

RECOVERED TREASURES: GREAT FILMS FROM WORLD ARCHIVES

January 15–February 20, 2011

VALERIE AND HER WEEK OF WONDERS (VALERIE A TÝDEN DIVU)

Friday, January 28, 7:00 pm

1970, 77 mins.

Restored by the Czech National Film Archive

Screening made possible with assistance from the Czech Center New York

Directed by Jaromil Jires. Produced by Jirí Becka. Written by Jires and Ester Krumbachová.

Photographed by Jan Curík. Edited by Josef Valusiak. Production design by Ester Krumbachová.

Costume design by Eva Lackingerová. Music by Lubos Fiser and Jan Klusák. Based on the novel by Vítězslav Nezval.

Principal cast: Jaroslava Schallerová (as Valerie), Helena Anýzová (as Babicka, Else, Matka and Rusovláska), Petr Kopriva (as Orlík), Jan Klusák(Gracián), Libuse Komancová (Sluzka-Novicka), Karel Engel (Kocí Ondrej), Jirí Prýmek (Tchor-konstábl).

Review by Michael Atkinson, *Sight and Sound*,
October 2008:

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 idolize 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 idealizing 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 Jires' *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* is a perfect

crystallization 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 film-makers who didn't emigrate either became defiant and saw their films shelved (Schorm, Menzel, Jakubisko) or, like Jires 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), Jires 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 Jires' greatest legacy, the film that survived its totalitarian context to become a trippy cult l'ave 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 Jires' 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 ghou (Jiri Prymek) stalks the young girl at every turn, the Mitteleuropian 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 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 Jires' 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 Jires' 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.

That *Valerie* is perhaps more famous nowadays than virtually any other Czech film outside *Loves of a Blonde* and maybe *Closely Watched Trains* indicates only its attractiveness for the psychotronic, sleaze-and-cheese crowd, for whom the current video releases in the UK and the US (all seemingly from the same light-beaten 16mm print) have proven sufficient. With the new 35mm Czech Archives print, full primary colors are restored and fully articulated subtitles installed.

Consider this: if the ardor still running wild for Jires' movie is nostalgia for an innocence long vanished, why would that be a critical down-tick, instead of an exaltive reason to love a movie?

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