

LONG LIVE THE REPUBLIC!

Karel Kachyňa; Czechoslovakia 1965; Second Run; region-free Blu-ray; b&w; Czech with English subtitles; Certificate 12; 133 minutes; 2,39:1. Extras: short film by Jan Němec *A Memory for the Present* (1963); interview with Kachyňa; booklet.

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL BROOKE

A child's-eye view of war is scarcely the most original of dramatic subjects, but Karel Kachyňa's eye-catching film is at the *Ivan's Childhood* (1962) and *Come and See* (1985) end of the quality scale, if not quite as intensely poetic as the former or as gut-wrenchingly visceral as the latter. *Long Live the Republic!* (1965) was a significant milestone as one of the first mainstream releases (as distinct from Jan Němec's low-budget, openly experimental *Diamonds of the Night* the previous year) to paint a portrait of the Czechoslovak experience of World War II rather more nuanced and ambiguous than official histories allowed. That ambiguity extends to the film's decidedly sarcastic title – it's not at all clear, even at the end, just what kind of republic is being extolled.

Oldřich, or Olda (Zdeněk Lstibůrek), is a typical 12-year-old rough-and-tumbler, giving as good as he gets from the local bullies, including cheekily making off with their ladder after they scale a church. But the end of the war is fast approaching, the Germans are in retreat (though still a constant presence), the Red Army is on the horizon, and as far as Olda is concerned every adult, very much including village locals, is a potential threat, to be regarded with equal and often justified suspicion, no matter how ostentatiously friendly the Russians appear to be. This in itself was, at a time when the Czechoslovak New Wave was still nascent, an unexpectedly subversive touch – albeit with plausible deniability inserted throughout, thanks to a narrator who's both unreliable and immature.

What's remarkable about the treatment by Kachyňa and regular screenwriter (and in this case source novelist) Jan Procházka is how effectively it gets inside a 12-year-old's head, constantly stressing his viewpoint, through the subjective exhilaration of a bicycle or horse ride (the film regularly explodes into bouts of thrillingly staged action), or interspersing objective reality with airy fantasy without immediately distinguishing between the two. Many of the more adult subplots, ranging from a family tragedy to an episode of Nazi collaboration, have to be teased out of Olda's skewed, rarely well-informed viewpoint. In his only acting role (he subsequently became a production designer), Lstibůrek is outstanding, showing the kind of instinctive talent that no amount of sympathetic coaching can coax out of a performer if it isn't there to begin with.

DISC: This resembles a repertory screening of a decent but not pristine print, similar to other Czech National Film Archive remasters that haven't been fully restored. A very welcome inclusion is Jan Němec's 1963 short film *A Memory for the Present*, which combines archive footage of World War II with contemporary images of Czechoslovakia to forge a dialogue across what was then only a two-decade gap. A 1998 interview with Karel Kachyňa for CUNY TV's City Cinematheque devotes much of its 31-minute running time to *Long Live the Republic!*, but has a voiceover translation instead of subtitles. Peter Hames provides analysis and invaluable context in his typically thorough booklet essay.

