

CZECH FILM SPRINGBOARD 2021: Introducing the projects

Ensemble drama blending dark humor and social critique, elliptical intimate drama tackling controversial social issue, formally experimental drama about toxic masculinity and Czech New Wave-inspired glocal story about domestic Gen-Xers belong among the most promising debuts from the youngest generation of Czech filmmakers.

by *Martin Kudláč*

Despite the toll that the pandemic has taken on the cinema industry, the situation did not discourage the youngest generation of filmmakers. The positive sign of the domestic cinema moving forward is the latest contingent of debuting newcomers introduced by the industry initiative **Czech Film Springboard**. The selection of 2021 gathers mostly directors that have already award-winning short films under their belt and in the midst of preparing their first feature offerings.

This year's roster of debutants has a single exception. The scriptwriter turned director Beata Parkanová debuted in 2018 with her first feature directorial offering, semi-autobiographic intimate drama *Moments*. Since then, the rising writer-director has been juggling several projects simultaneously, including wrapping up her sophomore feature, a period drama *The Word* inspired by her grandparents in and their life under the Communist rule and preparing the follow-up *Little Lightings* which will conclude the loose trilogy.

In addition, Parkanová is already working on the script of her fourth feature film, a psychological portmanteau drama *Bears* consisting of five stories and bound by the same archetype of the protagonist, a woman in 30s. The director noted that contrary to her trilogy where the world and its limits are determined by the main character, she chose an opposite approach for *Bears* "where the characters carry the theme". Parkanová adds that the characters "investigate closeness, its development, forms and phases during human life". The project received the Czech Film Fund support for script and project's development and the shooting is preliminary scheduled for 2024 with a premiere expected the following year. Přemysl Martinek who is working on the project revealed that even if *Bears* are an anthology feature, the film won't have a fixed structure.

"In *Bears*, Beata is returning from the past, where the films *The Word* and *Little Lightings* take place, back to the present, and we want it to be a film that would synthesize Beata's style while giving it a new dimension," adds Martinek. Production outfits working on *The Word* from the Czech Republic and Slovakia, love.FRAME and AZYL respectively, are producing *Bears* and they are currently looking for additional co-producing partners and a sales agent.

Kafkaesque kaleidoscopic ensemble drama

The emerging young filmmaker Jan Vejnar came into prominence after his short mystery drama *Figurant* (2019) starring the legendary French actor Denis Lavant travelled the international film festival circuit. Vejnar is currently working on a first draft of his feature debut *Head Nurse* with a co-writer Václav Hašek. Kamila Dohnalová who is attached as a producer for her production outfit Last Films described the project as a combination of dark humour and heavy social critique.

Vejnar said that **Head Nurse** will be an ensemble film “based on the unity of place, time and story” unfolding during a day shift in a regional Czech hospital. A group of five characters from among the staff and patients facing different personal and professional challenges within the system of healthcare will alter in front of the camera. The titular head nurse, Hana, will appear in each of the vignettes that will be blending poetics of slice-of-life and Kafkaesque bureaucracy.

“The narrative’s mosaic structure gives the audience a perspective of a tragicomic hyperbole, heavily relying on the absurdity created in the micro-situations,” elaborates Dohnalová adding that the production is planned for 2023. The producer confirmed that they envision the film to be a three-country co-production looking for partners in the region of Central Europe as well as Balkans or Nordic countries. “We are seeking co-producing partners who share the same sense of dark humour and who in the same time feel the poignancy of the topic and who are eager to balance with us on the edge of comedy and drama,” adds Dohnalová.

The Czech Film Fund has supported the script development while explaining the decision by saying that “the council appreciates that the authors succeed in creating a counterpoint to the idealised and unrealistic serialised images of the hospital environment. They successfully strive for credibility and authenticity and avoid anything false, including artificially constructed drama and dramatic clichés”. **Head Nurse** won this summer KVIFF & MIDPOINT Development Award at the 55th edition of Karlovy Vary International Film Festival.

Discreet drama on controversial social issue

The filmmaker Václav Kadrnka has recently closed his trilogy *Absence of a Loved One* with the last instalment, a minimalist drama *Saving One Who Was Dead*, which world premiered in the main competition of the 55th edition of the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival. Besides writing and directing, Kadrnka serves as a producer on his own films through his company Sirius Films.

However, the writer-director is extending his producing activities beyond his own projects with a newly founded production offshoot Sirius Films Manual. Sirius Manual Film will focus on works of emerging auteurs and their first or second films with “an idiosyncratic, distinctive style and unique approach to film language”. The filmmaker-producer noted that Sirius Films Manual came into existence in order to “break habits of cooperation between producers and directors and set up a more creative dialogue and to look for new lighter ways to make films”. The new production label has already two projects in the pipeline, the first one being a psychological drama *The Trees Are Quiet* co-written by Kadrnka with Marek Šindelka and with Michal Hogenauer (*A Certain Kind of Silence*, *The Last One Turns Off the Light*) attached to helm the film.

The next project is a feature-length debut written and to be directed by a recent FAMU graduate Martin Pavol Repka under the title **Invisible Loss**. Partly inspired by his childhood, **Invisible Loss** sees an elderly couple with three adolescent children finding out that they are expecting another child. In a sudden turn of events, an invisible loss engulfs the family which were preparing to welcome the newest member despite risks and prejudices associated with the mother’s advanced age.

Repka noted that he is not going to follow the trauma stemming from the loss, neither employing grief as a dramatic potential. “The ellipse has already become a significant stylistic element,” explains the director the method he will be employing as a narrative device adding “I consider the silencing of the loss itself, but also of others, smaller plot breaks, to be the key for the narration”. Repka plans to create the film out of “authentic manifestations of everyday life of a large family, which are delicately interwoven with moments when the characters, even due to invisible loss, touch things beyond the horizons of their earthly existence”.

The project received support from the Czech Film Fund for development and the principal photography is scheduled for Spring and Summer 2022 and the premiere the next year. “The motive of an involuntarily terminated pregnancy of an elderly woman in a Catholic family environment brings a different perspective to a controversial social issue,” says the producer Simona Kadrnková who revealed that they are open to a coproduction with Slovakia.

Inter-generational toxic masculinity

The young production company Shore Points behind critically acclaimed webseries *The Term* and a minimalist civilization horror *Domestique* is currently working on Ondřej Erban’s feature debut *Near/Far*. Erban is the writer and director of award-winning short film *One Hundred and Twenty-Eight Thousand* that screened in the Cinéfondation section at Cannes in 2019 who has been shortlisted for BAFTA while winning the Magnesia Award for the Best Student Film on the domestic turf.

As the founder and producer of Shore Points Jakub Jíra noted, Erban’s short films are defined by a search for authenticity and the director will continue in this concept in his feature project. “Whereas in the previous films, it was mainly about experimenting with the formal component of the film and the way of storytelling, this time, we plan to comprehensively subject the whole approach of shooting to this effort,” says the producer explaining that they will be favouring intuition instead of rigidly rehearsed scenes and actors will have freedom to intuitively interact with each other. Similar approach applies to camerawork as each scene will be shot in one long take akin to a documentary style.

The chamber drama *Near/Far* tackles the crisis of masculinity as the story follows a former film star and now a recluse David reconnecting with his 14-year old estranged son he gets to meet for the first time after the mother dies in a car accident. “I wanted to tell the story of two men who are, at their core, the same: unable to open up,” says the writer-director about the complicated father-son relationship in the centre of the story.

The script and development of the project have been supported by the Czech Film Fund while *Near/Far* has been selected for The Central Europe Feature Project workshop and MIDPOINT Intensive workshop. The producer expects the development to last until April 2022 while the production is set for September 2022. The post-production works should be finalized in March 2023. Experienced Slovak producer Ivan Ostrochovský of Punkchart Films joined the project as Slovak co-producer and once the film is shot, Jíra plans to talk to potential sales agents and festival programmers.

Unsettling charm of Czech Generation-X

The line-up of promising debut is rounded up by the winner of the Czech Lion for the Best Short Film, Magnesia Award for the Best Student Film and Czech Film Critics’s Awards, Adam Martinec. Martinec has been most recently spotlighted in the initiative of the next generation of emerging European filmmakers, Future Frames, with an unsettling short film *Anatomy of a Czech Afternoon*. The young director’s previous short film *Sugar and Salt*, less unsettling and more humorous, dealt with aging among a group of elderly friends and fear of death and the film has been screened at San Sebastian Film Festival among others festivals.

Martinec plans to continue in the developing the thematic line of his short films which calls “a depiction of Czech homo sapiens” in his feature debut poetically titled *Pig Slaughter*. The director who is also penning the script picked a home-based pig slaughter, a tradition in some regions, as the

stage for his drama where family members of different generations will converge and their “yearning, attitudes and fears” will come into conflict over the course of a single day.

Pig Slaughter will be doubling as Martinec’s graduation film whose development has been already supported by the Czech Film Fund. The final version of the script will be ready in January 2022 confirmed the film’s producer Matěj Paclík of a young production company Breathless Films who also produced the director’s two short films. The principal photography is scheduled for January 2023 with post-production works wrapping in September 2023.

“***Pig Slaughter*** is a film that draws the best out of the Czech New Wave’s tradition and Miloš Forman’s films” says Paclík adding ***Pig Slaughter*** is “a universally understandable global story where our main protagonist is a typical representant of the Generation X”. The producer is in the negotiation with potential Slovak co-producers while remaining open to co-producing partners from other neighbouring countries although he would like to present the project to Polish producers as well. ***Pig Slaughter*** does not have yet a sales agent while the producer plans to introduce the project to international festival representants.

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