



NA PUDE: ANEB KDO MA DNESKA NAROZENINY? (IN THE ATTIC: WHO HAS A BIRTHDAY TODAY?), known more widely in English under the title TOYS IN THE ATTIC, is the July, 2014 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. Below is Kino Ken's review of this dvd film.

Czech Republic 2009 subtitled / English-dubbed color feature animation dramedy 78 minutes
Eurocine International / Hannover House / Bio Illusion Films / Ceska TV / UPP / Kratky Film /
Continental Film / ARMZ Producers: Milos Smidmajer, Vivian Schilling

12 of a possible 20 points

*** of a possible *****

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates a juvenile performer

Points

- 1 Direction: Jiri Barta (original Czech version), Vivian Schilling (English-language version),
Milan Svator (Auxiliary Director)
 - 0 Editing: Lucie Haladova
 - 2 Cinematography: Ivan Vit, Zdenik Pospisal
 - 1 Lighting: Peter Stejskal
 - 0 Screenplay: Jiri Barta, Vivian Schilling (English translation), Edgar Dutka
 - 1 Music: Michal Pavlicek Orchestrator / Arranger: Michal Pavlicek, Lukas Pechal, Petr Wajsar
 - 2 Production Designer: Rudolf Balwar* Art Director: Jiri Barta*
 - 2 Sound: Marek Musel (Sound Designer, Sound Co-Mixer, and Sound Editor), Petr Lendel
(Sound Co-Mixer)
 - 1 Voices Cast
 - 2 Creativity
- 12 total points

Czech Voices Cast: Jiri Labus (Head), Nada Konvalinkova (Ruzenka), Petr Narozny (Baron),
Zuzana Kajnarova (Witch), Vladimir Javorsky (Krason), Boris Hybner (Mucha, the teddy bear),
Barbora Hrzanova (Sklodowska), Lucie Pernetova (Pomnenka), Ivan Trojan (Subrt)

English Voices Cast: Douglas Urbanski (Head), Vivian Schilling (Buttercup), Cary Elwes
(Sir Handsome, the Knight), Joy Ellison (Rosie the Crossing Station Guard), Rico Simonini (The Black Cat),

Miroslav Taborsky (Scarab a.k.a Doctor), Roy Yongtama (Schoolboy / Monkey), Forest Whitaker (Teddy Bear), Joan Cusack (Madam Curie, the Mouse), Rico Simonini (The Black Cat), Sandy Holt (Mrs. Nemachkova, grandmother of Andrecka), Emily Hahn (j) (Andrecka, granddaughter of Mrs. Nemachkova)

Coming from the Czech Republic, with a native cast here replaced by an English-speaking one, director Jiri Barta's feature animation reenacts life under Communism for the benefit of Westerners who have no firsthand experience with it. In a gloomy corner of what appears to be the attic of an old stone house, a petty dictator concocts a kidnapping plan. Its intended victim is housekeeper Buttercup, who is blonde, free, happy, and maternal. Buttercup keeps her suitcase home tidy and cheerful. She is baker, cook, and cleaner for three fellow tenants. The unlikely trio sharing a residence with her are a stuffed bear named Teddy, Sir Handsome, and Laurent. Sir Handsome is a gangly wooden marionette knight who properly belongs in the cast of a Don Quixote puppet theatre. Laurent, a French relative of Mr. Potato Head, sports a bottle cap hat on a metamorphic body of clay. He is capable of instant reassembly when splattered into pieces, as viewers will eventually discover.

Soon after daybreak, the happy household assembles to enjoy a bizarre breakfast together. One of the three male characters will have the privilege of eating a birthday cake. Who it will be depends on the roll of a die. Though Laurent produces the qualifying cake picture on a private pitch, he fares less well upon public trial. Winner of the cake on this fateful morning is Teddy. For three straight days he has obtained the prize with its flashing candles of satin ribbons. Is this perhaps a backhanded suggestion of capitalist monopoly? At any rate, grumping by Laurent stops considerably short of rebellion. Hunger assuaged, off go the males to various daily occupations, ending a scene which seems modelled on Goldilocks and the Three Bears.

Station Master Teddy readies a wooden train of blocks pulled by metal engine for its daily run. While it is being polished, properly nailed, and fuelled by Laurent, an express made of train tickets passes through the Praha train station on a track beside it. Passengers on the local run will include Schoolboy, a family of chess pieces tardy as usual, and Sir Handsome. Once inside the train, these will be represented by hand-drawn figures, their faces peering out windows.

In another part of the attic, a black cat is on the prowl. It's under orders to convey Buttercup to the Land of Evil. There a despotic Head rules over assorted freaks, reptiles, bats, and bugs. This tyrant is spying on the Western land where Buttercup resides. He utilizes an eyeball attached to a tube resembling a car vacuum hose. Its flexible rubber snakes easily over and around potential obstructions, creeping in apparent silence, as yet undetected by inhabitants of the attic's western side.

Through an inexplicable bit of transmission jamming, the Head vocally interrupts Buttercup's housecleaning, preempting regular television programming, which seems to be a black-and-white production from the 1950s. Buttercup is annoyed. When the Head persists in talking to her, even after she turns the set off, his hearer cuts through the malfunctioning unit's wires. That provides temporary psychological relief, but no termination of intrusion.

Elsewhere, at Switch Station 20, Rosie the pig is assaulted by a duplicitous black cat costumed in boots, overcoat, and stocking mask. Once she's been overpowered and trussed, her attacker rechalks train tracks to lead straight into collision with obstacles certain to cause derailment.

A mechanical ladybug on a wire leash of sorts is sent out to further harass the Head's victim. It stops, pops open, then emits forth what appears to be some kind of beetle attack squadron. This group scuttles off to a hole in the suitcase where Buttercup lives. There its members chew additional gaps in rotting fabric, making passages for entry into a Lilliputian kitchen. Buttercup, obsessed with cleanliness, swats vainly at them. More keep coming, overrunning her residence, further damaging its walls. Their destruction is halted, however, by noises from incoming human inhabitants.

Up into the attic climb little Andrecka and her grandmother. The older is on a mission to bring some wet laundry to lines where it can be hung to dry. As she pins up clothes, her granddaughter noses about, picking up Rosie and liberating her, then discovering unexpected disorder inside the suitcase. She straightens a piece of dollhouse furniture. Locating a prone Buttercup, Andrecka pulls her out from one side of the kitchen. Responding to a command for return, she carries the bisque doll over to show Grandmother. Mrs. Nemachkova inspects it. Recognizing an antique, Grandmother dissuades the girl from transporting it out of the attic. Instead, the woman relocates it underneath hanging sheets.

For some obscure reason, Laurent is running about nearby and manages to get himself trampled under Andrecka's foot. After the humans go back downstairs with some dry sheets in a basket, Grandmother notices a bottle cap fastened to her companion's shoe. She scrapes it off, pitching away hapless clay in the process. Smearred into an outright mess, the blob quickly remolds. Where is he? Just like Buttercup, Laurent has inadvertently become stranded in unfamiliar territory. In his case, that alien landscape is the second floor of Mrs. Nemachkova's old house.

To the rescue of maiden in distress comes busybody cat, now disguised as an old man. Using a cane that converts into a parasol, he pokes her off a table, providing at the last minute a kind of parachute to soften Buttercup's landing. When she continues requesting help, the feline intentionally misdirects her towards the Land of Evil. There the Head awaits his planned visitor.

Laurent, in the meantime, rushes to a white designer touchtone phone in a chamber resembling an interior from a 1930s Italian film. Frantically, he presses buttons. Below on the floor observing this is the black cat, a real danger. The man of clay successfully dials Station Master Teddy. Roused from slumber, the drowsy bear is directed to enlist the aid of Sir Handsome. The pair should travel immediately to "the mountains" where Buttercup is now wandering. Laurent will join them as soon as he can figure out how to obtain reentry upstairs.

Buttercup doesn't wait idly in place for recovery. Continuing to roam cluelessly, she eventually arrives at a locked gateway with posted signs informing travelers it's an international border. Being completely apolitical, the doll squeezes in between metal bars. This new land she encounters has layers of dust underfoot, large spider webs, discarded furniture. There's noticeable absence of anything resembling art. Everything she sees is in a state of decay. Happy housekeeper has arrived in the Land of Evil.

Using a handcart, Teddy pumps his way to the region where Sir Handsome is preoccupied with combat against an inflatable rubber dragon foe. A brief explanation follows, convincing the Knight to join him in a rescue journey into "the mountains."

While this is happening, a sort of self-winding woven rope bag ensnares Buttercup, who is then winged away by bat aviation to two guard Minotaurs. These convey her to the prematurely gloating Head. Rebuffing his attempts at ingratiating, the guest is threatened by cannibal potatoes with limbs like emaciated pipe cleaners who relish the prospect of turning bisque into biscuit. That conclusion would deprive Head of pleasure in acquiring a beautiful slave, however. He would rather attempt to shame

Miss B. into submission. At the counsel of Doctor Earwig, he orders the two Minotaurs to take their captive into the grate of an old-fashioned coal stove. There the rebel can sweep away ashes until she surrenders to his power.

What will become of Buttercup? Will the Land of Evil destroy the lives of all opponents? Why not watch the rest of the film and find out?

Superbly atmospheric and containing multiple forms of animation within single scenes, NA PUDE is a kind of updated ANIMAL FARM. In this picture, though, there are no cowardly collaborators. Only malevolent thugs, untrustworthy opportunists, heroic resisters, sadistic cannibals, naïve victims, and unthinking instruments of evil. Employing a combination of hand-drawn cels, sporadic computer-generated images, puppet animation, and live performances, this Czech film is eclectic and radically resourceful, a kind of Central European junkmation. It even resembles THE LEGEND OF THE SKY KINGDOM thematically, as well as in its recourse to economical found objects as props. Just in train sequences alone, there are combinations of cutouts, cel drawings on paper, and animated metal objects.

Significant liabilities offset the above assets. One of these is editing which jump cuts from one studio area to another without clarifying their geographical relationship. Smoother tracking shots would have been preferable. A second drawback is the multiform nature of the characters. Sometimes the cat is a real one. At other times, it's just a painting or model. Sir Handsome is represented both as a marionette with visible wires and as simply a drawn figure on paper. This makes for convenience in the studio. It also diminishes credibility and viewer empathy.

Another aspect of the film that disappoints is its music. Sometimes orchestrally lush and suggestive, at other times merely poppy and synthetic, the soundtrack swings illogically back and forth between conflicting styles. Trying to generate material that appeals to every possible segment of the audience is a waste of time. There is a solid reason why a traditional consistent format is so frequently by film composers.

The skill of the art department in sheer creation of props, backgrounds, and character costumes is everywhere apparent. Production designer Rudolf Balwar and Art Director Jiri Barta make a formidable team, establishing a colorful anachronistic toyland with plenty of variety and detail.

Eastern European animators do a commendable job of moving puppets about for the animation camera. Stop-motion photography, as witnessed here, is at least as effective as flash animation produced by compute, and seemingly more versatile in camera angles utilized.

While characters tend to be visually striking here, their personalities are mostly vapid outlines. An exception is Sir Handsome, whose articulated construction and rhymed couplet speech give him a more colorful personality than other members of the onscreen cast. Laurent's French accent is so unintrusive as to be borderline nonexistent. Buttercup has a petrified face, which limits emotional expressiveness. The same can be said for the Head. Cat's personality changes only insofar as physical forms and costume changes allow. Teddy becomes vocally tedious due to complete absence of stress, debate, or even whimsy in his speech. At the other extreme, Madam Curie is a token ethnic female, more political statement than eccentric individual. No doubt she is planted to represent female inventiveness. Unfortunately, M.C. is too much of a know-it-all. Witnessing her being safely siphoned through a propeller into the cockpit of a plane is so bizarre it crosses the line into total absurdity. How can a viewer take such a character seriously when its creator obviously doesn't?

Lighting is variable in quality. Given dark ambience throughout, it is mostly adequate. Too frequently jump edits necessitating visual adjustment from the viewer to sharp contrasts in diffusion level joust with cerebral adaptation to a new scene. In other words, there's a surplus of cuts in the film. This results in preponderance of fragmentation, making it appear more a collection of parts than a cohesive whole. No rhythm is ever established. Action bumps, flies, meanders, hiccups. Only when cellophane unwinds is there any sense of advancing flow. Then what registers is artificiality, since such operations are impossible in real time movement.

The MPAA gave the film a rating of PG, which permits virtually any child with parental supervision to watch it. More appropriate is a warning that highlighted elements of menace, a cloning subplot, political undertones and overtones incomprehensible to preteens, disconnectedness of plot, hints of sadistic torture, brainwashing, and rampant creepiness make for intolerably uncomfortable viewing by preadolescents under the age of thirteen.

Certainly a film for adults to watch and relish, NA PUDE is an animation both rewarding and discomfiting, tonally similar to THE STREET OF CROCODILES and THE SNAILS. Definitely not light entertainment for children. And more than slightly challenging for teens.

Special features of the dvd include a Behind the Scenes featurette lasting more than twenty minutes, a two-and-a-half minute theatrical trailer, a three minute Production Gallery, and a three minute U.S. Photo Gallery.

Enjoy if you dare.