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“No exaggeration, Sklep is therapeutic”

Divadlo Sklep is celebrating fifty years of existence. The principles of its work are examined by the feature documentary *Tajemství Divadla Sklep aneb Manuál na záchranu světa* (“The Mystery of Sklep Theater – A Guide to Saving the World”), which had its preliminary screening at Finále Plzeň. We spoke with director Olga Dabrowská not only about how the documentary came into being and the therapeutic value of Sklep, but also about the new live action film she's planning.

Were you an outsider or did you know Sklepsters personally before filming?

It's true that I know a lot of them from the past. I'm essentially in the generation after them. In the 80s and 90s we used to go see them, and we got to know not just the Sklepsters but also members of the Pražská 5 more and more. When I was still in secondary school I really liked the films of Tomáš Vorel, which I saw at the FAMU festivals. I was amazed and at the same time I had a crush on him. From Ondra Trojan I liked his student film Sedum, for example. The paraphrase of *The Magnificent Seven* in this case was seven inspectors. It was so funny it made my stomach hurt.

So the free environment of Sklep was dear to you...

At home freedom felt like the highest value, much higher than material possessions or career. Of course, by that I mean responsible freedom, not willful anarchy. So for me it was natural to keep looking for freedom. Sklep had a liberated environment so strong and authentic that for a person who wanted the freedom to live it was like a fish in water. I also think that with this experience they really sent our generations a signal. They had to influence us, whether we wanted to or not. It was strong also in that they completely said the hell with the regime we were living in, and thereby made it clear what they thought of it... What's more, after the revolution they had no

problem continuing to be creative, because they hadn't defined themselves by opposing Bolsheviks but by opposing principles. Or they just played. And they continue to do it completely the same.

That playfulness is ever-present in the film...

In the film there's a scene in which the Sklepsters are quarreling over a rehearsal schedule in development, what the different people will do in their performance for an upcoming Besídka. Normally they paint a schedule on the wall and gather around it with their backs to you. That can't be filmed. We needed to get the camera in front of their faces. So we put the schedule on a table that was losing a leg. And they immediately started playing with the leg. Aside from the fact that the Sklepsters usually argue about the schedule for two hours, but we needed a condensed version of the quarrel for about a half hour of rough material. All you had to say was: "Fight over the schedule the way you normally do, but condensed, for a half an hour." They were playing themselves, they knew they were, but at the same time they argued over the ferman so authentically because in their opinion they were truly supposed to follow it to play the Besídka. So it's not some spastic arrangement but a play and a document in the same situation. When we said: "Come on, we're going to do experiments on you," they showed up curious. It was just another interesting toy for them to grab and do what they want with.

What quantity of material did you have to work with in the editing room?

In this sense we had luxurious conditions, which I'll surely never see again. In the editing room we had as many days as we wanted. We worked all the rough material – condensed it and made "boxes", sets of sequences which in and of themselves were clean, free of ballast, and worked in their way. We could have presented some eight-hour indie film about Sklep. (*laughs*) Then we condensed the material in the boxes even further and organized it into the basic story of Sklep. In it we try to express the happiness that the Sklepsters found and that we found them, as well as to express the principles on which Sklep operates. We posed the question of how it is possible that Sklep has existed for so long, and that was what we tried to answer. The absolutely first version of the film from this came about in September. Another maybe five versions gradually came together before it grew into its final form.

What do you plan to do with the footage that never made it into the film?

In those discarded “boxes” or sequences there is a lot of great bonus material that we will put on the DVD. There are morsels of individual Sklepsters, interviews with them and sorts of microsituations, mostly from their private lives. For example, there is this amazing ode to David Vávra, where truly every Sklepster pours out unbelievable praise from the depths of their hearts. It’s interspliced with how David is sitting at the big Sklep meeting where he is deciding what they will play in the next year and giving incredibly praise to the work of every member.

How did the documentary develop from the initial idea?

There were a number of pitfalls I stumbled upon in the course of the entire creation of the film. I figured there would be a few scientists who would analyze the principles on which Sklep operates. Suddenly it seemed to be drowning in scientific experiments. Tomáš Sedláček was there, for example, who analyzed whether their economics were good or add. We’re adding that to the bonus material, too. I was a little afraid that it would sound like an adoration agitation about Sklep, since what I really wanted was for Sklep to show principles that can be healthily infectious for every person on this planet. I have a good feeling from the Sklepsters, so I figured that it should be an author’s testimony, so I would praise them because I know how. It’s not self-serving, it has a purpose. Another thing: They are normal people just like us. They fight, they have conflicts, they experience the exact same crises as everyone else. Perhaps that was another pitfall – how much or little to mention that. I concluded that there’s no sense of digging into that because everyone will realize that they are people of flesh and bone. And there’s no point doing a tabloid of who divorced or fought with whom. So I only lightly touched on this. Yes, Sklep had crises too, who hasn’t? It’s the very fact that they are united and can overcome crises that is interesting and inspiring about them.

It was a significant event for the Sklepsters to play soldiers in Afghanistan. That had a significant influence on the final form of the documentary...

It was a fundamental event that came out of the blue. Already at the beginning we wanted when we tried to write some kind of “script” to transport Sklep somewhere into a world that was much worse than in Czechia. For them to play and energize

everyone with their specific energy. We had completely megalomaniac ideas that I would travel the world, to Africa, the Eskimos, and there I would show them Sklep and the world would be saved. Then when we decided that it would be more of a document than a joke, because we wanted rather to leave it up to them, then Afghanistan came. It struck the perfect note and fit perfectly in our original suspicion of what it should look like. So with gratitude we accepted it from the God of filmmakers as his consent with the higher mission of the film.

What crew members set off on this adventure?

My son Dominik Dabrowski, a student at FAMO in Písek, shot Afghanistan. Only producer Světlana Holečková and budding sound engineer Ondra Oktábec. I'm sorry Pavel Bureš didn't go, he's a brilliant director, cameraman, and sound engineer in one person. He had taken wonderful shots for us before on Sklep and he really wanted to go to Afghanistan. He and Dominik would have been shooting on two cameras... now that would be material! But right then my mother died and the organizing of who would go instead of me, who wouldn't go and why, unfortunately got away from me. My directing instructions from Prague for the eventual minicrew were: "Shoot everything." And they truly and courageously shot everything. Then they brought us this pile of material and we boed and condensed it in the editing room down to its final form. For the Sklepsters and the minicrew it was a powerful experience, almost unbearable. So they kept meeting and paging through the photos from Afghanistan, talking about it, what it was like and what it meant to them. It was deeply interesting and I am deeply sorry that I wasn't there with them. To this day Sklep retains the relationships they formed with the soldiers.

The documentary shows the effect their humor can have in this joyless reality where risk is ever-present...

When they fly in the helicopter from one base to another, which is often captured in the film, the helicopter does enormous maneuvers to draw the aim of terrorists. They realized that they were flying over territory where they could get shot and they were very afraid. And yet that's what's appealing about them, that even when the risk is great, it's worth it to them – to express their encouraging energy and make someone happy with it. They know that these mere jokes and songs have a certain power worth

risking for. That it brings people something.

They experienced a rocket attack that they have a number of humorous anecdotes about, since the attack was repelled. For example, at the moment when the siren begins out of nowhere, some Sklepsters were in the dining room eating ice cream. At that moment they had to hide under the table. And the soldiers present gathered the ice cream from the table and handed it out under the table. Or how the actress Hanka Navarová was in the shower, completely naked, with a huge turban on her head, when the alert began. She tore into the next room, which was full of soldiers, and simply cried out: "Hello, I'm an actress from Prague!" and lay on the ground.

An entertaining peculiarity were the shots of the audience with an infrared camera and watching the reactions of the audience. How is it with measuring emotion?

Doctor Radek Ptáček, who appears in the documentary, is a modern star of Czech psychology. He brought a program from America called FaceReader, he's the only one in the Czech Republic to have one. It's something on the basis of a lie detector, but it records the microgestures in the face and reads the slightest tremors we can't control. So it reads actual emotions. When a person smiles on the outside, for example, but in reality is sad, it detects the sadness and doesn't read the smile at all. With FaceReader we measured the authentic emotions of the audience during a Divadlo Sklep performance, so the happiness we show in the graph in the film is no mystification, but the actual measured emotions of collective happiness using the most modern American tools! As we know, the emotions of happiness, laughter, and joy activate in our bodies the healthiest hormones and initiate healing processes in them. No exaggeration, Sklep is therapeutic.

What's your plan now?

Sorting through all that material and looking for a finished form would be arduous. So now I'd like to "take a break" from documentaries with live action film. Ivana Kubišová and I are planning a project with the working title *Děti samotářů* ("Children of Loners"). Though it may end up being named *Children of the Lonely*, because we don't want people to think its *Samotáři* ("Loners") the sequel and went looking for the future fate of the stoned Macháček. *Samotáři* was about thirty-somethings who want

a relationship but aren't capable of keeping one. This is roughly about forty-somethings who want a relationship, who aren't capable of keeping one, but they've had children born and grow up from these short-term relationships, an entire generation in fact. It's a new Euro-American sociological phenomenon – a huge number of people grew up and are growing up in various alternative models to the classic family, e.g. patchwork (or variously fused) families and many others of the most diverse combinations of partner cohabitation. This film is meant to be the question of what kind of people grow up in this environment and what do they do with the world.

What phase of preparations are you in?

We've received a grant for development so we're working on the screenplay, scouting, and casting actors. Jarda Plesl will play a psychopath and Simona Prasková will play the large role of the mother who doesn't know if she is a heterosexual or a lesbian. We've cast Natálka, Simona Prasková's daughter, a very beautiful girl, very lively, a little Sklepster. She's a little monkey, she always plays it the way her mom does. So Simona will play an adult woman in crisis with a small girl played by Natálka. The costumes will be made by Ivana Follová, set design by Petr Pištěk, camera by Diviš Marek with Pavel Bureš as a second cameraman, sound by Jiří Klenka, editing by Krasimira Velitchková, and music by Ivan Acher. It's a dream crew, we all know each other and have had great experiences with each other.

Ivan Acher provided the minimalist music of *Tajemství Divadla Sklep*. How did the collaboration come about?

Sklep has a lot of hits, they've got a band and a number of songwriters. Every Sklepster writes not only scenes but songs. But we chose our own composer – Ivan Acher, who is absolutely brilliant. Ivan wondered a bit whether his music belongs in the film at all, when the Sklepsters are musicians themselves. If it wasn't inappropriate to get in their way. When I convinced him that he should be there, because his music represents our view of Sklep, he was worried that it might look like he was showing off to the detriment of Sklep. I told him: "Something that would allow us to conceptualize a humble commentary and the theater within it as a whole..." Ivan came up with the idea of bringing a music box where you can insert rolls of paper you

can use little pliers to poke the music into. It's pretty arduous, because if you clip the wrong spot, you have to redo the entire roll. So it was maybe the fifth version that Ivan perforated properly. Afterward he inserted the paper into the little music box, turned the spindle in front of a microphone and that's how he recorded the music for the film. The sound you hear before the closing titles, that's from the winding of the music box.

You also won for animation of closing titles...

A Sklepster did those, the animator František Fáňa Váša. That was how I discovered how beautiful the animator's world is. A normal person solves some fundamentally serious duties, but we wondered whether David Vávra should swing or jump. Whether a tripe sausage should be larger and who'll do a cartwheel... so it was a trip to the most playful world yet.