed the novel's continuing

relevance. The portrait of Czechoslovakia we pieced together from its films of the 1960s was of what we might now call a slacker nirvana, a place where private problems always took precedence over public issues, where ideological pomp was ever subverted by the imp of the perverse.

There was something delightfully casual about the manner of these films, too. Loosely structured, often shot in the streets and on provincial back roads, frequently acted by amateurs, their lack of formality seemed all the more remarkable since they were, after all, the products of an Iron Curtain country. Perhaps its rulers were not as sternly censorious as those of the other Middle European Stalinist regimes, but still...

Prague Spring or not, Dubcek or not, we wondered how the chief figures of this renaissance—Milos Forman, Ivan Passer, and Jiri Menzel, all the other graduates of FAMU, the famous state film school—got away with it. Mostly, though, we were simply grateful and welcoming when, at roughly the same historical moment, Forman's *Loves of a Blonde*, Passer's *Intimate Lighting*, and Menzel's *Closely Watched Trains* struck us with gentle, insinuating force.

None was more successful in the United States than Menzel's marvelous film. Even cranky John Simon thought it was "unique, indebted ultimately only to [Menzel's] individual genius"—and his opinion was echoed by every major American reviewer. It went on to gain the fond regard of sophisticated audiences, such modest, but meaningful, commercial success as their patronage could grant an "art house" movie, and the Academy Award as the Best Foreign Language Film of 1967.

We always return to such widely hailed and greatly beloved films with trepidation, so often is our initial enthusiasm betrayed by the passing years. We wonder, especially with films that are so immediately adorable, if we were taken prisoner by people carrying false papers, whispering too-sweet nothings in our ears. That's not the case with *Closely Watched Trains*. If anything, it seems to me more powerful—certainly more poignant—now than it did when it first appeared some 34 years ago.

I think we were all somewhat misled by the film back then. A lot of us, Simon included, treated the end of the film as no more than a *coup de theatre*, a sudden lurch toward seriousness that the director and the writer (novelist Bohumil Hrabal) somehow pull off without spoiling the film's overall sense of absurdist fun.

There's some truth in that argument. But what most powerfully struck me when I returned to the movie was how integral to the movie that ending is, how carefully it all along prepares us for its conclusion. Yes, it is a surprise at first glance. But on second thought it appears to be utterly inevitable. And utterly right. What's most clever about the movie is the canny way Menzel and Hrabal deceive us, lead us into believing, right up to the end, that their aim is nothing more than a sort of chucklesome and off-hand geniality.

An apt alternative title for the movie might be *Closely Packed Frames*; despite its relatively short running time, and despite the fact that it rarely strays beyond a sleepy, small-town railway station, it is rich in character and comic incident. Given the modest volume of its traffic, each and every member of the station's staff has plenty of time to pursue his or her interests, all of them irrelevant to the great drama—World War II—that is proceeding just up the tracks from them. The stationmaster and his wife devote most of their energy to raising pigeons, geese and rabbits in the back yard. Hubicka, the train dispatcher, has a feckless air about him, which belies his success as a womanizer (his rubber-stamping

seduction method makes for one of the most original sequences in all of movie history). Passing through from time to time are the imperious local countess, the outraged mother of the seduced telegrapher, and some Nazi soldiers intent on conquering a carload of nurses whose train has been sidetracked near the station. The most significant of the station's visitors is the clueless Quisling, Councilor Zednicek (played with a sort of weary menace by Vlastimil Brodsky), who is in charge of making the trains—especially the “closely watched” ones (those carrying supplies to the German army) run on time. He always has a map with him, and uses it to eagerly demonstrate the strategic brilliance of the latest German retreat. He is, of course, treated with contempt from the gang at the station. Passionate ideologues are, for them, figures not of fun, but of puzzled bemusement.

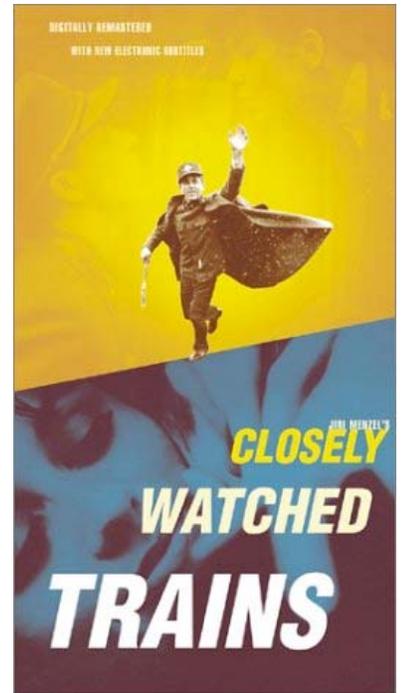
The film's central figure, Trainee Milos Herma (Vaclav Neckar), is primarily the passive observer of their little symphony of self-absorption, searching it for the clues that might help him to become a successful adult. This is not a status that we, watching him watching them, have much confidence that he will attain. If the film can be said to have a through line, it derives from Milos' battle with impotence, which takes the form, in his case, of premature ejaculation, and drives him to a typically inept suicide attempt. He is made a man, in more ways than one by dispatcher Hubicka, who is not as feckless as he pretends to be. He conspires with Victoria Freie (Nada Urbankov) to (A) have explosives delivered to the station so a “closely watched” train can be blown up and to (B) have the mature, pretty Freie make a man of the tremulous Milos. After so many years of vulnerability, he achieves, overnight, a new sense of invulnerability. Which leads him to heroic martyrdom, which Menzel shoots in an almost casual manner—which, as a result, is all the more powerful in its impact.

Just before that final burst of well-staged action occurs, Councilor Zednicek appears trackside to vent his disgust with the ridiculous hearing over which he has just presided. He's a busy man. And these Czechs are, he says, nothing more than “laughing animals.” Well, Hubicka does laugh. But it is a laugh of triumph, of unlikely victory. It's a reminder that any kind of animal, especially the human animal, can be dangerous when tormented or wronged or simply not taken seriously enough. Most important, this concluding sequence turns the entire movie into a metaphor for Czechoslovakia itself. It says that pleasant, pleasure-loving little country, so often

occupied, so often preoccupied by its own survivor's *Svejk*-ishness, is more dangerous than it looks. It is, after all, the country that assassinated Heydrich in World War II and endured the reprisal for that act at Lidice. It is also the country that, not a year after *Closely Watched Trains* was released, endured a terrible punishment for its cheekiness, its ironic-satiric spirit—Soviet tanks in Wenceslas Square, the re-imposition of the Iron Curtain mentality on its free and easy spirit.

Of the great figures of the Czech movie renaissance, only Menzel stayed on in Prague. He continued working as an actor and director on the Prague stage, but was obliged to denounce the “errors” of the Czech New Wave before being allowed to return to the cinema. Of the many features that he made after *Closely Watched Trains*, only a handful achieved (very limited) distribution in the West—some only after long delays imposed by the Stalinoid cultural bureaucracy.

It seems that Menzel is one of the many victims of 20th Century megapolitics, yet another artist on whose art the difficult business of surviving in a totalitarian society imposed too much of a distorting strain. The descriptions one reads of his many unseen works sound so graceful, so original. We can only hope for the opportunity to one day see those films, to be in touch with the full career of this most insinuating and ingratiating filmmaker. In the meantime, we are lucky to have *Closely Watched Trains*, a film that remains as fresh and potent as it was when we first saw it so many years ago, a film that continues to reward many a close re-watching.



FALL 2007 SCREENING SCHEDULE:

Oct 23 Buñuel **That Obscure Object of Desire** 1977
 Oct 30 Werner Herzog, **Aguirre: the Wrath of God** 1972
 Nov 6 Charles Burnett **Killer of Sheep** 1977
 Nov 13 Stanley Kubrick **Full Metal Jacket** 1987

Nov 20 Woody Allen **Crimes and Misdemeanors** 1989
 Nov 27 Elia Suleiman **Divine Intervention/Yadon Ilaheyya** 2002
 Dec 4 Ang Lee **Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon** 2000

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