



The Country Teacher

(Venkovský učitel)

Directed by Bohdan Sláma



Czech Republic/ Germany/ France | 2008 |
Drama | Czech with English subtitles |
113 min. | 2.35 : 1 | Dolby Digital

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SYNOPSIS

A gifted and well-qualified young teacher takes a job teaching natural sciences at a grammar school in the country. Here he makes the acquaintance of a woman and her troubled 17-year old son. The teacher has no romantic interest in the woman but they quickly form a strong friendship, each recognizing the other's uncertainties, hopes and longing for love.

When the teacher's ex-boyfriend comes to visit from the city, he quickly realizes that nobody in the village knows that the teacher is gay and harbors a secret affection for the teenage boy. His jealous actions set in motion a series of events that will test the inner strength and compassion of the teacher, the woman and her son to a breaking point. A beautifully shot, powerfully acted, profoundly moving story of desire, responsibility, forgiveness and the need to belong, from the internationally-acclaimed director of *Something Like Happiness* and *Wild Bees*.

Awards and Festivals

WINNER – Best Queer Film, **2008 Reykjavik Film Festival**

WINNER – Audience Award, **2008 Film Festival Cottbus**

WINNER – Best Actress (Zuzana Bydzovska), **Stockholm Int'l Film Festival**

WINNER – Best Cinematography (Divis Marek), **Stockholm Int'l Film Festival**

WINNER – Best Actress, Best Screenplay, **2009 Czech Lions**

NOMINATED – **9 Czech Lions**

OFFICIAL SELECTION

2008 Venice Film Festival – Venice Days

2008 Toronto International Film Festival

DIRECTOR'S COMMENT

We tried to shoot a film about intimate, personal things, the kind of things that are similar everywhere, wherever people live. Looking for love is a never-ending battle which defines and forms man, an essence within every story, and unrequited love hurts no matter where you live, whatever your geographical location, it hurts the same everywhere. In this story, there are three main characters, each of whom has a fissure in their lives, a fissure to do with love. Marie is in love with the teacher, the teacher is in love with her son who, in his turn, is being dumped by his first love. In such a chain of unrequited love our characters don't have a chance to find any kind of fulfillment, and it is this they must set aright. Love has many forms, as many as there are people, and every piece of a relationship between one person and another has absolute value in itself. Recognizing this value is difficult because it asks us to accept even that which we don't always understand, to forgive even when we feel betrayed. Our characters may not find romantic love per se, but they can find a deeper friendship and they can grow from this. If someone is mature, he must be capable of forgiving. The ability to forgive is one of man's greatest faculties. The ability to forgive restores faith in the meaning of life.

INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR BOHDAN SLÁMA

***The Country Teacher* came about as a co-production between Czech production company Negativ, Pallas Film GmbH from Germany, the French firm Why Not Productions, and the Paris-based international sales company Wild Bunch. What was it like to have so many partners?**

I'm grateful for our international partners. Without them, the film couldn't have come about. It also gives one more confidence. It reinforces the belief that our film will find an international audience.

Do you make your films with Czech or world audiences in mind?

It's important for Czech film that we filmmakers find themes which speak not just to our local population, but also to international audiences as well. In regards to our film specifically, it is defined by an emotional problem. In the realm of emotions one is in universally human territory. Unrequited love hurts no matter where you live.

The film is full of long takes, which concentrate on the characters and their environment.

For me, this is the most natural method of filming. I have a deadly fear of cutting in the middle of a scene. In an uninterrupted shot, you get a huge accumulation of emotion and energy from the situation, and this is what really works for me. Of course, that means every shot is a battle because any one little mistake wastes the efforts of everyone. Such a method requires amazing timing on the set. The whole crew and all the actors must hold their concentration for the entire time. Often, it takes you to the brink of what's possible, which can be uncomfortable, but the joy when that shot goes off just right is massive.

Did you write the parts with particular actors in mind?

I have been in love with Zuzana Bydžovská for a long time and have wanted to work with her. The character of Marie, who Zuzana plays, is a strong person who holds together the story's sense. I often thought of Zuzana when I was writing and needed inspiration. I was secretly drawing strength from her in order to be able to continue writing. With Liška, we'd worked together on my previous two features. I know his acting potential is huge, but all the same, it surprised me in rehearsals that he played his character in a way very different from what he has done before. For the entire shooting period he was absolutely concentrated, he really turned into the teacher and gave that character the truth and depth which I badly wanted it to have.

Which scene was for you, as a director, the most difficult?

In the film there's a scene in which the teacher can't resist his longing, breaks a taboo and attempts to have sexual contact with the teen-age boy, who's asleep at the time. I came to realize that the film would stand or fall based on the effectiveness of this scene. If done badly, the whole film would be bad and nothing would save it. As we shot the scene a great sense of relief settled over me because I could see that it was working, that it was convincing, tender and cruel all at once.

Do you have a new project in mind for your next film? If so, what is it about?

At the moment I'm interested in the character of St. Vojtěch [St. Adalbert]. Vojtěch yearned to lead his life uncompromisingly, preferring a martyr's death. And death found him, in Prussia, in the year 997 A.D. as he tried to convert the heathens. The film's story is set in those last days, when his internal conflict between love of life and love of God came to its climax.

INTERVIEW WITH PAVEL LIŠKA (Teacher)

To what extent before shooting did you and the director discuss your part?

It's not a written rule, but when working with Bohdan it's a matter of fact—in fact it's a necessity—to analyze both the characters and the entire story well ahead of time. We start approaching the material as he writes the film. There are many intimate and gentle elements, seemingly composed of trifles, which, at first glance, may seem furtive and undramatic, but really underpin the whole story. Maybe that's why the effect of Bohdan's films is so sincere. They're made up of ordinary things, such things as people's lives are made up of. As for the role of the teacher, we spoke about it for probably a year, but the process was a bit different than our work on the last film, *Something Like Happiness*, where we were in discussion from the concept phase. This time, Bohdan was already much further along. I was handed a first draft of the script. It was Bohdan's child and I really had to battle it out with him before he let me read it. I remember this as a very sensitive period after which, together, we began to work on the story. For me it wasn't just my character that was important but the whole story. I was growing into all the aspects of my character, I had to understand him.

In this love story, you are involved in a relatively original erotic scene which plays out in a single shot.

I don't know if it's original, but it was a very important scene for me, the key to my whole approach, not only to the character but to the story as well. And it really didn't matter to me if I shot that scene with a man or a woman. Acting is truly a perverse occupation. You live through strange fates, strange plights which become a daily part of you. You cry, you smile craftily, you suffer like an animal, you murder, you fart... and also, often, you love. And sometimes you love things which, in real-life, you don't. And yet you find a way to approach them, to love them. I think that I know how a man can love another man. The same as a man loves a woman.

You've worked with Bohdan on his first film "Wild Bees" and then on his second, *Something Like Happiness*, and now on his third, *A Country Teacher*. What do you think of his films?

They're honest. For me, all of Bohdan's films are precious in that, at the end of the journey in each of them, there is light, a deeper meaning, even if, at first glance, it doesn't look that way. In *A Country Teacher* I felt this most distinctly and deeply. This film is very much about forgiveness. It's a journey not just into these characters and their lives, but into one's self as well. Maybe this all sounds banal and maybe it really is, but it's an honest journey, very honest. And it's this

kind of honesty that makes me like Bohdan so much as a director and as a person.

INTERVIEW WITH ZUZANA BYDŽOVSKÁ (Marie)

Bohdan Sláma has said that he wanted to work with you for a long time and that he wrote the role of Marie for you.

I think I was the last to know that I was so esteemed by Bohdan, that he had this idea of writing a role for me to play. Right to the end, Pavel Liška and Bohdan acted like a couple of conspirators. Pavel would drop by the theater while I'd be rehearsing and say, "Bohdan says hi..." It was all very cryptic. I first met Bohdan more than ten years ago when I played a part in his graduate film, *White Acacias*.

What kind of feeling did you have when you first read the screenplay?

For me, it was first of all a film about forgiveness. At Bohdan's house in the country we then probed the script as if we were in a laboratory. I must say, I pressed Bohdan hard to flesh out his ideas. I very much wanted to understand what he thought, and from that find a way to play Marie.

What was most difficult about the shooting?

There was always something difficult. Of them all, though, maybe it was that it was amazingly hot but, no matter what, you had to stay cool. When you see the final product, you don't think about those difficulties. I mean, for instance, when I see Zuzana Kronerova with those glasses on, I immediately believe she's the mother of the teacher. The scenes in the well, we shot over the course of two months but when you watch it, it all matches so beautifully. I was amazed by that. And that's Bohdan, his method of work, how perfectly he sees it all.

SELECTED BIOGRAPHIES/FILMOGRAPHIES

Director's Biography/Filmography

BOHDAN SLÁMA

Born in 1967 in Opava, Czech Republic, he studied feature film directing at the Film and Television School of the Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU) in Prague. His student film, *Garden of Paradise*, won a number of prizes at student film festivals, and his graduate film, *White Acacias*, even though only one hour in length, was presented theatrically within the country. His debut feature, *Wild Bees*, won a Golden Tiger upon its international premiere in Rotterdam in 2002. His follow-up feature, *Something Like Happiness*, premiered internationally in 2005 at the Donostia/San Sebastian Film Festival, winning both the Main Prize and Best Actress Award, and has been sold into more than 20 territories worldwide.

Filmography:

The Country Teacher (Vesnický učitel) - 2008

Something Like Happiness (Štěstí) – 2005

- IFF San Sebastian 2005 – Golden Shell (main prize); Silver Shell (actress Anna Geislerová)

- IFF Athens 2005 – Main Prize

- Festival Premieres Plans d'Angers – Main Prize; Best Actor/Actress (combined for entire cast); Audience Award

- Official selection at New York Film Festival 2005 and Toronto Intl. Film Festival 2005

Wild Bees (Divoké včely) – 2001

- IFF Rotterdam 2002 – VPRO Tiger Awards

- IFF San Francisco 2002 – SKYY Prize

- IFF Sotchi 2002 – Main Prize "The Pearl of the World", Best Actress (Tatiana Vilhelmová), Prix FIPRESCI

- Festival Premieres Plans Angers 2003 – Jury Special Mention

White Acacias (Akáty bílé) - 1996 (student film)

Garden of Paradise (Zahrádka ráje) - 1994 (student film)

Selected Actors' Biographies/Filmographies

PAVEL LIŠKA (Teacher)

Born in 1971, he studied at the Janáček Academy of Musical Arts (JAMU), during which time he became a member of the HaDivadlo Theater's repertory company. Presently he is a member of the repertory company of Prague's Na Zábřadlí Theater. His film career began in 1999 when director Saša Gedeon cast him in

the lead role *Return of the Idiot* (Návrat idiota). He has worked with director Bohdan Sláma on all of his features.

Selected Filmography:

The Country Teacher (2008), dir. Bohdan Sláma
The Visitor (2008), dir. J.-P. Valkeapää
Lunacy (2005), dir. Jan Švankmajer
Something Like Happiness (2005), dir. Bohdan Sláma
Up and Down (2004), dir. Jan Hřebejk
Smart Filip (2004), dir. Václav Marhoul
Bored in Brno (2003), dir. Vladimír Morávek
Pupendo (2003), dir. Jan Hřebejk
The Devil Knows Why (2003), dir. Roman Vávra
Wild Bees (2001), dir. Bohdan Sláma
Expulsion From Paradise (2001), dir. Věra Chytilová
Return of the Idiot (1999), dir. Saša Gedeon

ZUZANA BYDŽOVSKÁ (Marie)

Born in 1961, she made her professional acting debut at the age of 11 in a children's film. She studied at the State Conservatory in Prague and very early on was one of the most sought-after television actresses. However, it has always been the theater that she prefers. For ten years she performed at the Na Zábradlí Theater and then, for another ten years, at the National Theater. After this, she returned to Na Zábradlí where, to this day, she continues to perform.

Filmography:

The Country Teacher (2008), dir. Bohdan Sláma
The Can (2007), dir. Tomáš Vorel
Wrong Side Up (2005), dir. Petr Zelenka
An Ark for Vojtu (2000), dir. Monika Elsíková
Bouquet (2000), dir. F.A. Brabec
Buttoners (1997), dir. Petr Zelenka
The Dance Master (1995), dir. Jaromil Jireš
Helimadoe (1994), dir. Jaromil Jireš

MAREK DANIEL (Boyfriend)

Born 1971, he studied at JAMU and was, for 13 years, a member of the HaDivadlo theater's repertory company. He also performs at other theaters in Brno and Prague, and has appeared in a number of local television series. He made his feature film debut in Jan Svěrák's international hit "Kolya".

Filmography:

The Country Teacher (2008), dir. Bohdan Sláma
Something Like Happiness (2005), dir. Bohdan Sláma
Over and Over! (2005), dir. Petr Vachler
Up and Down (2004), dir. Jan Hřebejk
Fatherland - A Hunter's Diary (2004), dir. David Jařab
Bored in Brno (2003), dir. Vladimír Morávek
Expulsion from Paradise (2001), dir. Věra Chytilová
Parallel Worlds (2001), dir. Petr Václav
Wild Bees (2001), dir. Bohdan Sláma
Kolya (1996), dir. Jan Svěrák

CREDITS

CREW

| | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| Bohdan Sláma | Writer / Director |
| Pavel Strnad | Producer |
| Petr Oukropec | Producer |
| Karl Baumgartner | Producer |
| Thanassis Karathanos | Producer |
| Diviš Marek | Director of Photography |
| Václav Novák, Petr Pištěk | Production Designer |
| Zuzana Krejzková | Costume Designer |
| Veronika Riehs | Makeup Artist |
| Vladimír Godár | Music Composer |
| Stephan Konken | Sound Mixer |
| Jan Čeněk | Sound Designer |
| Jan Daňhel | Editor |
| Pavel Čechák | Production Manager |
| Martin Špelda | Photographer |

CAST

| | |
|------------------|------------------|
| Pavel Liška | Teacher |
| Zuzana Bydžovská | Marie |
| Ladislav Šedivý | Boy |
| Marek Daniel | Boyfriend |
| Tereza Voříšková | Popsie |
| Miloš Černoušek | School Principal |
| Zuzana Kronerová | Mother |
| Miroslav Krobot | Father |
| Zdena Kučerová | Old Lady |
| Miloslav Vokatý | Jožin |
| Jaroslav Vlček | Jarda |
| František Prošek | Brother |
| Josef Prošek | Brother |
| Anna Vladyková | Waitress |
| Pavel Vladyka | Bartender |

Production Company: Pavel Strnad, Petr Oukropec / Negativ s.r.o.

Produced by: Negativ s.r.o., Pallas Film (Germany), Czech Television, Why Not Productions (France)