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CLOSELY WATCHING MENZEL

by Garry Mason

Jiří Menzel claims that being the proud possessor of an Oscar for the past 26 years has been neither a cross to bear nor a halo to flaunt. "I don't see it in those terms. It was more of an early retirement," says the director with his characteristic desert-dry wit. "It was a blessing. I have a very lazy nature and it made life a lot easier."

But as the 55-year-old Menzel struggles around the set of his latest movie, *The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Conkin*, on a bitterly cold and rainy 'summer' day, up to his armpits in mud, life seems far from easy.

His trials are almost over, however. The film, which has the biggest budget in Czech cinematic history (65 million Kč; over \$2.5 million) is now in the last week of its 60-day shoot, and promises to be a worthy companion to Menzel's blockbuster *Closely Watched Trains*, which took the Academy Award for Best Foreign-Language Film in 1967.

Life's been made even less easy by the fact that the film, based on the book by Russian novelist Vladimir Voinovich, has an entirely Russian cast (shy of one Pole and a Slovak) and has been shot in their native tongue. Menzel admits the language is not the strongest string to his bow: "I learned Russian for 11 years ... and hated it." With his preference for contact sound (on-set, natural recording), it was impossible to use Czech actors and dub it in the studio. The attractions diminish even more when shooting is halted for an hour while a helicopter buzzes noisily over the set. There is still a little uncertainty over whether the movie will be dubbed or subtitled into Czech for the home market. Menzel doesn't even want to contemplate the former. He says many Czech people can't seem to get over their dislike of all things Russian, but feels that perhaps the wounds should be healed. "Perhaps they

will dub it for Czechs and I will lose all my remaining illusions in the Czech audience," he says wistfully.

For logistical reasons, Menzel could not bring himself to travel to Russia to film, despite the exhortations of the producers. "I am comfortable here, this is my home. I have my team here." So a little slice of Russia was created 40 km outside Prague in the former Russian military base of

Granddaddy of Czech film, Jiří Menzel, returns to familiar ground and refuses to allow language barriers, mud and helicopters to get in the way.

Milovice, where a complete Russian village suddenly materialized, complete with church, manmade pond, imported chickens and pigs.

On examination, *Conkin* bears many similarities to *Closely Watched Trains* — the beautifully touching movie based on Bohumil Hrabal's story about a young railway worker's coming of age during the Nazi occupation. It remains a wonderful observation of ordinary people and love in repressive times.

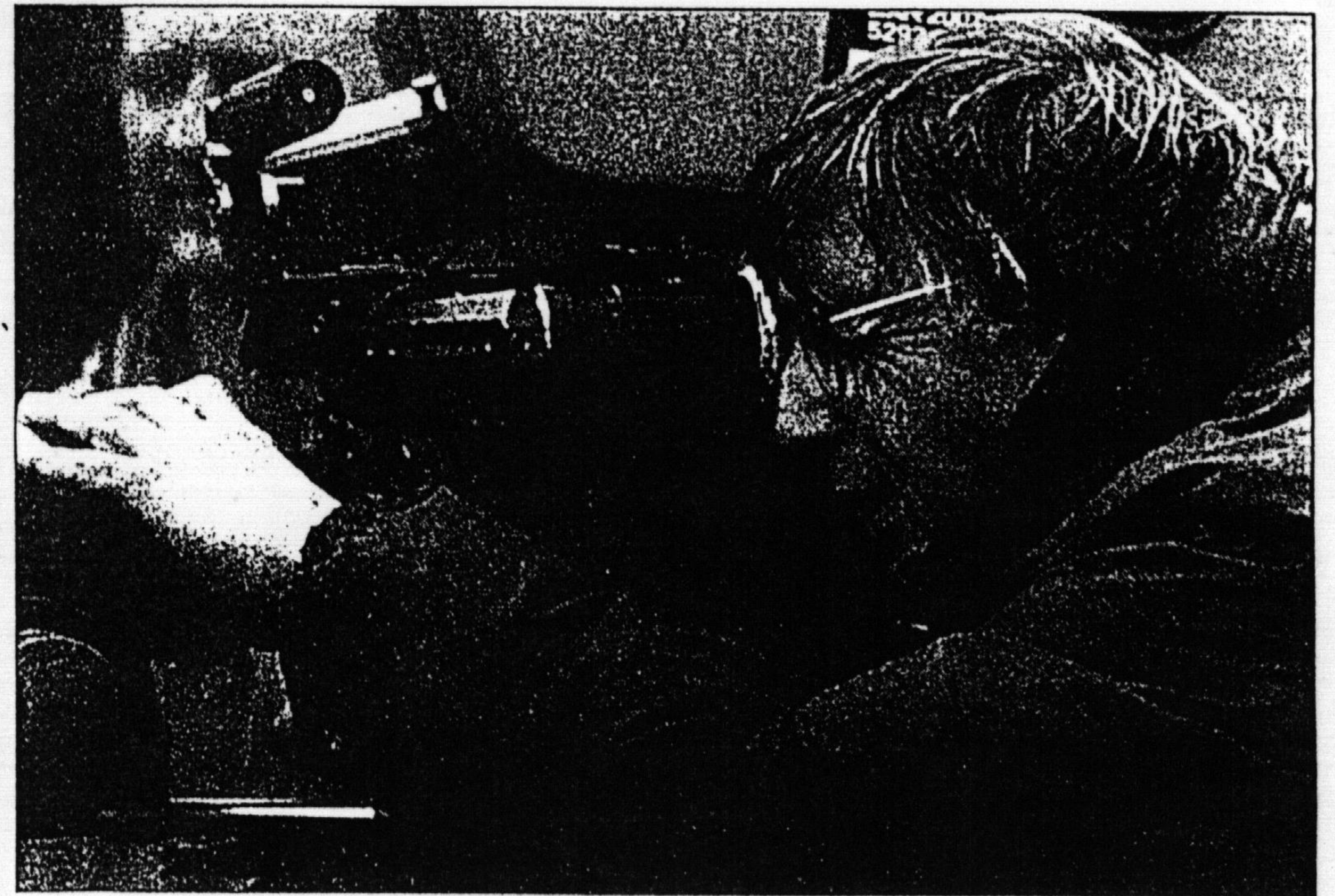
Conkin treads similar personal territory. Set in the chaos of 1941 Russia, the uncomplicated, eponymous Russian soldier is left in a village by his superiors to guard a downed biplane. Forgotten by his commanders, *Conkin* dutifully awaits fresh

orders and in the intervening time he falls in love with the village postmistress. Not to be shaken from his charge, he drags the plane to her vegetable patch so he can watch the plane while making love to her night and day. As the title suggests, extraordinary and complicated adventures follow and misunderstandings escalate until both Hitler and Stalin are personally after his blood.

The film is just one of the literary works that Menzel has adapted to the screen. Although this is a Russian piece, Menzel has become renowned for placing himself at the direct service of Czech literature. Among the literati he has served are Hrabal (*The Death of Mr. Balhazar*, 1965; *Looks on a Thread*, 1969; *Cutting it Short*, 1981), Vladislav Vančura (*Capricious Summer*, 1967; *The End of the Old Times*, 1989) and Josef Skvorecký (*Crime in the Girls' School*, 1965; *Crime in the Night Club*, 1968). And he has served them well, faithfully respecting the originals.

"There are not many scriptwriters who can write stories like novelists," says Menzel, explaining his preference for literature. "The material has already created success for itself in its original form. It's not an experiment." He says he would love to work with his favorite Hrabal once more, but unfortunately the octogenarian writer is far too ill now to complete another screenplay. But Menzel says there are still plenty of opportunities with his short stories. We will have to wait and see.

It is another work of fiction that is causing Menzel consternation at present. Jaroslav Hasek's 1920s novel *The Good Soldier Švejk*. Already, *Conkin* has been labeled the "Russian Švejk." But Menzel will have none of it and is clearly sick of the comparison to the stupid Czech soldier. "I don't like to hear it. It is not Švejk. *Conkin* has more heart," says Menzel.



Michel Peltier/The Prague Post

Director Jiří Menzel keeps his ideals in focus on the set of his newest film.

"Conkin is honest, down to earth and kind," says Menzel of the qualities that drew him to the character. "He is practical and has tremendous common sense. He doesn't try to be a clever, clever person. Above all, he has humor, which is the greatest quality." Indeed, a few of the qualities with which Menzel himself is endowed. But above all, it is a gentle, humanitarian humor which is most important to the director and remains the one constant in his movies. The British producers waited seven years to secure Menzel's services for the project; they believed his subtlety could enrich the slightly coarser Russian humor of the book.

Menzel claims, though, that he is not interested in satire, despite the satirical tales he has brought to the screen. "Satire must have a certain hatred. There is none here. There is enough cynicism in the world, why should I add to it?" he asks.

It would be easy for him to surrender to cynicism. While others, like close friend and fellow director Miloš Forman, fled the country after the Russian invasion, Menzel stayed and helped to build on the achievements of the Czech filmmakers who made up the famed New Wave of the 1960s. "There have been people who suffered more than me. At that time I was too much of a coward to leave. I don't consider myself any better than those who left. It's easy to pretend to be a patriot," he says as a serious expression flits across his still-boyish face. "Besides, I find it hard to be away from this country for extended periods. I have my friends, my books. I am a comfortable sort of person."

"Actually I did suffer. Directing pop concerts was suffering," he jokes, remembering his time in the early 1970s when he was banned from making movies and turned to whatever he could. "I still

loathe that kind of music and I can't abide pop singers even now."

Menzel hit the headlines last year when a highly public row developed between him and his students at FAMU, the film academy. The episode still rankles. His pupils went on strike to protest the fact that they felt he was not spending enough time with them. In the end, he resigned. "It is clear that the school is full of superfluous people and they knew I was against them. I wanted the school to be more effective and productive. They felt threatened and used my absence to persuade those students against me."

Despite his rough treatment, he still believes in the young Czech talents. "Perhaps there will be a new New Wave. They are young and free of prejudice." Besides, he is keen to see Czech film survive. "Why should we watch American shit when we can make Czech shit?" he smiles.