

FAMU'S BIOGRAPHY - HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL FILM SCHOOL IN PRAGUE

by Jan Bernard



Origination of the film school in Prague had at least two historical sources. One came from a results of heading of left oriented filmmakers and artists to an art film or vanguard film and it was a series of lectures in film education of scriptwriting, directing and acting, given in Prague by scriptwriter and director Otakar Vávra, cinematographer, editor and documentarist Alexandr Hammid (Hackenschmied), film

history researcher Karel Smrž, choreographer Joe Jenčík and others in fall 1934. (Part of project was published by Karel Smrž as *A-Z of Film Scripwriter and Actor*, 1935.) This activity continued in frames of proposal of Czechoslovak Film Society for postwar nationalization of film industry and exhibition by initialization of Film School project, elaborated by Otakar Vávra and theatre directors Jindřich Honzl and Karel Dostál. Project was published 1939 in Zlín, with participation of film engineer and producer František Pilát under title *We Are Preparing School for Education of Film Youth*. This original school was planned as enterprise school by Bata shoe factory and its film studio in Zlín as two years course. For to prepare it, Sascha Hammid went in thirties to USSR, for get some information about Moscow Film School (VGIK), Jaroslav Brož brought information from Berlin and producer of Zlín Studio Ladislav Novotný brought information about system of education from California, from university dept. headed by prof. Morkovin. (This kind of more practical school for education of film professionals was later, in beginning of fifties based instead of moravian Zlín in South Bohemia's Čimelice as a competitive project to FAMU. At Nineties, when Film High School in Čimelice was dismissed, it was really originated in Zlín, where it is now part of University of Tmáš Baťa and competitive school was based near Čimelice in Písek, being now Film School of Miroslav Ondříček.)

Second source was an attempt of teacher, ethnographer, photographer and documentarist Karel Plicka, who's film *Zem spieva* was awarded at 2nd Venice FF in 1934, to base two-year school for education of documentary film cinematographers and directors as part of School of practical arts (*Škola umeleckých remesiel*) in Bratislava in 1937. This project was broken after one year duration by origination of

Slovak state through local clerics, nationalists and fascists, but one of its students was for example Ján Kadár, who later continued to study at FAMU and whose film from sixties, *Shop on Main Street*, was awarded by Oscar of AMPAS. (In Bratislava was in 1967? originated Film and TV School as part of VŠMU on FAMU model.)

Both projects were based on idea of giving wider aesthetic and practical education to people, who wanted to make more artistic films than those, represented by cheap mainstream melodramas and comedies and who had only little chance of obtaining necessary information from professionals, keeping their knowledge in secret.

Once project of nationalization was accepted by both exile governments (London, Moscow), realised in revolutionary way in May 1945 and legalised by decree of president E. Beneš from August 11, 1945, it was only logical that the school becomes reality too. Beneš signed decree about foundation of AMU at October 27, 1945. 1st International Meeting of Filmmakers in Mariánské Lázně, initialised by A.M. Brousil in summer 1946, accepted proposal about teaching film at schools.

So FAMU was originated as film section of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague in 1946/47, making it – after Moscow (1919), Berlin (1936), Rome (1935) and Paris (1939) – the fifth film school in the world. In statement of reasons for decree we can find arguments both economical (to have a possibility to prove things) and political (to compete world film production). Ministry of Information proposed at May 1946 first three professors for new film school - Karel Plicka, Ing. Josef Bouček from Technical University in Brno, author of some innovation patents in sensitometry, member of UNIATEC

(L'Union internationale des associations techniques cinématographiques) and later SMPTE (The Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers) and A.M. Brousil, film researcher and film redactor of agriculture newspapers (*Venkov, Zemědělské noviny*) and of communist newspaper *Rudé právo* and member of FIPRESCI. They really became professors only in August 1949.

The school's first applicants could study directing, dramaturgy and film photography since beginning of 1947, when from more than thousand of applicants first 35 was accepted, amongst them also some from Poland (J. Passendorfer), from Bulgaria (Ljuljana Christova - Lorencová, Kiril Ilinčev) and from Yugoslavia. (In proposal of FAMU statute we can find also establishing of departments for film theory, technique and design, but these were established only later.)

Until 1948, the school's home was on the fourth floor of the building at Havlíčkova street (no. 13, now 11); it then acquired its first spaces in so called Vančura building at Klimentská street no. 4, where until 1960 students had their theoretical (from 1950 also practical) instruction. Jaroslav Novotný became head of practical exercises organised in Film Institute. Students of directing were supposed to graduate by one documentary and one narrative movie, both about 500 meters, same as their cinematographers, while scriptwriters by scripts for one feature film and one short film, or for three shorts.

From the beginning, the school shared the house with the Film Institute, which however was dismissed soon after (1949) by new communist director of Czechoslovak State Film, previous insurance company director Oldřich Macháček; many of its former staff then began teaching at FAMU. So FAMU faculty was originated from film enthusiasts, daring to share their experience and dreams with students, from group of progressive and independent filmmakers, mostly documentarists of Bata Zlín Studio and from Film Institute producers, editors and historians. This created independent and creative atmosphere, culminating at fall of 1947, when as result of conflicts between Ministry of Information (led by communist Václav Kopecký), having film under its auspices (including practical exercises of FAMU students) and Ministry of Education (led by national socialist Jaroslav Stránský) externists can't get their salaries, so they made a decision to teach for free, to keep school running.

"Young people were just clamouring to get in", remembers one of the school's first instructors, legendary Czech director Václav Wassermann. "Right from the start there were thousands of applicants ...the first entrance interviews were held by... the founders, such as Karel Plicka, A.M. Brousil, Julius Kalaš, Jaroslav Bouček... I remember the early days when there was barely anything here. When there were no teaching aids, no facilities, no technical or financial resources – but over time we saw the creation of a filmic *chytrón (smartinion)*, the creation of much from little, great success from few resources".^[1]

During this time, FAMU had to overcome the resistance towards academically trained filmmakers on the part of the film professionals at Barrandov Studios, fought off an attempt at its closure, survived attempts by the AMU Action Committee to expell students (only two were really expelled) and teachers after the communist coup d'état, and began to create a systematic form of education based on the experiences

of Moscow's VGIK. It's necessary to say, that school was really supported by communist party and it's situation became more consolidated after coming of Zdeněk Nejedlý, communist musicologist, on post of minister of education in 1948. At beginning there was any curriculum and majority of lectures and seminars was only improvisation, based on common discussion, often held at private apartments, restaurants and unique lecture hall at Klimentská. Majority of them was held for all students, same as screenings and analyses of films. Plicka held seminary in photography composition, forcing students to move framing straps on screened diapositive in way to find the best one and on walks through Praha showing them composition for photography of architecture. Bouček, who was at 1947 in USA, was teaching cinematographers in sensitometry and in controlling of laboratory processes. Brousil lectured literature and theatre, Smrž scriptwriting and film history, Kalaš film music through analysing screened movies, Klos history of film directing and film language, Lehovc and Šulc documentary and short film, Brichta, who founded national cinematheque in 1945 and directed Film Institute, film history. Brousil invited for guest lectures Béla Balász and actors from Stanislavsky's MCHAT, later also Giuseppe de Santis, Vittorio de Sica, Joris Ivens and John Grierson. In this first year, before final exams, also four week seminary in filmmaking was held in castle Lešná near Zlín-Gottwaldov, where first films were shot by students (director Zdeněk Podskalský, cinematographer Ján Šmok), using silent camera of K. Plicka under technical supervision of Vojtěch Jasný. Some other films were shot with 16mm cameras, Brichta was teaching time-lapse shooting with 35mm high speed camera. Guest lectures were held by Barrandov professionals, including Jiří Weiss, later head of directing department. Weiss, together with cinematographer Karel Degl, director Václav Wasserman and with students from Spolek posluchačů FAMU elaborated first curriculum, according which students in first year were supposed to learn technique, in second to develop their gift, in third learn profession and in fourth their mastership. Great importance was given to practical exercises, student films.

In 1950 the various disciplines are given their own departments, to which is later added the Department of Production; the Dramaturgy Department, meanwhile, sees the creation of a specialisation in film theory. In Klimentská was previous German Zimmerteater rebuilt for little studio equipped by sound camera. Years 1948-1950 were also years of studentocracy and students used to teach and to choose their teachers too. According to two-sided agreements with USSR two FAMU students - František (Frank) Daniel (member of CP and chairman of FAMU Commission for

reforms) and Zdeněk Podskalský (member CP FAMU committee and of Action committee) were sent for postgradual studies to VGIK and they were consulting (without real knowledge of Russian language and so rather through their experience with VGIK lecturers) creating of first real FAMU curriculum, elaborated by Ján Šmok on base on VGIK curriculum, brought to Praha by delegation of Czechoslovak Film from Moscow in 1949. In early fifties it was enriched by editor, vanguard filmmaker and theoretician Jan Kučera on base of Lev Kuleschov's book *Elements of Film Directing*. While Weiss criticized possibility to shoot with actors only in third year (first two years were common for all students) and little attention to work with actor, Kučera divided education to four steps: 1) From reality to the image (Aesthetics) 2) From idea to script (knowledge of life and following art creation) 3) From script to live realisation 4) From directing to movie (methods and practical using of technology). When Weiss headed Directing Dpt. (1952/53), he asked one of best Czech actors Karel Hoeger to teach work with actors and by this based tradition, prolonged by Hoeger's assistant Radovan Lukavský for next half of century.

Thus we can say, that at beginning of fifties, when having first graduates, FAMU was highly selective school (by admission exams and by selective exams at the end of first year - in 1952 only 50% students came through it), with not only practical, but universal kind of education (philosophy, art, theatre, film and music history and theory), concentrated on professional education in directing, still and film photography, scriptwriting and editing, lectured by experienced professionals. A.M Brousil, as chancellor of AMU and later head of Theory department kept students in contact with actual world filmmaking even in times, when borders were strictly closed and films from West were unreleased in Czechoslovakia. Contact between students and professors is quite intimate - professor teaches just few students and initiates them into his own experiences, working methods, takes them for shooting and contacts them with his collaborators and colleagues, what's excellent for beginning their own professional career. Students could earn their skills by shooting short films (one per year), mainly documentaries and only in last year narrative one. Documents used to be dedicated to actual themes of CP politics and this way students could see difference between political thesis and reality, what in times of so called thawing after Stalin's death and later in sixties gave them possibility to speak about reality more open way. On some of these exercises we can see influence of Dziga Vertov's films and of Italian neorealistic films. Some of these documentaries were shot for educational purposes, like *Face and Mask* (1949, Tatterová, Baran), about art of

make-up, Development of Film Negative (P. Solan, 1951), Blow-up (J. Šíkl, 1951), Measuring of Exposition (1952), Taking care about Film Copy (V. Delong, 1957), A Box with a Film Reel (V. Sklenář, 1958), including portraits of music composers and interpreters, representatives of Czech puppet theatre and records of Theatre school (DAMU) spectacles: Central Puppet Theatre (F. Filip, 1954), Karel Pokorný, a Sculptor (J. Vašta, 1954), Before Puppets Come Alive (J. Hannibal, V. Sklenář, 1955), Before Curtain Comes Up (V. Plívová, 1957). Narrative film in this first period were mainly versions of some scenes from scripts for Barrandov films, shot in FAMU studio. Until half of the fifties was established educational system not only at cinematography dept., but also at directing dept., where five head lecturers had got their assistants, younger directors, teaching when older professors were shooting their films. (This is very similar even today and relates to the fact, that main teachers are usually best Czech directors.) System of practical exercises was divided on common and special ones. In first year students created two photoscripts, in second 16mm documentary, in third studio work with actors, in fifth diploma movie (on location and with originally composed music). Diploma movie was fulfilled by short theoretical explication. This system lasted changed only little (documentary in 1st year, studio film in 2nd, on location in 3rd, TV drama in 4th) until the end of nineties.

In 1952 FAMU is given the former Jewish cinema – the Roxy at Dlouhá street no. 33 – where it sets up another film studio (from 1955). The head of the Directing Department, Václav Krška (1953-57), establishes a specialisation in documentary and popular scientific film, as well as an editing cabinet headed by Jan Kučera. Around the second half of the 1950s, the Department of Film and Television Technique is formed (Bouček, Pecák), with cabinets for music (J. Kalaš, J. Srnka) and sound (O. Tichý). The Camera Department is rechristened the Department of Film Photography and the Television Image (in 1964 the Roxy studio is equipped with TV technology produced by the students and professors of the secondary technical school for media in Panská street).

In 1955 at Cannes Film Festival FAMU becomes one of eight founding members of CILECT.

In 1957/58 Otakar Vávra comes again at the Directing Department with a new approach to lectures and the admissions process. He personally selects his students, whom he forms into the core of *new wave* (Věra Chytilová, Evald Schorm, Jiří Menzel, Jan Schmidt). It was his fundamental belief that a director must "*know all types of art*

which he works with, work with actors... also philosophy and aesthetics. Mastery of the technology of film comes second. At school, he should get to know all fields of knowledge as they relate to film work. Theory should be on an equal footing as practice, because a director both creates and realizes a vision".^[2] This group of students was educated by Vávra personally for all five years of study. Later system was changed into system of course teachers (1st Zdeněk Forman, 2nd Elmar Klos, 3rd Václav Wasserman and 4th Vávra) and this way worked until break of millenary, when it has been changed into system of selective workshops. Vávra insisted on wide range of knowledge (seminars in analysis of film music, history of music, architecture and arts, lectures of Václav Mencl in style of life in different historical periods) and on detailed analyses of important films parts with help of editing table (so called "back script"), serving as base for analysing narrative continuity, editing, sound and for to compare final film with its literature base and with script.

The years 1960/61 represent a turning point; the departments and chancellor's and dean's offices move into the Lažanský Palace (Smetanovo nábřeží 2) and film school loses its intimacy of everyday meeting of all students in same spaces. Over time, the school begins to see a reorganisation of departments as well as curriculum, with more emphasis on graduates' success in the world of television. In the mid-1960s, most departments – and the school as a whole – receive the modifier "film and television".

The year 1961 sees the founding of an independent Department of Film Journalism, later renamed the Documentary Film Department; in 1963 the discipline of film and television editing is established, with instructors supplied by the editing cabinet of the Department of Film and Television Directing. Film and television theory was made independent in 1959, with instruction ensured by the cabinet of film and television theory at the Department of Film and Television Dramaturgy (in 1965 theory receives its own department). Starting in 1966 Ján Šmok works to make art photography an independent discipline, first as a cabinet within the Department of Film and Television Image.

During the 1960s, the school graduates two to three generations of students thanks to whom FAMU becomes a name recognised throughout the world. During the subsequent thirty years, FAMU would become practically the only one source of film (and partially television) professionals in Czechoslovakia. Fully established and fixed system of film and TV education is presented on Prague Congress of CILECT in 1966, declaring FAMU as "école modèle". Just few years later, after Warsaw pact armies

invasion, CP, who helped to establish the school, has tried to rule it and change the education to film art into education to agitprop. But once established system proved to be more resistant, then they expected.

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