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Creators

Producers: Rozhlas a televízia Slovenska (Tibor Búza), PubRes (Zuzana Mistríková, Ľubica Orechovská), Offside Men (Ondřej Zima, Jan Prušinovský), Česká televize (TPS Kateřiny Ondřejkové)

Director: Jan Hřebejk

Screenplay: Petr Jarchovský

Director of Photography: Martin Žiaran

Editor: Vladimír Barák

Sound Design: Jiří Klenka

Music: Michal Novinski

Production Designer: Juraj Fábry

Costume Designer: Katarína Štrbová Bieliková

Make-up Artist: Anita Hroššová

Line Producer: Erik Panák

Financial support

Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic, Slovak Audiovisual Fund, State Cinematography Fund

Genre drama/Slovak-Czech

Runtime 102 minutes

Age rating general audiences/all ages admitted

Format DCP 2D, DVD

Distributor A-Company Czech

World premiere: 4 July 2016 at the 51st IFF Karlovy Vary (Official Selection - Competition)

Distribution premiere (CZ+SK): 21 July 2016

Cast

Zuzana Mauréry (Marie Drazděchová)

Csongor Kassai (Marek Kučera)

Peter Bebjak (Václav Littmann)

Martin Havelka (Jaroslav Binder)

Ondřej Malý (pensioner Řehák)

Éva Bandor (Hana Binderová)

Zuzana Konečná (Iveta Kučerová)

Richard Labuda (Karol Littmann)

Oliver Oswald (Filip Binder)

Tamara Fischer (Danka Kučerová)

Ina Gogálová (school head teacher)

Monika Čertezni (deputy Chvalovská)

Alexandra Strelková (Králová)

Martin Šulík (janitor)

Judita Hansman (hairdresser Bártová)

Ela Lehotská (greengrocer Vojáčková)

Jozef Domonkoš (doctor Němec)

Ladislav Hrušovský (judge Malinovský)

Attila Mokos (Mr Kindl)

and others



Synopsis

A seemingly passionate and kind teacher uses her pupils to manipulate their parents for her own personal benefit, whether for material gain or even the promise of a romantic affair. Concerned about the school performance of their beloved children, most parents succumb to the pressure and provide the teacher with various services and gifts. Three families, however, decide to take a stand and try to remedy the situation together with the school head teacher at a clandestine parent meeting. Inspired by true events, this suspenseful and highly topical film about the strength of human character, although set in the early 1980s, tells a universal story that could happen anytime and anywhere... at least as long as corruption, pettiness, and selfishness still rule the world.

The established partnership of screenwriter Petr Jarchovský and director Jan Hřebejk has joined forces for the first time with up-and-coming production company Offside Men (Ondřej Zima and Jan Prušinovský), producers of the TV show *Čtvrtá hvězda* and the movie *Kobry a užovky / The Snake Brothers*. Though the film was originally conceived as a purely Czech project, it was eventually created as part of a Slovak-Czech coproduction with PubRes (Zuzana Mistríková and Ľubica Orechovská) as its main producer. This allowed the creators to cast many lesser known but excellent actors (Zuzana Mauréry, Csongor Kassai, Peter Bebjak, Martin Havelka, Ondřej Malý, and others) and to shoot the film in the Slovak capital Bratislava.



About the film

“All adults and most children have experienced the feeling where something that might benefit you now might also be the wrong thing to do. Or the other way around: that following your conscience or moral code may be difficult or very disadvantageous. That’s why this story is understandable to everyone,” says director Jan Hřebejk.

The story by Petr Jarchovský recalls the atmosphere, tone, and theme of the authors’ earlier movie *Musíme si pomáhat / Divided We Fall*. *“Just like Divided We Fall wasn’t about the Holocaust or Nazism, this film is not about Communism or bullying. Our main theme is fear, opportunism, human dignity, and so forth,” adds Hřebejk.* The creators have managed to cast excellent actors who are not overly familiar on the silver screen, led by Zuzana Mauréry as the teacher. The casting process for both adult and child roles was very refreshing for Jan Hřebejk, as he had previously worked only with Csongor Kassai. The cast also includes Peter Bebjak, Zuzana Konečná, Martin Havelka, Ondřej Malý, and in one of the leading child roles, Richard Labuda, grandson of the legendary Slovak actor Marián Labuda.

“The fight against a teacher who misuses her position evokes moral dilemmas which are specific to the historical period and universally human. The basis is a true story that survived in our family mythology for its particular intensity. For many years it was brought up, retold, and remembered on various occasions. The events that took place at a clandestine parent meeting inspired me to write this specific variation on the courtroom drama,” says the screenwriter Petr Jarchovský. To make the story more timeless and plausible, the creators armed the teacher with greater sophistication, intelligence, and sex appeal than her real-life counterpart. *“What I liked about the screenplay and my character was that it wasn’t clear whether this was a comedy or a drama. I tried to keep the teacher Drazděchová between those two extremes, and it wasn’t very hard to do, because it was written so well,” recalls the leading actress, Zuzana Mauréry.* *The Teacher* was shot in the capital of Slovakia and the creators claim that the energy of the Slovak-Czech crew brought many important and refreshing impulses to their project.

*“When the producer and the creators asked me whether I wanted to join *The Teacher*, I didn’t hesitate for a second. *The Teacher* is the kind of film that sends shivers down your spine. It doesn’t matter what period the story takes place in, because it’s ‘unfortunately’ timeless. Bowing to one’s superiors just to get a small benefit is something we see around us every day. So I hope that seeing *The Teacher* might make us all a bit braver,” adds Kateřina Ondřejková from Czech TV.*



Interview with director Jan Hřebejk



With its atmosphere, style, and themes, *The Teacher* seems somehow related to your earlier film, *Divided We Fall*. What was so interesting about the screenplay that you decided to make this film?

I've known the story roughly since the time when it happened, because Petr Jarchovský related it to me in the early eighties when it was still quite recent... This is simply our main topic: fear, opportunism, human dignity and things like that.

This time you've moved on from an analysis of partnership to the broader themes of strength and the quality of human character. Do you think this is what people are interested in today?

It's what we're interested in! If we weren't, we wouldn't have made this. This film can be powerful. When we show it to random audiences, it has quite an emotional effect, they keep returning to it for days afterward. It's not primarily a political film, but it's difficult to avoid that label. We call it "*Pupendo* with a story".

It's a relatively small-scale story. Was that deliberate?

Yes, we wanted the whole thing to be as tight as possible. To make sure the stylisation is pure and natural.

Were you inspired by any specific films when making this one?

Not really, but we won't mind at all if it reminds anyone of *Entre les murs* or *12 Angry Men*.

How important was the casting of the child actors? How did you manage to find child actors so expressive, yet so authentic?

That is, of course, the key with a story like this, particularly for the emotional effect. I'm indebted in particular to Ingrid Hodálová who did the casting and recommended the actors, including the children.

How did you find the actress who would play the teacher?

The cinematographer Martin Žiaran knew it would be Zuzana Mauréry long before we actually cast her. His intuition was correct.

Is it just coincidence that the boy playing Kája is the grandson of Marián Labuda, or did someone point him out to you?

I'm told Richard Labuda is relatively well known as a child actor. This isn't his first role. His grandfather is a legend, and his father is a key person in the Astorka theatre today. I've met them both and admire them both as actors, but I've only worked with Richard.

Do you have any personal experience with similar kinds of manipulation or intimidation? Did you bring any of your own experiences into the film?

It wasn't just a feature of the Communist era; similar moral dilemmas, manipulations, and ambiguities are something we must all face every day. You'll find several Czechoslovak films addressing these themes – *Obchod na korze / The Shop on Main Street*, *Kachyňa*, or Svoboda's movies from the eighties. There's Najbrt's *Protector* and more...

Did you consult any of the issues, such as bullying of pupils by teachers, with psychologists, etc.? What's the main subject of *The Teacher*?

The Teacher is not about a teacher bullying students! Today we even hear about cases where the opposite is true. Our main theme is fear as a test of character. Just like *Divided We Fall* wasn't about the Holocaust or Nazism, this film is not about Communism or bullying by teachers.

Do you think similar stories take place in schools also today, where teachers paradoxically tend to lose respect and are often the victims of bullying by the children, or even their parents?

Yes, everything repeats itself and keeps coming back. All adults and most children have experienced the feeling where something that might benefit you now might also be the wrong thing to do. Or the other way around: that following your conscience or moral code may be difficult or very disadvantageous. .

Your story is very timeless, because it can be applied to many different environments even today. Do you personally feel that our contemporary society is more easily corrupted than it was under socialism?

Human nature doesn't change. Things were more dramatic back then. This makes the story even more poignant, since today many such situations are kept out of sight.

You have cast actors who are relatively unknown on the film screen, which is rather refreshing. Was that deliberate?

The main reason for that is that we decided to shoot the film in Slovakia. Of course it was refreshing for me because I don't have these actors connected with any other roles, their social presence etc. I had only worked with Csongor Kassai before on *Divided We Fall*; he was still a student back then. At the start of the shooting, we agreed it would be great if we managed to do as good a job as last time. :)

What do you think makes *The Teacher* stand out from your other films?

That it's in Slovak!

Jan Hřebejk (*1967)

Born in Prague. Attended secondary school together with his film collaborator and screenwriter Petr Jarchovský; studied screenwriting and dramaturgy at Prague's FAMU in 1987–1991.

Already during his studies, he caught the attention of the public as the director of short films

Co všechno chcete vědět o sexu a bojíte se to prožít / Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex, But Were Afraid to Experience (1988) and *L.P. 1948* (1989), both self-produced. These films won prizes at student festivals, as did his first feature film, *Nedělejte nic, pokud k tomu nemáte vážný důvod / You Do Nothing Because You've Got No Good Reason*, made for Czech TV. While still studying at FAMU, he co-wrote with Petr Jarchovský a film comedy set at a summer camp, *Pějme píseň dohola / Let's All Sing Around* (1990) which became the first film of director Ondřej Trojan.

His career as a respected and popular director was launched by the film musical *Šakalí léta / Big Beat* (1993), set in the 50s and adapted by Petr Jarchovský from a novel by Petr Šabach. In 1996, he made the children's TV show *Kde padají hvězdy / Where Stars Fall* which was shown in many European countries.

1999 was the year of the premiere of Hřebejk's megahit *Pelíšky / Cosy Dens*, an enormously popular retrocomedy from the 60s about one historical generation. Hřebejk's next film, *Musíme si pomáhat / Divided We Fall* (2000), the story of a couple hiding a Jewish refugee in their home during World War II, was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. His next highly successful retrocomedy takes place in the eighties: *Pupendo* (2003). One year later, Hřebejk returned with the bittersweet *Horem pádem / Up and Down*, a modern-day story that was recognised by the Czech Academy of Film and TV as Film of the Year.

Jan Hřebejk is one of the most prolific and successful Czech filmmakers and the winner of numerous prizes at international festivals. Since *Kráska v nesnázích / Beauty in Trouble* (2006), which won the Jury Award at the International Film Festival Karlovy Vary, he has been making roughly one film per year (*Medvídek / Teddy Bear*, *U mě dobrý / I'm All Good*, *Nestyda / Shameless*, *Kawasakiho růže / Kawasaki's Rose*, *Nevinnost / Innocence*, *Svatá čtveřice / 4Some*, *Odpad město smrt / Garbage, the City and Death*, *Líbánky / Honeymoon*, *Zakázané uvolnění / Icing*). In between making feature films, Jan Hřebejk has directed several TV shows, documentaries, music videos, and commercials, as well as working in theatre. His latest feature film, *Učitelka / The Teacher* will have its world premiere as part of the main competition of the 51st International Film Festival Karlovy Vary. In 2013, Hřebejk won the Best Director Award from Karlovy Vary for *Líbánky*.

Interview with the screenwriter Petr Jarchovský



This story of a manipulative teacher is based on your own experiences from primary school. Why did you decide to return to this story after such a long time?

The situation that inspired the screenplay for *The Teacher* happened in the late seventies, and played an important role in shaping my view of the world. The fight against a teacher who misuses her position evokes moral dilemmas specific to the historical period and universally human. The basis is a true story that survived in our family mythology for its particular intensity. For many years it was brought up, retold, and remembered at various occasions. The events that took place at a clandestine parent meeting inspired me to write this specific variation on the courtroom drama.

To what extent are the characters and their fates based on reality and to what extent are they fictional?

Most of my screenplays are to some degree based on true events, and my characters have their specific models. The key dramatic situation in *The Teacher* was expanded with other partial moments that enrich the story, both real and fictional. So the result is a mixture of distilled real experience and my own invention.

How did you perceive this manipulative and dictatorial behaviour of the teacher as a child? Were you afraid of her, or did she still maintain her kindly face? Were you one of the children who had to “help” their teacher? Or perhaps your parents?

In real life, the teacher wore the mask of maternal kindness, but her actions were a bit more primitive than those of her counterpart in the film. To make her character more timeless and plausible, we armed the teacher with greater sophistication, intelligence, and sex appeal. My mother worked as an accountant at the airport back then, so the dilemma faced by Danka Kučerová's father in the movie, played by Csongor Kassai, was her own dilemma, and it very closely mirrors real life. Danka's situation wasn't mine, but was based on a girl from our class.

What do you think was the real motivation of the teacher?

Similar to the motivation of the teacher in our film, if not identical. Just like our character, I think she was convinced that there was nothing wrong with this; it was mutually beneficial, the well-oiled system of quid pro quo that makes the world turn. The results of this model are destructive; unfortunately, it existed back then and exists still today.

Similar stories must be happening all over the world even today, making the story quite timeless. On the other hand, we now see pupils bullying their teachers. How much do you think the education system has changed in the last thirty years?

The system may have changed, but human nature remains constant. *The Teacher* is a drama of human attitudes, and tells a story about their conflict. It shows the mechanism that cultivates the courage to face evil, and how the brave are always pushed to the sidelines regardless of the context of the times. But you can't have a free society without brave people who have the courage to take a stand against injustice. This was just as true back then as it is today.

Originally, the story took place in a school in the Prague suburbs. Then you relocated it to Bratislava, where the film was shot. Did this affect the story itself?

When we decided to relocate the story to Slovakia for production reasons, it turned out that our shared past made it very easy to do. Nothing significant had to be changed in the story or setting. The energy that the Slovak crewmembers and actors brought to the film gave Jan Hřebejk and me many important and refreshing creative impulses, and we hope this came through in the final film as well.

When you wrote the story, did you have any specific actors in mind? How important was the role of child casting?

Casting was very inspiring, because it brought in many fresh Slovak actors entirely unknown

to us, all of whom were all excellent. Their portrayal of our characters is not disrupted by the context of their other roles, making the characters easier to relate to. I try not to think of specific actors when I write, as that would just hinder our inspiration when we cast the individual roles. When I need to watch some phantom actors in my head, it's always the old greats – people such as Vladimír Menšík, Hugo Haas, Dana Medřická, Jiří Hrzán, Petr Čepek...

Every creative artist has their main theme and several secondary themes. How important was this screenplay to you?

When I'm writing as an author, and not for a producer project, I always choose a topic that the director and I consider important. You don't write a film during one flash of inspiration in a café like you would write a poem. Some stories take a lifetime to condense. Once the solution is saturated, and if the circumstances are favourable, you make a film. That's how it happened with *The Teacher*. The question you're asked most often as a screenwriter is this: "How long did you spend writing the screenplay?" I've always been fascinated by this need to measure the creative process in time. In the case of *The Teacher*, I can answer that I have been writing it more or less for thirty-eight years.

Interview with Zuzana Mauréry, playing the teacher



You've found out about the filming of *The Teacher* before its production. How did your cooperation with Jan Hřebejk actually begun?

Ironically enough, I learned that Mr Hřebejk would be making this film completely by accident from an interview in a Czech magazine. I think he was saying that he wanted to cast Mrs. Šafránková, but she was playing a teacher in another film at the time, so he was visiting regional theatres trying to find another actress. Back then I thought that I might have a chance if there were a round of castings, but that Slovakia probably wasn't likely... then six months later the co-producer of the film, Zuzana Mistríková, told me in passing that she might have an audition planned for me, and I gave thanks "on high" for looking out for me.

The issue of manipulation, which is central to the story, remains current in every period regardless of the political situation. What was it like to play this controversial character?

No doubt about that, manipulation is an ugly thing and you see it everywhere. It seems normal at first glance, and we're all slowly getting used to it. The screenplay is excellent and the teacher was written in a way that I could work with; most importantly, I was looking forward to playing what is essentially the villain; I haven't played many of those. What I liked about the screenplay and the character was that it wasn't clear whether this was a comedy or a drama. I really enjoyed that and wanted to try and balance between those two extremes. It wasn't very hard to do, because the screenplay was good and we were enjoying ourselves.

The teacher manipulates parents through her pupils, who are also important characters in the film. What was it like acting alongside so many child "colleagues"? Are children good acting partners?

The children were selected really well, not least because they resemble their film parents. We also had Mr Labuda's grandson, and he was really good. There was one longer scene with the full class that we had to get right in one take. I was slightly worried about that one, because by the second and third take, the children are already a bit bored.

Have you worked with any of your adult colleagues from *The Teacher* before, either in film or in theatre? Does having such previous experience help?

Yes, I knew most of the actors very well. Csongor Kassai and I play in a touring theatre performance together, *Romeo and Juliet Thirty Years Later*. Of my Czech colleagues, for example, I did two theatre shows with Martin Havelka at the City Theatre in Brno. And there's of course Peter Bebjak, who directed the TV show *Odsouzené* where I played the main role. We had a great group of people. In fact, we had three directors on set – there was also Martin Šulík who played the janitor, which was delightful.

This is your first collaboration with Jan Hřebejk, one of the most prominent Czech directors. What was unique about working with him? Did he give you any freedom in choosing how to portray the teacher?

It was one of the most pleasant collaborations of my career. I feel that Mr Hřebejk is very careful when selecting his actors during casting, which means he can give them more freedom on the set. The screenplay was written so well that there wasn't much to discuss anyway. I felt his confidence in me and it seemed that he was enjoying himself. Working with him was a very pleasant experience and I'm grateful for the opportunity.

Interview with Csongor Kassai, Danka's father



In *The Teacher*, you portray the father of Danka Kučerová, the girl who bears the brunt of the teacher's bullying. Her father is subject to enormous pressure, but he's also one of the few parents who truly cares about justice and fair grades for his daughter. What was it like to play this character?

When I receive an offer I'm not as concerned about the mental condition of the character; I want to know what I can bring to the role personally. Of course, if the character is well-written, it inspires the actor from the start.

Do you think, given the time in which the story takes place, that the parents did everything they could?

I could think that, but I haven't been in this situation myself. When you're protecting your child, then everything else is likely to be pushed aside.

This is your second collaboration with Jan Hřebejk, after *Divided We Fall* which was nominated for an Oscar. Is there something specific about his directing style?

His style gives actors room for improvisation and he likes "imperfect" acting. His approach to directing is probably best summarised by his quote: "Please don't feel tempted to act!"

What was it like to work with child actors who feel very authentic in their roles, such as your daughter in the film?

Your question already contains the answer. When they feel authentic, they are an equal partner to a professional actor. That's all you need!

Have you personally encountered bullying at any stage in your life? What do you think remains relevant today from *The Teacher* – the issues of manipulation, corruption, distorted relationships?

Yes, I have experienced that. Looking back, I realise that it was the most important lesson I could get in my job. The issues you've mentioned have always been with us. Ever since the first man picked up a weapon and attacked an enemy.

What are you currently working on, what are your next plans?

In early June, my students at the Department of Alternative and Puppet Theatre at Prague's DAMU will be doing their final projects. I will also be touring Slovakia with several theatre shows, there's the Summer Shakespeare Festival in late July, and I will start on the Orfeus project that I'm doing with the Bubeníček brothers, directed by SKUTR.

Interview with Peter Bebjak, Mr Littmann



In addition to acting, you're also a director; you presented your feature drama *Čistič / The Cleaner* at Febiofest, you co-directed *Případy prvního oddělení / Cases from the First Department* for Czech TV and the *Nevinné lži / Innocent Lies* series. Do you think of yourself as a director or an actor?

I enjoy directing, it brings me satisfaction and it's how I make a living. Acting is a hobby. So I also enjoy that once in a while.

How difficult is it to leave your director's hat behind when you're acting?

Because I act once every five years, I think I do reasonably well. When I'm acting, I try to fulfil the director's wishes and keep my own ambitions under lock and key.

What caught your interest in *The Teacher* and your role of Karol's father, whose wife has run away?

Mr Littmann, which is the name of the character, is considered an enemy of the state, almost a dissident, and some see him as a hero. And yet he's just a loving husband who sacrificed himself for the happiness of his wife.

What was it like to work with so many child actors, such as Marián Labuda's grandson who portrayed your son?

It's like with any other actor. I don't care where he's from, I want to know what he can do. And Richard certainly has acting genes in the family. I enjoyed his professionalism.

How do you see the character of the manipulating teacher? Why do you think she does it?

Because of the power that she knows she wields, and because of the fear that everyone else feels.

Have you ever encountered something like what is shown in the film?

Drazdechová is not just a person from the previous century, the previous regime. She represents all people who misuse their position and our Slavic willingness to be controlled.

What was it like to play Mr Littmann, a person with a strong character and integrity? Even though he doesn't talk much, his character says a lot.

Being on set with another director and watching him work, or better yet performing in his film, is a great experience. Particularly when it's Jan Hřebejk. And when you're meeting other great actors on the set, it stops being work and becomes fun. And I like fun.

What are you currently working on, what are your next plans besides the premiere of *The Teacher*?

Martin Žiaran and I are currently finishing a TV miniseries called *Spravedlnost / Justice* for Czech TV. In summer, I'll be wrapping up the period drama *Četníci z Luhačovic*, and we should also be finishing a movie called *Čára / The Line*, about life at the Ukrainian-Slovak border. So it's quite a busy year.

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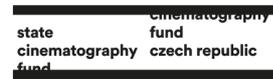
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