

I SERVED THE KING OF ENGLAND

Directed by Jiří Menzel

Screenplay by Jiří Menzel
Based on the novel by Bohumil Hrabal

Starring

Ivan Barney
Oldřich Kaiser
Julia Jentsch

Official selection 2007 Berlin International Film Festival

**Czech Republic's official selection for the 2008 Best Foreign
Language Film Academy Award**

Running time: 118 minutes

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East Coast:

Sophie Gluck & Associates
Sophie Gluck/Sylvia Savadjian
124 West 79th St Ste 2B
New York, NY 10024
Phone (212) 595-2432
Sophie.gluck@verizon.net
gluckpr@verizon.net

West Coast

Block-Korenbrot
Melody Korenbrot
Jay Waterman
110 S. Fairfax Ave., Ste 310
Los Angeles, CA 90036
Phone (323) 634-7001

Exhibitor Contacts

Sony Pictures Classics
Carmelo Pirrone
Leila Guenancia
550 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10022
Phone (212) 833-8833

SHORT SYNOPSIS

Jan Dítě (Ivan Barnev) is short in height, but high in ambition. To put it bluntly, the young provincial waiter wants to become a millionaire. And he knows just how to do it: by hearing everything, seeing everything, and creating opportunities at every turn. Armed with this knowledge and an irrepressible wish to please, he soon leaves his first place of employment, a pub, for a luxury brothel and, finally moving onto an elegant Art Nouveau Prague restaurant. But by the late 1930s, things are changing: Hitler has taken the Sudetenland region and is breaking apart Czechoslovakia. Jan falls in love with Líza (Julia Jentsch), a Sudeten German proud of her Aryan blood. They marry, and soon after Líza is sent to serve on the Polish front, while Jan remains behind to serve as a nurse in a Nazi SS Research Hospital, but when she returns, she has a fortune in rare stamps that Jews had 'left behind' ... After Líza's less than heroic death, Jan sells the stamps and becomes ... a millionaire. But he only has three years to enjoy his fortune: the new Communist regime puts him behind bars for 15 years, one for each of his millions... Upon his release from jail, Jan is sent to live in a decrepit border town. Here Jan reflects on the events that have shaped his life – and to reflect on what might have happened if he had played a different role in these events.

LONG SYNOPSIS

Following 15 long years of incarceration, Jan Dítě (Ivan Barnev), is released into a world very different from what he left. On his way back home he recalls his early years as an apprentice waiter, his knack for making money, and his first sexual experiences. Apart from his first lessons in waiting and lovemaking, he is lured by success and becomes blinded by his dreams of fabulous wealth. Living by his wits and skill, the young Jan becomes so successful that small town jealousy soon forces him to move elsewhere. He finds work at a luxury hotel near the capital where the *crème de la crème* of 1930s Czech society come to live it up. He is fascinated by their self-indulgent, carefree existence. For a young man of his background the lifestyle of these rich young folk seems quite unimaginable – which makes it all the more enticing. So he sets himself a goal: to get rich and live like them.

The older Jan is reminded of the easy sexual conquests of his youth when he finds himself attracted to Marcela, a young woman who happens to come into his orbit and intrudes on his solitude. But young Jan has to quit the luxury hotel, too. Hoping to become a wealthy and successful hotelier, he takes a job in an elegant art nouveau establishment in Prague. Here he learns how a classy waiter should dress and behave; and it is here he has his greatest moment of glory. The Emperor of Abyssinia visits the hotel, and Dítě is decorated for his excellent (though brief) service. Naturally, this results in more jealousy.

The events following the Munich Agreement just before the war mark a turning point in Jan's life. Having fallen in love with Líza (Julia Jentsch), a young Sudeten German activist, he suddenly finds himself on the wrong side – an unwitting collaborator with the forces that have invaded Czechoslovakia. He marries Líza, though not before undergoing a degrading examination to ensure he is of good Aryan stock. While his own country is being humiliated and his compatriots imprisoned and executed, he celebrates his marriage to a fanatic German nationalist. Soon he is working for the Germans.

War breaks out. The Germans invade Poland and Líza decides to serve as a volunteer nurse. Her young husband now works for an institute set up by Himmler to produce master race specimens from German girls and full-blooded Aryan warriors. It is an unbelievable place, where the new Teutonic breed is conceived, born, and reared under 'expert' supervision. There Jan works obediently as a nurse. Líza returns from Poland with a priceless stamp collection – her 'war booty' – and the couple look forward to building a magnificent hotel when the war is over. But the war does not end in the way they imagined, and as it drags on, the SS 'research institute' is turned into a military hospital, where both Jan and Líza work. As the war draws to a close, Líza is killed in an air raid and Jan faces prosecution as a Nazi collaborator.

After serving time for assisting the Nazi's, the older Jan finds peace and reconciliation in the solitude of the south Bohemian mountains. Only now does he understand where he went wrong: he was simply too eager to succeed, and too eager to please.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Bohumil Hrabal

Bohumil Hrabal, one of the most important Czech writers of the 20th century, was born the illegitimate son of Marie Kiliánová. He was later adopted by her future husband, Frantisek Hrabal, a brewery manager from Nymburk. Though born in Brno, he spent his childhood in Polná and Nymburk, where he attended the local secondary school, graduating in 1935. He then studied law at Charles University in Prague until, following the German occupation, the authorities closed down all Czech universities. For the next few years he had a variety of jobs – including clerk, railway laborer and train conductor. After the war he completed his university studies, though he never took up law as a profession. From 1947- 1949 he was a traveling salesman; then he worked in a steel mill in Kladno, where in 1952 he suffered a serious injury. In 1954 he took a job as paper-packer in a waste-processing plant; in 1956 he got married and in 1959 started work as a stage hand at the S. K. Neumann Theatre (now Palmovka Theatre, Prague). From 1963 till his death in 1997 he devoted himself to writing.

The type-composition of his first book, 'Lost Alley' was destroyed after the communist take-over in 1948. His first published work, therefore, was 'People Talking' (1956), which appeared as a supplement to the Bulletin of the Czech Bibliophile Association in an edition of 250 copies. Three years later he was thwarted for a second time when the communists again visited the printers and smashed up the composition of his first proper publication 'Larks on a String'. So the first book he actually published, the collection of short stories 'Pearls on the Bottom' did not see the light of day until 1963 when he was 49. Its enormous popularity soon led to the publication of a second volume, 'The Palaverers' (1964). There followed a series of novellas: 'Dancing Lessons for the Advanced in Age' (1964), 'Closely Watched Trains' (1965) and 'Advertising the Sale of the House I no Longer Wish to Live in' (1965). After the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact forces in 1968, Hrabal was again forbidden to publish. Two books, 'Home-works' and 'Buds' were 'withdrawn' just before going to print. But Hrabal was not deterred, and went on to produce his masterpieces 'I Served the King of England' (1974), 'Cutting it Short' (1976), 'Snowdrops Festival' (1979), 'Sweet Melancholy' (1979), 'Too Loud a Solitude' (1980) and 'The Harlequin Millions' (1981). These were followed in the late 1980s by the autobiographical trilogy 'Wedding in the House', 'Vita nuova' and 'Vacant Lots'.

Hrabal's influence is enormous, not only on 20th century Czech literature but also on Czech cinema. The film adaptation of his Pearls on the Bottom, stories about the 'remarkableness of everyday life' is regarded as a seminal work of the Czech New Wave. Besides the war time comedy "Closely Watched Trains" and 'Larks on a String', other memorable films inspired by Hrabal's writings are "Cutting it Short" (dir. Jirí Menzel, 1980), "Snowdrops Festival" (dir. Jirí Menzel, 1983) and "The Gentle Barbarian" (dir. Petr Koliha, 1989). Almost all Hrabal's

books have been filmed, including "Too Loud a Solitude" (1994) directed by the Czechborn Vera Caisová (who lives in France) and starring Philippe Noiret.

AN ESSAY ABOUT AUTHOR BOHUMIL HRABAL BY JIRI MENZEL

(Born March 28, 1914, Brno Austro-Hungary; died February 3, 1997, Prague, Czech Republic)

"Bohumil Hrabal is one of the greatest contemporary European writers, but for me his work also resonates with the very best traditions of Czech literature. Back in the mid-1960s Hrabal's vision of the world, and his way of interpreting that vision, fascinated my entire generation. As a token of their admiration, seven young filmmakers decided to join forces on "Pearls on the Bottom", a film based on several of his short stories. I was lucky enough to be one of those seven, and although I was a virtual beginner compared to my older colleagues, I was given the chance, thanks to the success of my short feature Mr. "Balthazar's Death", to film Hrabal's novella "Closely Watched Trains". In the course of making that film Mr. Hrabal and I became close friends, which led to our collaborating on further screen adaptations of his stories. After "Closely Watched Trains," which won an Oscar for best foreign film in 1968 as well as several other awards, we worked together on an adaptation of several stories from his "Advertising the Sale of the House I no Longer Wish to Live in". This was during the Prague Spring. In the summer of 1969 we somehow managed to finish shooting "Larks on a String", also based on Hrabal stories, which was immediately banned. Twenty years later, in November 1989, it was shown at last in the cinemas and shortly afterwards won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival.

In the first years of the Soviet occupation we were prevented from working together, so it was not until 1980 that we were able to make "Cutting it Short" based on the story of the same name, which won a prize in Venice and attracted record audiences in Czechoslovakia. This, my last personal collaboration with Hrabal, was followed by yet another adaptation from his volume of short stories "The Snowdrop Festival". This film remained somewhat overshadowed by the better-known titles, although I believe it captures the essential spirit of Hrabal best of all.

I loved and admired Bohumil Hrabal's writing from the moment I discovered it. But it was never my wish to bring to the screen a mere illustration of his epic stories. Instead, I attempted to express and preserve, as best I could, the spirit of Hrabal's narrative style and interpret his voice through the language of film. I wanted to serve a great author by bringing his work to as many people as possible – that is, to cinema audiences. For over thirty years my work has been interwoven with that of Bohumil Hrabal. The novel "I Served the King of England" is one of his greatest achievements – a view of the modern world and a segment of 20th century history as reflected in the life of one man."

TURNING HRABAL'S PICARESQUE NOVEL INTO A FILM

"I Served the King of England" is one of Bohumil Hrabal's finest books. It tells the story of a 'little' Czech waiter (he is in fact a short man) in 20th century Czechoslovakia, starting in the inter-war years and ending up in the 1960s. From the author himself we know the novel was written in a very short amount of time as a reaction to the constant pressure, emotional and social, under which the writer was forced to live in the period of 'normalization' (i.e. the post-1968 years) when he was not allowed to publish. Hrabal packs his long novel with a lot of situations, scenes, stories and anecdotes through which he guides his hero. In creating a screenplay from such an extensive narrative I had to make a selection of the most essential elements. The screenplay focuses on two parallel stories. The first follows the youthful exploits and gradual maturing of an ambitious little man before the War and during the German occupation when, in love and guided by stupidity rather than opportunism, he finds himself on the side of the occupying power. The second story, concerns only a short period in his later life when, after years in prison, he seeks peace and solitude in an abandoned German village whose inhabitants were expelled after the war. His peace is only briefly disturbed by the arrival of a young working class woman whose youth and vitality bring back memories of his romantic adventures as a young man.

ABOUT WRITER-DIRECTOR - Jiří Menzel

One of the best-known and most successful Czech directors, Jiří Menzel fell in love with the films of Chaplin, Clair, Renoir and others while still in primary school. Yet it was theatre he first chose to study, and it was only after he failed to get into drama school that he was awarded a place at FAMU (Prague Film Academy) where he was a student from 1958 to 1962. It was a particularly good year (it included among others Vera Chytilová and Evald Schorm), and is widely regarded as the driving force behind the Czech New Wave. In 1965, together with Jan Němec, Věra Chytilová, Evald Schorm and Jaromil Jireš, he directed "Pearls on the Bottom", a feature made up of several different stories (FIPRESCI award, Locarno Film Festival). His first solo full-length feature, "Closely Watched Trains" (1966), based on a story by Bohumil Hrabal, won him a number of awards, including the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.

With the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact forces in 1968 and the period of so-called 'normalization' that followed, he was one of the first directors to be barred from filmmaking. The communists were particularly outraged by his next Hrabal adaptation "Larks on a String" (1969) – an exposé of the true nature of 'people's democracy' in fifties' Czechoslovakia. (The film was not shown until 1990 when, among other awards, it won the Golden Bear at Berlin). In the mid-seventies he returned to directing with "Who Seeks a Handful of Gold" (1974), a depiction of working-class life. But it was the chance to adapt two other Hrabal works for the screen – "Cutting it Short" (1980, special prize at the Venice Film Festival) and "Snowdrop Festival" (1983) that finally brought him real creative freedom.

In 1986 he was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film for "My Sweet Little Village" (1985). Menzel's last film to date, is an adaptation of Vladimir Voynovitch's bestselling novel "The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin" (1993). Since then he has worked exclusively in the theatre, in Prague's Cínoherní klub (Drama Club), Divadlo na zábradlí (Theatre on the Balustrade), Divadlo na Vinohradech (Vineyards Theatre), and as guest director on several leading European stages, among them the Comédie-Française in Paris. Other full length features directed by Menzel include "Capricious Summer" (1967, Grand Prix, Karlovy Vary), "Seclusion Near the Forest" (1976, Silver Hugo, Chicago; FIPRESCI special prize, Mannheim; CIC prize, San Sebastian), "The End of the Old Times" (1989, Best Director and Best Film awards, Los Angeles; Best Director, Montreal, Las Vegas and Melbourne) and "The Beggar's Opera" (1991, Special Prize, Chicago).

Among Menzel's notable appearances as an actor are his roles in "The Accused" (1964) which won its joint directors Ján Kadár and Elmar Kloss an Academy

Award, "The Body-Burner" (1968, dir. Juraj Herz), "30 Virgins and Pythagoras" (1973, dir. Pavel Hobl), "The Apple Game" (1976, dir. Vera Chytilová), "Greetings from Planet Earth" (1982, dir. Oldrich Lipsky), "The Vampire of Ferato" (1982, dir. Juraj Herz), "The Gentle Barbarian" (1989, dir. Petr Koliha), "Martha and I" (1990, dir. Jiří Weiss), "La Petite Apocalypse" (1992, dir. Costa-Gavras) and "Escape to Budin" (2002, dir. Miloslav Luther). Jirí Menzel is a member of The Czech Film and Television Academy, The European Film Academy and The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. He has received many prestigious awards, among them the French order of Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres and the Akira Kurosawa Prize for Lifetime's Achievement at the San Francisco Film Festival.

ABOUT THE CAST

Ivan Barnev (the young Jan Dítě)

Born on July 15, 1973 in Bulgaria. Following graduation from the Academy of Performing Arts in Sophia, Barnev quickly became one of the top young actors in Bulgaria. Recent films include "Kalabush" (directed by Adoni Floridis, Theodoros Nikolaidis, 2002), "A Leaf in the Wind" (directed by Svetoslav Ovtcharov, 2002), and "Lady Z" (directed by Georgi Djulgerov, 2005).

Oldřich Kaiser (the older Jan Dítě)

Born on May 16, 1955 in Liberec, Czechoslovakia. Graduated from the Brno Conservatory and the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Musical Arts in Prague. In 1985, after a seven-year stint at the Vinohrady Theatre he moved to the Ypsilon Theatre, which had relocated to Prague. In 1993 he became a member of the National Theatre. While still at the Brno Conservatory Kaiser was discovered by Karel Kachyna, who cast him in the lead role for the film "Láska" (1972). Up until the 1980s he played young, romantic leading roles, though his comic talent later took precedence and was used by, among others, directors Václav Vorlíček and Zdenek Troska. In the 1990s Kaiser appeared in Vladimír Michálka's debut "Amerika", and Jan Sverák's "Dark Blue World" (2001). Before I SERVED THE KING OF ENGLAND, his latest performance was in "Shark in the Head" (directed by Marie Procházková, 2005).

Julia Jentsch (Líza)

One of the top young stars of German cinema, Jentsch was born on February 20, 1978 in Berlin. From 1997 to 2001 she studied acting at the Hochschule Ernst Busch in Berlin. She is the winner of numerous awards for her starring role in the Academy Award nominated film "Sophie Scholl" (directed by Marc Rothemund, 2005), including the European Film Award for Best Actress and the Silver Bear for Best Actress at the Berlin Film Festival. Her other films include: "The Edukators" (directed by Hans Weingartner, 2004), "Downfall" (directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel, 2004), and "Schneeland" (directed by Hans W. Geissendörfer, 2005). She is currently shooting "Effi Briest" (directed by Hermine Huntgeburth) in the title role opposite Sebastian Koch ("The Lives of Others," "Blackbook.")

CREW

Director/Writer	<i>Jiří Menzel</i>
Cinematography	<i>Jaromír Šofr, AČK</i>
Editing	<i>Jiří Brožek</i>
Production Design	<i>Milan Býček</i>
Music	<i>Aleš Březina</i>
Costume Design	<i>Milan Čorba</i>
Sound	<i>Radim Hladík jr</i>
Makeup Artist	<i>Jiřina Pählerová</i>
Assistant Director	<i>Jiří Kačírek ml</i>
Associate Producer	<i>Pavel Cechák</i>
Producers	<i>Bioskop and AQS</i> <i>Robert Schaffer / Andrea Metcalfe</i>
Executive producer	<i>Rudolf Biermann</i>
Co-producers	<i>Petr Dvořák</i> <i>Helena Uldrichová / Dušan Kukal</i> <i>Vít Komrzý</i> <i>Luba Féglová</i>

CAST

Ivan Barnev	<i>Jan Dítě (Younger)</i>
Oldřich Kaiser	<i>Jan Dítě (Older)</i>
Julia Jentsch	<i>Líza</i>
Front Waiter Skrivánek	<i>Martin Huba</i>
Walden	<i>Marián Labuda</i>
Professor	<i>Milan Lasica</i>
Hotelier Brandejs	<i>Josef Abruham</i>
Manager of Golden City Prague's Hotel	<i>Jirí Lábus</i>
Waiter Karel	<i>Jaromír Dulava</i>
Marcela	<i>Zuzana Fialová</i>
Hotelier Tichota	<i>Rudolf Hrušínský</i>
General	<i>Pavel Nový</i>
Waiter Karel	<i>Jaromír Dulava</i>
Jaruška	<i>Šárka Petruželová</i>
The Emperor	<i>Tonya Graves</i>
Waiter	<i>Jiří Šesták</i>