



Oil Lamps

Less flamboyant and outwardly more conventional than Juraj Herz's best-known work, this period drama about a woman who curbs her hedonistic instincts to enter into a marriage of convenience, only to find that it's no marriage at all, has plenty to offer – not least a superb central performance by Iva Janžurová

BY MICHAEL BROOKE

Juraj Herz (1934-2018) was the black sheep of the Czechoslovak New Wave family. Instead of formally studying film at FAMU, the Prague film school, he studied photography, puppetry (alongside lifelong friend and non-fraternal twin Jan Švankmajer) and theatre directing. Whereas his fellow Slovaks generally made Slovak-language films at Koliba Studios in Bratislava, Herz made Czech-language films at Barrandov Studios in Prague. And while the other New Wave directors, whether Czech or Slovak,

tended to make keenly observed comedies and dramas or overtly experimental pieces, Herz's best-known films were, if rarely out-and-out horror, at the very least genre-adjacent, and liberally laced with lacquer-black humour.

Consider his third feature *The Cremator* (1969), deservedly his best-known film, a riveting study of a crematorium manager's descent into narcissism-fuelled megalomania against the backdrop of the rise of Nazism in Czechoslovakia. Or the floridly gothic *Morgiana* (1972), propelled by inheritance-related murder attempts and ensuing blackmail, with a cat bearing inscrutable witness. Or the startlingly dark *Beauty and the Beast* (1978), from which innumerable parents prematurely removed their terrified, crying offspring after finding out the hard way that it wasn't quite as soft-centred as most Czechoslovak fairytale films (in Britain, it even has a 15 certificate) – and neither was the Švankmajer-designed *The Ninth Heart* (1979), filmed at the same time on the same sets. Or *Ferat Vampire* (1982), an out-and-out horror film about a car that runs on its driver's blood, surreptitiously ingested via one of the pedals. (Most of these are available on Blu-ray either

from Second Run in the UK, Severin in the US, or both, with *Ferat Vampire* an upcoming Severin release.)

Made between *The Cremator* and *Morgiana*, Herz's fourth feature *Oil Lamps* is initially somewhat startling for Herz devotees, since it appears to be a conventional period drama, with few of the flamboyant stylistic flourishes of the bookending films – although this unexpectedly rigorous control of mood turns out to be very much to its advantage. The film opens as 1899 ticks over into 1900, with much excitable speculation about what the future holds – something that a Czechoslovak audience in 1971, many with memories of Nazism and Stalinism and all with then-current experience of post-Soviet invasion 'normalisation', would most likely have greeted with the hollowest of laughs.

Štěpa (Iva Janžurová) is 30 and unmarried. There is no shortage of eligible suitors, but all have balked at her unwillingness to rein in a lifestyle that fully indulges her love of the theatre (including performing), drinking beer, playing skittles and wearing ostentatiously extravagant hats. Under increasing social and family pressure to settle down, she opts

for marriage to her childhood sweetheart Pavel (Petr Čepek), a marriage she knows will be one of convenience (he's bluntly upfront about needing her dowry to pay off debts incurred by his family farm) – but in exchange he's prepared to let her carry on living her preferred lifestyle to the full. Her parents clearly disapprove – her deeply unimpressed father bluntly tells her, "I'd rather stuff every penny [of your dowry] into a dead dog's arse" – but ultimately go along with it in the absence of any obvious alternative. And at least this raises the prospect of them meeting their grandchildren before they die.

However, that possibility seems increasingly remote, as Pavel refuses to consummate the marriage. This is something that initially baffles Štěpa: he's clearly sexually potent – after all, prior to their marriage she inadvertently witnessed him raping the servant girl Manka (Jana Plichtová), an experience that she clearly found at least as arousing as alarming. (Interestingly, despite her fondness for excess elsewhere, Štěpa appears oddly innocent when it comes to matters of the flesh.) Pavel gradually loses interest in much else, and his already irritating traits, notably a tendency to burst

The film opens as 1899 ticks over into 1900, with much excitable speculation about what the future holds – something that a Czechoslovak audience in 1971, many with memories of Nazism and Stalinism and all with then-current experience of post-Soviet invasion 'normalisation', would most likely have greeted with the hollowest of laughs



ABOVE LEFT
Petr Čepek as Pavel, Iva Janžurová as Štěpa

ABOVE
Stanislav Remunda as Mr Groman, Janžurová as Štěpa

Juraj Herz; Czechoslovakia 1971; Second Run; region-free Blu-ray; Czech with English subtitles; Certificate 15; 104 minutes; 1.66:1. Extras: commentary by Projection Booth podcast team; 1947 Czech public information film *Conversation on a Train*; restoration trailer; booklet.

into random giggling, become increasingly pronounced.

In the English-speaking world, Janžurová is perhaps best known for her virtuoso dual role as the warring sisters, one slowly poisoning the other, in *Morgiana*, and Czech-cinema specialists will fondly recall equally virtuosic turns in wild Václav Vorlíček comedies like *You Are a Widow, Sir!* (1970) and *How About a Plate of Spinach?* (1977) – the latter saw her playing opposite Herz as an unscrupulous beautician whose experimental treatment causes her brain to regress to that of a baby while her body remains fully adult. But Štěpa is in many ways an even more impressive performance, as Janžurová, like her director, reins in her natural exuberance in favour of a laser-focused psychological study of a woman whose instincts run directly counter to the situations in which she ends up. And Čepek, a reliably saturnine presence in a wide range of films, including František Vlácil's *Valley of the Bees* (1967) and Švankmajer's *Faust* (1994), creates an equally complex and unexpectedly sympathetic characterisation of someone who in less nuanced hands might have been more of a stock villain.

Sourced from a recent 4K restoration by the Czech National Film Archive, Second Run's disc is the most impressive-looking Juraj Herz Blu-ray to date, with particularly punchy colours, such as the electric blue of Pavel's army uniform. The label's usual thorough contextualisation is provided by its regular contributors, with Peter Hames's booklet essay giving much background on Herz and his collaborators as well as a detailed analysis of the film, and a wide-ranging Projection Booth commentary by Mike White, *Sight and Sound* contributor Kat Ellinger and Czech-cinema expert Jonathan Owen.

But the most intriguing extra is a 13-minute public information film *Conversation on a Train* (1947), in which a casual conversation in a train compartment with a gynaecologist turns into a no-holds-barred denunciation of the demon drink and its role in the proliferation of sexually transmitted diseases, thanks to its loosening of inhibitions. Its educational purpose meant that it wasn't subject to the kind of censorship imposed on dramatic features at the time – a situation that Herz, whose films (including *Oil Lamps*) were often censored, would doubtless have regarded somewhat wistfully.