

Director of *The Loves of a Blonde*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Amadeus*

Filmmaker Milos Forman (1932-2018), one of the leading figures of the Czech New Wave

By David Walsh
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Czech-born filmmaker Milos Forman, best known for *The Loves of a Blonde* (1964), *The Firemen's Ball* (1967), *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), *Ragtime* (1981) and *Amadeus* (1984), died at a hospital in Danbury, Connecticut, near his home in Warren, Connecticut, on Saturday. He was 86 years old.

Forman was originally identified with the so-called Czech New Wave, a group of directors whose lively and honest films came to international prominence in the mid-1960s, prior to the Soviet invasion and suppression of the “Prague Spring,” the anti-Stalinist mass movement, in August 1968. Forman thereupon emigrated to the US and attempted to integrate himself into the Hollywood system.

According to Forman's own website, the future film director was born in 1932 “into a teacher's family in the small town of Caslav (Central Bohemian region). He was the youngest of three brothers. His father was a member of a resistance group against the Nazi occupation, and was arrested by the Gestapo when Milos was eight years old.” His mother was also later picked up, after a grocery store owner was interrogated about anti-Nazi leaflets that appeared in his store. He mentioned the names of 12 women, including Forman's mother.

Rudolf and Anna Forman both died in concentration camps. Forman later discovered his biological father was Otto Kohn, a Jewish architect who survived the Holocaust.

Forman was first interested in the theater, in part because of an older brother, a painter who worked as a set designer. However, he was rejected by a theater school and accepted at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, as a screenwriter.

The Czech New Wave, according to film historians D. and A. J. Liehm, “had its roots in the years between 1953 and 1958, when several leading filmmakers tried to break with the rigid ideological policy laid down for the arts, and began attempting to make films which would have more contact both with real life and with the evolution of contemporary cinema in other countries. The death of Stalin in 1953 had made possible a more liberal and progressive cinema—but this early spring came to an end in 1959 when, out of the twenty-nine films produced during the preceding year, three were banned and their directors blacklisted.” (*Cinema: A Critical Dictionary*)

The Czech Stalinist apparatus convened a special congress in 1959 “for the express purpose of severely criticizing Czechoslovak cinema as a whole” and, as a result, six important films were rejected, on the grounds of “ideological confusion, influence of naturalism, blackening of reality and dangerous revisionism.” In other words, the films lifted the lid on some of the realities of life.

The situation became somewhat more favorable later during the

Khrushchev Thaw, as it reached Czechoslovakia. In 1963, the authorities attempted to suppress *The Sun in a Net*, directed by Stefan Uher, which dealt with a number of hitherto unacceptable social and political themes (uncaring parents, adultery, a suicide attempt), but the filmmakers resisted and had their way. Uher's work won the Czech film critics' award.

In the early 1960s, Forman, along with future director Ivan Passer and cameraman Miroslav Ondricek, set out to do a film about a popular Prague theater. It eventually inspired them to make *The Audition* (1963), for which they “organized a fake audition for a female singer and thousands of ambitious young girls turned up.”

Forman's first feature film was released in 1964, *Black Peter*, about a few days in a teenager's life. The Liehms note that, “as in all his films, Forman combined great sensitivity with a cruel satire on the generation gap. He was one of the first to leave the studios and shoot in the streets, using non-professional actors and occasionally improvising dialogue.”

In *The Loves of a Blonde*, the title character, an 18-year-old shoe factory worker, Andula (Hana Brejchová, the younger sister of Forman's first wife), lives in an industrial town where the women (because of poor, bureaucratic economic planning) far outnumber the men. Along with her fellow workers, Andula has dreams of love and romance. The realities fall far short. At a “mixer,” organized to have the local young women meet an eligible group of soldiers, most of the latter prove to be middle-aged and married. Andula falls in with a young musician for the night and later decides to follow him to the city. His family is not particularly friendly, the boy seems indifferent and she returns to her factory town, making up a story about her “wonderful” trip for the benefit of her friends.

The Loves of a Blonde made a great impression in Czechoslovakia, where it was a great success, and in Europe and America too, for its directness, humor and sensitivity. Forman later explained that the source for his early films was a response to the “stupidity” of the movies turned out in the name of “socialist realism,” the Stalinist perversion of art, in which everything was so “fake, so untrue, so propaganda-oriented, that we just wanted to bring our truth, subjective truth and objective truth, real people, real faces on the screen.” *The Loves of a Blonde*, Forman explained, “was a film expressing compassion” for “all these desperate people.”

Cinematic inspirations included Italian neo-realism and the budding French New Wave. Forman and his collaborators had very little money, used a mix of professionals and non-professionals, and generally went about their business with emotional and artistic economy and matter-of-factness. *The Loves of a Blonde* holds up today.

As does *The Firemen's Ball*, a slightly more ambitious work, made in color this time. The work, inspired by an evening Forman spent at a real

firemen's party, takes place at the annual ball of the local fire department in some provincial town. The firemen intend to present their retiring chief with a ceremonial fire-ax. During the course of the evening, the various prizes to be handed out in a raffle begin disappearing. Contestants, more or less reluctant, in an ineptly handled, slightly seamy beauty pageant, present themselves to the presiding committee. They eventually refuse to participate. A blaze breaks out in the town, but the fire truck gets stuck in the snow, and the firemen are unable to put it out. One minor disaster after another, culminating in the theft of all the raffle prizes and the ceremonial ax!

The Stalinist regime took *The Firemen's Ball* to be a satirical attack on a corrupt, mismanaged society, and eventually "banned [it] forever." Forman was in Paris when the Soviet Stalinist leadership sent troops into Prague in August 1968, and he did not return to Czechoslovakia for many years.

There were numerous directors who made contributions to the Czech New Wave, including Jan Nemec, whose *Report on the Party and the Guests* (1965) brought to the fore "the conflict between oppressors and oppressed, a conflict which was both symbolic and real." Ivan Passer's *Intimate Lighting* (1965), Jiri Menzel's *Closely Watched Trains* (1966), set during the German occupation in World War II, and *The Shop on Main Street* (1965, Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos) also stood out. The latter work is set "in a small Slovak town during the Fascist era," and centers "on the relationship between an old Jewish woman and a good-hearted, if simple carpenter, who by ironic coincidence becomes her hangman." (*Cinema: A Critical Dictionary*)

It was still the case in 1968 that a good many Czech intellectual dissidents considered themselves left-wing. However, cut off from genuine Marxist criticism of Stalinism and under conditions where official public opinion, both in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and in the West, universally treated the world as divided between "Communism" and "democracy," these dissidents generally moved to the right, choosing "democracy" over "totalitarianism," especially as they came to lead comfortable lives in the US and elsewhere.

The Czech New Wave is sometimes treated as having evolved out of the earlier avant-garde Dev?tsil artistic movement of the 1920s and 1930s. One of its leading members, Karel Teige, who had associated with the surrealist movement in the 1930s, initially greeted the Soviet army as a liberator, but was silenced by the thuggish Czech Stalinists and hounded to his death, from a heart attack, as a "Trotskyite degenerate," in 1951. His papers were destroyed by the secret police. Another leading artist and member of Dev?tsil, also a sympathizer of Trotsky, the painter Toyen (Marie ?ermínová), fled Stalinist Czechoslovakia in 1948. One of their comrades, the historian Závíš Kalandra was expelled from the Czech Communist Party in 1936 for his criticism of Stalin's policies. He was arrested by the Gestapo in 1939 and held in various concentration camps until 1945. After the war he was arrested by the Stalinists as a "Trotskyist" and hanged after a show trial in June 1950.

In 1952, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia was decimated by the notorious Slánský trial, in which Rudolf Slánský, General Secretary of the Czech Stalinist party and thirteen other leading members, were accused of taking part in a "Trotskyite-Titoite-Zionist" conspiracy (11 of the defendants were Jews). Slánský and ten others, found guilty of entirely fabricated charges, were hanged in December 1952.

Czech Stalinism exterminated left-wing thought to whatever extent it could and muddled consciousness, helping to create the confusion and disorientation that affected wide layers of the population. The August 1968 invasion did massive additional damage, further undermining the credibility of the October Revolution.

Forman's directed nine feature films during the 40 years he pursued his filmmaking career in the US. He maintained an interest in iconoclasm and anti-authoritarianism, in films like *Taking Off* (1971), *One Flew Over the*

Cuckoo's (1975) and *Hair* (1979).

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In answer to a question about his approach, he once told an interviewer, "Well, individuals fighting or rebelling against the status quo, the establishment, is good for drama. And also I feel admiration for rebels, because I lived twice in my life in totalitarian society, where most of the people feel like rebelling but don't dare to. And I am a coward, because I didn't dare to rebel there and go to prison for that. That's, I guess, why I admire the rebels and make films about them." Those rebels ranged from Mozart in *Amadeus* to comic Andy Kaufman in *Man on the Moon* (1999). There are elements of social criticism in *Ragtime* and *The People vs. Larry Flynt* (1996). However, this remains fairly limited.

In 2000, we commented on the WSWS: "A victim of both fascism ... and Stalinism, Forman imparts to his films a feeling for the predicament of the individual in conflict with rigid or even monstrous institutions. His humanism values eccentricity and idiosyncrasy. One might make the case that Forman, on the whole, has fared better than the vast majority of refugee or former dissident artists from the Stalinist countries. There is something to him.

"At the same time there seem to be definite limits beyond which he is not prepared to go. While he has criticized aspects of American life, he has never taken a sharp look at social relations in his adopted country. Nor has he exhibited any interest in probing the most devastating emotional problems. Forman displays an attraction for certain types of extreme behavior, but he resolutely refuses to probe it for its more general significance."

In 1997, Forman was asked whether he was "happy that America won the Cold War." "Of course," he replied, "what a silly question," because people in America "are now fighting normal evils, and not devious evils like any totalitarian regime." His discussions of the Soviet Union never went beyond the bounds of the prevailing bourgeois commonplaces and the strict identification of Stalinism with socialism.

His iconoclasm, in the end, never went deep enough to sustain him intellectually and artistically in emigration. Forman essentially went with the flow in the 1980s and 1990s, and this cost him dearly as an artist.

It is telling that his pre-emigration films, *The Loves of a Blonde* and *The Firemen's Ball*, remain his most enduring contribution.

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