



The Main Feature

Season 39 - Issue 18 screening 23.5.19

Czechoslovakia
71 minutes

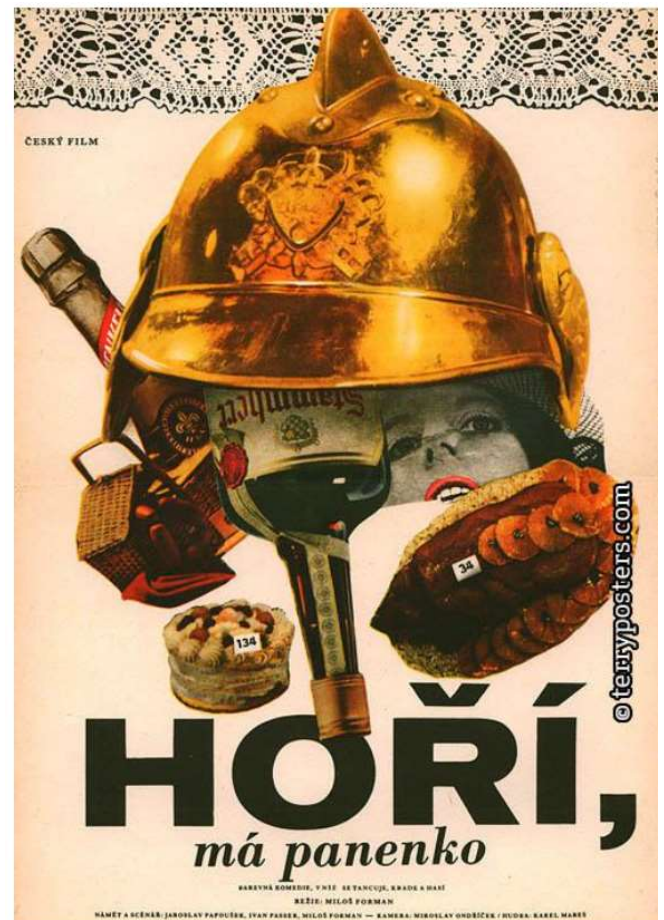
1967
Cert PG

Director	Miloš Forman
Screenplay	Miloš Forman, Jaroslav Papoušek, Ivan Passer and Václav Šašek
Producer	Carlo Ponti
Cinematography	Miroslav Ondříček

Cast:

Jan Votrčil	Head of Committee
Frantisek Debelka	Committee member 1
Josef Sebánek	Committee member 2
Jan Stöckl	Retired Fire Chief

The last film in the 2016-17 season was *Closely Observed Trains*, made in 1967 in Czechoslovakia when that country had a communist regime under the influence of the USSR. Our final film of this season comes from the same country and the same era, but from a director – Miloš Forman – who later became much better known in Hollywood where his film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* won five Oscars, including Best Director; and *Amadeus* won eight, again including Best Director.



Forman was born in 1932. Both his parents were Protestant: during the Nazi occupation, as a member of the anti-Nazi Underground, his father Rudolf Forman was arrested for distributing banned books, and died while being interrogated by the Gestapo in 1944. Forman's mother had died in Auschwitz the previous year. Forman was later raised by family members and by friends.

He later attended a boarding school for war orphans. Political parties competed to donate money to establish this new school so the headmaster could afford to have the finest teachers, and it became the best high school in the country. Both the new communist and the old capitalist elites would try to get their own children into the school with the war orphans. At school Forman received a top-class education and met his lifelong friends Ivan Passer (who would go on to become a filmmaker) and Vaclav Havel (who would later become President of the Czech Republic).

Forman's career started in the theatre. He turned to making films in the early 1960s as part of the Czech New Wave, with his *Loves of a Blonde* (1965) being nominated for the Best Foreign Language Film Oscar. He recounts that he was trying to write a new screenplay in the mountains

with two colleagues and, faced with collective writers' block, they decided to forget about the script and go to a ball thrown by the local volunteer fire brigade. It was pretty chaotic and influenced them so much that they dropped the previous project and developed the script of *The Firemen's Ball* in just six weeks based on what they had seen. The result is a satire which pokes gentle fun at a town under the communist regime and exposes the human weaknesses of petty bureaucrats. The cast is mainly non-professional, drawn from the people of Vrchlabí where the film was written.



The film was a Czech-Italian co-production, with Carlo Ponti putting up enough money for the film to be made in colour. Once finished, it ran into controversy in part because Ponti – a Party member – believed Forman had used sarcasm to ridicule common people. He pulled out of the contract because the film was just short of its expected length, which exposed Forman to the criminal offence of causing 'economic damage to the state' which carried a mandatory prison sentence. Ultimately, the French producer Claude Berri bought the foreign rights to the film which paid Forman's debt; and because Forman was in Paris when the

Soviet tanks invaded Prague, he decided to stay in the West.

The other element to the controversy was the Czech censors, which meant the film had to wait nearly a year until its premier in Prague thanks to the Prague Spring. Forman remembers the declining influence of the political authorities:

"In the past, they would have simply prohibited the showing of the film, but in that strange era before the Prague Spring, the communist leadership was losing its nerve and had started crafty manoeuvres around its unpopular decisions. Now they would set up a screening of a film they wanted to ban in front of an invited audience. They planted a few provocateurs in the crowd to shout that the movie insulted the working people, and then ordered the film removed from distribution on the grounds that the "people" had demanded it."

"The first public preview of "The Firemen's Ball" was scheduled for Vrchlabi. The cultural communist sympathizers chose the place because they figured that the Vrchlabi folks would feel ridiculed once they saw the way I portrayed them on the screen. They thought my firemen would be so furious that I'd be ordered to stay away from Vrchlabi because my personal safety at the screening could not be guaranteed. In reality, the Vrchlabi crowd laughed uproariously throughout the show. When the discussion started, the first of the Party plants rose and gave this by-the-numbers speech about how the film insulted the working people. He finished and one of the firemen, whose name was by chance also Novotny, raised his hand. (Novotny was the name of the president of Czechoslovakia). Mr. Novotny got up. "Well, I don't know, comrades, I just don't know. This comrade says this is an insult to us, and maybe it is, but do you people remember when Jira's goat shed caught fire? And we were all drinking in the tavern? And how by the time we finally staggered out there, we forgot the nozzles? Remember? And then the whole fire truck tipped over on that ice. I still remember how Jira's goat burned up. Hell, we don't even look that bad in this movie."

Michael Hipkins

The future state of cinema has been one of the most hotly-debated topics in sun-drenched Cannes this week, during what jury president Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu described as a "crucial" stage for the "collective film experience".

For the second year running, movies by streaming giant Netflix are notable by their absence, as talks remain ongoing between the studio and the festival about its commitment to theatrical releases. French cultural laws dictate films considered for the esteemed Palme d'Or prize cannot be streamed within three years of competing and this unwavering stance caused Cannes to miss out on hosting the Oscar-winning Roma last year - as Netflix took the film to Venice for its premiere instead,

Prior to this year's event, the festival director declared: "We are not ready to welcome films that are not released in a theatre" and his passion for the preservation of the big screen experience - amidst a sea of readily available online content - was echoed on Tuesday by Inarritu who praised the "communal experience" of cinema.

The filmmaker remains upbeat that cinemas and streamers can find a better solution. "There are great films all around the world," he said, "the thing is the way they are accessed by everybody. France is an exception that they protect [cinemas] but I always ask how many of these films that we will see over the next 10 days will be exhibited around the world? I am a true believer that to watch a film is not to see a film, and to see [something] is not to experience something, and cinema was born to be experienced as a communal experience."

He continued: "I do not have anything against watching on a phone, on an iPad or a computer; I sometimes do it myself with my headphones and I can enjoy. But I know that to watch a film there, is not the same."

Inarritu - who won an Oscar for the sweeping survival tale The Revenant in 2016 - added: "I was saying the other day to a friend, if somebody 200 years from now should come alive and should see me listening to Beethoven in ridiculous speakers in my car, I would say 'yeah, it's great, what is wrong with that?' But it would be disastrous if there was not an opportunity to hear a whole 100 person orchestra playing in a concert hall. It's great that they [Netflix, Amazon et al] exist in TV but why not give people the chance to experience cinema?"

One thing people in Cannes will not be able to experience this year, is the premiere of Martin Scorsese's new film, The Irishman - starring Robert De Niro and Al Pacino. The Netflix-backed film would have been one of the biggest draws had an agreement been in place, although reports suggest it might not have been ready in time. Scorsese has praised the streaming giant for affording him the "money and freedom" to tell the story.

Other directors, though, including Spielberg and Tarantino - who arrives next week with his new film, Once Upon a Time in Hollywood - appear more loyal to the Cannes cause and less keen to make "TV movies".

Imax CEO Richard Gelfond is doing nicely out of cinema and told the BBC streaming companies, which will soon include Apple+, Disney and Warner, might struggle to attract top filmmakers. "I don't want to sound arrogant," he said, "but there really hasn't been an Imax-worthy film released by a streaming service until now. I think that they'll continue to [move into blockbusters] but they're a long way away. The biggest directors are reluctant to make a blockbuster for streaming," he added.

The movie mogul suggests the success of the Avengers films in theatres globally "bodes well" for another concluding "event-driven" big-hitter, Star Wars, as audiences still want "to feel like they're inside the movie". "To get people off the couch you've got to give them something different," he declared.

But he predicts the future for mid-budget movies will generally be away from the traditional major studios and "increasingly on to streaming platforms", as the industry adapts to the new technological era.

Netflix screened Roma in US movie theatres in order to it qualify for the Academy Awards and Gelfond argues that "once the [Cannes three year] window issue resolves itself" there is no reason why films made for online can't include "theatrical screenings" on release.

Chantal Toporow from House of Film - "a boutique distributor on a world scale" as she puts it - believes the value of a theatre showing for a small film anywhere is worth much more than being included on a streaming service. "We make movies with a twist and more cerebral curated content," she said. "You're not monetising your film as best as you can only by streaming. You really want to get as many theatrical releases as you can, in Cambodia or wherever."

Whether her movies and those of many other filmmakers of the future will be able to find a home in cinemas, online and in competition at Cannes in the near future, remains to be seen.

Comments and reactions to: **The Third Man**

Score **0** **1** **2** **3** **4** **5** **6** **7** **8** **9** **10**
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No of reaction slips received = 41

Average Score = 8.05

Still good after all these years. Terrific photography & editing.

As good as ever!

A very good film in spite of its age. Fantastic photography.

Wonderful

Still very enjoyable, especially the sewer chase – and the cat scene!

Just as I remember it!

A classic! A great portrayal of post-war Vienna

Good, very dated but still worth seeing

Speech a little difficult to understand but otherwise a brilliant film.

Much better with the subtitles!

Pity we didn't have the subtitles from the start.

Subtitles after the interval made second part of the film intelligible.

Very atmospheric – second half much easier to follow with subtitles.

Shadows, footsteps, music = high drama. Excellent.

It was very enjoyable to see this film again after so many years.

Atmospheric. A true classic. The final scene is memorable

Strange how memory plays tricks. Now not one of my favourite films.

Somehow doesn't seem quite as extraordinary as it once did. Still very good.

Perfect blend of story, scene, acting & (especially) photography. Never tire of watching.

A masterpiece with so many iconic images, especially when Orson Welles' moon shaped face first appears.

Very atmospheric in a devastated Vienna, with Welles a (much) later player & others really dominating.

This classic has aged magnificently. Excellent acting, great scenery plus the use of 'shadows'

Didn't fully understand plot but found it engrossing. Worth seeing for the lighting, camera work and music score.

Position	Film	Average Score
1 st	Darkest Hour	8.08
2 nd	The Third Man	8.05
3 rd	The Post	7.67
=4 th	Guildford in the Great War	7.56
=4 th	The Divine Order	7.56
6 th	Florence Foster Jenkins	7.47
7 th	Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri	7.4
8 th	Film Stars Don't Die in Liverpool	7.21
9 th	The Violin Teacher	7.2
10 th	Revanche	7.0
11 th	Les Quatre Cents Coups (400 Blows)	6.74
12 th	L'homme du train	6.71
13 th	Piccadilly	6.41
=14 th	Bar Bahar (In Between)	6.26
=14 th	Death of Stalin	6.26
16 th	The Levelling	5.6
17 th	Phantom Thread	5.16

Our next film will be on 12 September when we start our 40th season with



All will be revealed at our AGM.....