Restored

Valerie and Her Week of Wonders

+ intro by writer Virginie Sélavy

Valerie and Her Week of Wonders
Valérie a týden divů
Director: Jaromil Jireš
Production Company: Filmové Studio Barrandov
Screenplay: Jaromil Jireš, Ester Krumbachová
Based on the original story by: Vítezslav Nezval
Director of Photography: Jan Curík
Editor: Josef Valusiák
Art Director: Jan Oliva
Set and Costume Design: Ester Krumbachová
Music: Luboš Fišer
Sound: Emil Polednik
Cast:
Jaroslava Schallerová *(Valerie)*
Helena Anyzková *(grandmother/Elsa/mother)*
Petr Kopriva *(Orlik/Eagle)*
Jiri Prymek *(Tchor/Weasel/constable)*
Jan Klusák *(Father Gracian)*
Martin Wielgus *(Tchor/father)*
Alena Stojáková *(Hedvika)*
Libuse Komancová *(novice)*
Czechoslovakia 1970
77 mins
Digital (restoration)

Digitisation carried out in 2026 in UPP and Soundsquare studios by the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in collaboration with the Národní filmový archiv, Prague and the Czech Audiovisual Fund, with funding from Milada Kučerová and Eduard Kučerá.

In collaboration with the
30th Made in Prague Festival

CZECH CENTRE LONDON

Since 1968, Prague's filmmakers have been the most inventive, irreverent and politically astute in the world. Their films have been banned, censored, shelved, championed, awarded and applauded. Made in Prague celebrates the Czech New Wave and its legacy, showcasing the best of Czech cinema, past and present.

Such is the ripe budding, the July-morning energy, of the New Wave age – the 1960s and 1970s, roughly demarcated – that even if the films made in that furious Zeitgeist didn't in fact comprise a kind of film-culture *belle époque*, we'd still idolise them for their teenage blush and experimental piss and vinegar and wide-open sense that anything at all was possible. For the first time, movies and their associate cultural tentacles weren't celebrating the past or idealising the future; they had their horny mitts on the youth-drunk, rule-rewriting now. It happened nearly everywhere, and if the era could indeed be viewed as the blossoming of a cultural puberty – movies, for the first time, were free, and lusty, and awake to the world – then Jaromil Jireš' *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* (1970) is a perfect crystallisation of the time's indulgent, hedonistic vibe. In fact, it's arguable that no one film so succinctly captures the time, when lovers could have impulsive sex in sunlit fields, when plots could be discarded like Victorian morals, and when the thigh-squeezing passage of a pubescent girl's daydreams could not merely inspire a movie but become a movie in and of itself.

The Prague Spring was supposed to have met a definitive stop point with the Soviet tanks of August 1968, but the filmmakers who didn't emigrate either became defiant and saw their films shelved (Schorm, Menzel, Jakubisko) or, like Jireš and Vera Chytilova, veered towards a mythic abstraction that toyed with new-generation pulp and dared the censors to find political content. Ricocheting from the anti-communist satire of *The Joke* (1969) to the loopy Grimm-ness of *Valerie* (made when the Politburo boot had already come officially down) to the prison howl of *…And Give My Love to the Swallows* (1972), Jireš nevertheless maintains a distinctive style – fragmented, impressionistic, de-dramatised, stuffed with crass Czech gusto but always hyperreal and soaked in palpable weather. Still, *Valerie* has become Jireš' greatest legacy, the film that survived its totalitarian context to become a trippy cult fave decades later in Central Europe and in the UK. It's not tough to see why: a scramble-bag of vampire horror and soft porn and hippie largesse, the film is a parable on menstruation, a dream-in-a-dream collage of medieval fantasy and sexual predation that leaps shruggingly from episode to episode in a daze, sometimes cohering long enough for dramatics but most often tumbling right into the next tableau, the next semi-nude violation, the next wild daisy dribbled with menstrual blood.

It's in fact a little difficult to unravel Jireš' symbology – demons become fathers become lovers become priests become weasels – but the titular heroine (played by 14-year-old Jaroslava Schallerová) does happily admit, as she's being carried over someone's shoulder, 'I am dreaming.' Valerie's godmother/grandmother/aunt (depending) trades Valerie's estate for vampiric youth, a ubiquitous Max Schreckish ghoul (Jiri Prymek) stalks the young girl at every turn, the Mitteleuropean village square fills with travelling actors, Valerie herself skips and slinks and strips through the gauzy milieu unthreatened and rather delighted with her newfound sexual power. The coy girl even gets

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burned at the stake at one point by a fiery clergyman and terrified townspeople, but she is entertained by it, like Catherine Deneuve getting pelted with mud at the onset of Buñuel's *Belle de jour*. Everything in Jireš' film is a symbol, and nothing matters more than Valerie's thrumming sensuality – the reality of which, if the diegesis we're given is entirely dreamy, remains offscreen and explored only from the inside out.

Oddly, no one has yet seemed chagrined at Schallerová's underage nudity, perhaps because the forward thrust of the film is so generous, fanciful and empowering, or because the film's home-video audience has mostly been obliviously stoned. Oh, but the whimsical montage, the cartoon-gothic compositions, the hazy summer sunlight, the reposing girls in sheer white dresses, the near-Hammer genre-ness, the album-cover surrealism (the bed in the forest, the procession of nuns), the orgiastic medieval milieu (and beloved quasi-medieval score, by Lubos Fiser), the overall spirit of sexual élan, the dry ice, the tarot cards – if you're thirsty for the raw memory of discovery that came both with the 1960s and with your own sociosexual awakening, you can hardly do better in cinematic terms. As an expression of pubertal anxieties Jireš' film is the flower-power B-side to Neil Jordan's more toothsome *The Company of Wolves*; as a keystone to its day and age, which is still underappreciated for the radical departure from dialogue-engined progression to textural experience, it's priceless.

Michael Atkinson, *Sight and Sound*, October 2008

A contemporary review

In the Gothic extravaganza of *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* one detects the guiding hand of Ester Krumbachová, co-scriptwriter of Nemec's *Martyrs of Love* and Chytilova's *Daisies* as well as of this film and fast emerging as the doyenne of the group of Czech filmmakers who knowingly walk in the shadow of Kafka. Too easy, perhaps, to divide contemporary Czech cinema neatly into two schools, since there are hints of the baroque even in the work of the 'intimist' directors like Forman, Passer and Menzel, but Jireš' new film is very much the product of the Czech sensibility, with its liking for fantasy and animated dreams and its ready accommodation of the bizarre in the most commonplace of experiences; to the Anglo-Saxon mentality (the vogue for Tolkien notwithstanding) these fairylands of the mind seem a mite too forlorn, or at the very least a matter of personal taste.

Coffins and cobwebs, transmutations, the corruption of innocence, the bizarre forms of sexual gratification (flagellation, persecution of witches, masturbatory fantasies) prompted by religious hypocrisy and repression – the accumulation of images adds up less to the fragmented totality of a dream than to items from a dream recalled in retrospect. When Valerie looks into what seems to be a mirror and is then revealed to be the open window of a carriage, we are left admiring a magician's illusion, and feel vaguely irritated that the magician hasn't let us into his secret. *Valerie* is shot in ravishing colour (as richly textured as anything in *Capricious Summer* or *The Firemen's Ball*), abounds in appealing *trompe l'oeil* effects, dazzles with its marvellous sets and costumes. But this is the architecture of a dream and not the substance; dreams, even in fairyland, are seldom so seductive.

David Wilson, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, May 1971