

Jiří Trnka: Puppet Master

THE CZECH YEAR OLD CZECH LEGENDS

Jiří Trnka; 1947/1953; Second Run; region-free Blu-ray; 2 discs; Czech with English subtitles; Certificate PG; 165 minutes; 1.37:1. Extras: documentary *The Puppets of Jiří Trnka* (1955); documentaries on Trnka and Czechoslovak animation by Evan Chester; Trnka short *The Hand* (1965); *Badly Painted Hen* (1965), by *Old Czech Legends* screenwriter Jiří Brdečka; trailer; booklet.

REVIEWED BY THOMAS FLEW

These two features by puppet-maker, animator and director Jiří Trnka are two of the most significant in the history of Czech animation, early milestones in an industry that was fast growing in ambition and artistry. They demonstrate not only the filmmaker's occupation with the mythology of his nation, but his mastery of stop-motion; the fluidity of camera movements, the expressiveness of his puppets' body language (the fact that their faces never change emphasises this while adding an air of solemnity), the depth of *mise en scène*. They fascinate in their inventiveness.

Both *The Czech Year* and *Old Czech Legends* are episodic: the former comprises six previously released shorts which were combined into one whole, covering the seasons and festivals of roughly one calendar year; the latter is adapted from Alois Jirásek's 1894 book of the same name, which chronicled the myths and facts of the foundation of Bohemia. For those without a strong grasp of Czech history, the historical details of these episodes may be hard to follow, but this does little to diminish their pleasures.

In *The Czech Year* (pictured below), a focus on folk songs creates a lively throughline of musical numbers, performed by a children's choir and simple, toy-like dolls (inspiration, no doubt, for Henry Selick). Various scenes introduce the seasons by way of falling leaves and snow, or revolve around festivals and traditions; variety is added by way of retellings of folk and religious stories, including the suicide of a Czech girl sold to a Turkish prince. This story is a puppet show within the film, necessitating movements of remarkable precision, as we watch a puppet pulling on the strings of another, smaller puppet. That moment is particularly telling of Trnka's ethos: technical difficulty never seems to get in the way of the specific shot that he wants to construct.

Old Czech Legends – whose narrative begins with Forefather Čech bringing his people to their eventual homeland, Čechy (Bohemia), and goes on from there to recount stories of national mythology – is even more intricate in design, and even more beautiful, from shots of insects and animals in the forest (the deer alone are enough to excuse the reductive title that Trnka has often been given, the 'Walt Disney of the East') to a moment during a battle scene when a rain of arrows flies into a flock of birds – an almost impossibly complex composition.

DISC: Video essays on Czech animation and Trnka provide thorough inspiration for further viewing, while booklet essays give useful background information on Trnka and his films. Excellent shorts *The Hand* and *Badly Painted Hen* show their creators' subversive nature, a pair of allegories about state disapproval of, and control over, individual creativity.

