



Larks on a String

Director: Jiří Menzel

Country: Czechoslovakia

Date: 1969

A review from Czech Film Review:

Banned for over twenty years and only released after the Velvet Revolution, Jiří Menzel's *Larks on a String* is a film out of time. It was one of the director's more overtly critical works in the '60s, openly sarcastic about the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia. As a result, it endured censure and became a valuable relic of the grim post-Prague Spring era, lacking the timelessness of Menzel's more gently comedic films of the period...

It's a shame that it has dated in comparison to the likes of *Closely Watched Trains* (*Ostře sledované vlaky*) and *Capricious Summer* (*Rozmarné léto*), because as well as ripping the piss out of the petty bureaucrats and their dim-witted slogans ("We'll pour our peaceful steel down the imperialist war-mongers' throat!") it is also an extremely tender and poignant film.

Set in a huge scrapyards in the Bohemian town of Kladno in the '50s, the story centres around a group of so-called dissidents and counter-revolutionaries, sent by the authorities for re-education among the piles of broken typewriters and twisted wrought iron bedsteads. They're a mostly meek and browbeaten bunch, resigned to shuffling about among the mountains of waste, having philosophical discussions and sneaking a peek at the group of women detained for attempted defection across the fence.



When the two groups do occasionally come into contact, both men and women use every excuse to flirt and take comfort in a little human contact with the opposite sex – a scene where they huddle in a circle to warm themselves around a fire and furtively touch each others hands brought a tear to my eye.

They have to be a bit careful, because they are being watched over by a melancholy prison guard, Andel (Jaroslav Satoranský), who's having romantic trouble at home with his new Romani bride, who may be mentally

impaired. Every now and then a Trustee (Rudolf Hrusínský) also drops in to hit them with a few slogans and throw a few slivers of metal into the bin to show that they're all in it together.

These two characters could have been portrayed as comic jobsworths or outright bad guys by a lesser director, but it's a testament to Menzel's magnanimity that he depicts them with almost as much compassion as the prisoners. His refusal to demonize the other side during a time of oppression is reminiscent of the wartime works of Powell and Pressburger, who angered Winston Churchill by portraying a great friendship between a British and German soldier in *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*. Similarly, they took the long view of the war as only a small blip in the lengthy history of the United Kingdom to explore more timeless themes of Britishness in *A Canterbury Tale*.

The main thrust of *Larks on a String* focuses on two marriages. There is the marriage of Andel to a Romani woman, and during their wedding



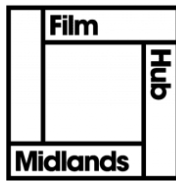
celebrations he realizes that she has ties to her people that are far stronger than he can ever hope to match. Once he takes her away to live in a brand new apartment provided by the state, her mental state deteriorates rapidly, and the pair are unable to consummate their marriage. Nevertheless, the sensitive and forlorn Andel finds himself complicit in assisting the budding romance between boyish Pavel Hvezdár (Václav Neckář) and one of the female convicts, Jitka (Jitka Zelenohorská). The situation descends into farce when, with Jitka incarcerated, she and Pavel marry with her grandma as a proxy bride.



While the satire is often pointed, the really remarkable thing about *Larks on a String* is how tenderly Menzel treats his characters, ably assisted by an impressive cast of his regular actors. Again Menzel adapts from the works of Bohumil Hrabal, and the author's worldly voice shines through strongly, with quirky, intelligent conversations between learned men working menial jobs as punishment for their opinions, something that Hrabal would revisit in his later novel *Too Loud a Solitude* (*Příliš hlučná samota*).

This was the film that finally sold me on Menzel. I found *Capricious Summer* and *Closely Watch Trains* a little too twee, and lacking the bite I needed. *Larks on a String* combines an acerbic critique of the regime with Menzel's trademark whimsical pathos, making it one of his strongest works, despite how much of a museum piece it feels.

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This film show is part of Shrewsbury Film Society's *Five at Fifty* season of classic films from 1969 which has been made possible with support from Film Hub Midlands through funds from the National Lottery. Film Hub Midlands support people to watch, show, and make films in the Midlands.