



Big Screen Classics

Daisies (Sedmikrásky)

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Director: Věra Chytilová

Production Companies: Filmové Studio Barrandov, Československý Film

Producers: Bohumil Smída, Ladislav Fikar

Screenplay: Věra Chytilová, Ester Krumbachová

From an idea by: Věra Chytilová, Pavel Juráček

Director of Photography: Jaroslav Kucera

Editor: Miroslav Hájek

Art Directors: Jaroslav Kucera, Ester Krumbachová

Set Design: Karel Lier

Costumes: Ester Krumbachová

Music: Jirí Slitr, Jirí Sust

Sound: Ladislav Hausdorf

Cast:

Jitka Cerhová (*Marie I*)

Ivana Karbanová (*Marie II*)

Julius Albert

(*man about town with butterfly collection*)

Marie Cesková

Jirina Cesková

Jirina Mysková

Jan Klusák

Czechoslovakia 1966

76 mins

Digital

The screening on Wed 2 Apr will be introduced by Ella Kemp, Letterboxd Editorial Lead (UK & Europe)

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When Věra Chytilová died in 2014 at the age of 85, tributes remembered the director as a vibrant innovator, whose uncompromising vision in a decidedly male-run industry made her known as the 'First Lady of Czech Cinema'. Her reputation rests predominantly on her free-spirited *Daisies*, the film that ties her in most closely with the new wave that her nation's cinematic history has been framed around. Undeniably a masterpiece, it has – due to distribution issues – also been the only work of hers many fans have seen. A retrospective of 13 of her films at BFI Southbank in March 2015 and DVD releases by the label Second Run have done something to redress the balance, however, shedding much light on her singular approach to the battleground of gender.

Věra Chytilová formed her career when Czechoslovakia was under Soviet rule, and the politically charged climate deeply impacted her work. After working as a fashion model and film production clapper girl, she was accepted into Prague's renowned film school FAMU, which brought her together with other directing talents such as Jiří Menzel and Jan Němec. They made films with a spirit of dissent and black humour that satirised life under the communist regime, and collectively became known as the Czech New Wave.

This flourishing of creative expression was part of a period of liberalisation that culminated in the 1968 Prague Spring – Alexander Dubček's attempt to bring 'socialism with a human face'. It didn't last long. Soviet-led tanks rolled in to crush the reforms, bringing a cultural crackdown. A number of Chytilová's contemporaries including Miloš Forman left for abroad, but she continued the struggle to work at home. The state-controlled nature of film funding meant falling foul of the authorities left few alternatives to get projects off the ground, and in creative frustration Chytilová at times resorted to working on TV commercials under a pseudonym.

In 1966, Chytilová made her second feature *Daisies* – a playful riot of mischief and joyous, kinetic experimentation. Its giggling accomplices Marie I and Marie II (non-professionals Jitka Cerhová and Ivana Karbanová) agree that since the world has gone bad they'll be bad too. Their pranks wreak havoc around Prague, as they leave the sugar daddies who dine them abandoned with huge bills, and scandalise a dance hall with their beer-stealing antics.

The mayhem culminates in a debauched food fight, as the friends lay waste to a banquet that's been set out for party officials, and swing from a giant chandelier. This irreverent carnival of excess and destruction was the antithesis of state ideology glorifying worker productivity and promising a bright utopian future for heroes of developed political consciousness. The authorities banned *Daisies*, citing the wastage of food as particularly reprehensible. An end-title dedicated the film 'to all those whose sole source of indignation is a trampled-on trifle' – a barb aimed at hypocritical officials who would take offence at such scenes, while turning a blind eye to greater evils.

The playful, anything-goes experimentation of *Daisies*, with its psychedelic onslaught of coloured filters and fragmented editing, made it the most formally vibrant and daring film of the Czech New Wave. Chytilová's taste for visual symbolism and multi-layered associations was echoed in her next film *The Fruit of Paradise*, on which she again joined forces with co-writer and costume designer Ester Krumbachová, and cinematographer (and husband) Jaroslav Kučera.

Big Screen Classics

Modern Times

Mon 31 Mar 18:10; Tue 15 Apr 18:15;
Sun 20 Apr 12:00

Mildred Pierce

Tue 1 Apr 20:40; Sat 5 Apr 12:15; Sun 13 Apr 18:10;
Fri 18 Apr 20:45

Daisies Sedmikrásky

Wed 2 Apr 17:55 (+ intro by Ella Kemp, Letterboxd
Editorial Lead (UK & Europe)); Mon 7 Apr 20:55;
Wed 23 Apr 21:00

Happy Together

Wed 2 Apr 21:00; Thu 10 Apr 20:50; Thu 17 Apr
20:50; Tue 22 Apr 18:10; Tue 29 Apr 21:00

Pather Panchali

Thu 3 Apr 20:35; Thu 17 Apr 18:05;
Sun 27 Apr 11:45

Volver

Thu 3 Apr 20:40; Sat 12 Apr 20:40;
Wed 16 Apr 17:50 (+ intro); Thu 24 Apr 12:00

The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie Le

charme discret de la bourgeoisie
Fri 4 Apr 20:40; Fri 11 Apr 12:30; Sat 26 Apr 11:45

Tampopo

Sun 6 Apr 15:10; Fri 11 Apr 20:40;
Wed 30 Apr 18:10 (+ intro)

35 Shots of Rum 35 Rhums

Sun 6 Apr 18:40; Wed 23 Apr 18:10 (+ intro by Ruby
McGuigan, Programme Development Manager)

Spirited Away

Tue 8 Apr 18:10; Mon 21 Apr 12:00;
Mon 28 Apr 20:35

Life is Sweet

Wed 9 Apr 18:10 (+ intro); Mon 14 Apr 20:45;
Fri 25 Apr 20:55

The Flavour of Green Tea Over Rice

Ochazuke no aji
Sat 19 Apr 11:45; Tue 22 Apr 20:45

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Made up of absurdist, surreal episodes, these films drew on nature for their floods of striking imagery and abstracting patterns, and featured some of cinema's most startling opening sequences. The glowing texture of autumn-coloured leaves and bark flickering in double-exposures on the skin of a naked couple amid a feverish chatter of sound kicks off *The Fruit of Paradise*. In *Daisies*, black-and-white archival imagery of warplanes strafing the ground sets the scene for a world ripped out of joint.

Chytilová's films became less overtly experimental in later years, but this did not signal a mellowing of subversive intent, as they parodied the mass-appeal comedies that had come to proliferate in the post-Soviet era. The boorish jokes and sexual banter of 1998's *Traps* set out the misogynistic milieu of the advertising agency it satirises, while 1993's *The Inheritance or Fuckoffguysgoodday* also pokes fun at brash consumption.

Following the lives of two women – a gymnast in gruelling training, and a dissatisfied housewife – Chytilová's 1963 feature debut *Something Different* had explored the expectations and strictures of female gender roles. The lot of women in a patriarchal society of double standards and predatory sexualisation was a constant theme in her films, and was often turned on its head by female protagonists with no qualms about going to extremes, giving her work its acerbic, black-humoured bite.

Ageing lechers determined to have their virility affirmed through conquest are the brunt of much of Chytilová's satire. Raised a Catholic, she reworked the Garden of Eden myth into a feverishly bizarre swirl of sensory impressions in *The Fruit of Paradise*. In the similarly hallucinogenic and frequently hilarious *The Very Late Afternoon of the Faun*, a 'determined erotic' tries to stave off his advancing years by desperately careening around Prague to pick up young lovers, as pensioners try to claim him as their own. In *Traps*, a sense of sexual entitlement leads to rape, as a Prague politician and his smarmy ad executive friend force themselves on a young vet who has run out of gas on a country road. She uses her professional skills to deliver an extreme, surgical comeuppance.

While producing films with strong feminist concerns, Chytilová remained opposed to self-identifying as a 'feminist' throughout her career, and could be brusque when asked to clarify her position by the media. Aligning herself instead with rule-breaking 'individualism', she was not unusual for this reticence in a central Europe in which the activism of feminism tended to be ridiculed or belittled and viewed as a posturing western import, if it entered the public conversation at all (acclaimed Hungarian director Márta Mészáros, while producing work of a feminist bent, also rejected the label).

A saturation of overstated, vacant ideology had been part of life's drudgery under a totalitarian state and had made Czech dissidents deeply suspicious of slogans and gathering cries of any kind. The only female in her film school class, then a woman director among men, she undoubtedly wanted to be taken seriously without the reductive pre-judgment of stigmatisation any such vaunted allegiance could bring.

Already fighting to work amid a complex stranglehold of censorship in which even the country's most revered dissident upholders of truth, such as future president Václav Havel, admitted having no time for feminism, Chytilová resisted defining her work through labels and left it to speak for itself. As she says in Jasmina Blažević's documentary portrait of her life *Journey*: 'I was daring enough to want absolute freedom, even if it was a mistake.'

Carmen Gray, bfi.org.uk, 27 February 2015