

STAR-CROSSED IN PRAGUE

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SOLDIERS' EVENING OUT IN "A BLONDE IN LOVE".

DIRECTORS CANNOT BE RELIED UPON to look and sound like the films which they make. Milos Forman, who with two Czech films has made much the same quiet impact as Olmi did a few years ago, can. There's no good reason why one should expect him to live up to the image which his films create. It is simply interesting that—having lunch with him, hearing him introduce his latest film at the London Film Festival—his personality confirms one's feeling about his work. He has a puckish wit and a puckish love of pulling strings, like some benevolent puppet-master. Now that Central European directors of Shakespeare are all the rage, one would love to see him bring his fresh modern eye to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The ingredients seem tailor-made: mechanicals, star-crossed lovers, Oberon the supreme puppet-master and Pucholt playing Puck (obviously).

Peter and Pavla and *A Blonde in Love* are about the same things: adolescent difficulties with the other sex, a tangle of cross-purposes between boys and their parents, the dissatisfaction and search for identity suffered by only ordinarily intelligent boys and girls in soul-destroying jobs. Forman also has a love-hate (though in fact the term is misleadingly extreme) feeling about dance-halls. This is one of the characteristics which has led to the inevitable comparison with Olmi.

I think there is a closer link with the early films of another director, the English (but like Forman Czech-born) Karel Reisz. *Mamma Don't Allow* was one of the first films I can recall to take a close, quizzical look at teenagers' dancing habits. Much of *We Are the Lambeth Boys* commented on the deadly monotony of so many factory and office jobs. However, it is doubtful if Forman would recognise any deeper affinity than that. His two films are not confined within documentary disciplines; and his use of amateur actors is bound to be more fruitful than that of anybody filming the English at work and play.

There is a difference of tone, of emphasis, too. Karel Reisz once said to me, apropos of my strictures on a proselytising critic bludgeoning some harmless little muddle-headed film,

"You're right. One can't be serious all the time." Yet his own films, springing from a Free Cinema climate of protest and scorn, were and indeed then had to be openly committed to Left Wing didacticism. Forman, on the other hand, prefers to let his generalised social comments find their own way through situations that are presented in the particular, and characters that are amusingly semi-articulate.

For Forman, gently poked fun is the thing. This could be due to working in a nationalised film industry where criticism is safer the more general it is. But I doubt if this is the case. There is evidence, in the films and in Forman's own conversation, that he is doing exactly what he wants to do. Certainly his concerns are serious ones: about kids who don't know what they want to be and whether or not they should have sex; about parents whose attitude is one of nagging, irascible bewilderment. But there is a hint of autobiography in Forman's concern (the problems are so commonplace there couldn't help but be), coupled with a wry determination not to take himself too seriously. His own conversation comes remarkably close in tone to that of his characters. Conscious that he has nonplussed a London audience by getting excited, in halting English, about the idea of filming Jesus Christ at the time He lived, he suddenly ends his speech by observing brightly: "Hasn't the weather been terrible lately?"

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In *Peter and Pavla*, the spotlight is on the boy, a seventeen-year-old trainee in a supermarket. The humour springs from the particularity of his job, and his singular unsuitability for it. A shy, somewhat abstracted youth of limited intelligence, he is of all things a store detective. But this is by no means the sum of his problems. He is obsessively worried about sex and his own virginity; he can't do the twist; his time off with the slightly bored, slightly provocative Pavla is ruined by the ever-present Cenda (Vladimir Pucholt), a skinny and often tipsy young labourer who persistently reads offence into the intonation of the word "Hello"; his mother barrages him with questions about his love life; and his father is given to endless,

rambling lectures in his braces, punctuated by turns up and down the living-room and the massage of an ample chest.

Like an expert juggler, Forman keeps all these themes running throughout his film. The narrative structure is fragmentary, composed of minutely observed details and a great deal of improvised dialogue. Forman is a master of the verbal and mental hiatus, of the comically strained pause for thought connecting truism with banality, and banality with some magnificently conceived non-sequitur. One cannot avoid quoting the film's already oft-quoted ending. To Peter's chagrin, Cenda and his mate barge in during one of his father's lectures. Their arrival encourages Peter's father (the formidable Jan Ostrcil) to embark on odious comparisons and homilies about hands blessed by honest toil. Out of his depth, Cenda brightly informs Peter's father that he has found the discussion "interesting." The word, though quite innocently snatched out of Cenda's shallow consciousness, strikes Peter's father as the height of impertinent inadequacy when applied to the insoluble problem (as he sees it) of a shiftless son. Failure of communication is complete on all sides, and the film ends on a frozen shot of the father's utter bewilderment.

This shot is the core of the film, what it has been informally leading up to. It is a perfectly ordinary terminus, the end of a relaxed and impressionistic journey through one stratum of working-class life today, and had it been unsupported by some focal narrative thread one's interest might well have flagged. That it doesn't is due to the brainwave of setting so much of the action in a supermarket. Peter's job as a store detective turns the film into an affectionate comedy of embarrassment in which we all become voyeurs as willing as he is unwilling. There is the sinister suspect whom Peter tails through the town without having the courage to go up to him. The comedy is heightened by our understanding that Peter knows perfectly well he has no intention of challenging the man. (Later it turns out that he is a friend of the manager.)

But the highlight, almost cathartic in its relief after all those shots of hands feeling and prodding each and every product, is the great occasion when a woman suddenly steals something, then something else, indulging in an orgy of petty theft that leaves her shopping bag bulging as widely as Peter's eyes. True to form, Peter fails to make his move. Anything as violent as an actual nab would be as alien to Peter's timidity as to Forman's way of looking at life.

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A Blonde in Love covers similar territory from a different, mainly feminine outlook. The heroine, a budding Czech Jeanne Moreau called Hana Brejchova, works in a factory and lives in a hostel. Vulnerably romantic, she gets picked up by a young jazz musician (Vladimir Pucholt). To her the night they spend together is the start of something precious. The boy, however, is still at the experimental stage, and he is utterly out of his depth when he comes home one evening to find that the girl has called to see him. His mother is appalled by the situation, delivering harangues as endless as those of the father in the previous film. Nagging curiosity (Forman's mothers are boundlessly curious and pessimistic) gives way to a curbed smile of hospitality, which in turn is quickly wrenched into a censorious inquisition.

The girl is put to bed in the boy's room, the mother drags him out to share the parental bed, and voices are querulously raised. There is a brilliantly timed switch of feeling here, with the audience relishing the prolonged, almost vaudevillian antics of the disrupted family and the girl listening outside and shaking. For a moment one imagines she must be laughing too, till a closer look reveals that she is sobbing bitterly. Silent sympathy overtakes the audience, a miraculous piece of mood-manoeuvre, and the scene quickly fades.

Again, the narrative is deceptively casual, zigzagging about to accommodate a number of comic set-pieces, but always coming back to the girl and her generous idealism, confiding to a friend that all is whiter than white where her current romance is concerned. In between, we get gently cutting glimpses of well-meaning adults, like the lady welfare officer in the hostel putting moral purity to the vote and gaining bland satisfaction from a herdlike show of hands.

Forman's view of hearty, well-meaning bullies and their obedient creatures, exemplified in a long, brilliantly worked out dance-hall scene involving three soldiers and the retrieving of a bottle of wine sent to the wrong table, is always gentle, never overtly critical. He respects people's shyness like no other director; and he sees the puzzled insecurity behind each show of self-assertion, as in the scene where a discarded boy friend argues his rights before the girl's hostel companions.

To be so scrupulous about the feelings of his characters, Forman resorts to a less scrupulous form of deployment in order patiently to achieve his ends. He leaves his actors pretty much in the dark about the plot, the theme, the characters they are playing. The father in *Peter and Pavla*, he told me, saw the film as some sort of tragedy; the boys found the film's situations irresistibly comic.

An apparently unique aspect of Forman's use of amateur actors, like the father in *Peter and Pavla*, is the exhaustive length given to any take featuring improvised speeches. The actor eventually grinds to a halt—more than likely there has been a mental block—yet Forman's camera keeps on turning. It's rather like watching a chain-smoker work his way through two cigarettes, with the camera giving special attention to the lighting of the second cigarette from the first. This metaphorical lighting of a second cigarette, in fact a signal of anguished mental effort, is accompanied by a grim, unchanging expression of almost bovine concentration which is for the audience a source of unfailing comic pleasure. Much the same technique is used in the dance-hall sequence in *A Blonde in Love*. As the three bored, unwilling soldiers try to work up a synthetic interest in the local girls, the camera fixes a beady eye on their every indication of discomfort. It is difficult to say or even guess how much rehearsal goes into setting up such a scene. But once set up, there is no cheating the audience. The ball of wool slowly, expansively unrolls, rather as in that famous practical joke sequence in a Swiss hotel in Hitchcock's first *Man Who Knew Too Much*.

I think the secret of Forman's success lies in his self-awareness, his ability to respect and at the same time deploy the reluctance, intensity and bewilderment of the people he works with. One last story sums up what I mean. Commiserating with him on his return home to do his annual military service, we tentatively enquired whether it wasn't perhaps a rather boring intrusion into his professional life. Forman disagreed. How could it possibly be boring, when he spent most of his time relieving the boredom of his fellow reservists by recounting fictitious meetings with innumerable glamorous screen stars?

VLADIMIR PUCHOLT IN "PETER AND PAVLA".

