

BABI LETO (AUTUMN SPRING) is the November, 2013 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library.

BABI LETO (AUTUMN SPRING) Czech Republic 2001 color live action feature dramedy in Czech with English subtitles Ceska Televize / BKP Film s.r.o. / BUC-FILM s.r.o. Producers: Jiri Bartoska, Jaroslav Boucek and Jaroslav Kucera 102 minutes

\*indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) indicates juvenile performer

20 of a possible 20 points

\*\*\*\*\* of a possible \*\*\*\*\*

Points

2 Director: Vladimir Michalek\*

2 Editor: Jiri Brozek

2 Cinematographer: Martin Strba\*

2 Lighting

2 Screenplay: Jiri Hubac\*

2 Music: Michal Lorenc\*

2 Art Director: Jiri Sternwald

2 Sound: Jiri Synacek and Radim Hladik, Jr.

2 Cast: Vlastimil Brodsky\* (Fanda = Frantisek Hana), Stella Zazvorkova\*

(Emilie Hana, Fanda's wife), Stanislav Zindulka\* (Eduard, Fanda's fellow prankster),

Ondrej Vetchy (Jara Hana, Fanda's son), Petra Spalkova (Kralova), Zita Kabatova\*

(Maruska Grulichova, retired 85-year-old singer), Jiri Labus (Real estate agent),

Krystyna Vyletova (j) (Karolinka, a granddaughter of Fanda and Emilie),

Sandra Fronkova (j) (Marketka, a granddaughter of Fanda and Emilie),

Dominika Kofrankova (j) (Evicka, a granddaughter of Fanda and Emilie), others

2 Creativity

20 total points

Proof that Czech film masterpieces did not end with the Russian invasion of Prague in 1968, Vladimir Michalek's witty and emotionally engaging BABI LETO (AUTUMN SPRING) from 2001 is an invigorating examination of vitality in confrontation with aging. Its protagonist, Frantisek Hana, is a retired operetta bit player, determined to continue living zestfully as long as possible. If there is anything that terrifies him, it is surrender to despair and morbidity. This frustrates pragmatically conventional wife Emilie, whose principal concern is preparing financially for an exquisitely tasteful funeral, capped by the most artful tombstone obtainable. Which happens to be a second-hand one sold off by a family that discovered belatedly it would not be needed due to absence of progeny. While husband Fana cheerily distributes pensioner stipends to virtually everyone he encounters, wife Emilie diligently jars treasured coins with identifying labels for their ultimate purpose: gravestone funds, death announcements, funeral services, etc. This odd couple leads a contradictory, but felicitous, conjugal life until a backfiring sham estate purchase leaves Fanda one week to provide genuine accrued expenses compensation to aggrieved realtors. Partner in folly Edouard cannot cover the bill from personal funds and a scheme to

obtain cash from Edouard's young female relative fails due to totally incredible alibis delivered extemporaneously by the supplicant. It seems the only way to successfully meet the deadline is for Fanda to raid Emilie's funerary funds. Perhaps if the old gentleman were to actually meet an unexpected demise, this could be justified.

What that ruse triggers is an unpardonable rupture between the spouses. Emilie justifiably feels robbed, both emotionally and financially. Fanda cannot provide an adequate excuse for staging a counterfeit death scene. His audience is shocked into rejecting any further countenancing of impractical jokes.

Obligated to repay Emilie and banned from further association with colleague Ed, Fanda lapses into dutiful resignation, becoming sedentary and inattentive. Each successive day brings only cheerless news of obituaries and urgent inducements to vacate the couple's comfortable apartment. Emilie has located a wonderful nursing home where the old couple can enjoy a few final years of tranquillity. Son Jara needs another domicile for his current wife and brood of girls, a haven no jealous previous mate will violate. His present home is too small, anyway. Why shouldn't elderly parents withdraw to the security of guaranteed health care and leave expenses of maintaining their current apartment to far more affluent younger people? It's the least they can do, considering Jara bought them their flat.

When an unexpected phone call communicates news of Ed's stroke, Fanda finally feels the press of mortality and is inclined to accept living arrangements outlined by Emilie. More and more he comes to resemble the zombielike neighbor who stares all day long vacantly out a front window, life passing unregistered before an apathetic gaze. This fraternity of miserable passivity scares Fanda's mate, who finds it increasingly difficult to accept mumbled acquiescences and unrepented oversights. At last, she decides to visit the shunned Ed and seek advice from the very source of past domestic strife. Can the two of them find a way to bring their mutual companion back to cheerfulness?

Watch the film and find out.

Technically, *BABI LETO* is very nearly perfect. Vlastimil Brodsky's performance as a blustery, generous hedonist makes an ideal foil to Stella Zazvorkova's determinedly conservative Emilie, whose slavish attachment to the material world masks a timidity about exploring possibilities beyond what is immediately affordable. Faded diva Grulichova is portrayed with brave magnificence of tone and gesture by a still-commanding Zita Kabatova. Plenty of able support comes from minor cast members, none of whom is miscast or inclined to shortchange viewers.

Jiri Hubac's superior screenplay eschews rampant vulgarities of language, instead offering mature dialogue peppered with captivatingly droll humor and penetrating insights into human eccentricity. Lines such as "He was dead even when he was alive." and "So he found us a lovely room with a view into despair." not only remain firmly in memory, but also define character with economy of language.

Wonderful camera mobility takes us dashing after a pickpocket, sluggishly traipsing through a cemetery, racing up and down exhausting flights of steps and into brilliantly-lit Prague subway stations, as well as along stately tree-lined country avenues resplendent with shadow-flecked foliage. Martin Strba's exhilarating cinematography is richly satisfying and contributes a painterly patina, particularly to outdoor scenes.

Sound and lighting are both impeccable, eliminating any need for strained eyes or extrapolation of dialogue from sporadic audible excerpts.

The color scheme and architectural embellishments of Jiri Sternwald provide diverse and vibrant settings for the prodigal shenanigans of AUTUMN SPRING's protagonist and sidekick.

Michal Lorenc's music score is symphonically full and rhythmically energetic, adding considerable charm and grace to accompanying visuals.

Though editing of the film is less conspicuous than other elements, Jiri Brozek's craftsmanship pulls various comic and dramatic episodes together tautly, neither lingering with aggravating sentimentality nor zipping along with dismissive flippancy. When the film darkens and slows in its buildup to a revelatory climax and buoyant coda, Brozek applies brakes and accelerates with consummate grace and dexterity.

Vladimir Michalek elicits accomplished, multilayered performances from all his chief cast members, allowing Vlastimil Brodsky a memorable valedictory with a character whose duplicitous flaws, manipulative histrionics and unconscious egotism is counterbalanced by a loving heart and a total spurning of any inclination to greed or condescension. He permits Stella Zazvorkova a sympathetic gradual transformation from obsessive materialism to resolute experimentation, leaving her pleasantly anchored in a world where money is simply a means to a happier end and not just a gateway to the kingdom of the dead. Perhaps, after all, one final "arctic seaside holiday" might better culminate a worthwhile life than a lengthy parade of graveyard visitations. This caution to reconsider obsession with financial security and alienation of elderly from youth is quite relevant and charmingly presented.

Though the dvd does not include any extra features other than scene selections and subtitles, the film itself, suitable only for adults due to mature themes and occasional obscene language, is sufficiently rewarding for discriminating viewers. Hopefully, Mr. Michalek will surprise us agreeably again in the future.