

The Cage

Once the wife of a prominent man, she used to live in a lovely house in Hradčany and socialize with Eliška Junková, the famous lady race car driver. Now she lives in a ground floor apartment with windows to the yard and the street somewhere on the periphery of Prague. She is alone and deserted. Her husband died many years before and all she has are her regular meetings with the mailwoman who delivers her pension and brings her favorite motorist magazines, the housekeeping she does at the parsonage, and the upkeep around the local church. Occasionally, she cooks or bakes something for Father Jan, and she doesn't mind at all to wash and iron his clothes. But even these certainties unexpectedly collapse when the clergyman is transferred to Hradec Králové and is replaced by a young priest who likes doing things himself. It is at this moment that a friendly young man in dark sunglasses and flower in hand enters Květa Galová's life. He claims to be Jeník Sekora from her home village of Zučice and says he is her great-great-step-nephew. Květa Galová spends a wonderful afternoon with him, perhaps the nicest she's had in years. For a while, her life is brightened by the youngster's attentiveness and discussions about mutual acquaintances. But then Mrs. Galová begins to notice that something is off. What is it and why? A game of cat and mouse ensues where no one can be sure who is predator and who is prey.

"I wanted to make a completely different kind of film from what is commonly made today. One that deals with current issues, is powerful and provides space for truly good actors" says creative producer **Jaroslav Sedláček**.

"It was one of the hardest roles I have ever played," admits **Jiřina Bohdalová**. *"The most important aspect of Marek Epstein's work is always the human story. That is why I wanted the character of Květa Galová to be believable. I had to play a very old and lonely woman. I myself am still full of life. For me it was really playing against type. It's a paradox, but I had to let them 'age' me",* the eighty-eight year old actress adds with a smile. **Kryštof Hádek**, co-star and the film's antagonist, has this to say about his role: *"I can't reveal too much, but my character is a crook. Unfortunately, there are just people like that. But it's also important to say that he didn't have an easy life and that may lead to a certain type of behavior. There is a powerful human dimension."*

This was not the first time Jiřina Bohdalová and director Jiří Strach had met; in 2005 the actress had played in *Povodeň* (The Flood) with her good friend Jiřina Jirásková. Even though **Jiří Strach**, at the time still a relatively unknown director, experienced some anxiety over filming the celebrities, today he often communicates without words: *"People expect a star like Jiřina to behave like a prima donna, but it's just the opposite. She approaches each shot with such humility. The only scenes I wouldn't let her shoot involved doing things where she could hurt herself. We had a stunt double do those, and each time she said, 'But I really can manage that myself', I had to uncompromisingly say no. It would seriously not be worth her cracking her head on the toilet bowl or breaking a leg falling into the bath tub."* *"Acting with Jiřina Bohdalová was a huge experience for me. I've known her my whole life. She accompanied me through childhood in fairytale movies, later in films with more serious themes, and she has an incredible comedic gift. She really is an amazing actress and I am so glad to have been able to work with her,"* **Kryštof Hádek** concludes.

Jiří Strach - Director: Viewers are not silly. And that applies to Czech TV viewers two-fold.



What is behind the title “The Cage”?

A cage is an enclosed space from which there is no escape. Terrible cage beds were supposed to protect us from aggressive, mentally ill people, prisoners are sometimes thrown into cells to keep them from injuring themselves. Animals are often placed in cages before they are slaughtered. Who is setting the cage for whom, and who will finally end up inside - that is what our film is about. It is about naïve trust and non-empathetic inhumanity.

Two films with the same title, yet different themes, came out in the 70s. One, starring Jan Tříska, was locked away for forty years before it was released. The second was a short film from the TV series “Bakaláři” (The Bachelors) starring Vladimír Menšík. Did you take inspiration from either of them?

I admit - no torture necessary - that I haven't seen either film. The only inspiration I might take would be the top-notch cast. I'm always happy to let myself be influenced in that regard. And as viewers know, I like to surround myself with the best actors when I work.

A whole array of films have been made abroad about home entrapment. Some examples are both versions of Michael Heneke's Funny Games or David Fincher's Panic Room. Did you take any inspiration from there?

No. It can sometimes happen that one begins unconsciously imitating others. I don't want my films to be a Xerox copy of other films, I want them to be unique, to serve the screenplay, the story and the psychology of the characters.

An intimate drama for two main characters requires a responsible choice of actors. How did you finally decide on Jiřina Bohdalová and Kryštof Hádek?

There aren't many actresses left in the required age category. At her respectable age, Mrs. Bohdalová remains in amazing shape and has more energy than many a sixty-year-old. And Kryštof Hádek was the only possible choice for his part... But viewers will understand why after they see the film. That's why we didn't do any casting calls for his character. He was cast right away without the need for long consideration. Actually, I had already begun seeing him in the role during my first reading of the script.

This film signifies Jiřina Bohdalová's return to the genre of drama after a long hiatus. Earlier on, the two of you had worked on such fairytale movies as *Anděl Páně 2* (Angel of the Lord 2), *Šťastný smolař* (Lucky Loser) or the comedy film *Vrásky z lásky* (Wrinkles of Love). How has your relationship changed, and did you have any concerns about this collaboration?

When, as a beginning director, I first cast Mrs. Bohdalová and Jiřina Jirásková for the film *Povodeň* (The Flood), I was very afraid. Afraid whether I would be able to direct these two great women of Czech film and achieve the result I wanted, despite my inexperience. It quickly became apparent that Česká televize – Press Office, Kavčí hory, 140 70 Prague 4 T: +420 261 133 312 F: +420 261 218 599 E: pressct@ceskatelevize.cz www.ceskatelevize.cz/press RSS: www.ceskatelevize.cz/rss/tiskove-zpravy

Mrs. Bohdalová is absolutely wonderful and a complete professional, someone who respects the director when she sees that he knows what he wants. Ever since, we have had a great relationship, I might even say, a bit boastfully, we're on friendly terms. I still have much to learn from her, she gives me a window into the experiences of a time before I was born. Who else can tell you what it was like to shoot with Frič or Kachyňa?

For Jiřina Bohdalová, this was one of the most difficult films she has ever shot. Were you careful with her, and did you have to ask her permission for anything or be strict with her?

We understand each other. There's no need for strictness or boundary setting on either side. We have shot more than one film together, so we don't have to share our impressions verbally that much. Sometimes a gesture or a wink is enough, and we know right away what and how we can do better. People expect a star like Jiřina to behave like a primadonna, but it's just the opposite. She approaches each shot with such humility. The only scenes I wouldn't let her shoot involved doing things where she could hurt herself. We had a stunt double do those, and each time she said, "But I really can manage that myself", I had to uncompromisingly say no. It would seriously not be worth her cracking her head on the toilet bowl or breaking a leg falling into the bath tub.

Does your film seek to find a remedy or simply offer viewers a journey?

Is it even possible to find a remedy when the fundamental principal is inhuman and twisted from the start? Scripture says all that has happened once will happen again, there is nothing new under the sun. The only thing to do is point an issue out and, through the tragedy of a story, arouse the audience's emotions so they do not take human, or rather, inhuman acts lightly or close their eyes to them, but stand up to them all the more emphatically if they encounter them in their own lives.

In the film, you deal with questions of faith, hope, forgiveness and atonement. Yet with each passing minute, the spiritual dimension fades. Were your favorite religious topics originally part of the screenplay, or did you add them there yourself?

They were already in Marek Epstein's screenplay. But I don't think they fade. They just transform into something else. Hope always leads to forgiveness, and Mrs. Galová is capable of that despite all she has encountered. The fact that it in the film it appears futile does not mean we should give it up. After all, hope is often the source of our humanity.

There are many things about the film that are merely implied. How hard was the decision-making process before the final edit?

We spent more time in the editing room than usual this time fine tuning visual rhythm and linking time lines. We didn't want to be too explicit and often worked with suggestion and left certain things unsaid. But I believe in intelligent viewers. I have never underestimated their ability to read into the story and between the lines, and it has always paid off. Viewers are not silly. And that applies to Czech TV viewers two-fold.



Marek Epstein - Screenwriter: It is my obligation to point out things I don't like or don't agree with.

The screenplay was inspired by something that happened to your own grandmother...

Yes, my grandmother was stopped on the way home from church by a friendly young man who claimed to be our relative. He brought sandwiches and a flower, and was an absolute delight. He didn't want to keep her long, at most have a coffee. In the end he decided to give three thousand crowns to the church for charity, but he only had a five thousand crown bill. Grandma was more than happy to change the money from her own savings. And that was the moment the charming young man knocked her to the ground,



took her money and vanished. Luckily, my grandmother wasn't injured. Except for the deep scar left on the soul of a kind person. That's the story the film was based on.

I heard you wrote the role of Květa Galová specifically for actress Jiřina Bohdalová. What did that mean from the screenwriter's point of view, and what were some of her idiosyncrasies that you had to work with?

On the contrary, Jiřina and I had arranged that the character would be quite the opposite of what she has played over the last few years. It wouldn't be a prickly old shrew. It wouldn't be funny, jovial or snappy. It would be completely normal.

This was not your first project with Jiřina Bohdalová, how is it to work with her?

Jiřina is the proof that age is merely a number. Of course selecting a topic can be a bit complicated. But because our population is aging, stories about the elderly will become more common.

Did it rub you the wrong way to write about a crime committed against our most famous and beloved fairytale grandmother?

Not at all, it was a joy!

There are moments in the film where a cricket can be heard chirping. What does it symbolize?

The cricket is our leitmotif. Whoever has had the experience of the insect moving into their house will agree that it is a disconcerting and often unlocatable acoustic element. It appears inconsequentially, almost randomly. Each character can view it in their own way. Galová sees it as a sign from God, Daniel as his conscience.

What should viewers take with them after watching The Cage?

Hopefully a raised awareness. We live in a time where words like truth, love and humanity have become vulgar. Characters like Daniel are the fruits of a society without constraints. I am sorry we are pointing more to the symptoms than to the remedy. I don't feel it's my place to moralize, on the other hand, I feel it to be my professional and human obligation to point out things I don't like or don't agree with.

Is it hard to merge psychological drama and thriller?

The term "psychological drama" is usually a good way to scare viewers off. Despite living in what is demonstrably the wealthiest era in history, people are tired, unsatisfied and are in a traditionally Czech bad mood. Viewers don't want to deal with any more suffering. They want to have fun because that doesn't hurt. The fact that we were able to find an exciting format for the film is probably a bonus, though it was not the primary aim.

Jiřina Bohdalová: It's a paradox, but I had to let them make me even older



Marek Epstein wrote the role of Květa Galová specifically for you. How did the character appeal to you?

Marek Epstein always appeals to me. He is one of our best authors. I approach his screenplays with that in mind. I would never put that aside. I admit I was aware he was working on something, and I waited three whole years for him to finish it.

Kryštof Hádek co-starred with you in the film. Did you pick him yourself?

No. The first to mention his name was Jirka Strach, and my immediate reaction was "That's it!" There was complete agreement between both of us.

You have played hundreds of roles, what was this one like?

It was one of the most difficult roles I have ever played. The most important aspect of Marek Epstein's work is always the humanity of story. That is why I wanted the character of Květa Galová to be believable. I had to play a very old and lonely woman. I myself am still full of life. For me it was really playing against type. It's a paradox, but I had to let them "age" me. This character was a hard nut for me to crack.

The Cage focuses on the loneliness and gullibility of seniors. Do you view that as one of today's big problems?

Yes. I am a senior too, and when I hear on the news what happens to people, I'm shocked. My imagination doesn't even come close to the reality of what those swindlers do. Old people are gullible, we aren't used to such practices. But even if only a few people start being more careful, the film has still fulfilled its purpose.

There were moments of physical violence between your character and the character of Kryštof Hádek. Was that difficult for you?

You know it wasn't easy. Fortunately we had a stunt double who took over in the most intense scenes. Nonetheless, I did my fair share too. It's not like my head is hollow or anything, but sometimes I was sure I heard an echo in there.

Wasn't it even harder for Kryštof in some ways?

Certainly. But he's a really good actor, so he managed. There were so many times he apologized for having to whack me before we shot a scene.

Jiří Strach is another important person in the film...

Yes. Together we shot *Povodeň* (The Flood) with Jiřina Jirásková, *Vrásky lásky* (Wrinkles of Love) and *Anděl Páně 2*. We're longtime collaborators. I truly respect him and trust him.

The Cage is an intimate drama built on great acting. You already have films like Ucho (The Ear) and Fany under your belt. Do you like this genre?

Of course I do. I think every actor must. Most of all, I like true stories because first I have to believe them and then I can put on the role. If I don't believe the story, I won't do it.

Do you choose your roles according to the screenplay?

At my age, I don't have to work to pay the bills. I understand younger people do. That's just the way it is. But I don't have to, so I can pick and choose the things that really appeal to me. I read screenplays conscientiously, and I give my honest opinion. If something captivates me, I hope it will captivate audiences too.

The Cage is a TV movie and you have done a lot of work for television. What is your relationship to the medium?

It doesn't make much difference to me whether film or television. I act exactly the same way whether the film is intended for TV or the cinema. That is more a question for the director and the cameraman. Even though I think that these days, there really isn't any difference.

Is there something about present-day filmmaking that speaks to you?

Not that much has changed from the past. Except that nowadays you say "action" instead of "camera". You can still say camera quietly, but you have to say action nice and loud, and that always startles me.



Kryštof Hádek: One day, I hope I'll be in as good a shape as Jiřina Bohdalová



It isn't often you play a negative character. What do you think Daniel is like?

He certainly is no saint. He might have been a talented kid who set out in the wrong direction.

Is the character enigmatic in any way? Do we discover anything positive about him, should we pity him?

Yes, at first glance, Daniel is not a criminal. The question is, how many of his actions can be

excused by his life circumstances, his upbringing and the environment he grew up in. There are just some actions in life that are simply inexcusable. So we should definitely not pity him. Besides, he clearly isn't stupid.

This was your first encounter with Jiřina Bohdalová and Jiří Strach in front of the camera. Was it a challenge?

I had met Jiří Strach before. In cameo roles. So playing one of the main characters under his guidance was a dream come true.

The Cage is essentially a film for two actors and everyone's attention is directed toward you. Is it an advantage or a disadvantage not to be able to rely on "backup"?

I don't know if it's an advantage or a disadvantage. But the fact that most of the action takes place in a single apartment between two actors made it possible to shoot continuously without all the skipping around that usually happens. It was pleasantly intimate.

There are several violent scenes between the two central characters. Jiřina Bohdalová said you apologized to her several times during rehearsals...

Once people see the film, I think they will understand why. 😊 It was difficult sometimes, but Mrs. Bohdalová is just incredible. I hope that one day, I'll be in as good a shape as she is.

For Jiřina Bohdalová, this was one of the hardest roles she has ever played. How was it for you?

It was an adventure and a valuable experience.

The film addresses some important issues including loneliness, the gullibility of seniors etc. What specifically intrigued you about Marek Epstein's screenplay?

It was precisely the issues of senior abuse and gullibility. And then a certain ambiguity of the characters. I think it's a human interest film with a point.

You cry in the film. I guess it's a cliché, but can you cry whenever you want?

It depends what kind of crying it is. Sometimes I can play it believably. But it's harder to do the real thing. 😊

Czech Television is presenting this film for Jiřina Bohdalová's 88th birthday. What is your favorite role of hers?

I really can't say. There certainly isn't just one. When I think about it, Mrs. Bohdalová has surrounded me my whole life, whether in fairytale films, or the wonderfully voiced TV bedtime stories I watched my entire childhood, or variety shows, or tons of amazing, now legendary films and comedies, and even cooking shows. She has always been here. And now I've even been able to act in a film with her. That is absolutely unbelievable!



The Cage

screenplay: Marek Epstein

director: Jiří Strach

camera: Martin Šec

executive producer: Jan Rolínek

creative producer: Jaroslav Sedláček

starring: Jiřina Bohdalová, Kryštof Hádek, Viktor Preiss, David Švehlík, Vilma Cibulková, Miroslav Etzler, Andrea Elsnerová, Barbora Munzarová, Jaromír Dulava, Pavel Kříž and others



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