

Document Citation

Title	Larks on a string
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Source	<i>Variety</i>
Date	1990 Mar 14
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Skrivánci na nitich (Larks on a string), Menzel, Jirí, 1990

3/14/90 Variety
Skrivanci Na Nitich
(Larks On A String)
(CZECHOSLAKIAN)

Berlin A Barrandov Filmstudio production. Produced by Karel Kochman. Directed by Jiri Menzel. Screenplay, Bohumil Hrabal; Menzel, from a story by Hrabal; camera (color), Jaromir Sofr; music, Jiri Sust; assistant director, Josef Sandr. Reviewed at Berlin Film Festival (competing), Feb. 16, 1990. Running time: 94 MIN.

With: Rudolf Hrusinsky, Vaclav Neckar, Vladimir Brodsky, Leos Sucharipa, Jitka Zelenohorska, Nada Urbankova, Jaroslav Satoransky.

■ A full 21 years after it was made, Jiri Menzel's "Larks On A String" is finally off the shelf. Through perhaps not the banned masterpiece of legend, it is a courageous, bittersweet comedy of considerable charm and invention. Cowinner of the Berlin Fest's Golden Bear (with "Music Box") should spark interest worldwide.

The film was made at the end of the Golden Age of Czech cinema. In 1987, Menzel won an Academy Award for his first feature, "Closely Watched Trains." In 1968, at the height of Alexander Dubcek's Prague Spring, his next film, "Capricious Summer," won the Grand Prix at the Karlovy Vary Film Fest. "Larks On A String" went into production just as the Warsaw Pact invaded the country (August 1968) and, as soon as it was finished, was banned.

Menzel's heresy, and that of his writer, Bohumil Hrabal, was to satirize the "reeducation" of "bourgeois elements" in the early '50s, immediately after the Communist takeover of the country. Much of the film is set on a scrapheap close to heavily polluting factories.

There, a small group of "bourgeois" types are forced to do manual labor. They include a former philosophy professor, a former state prosecutor, a musician, a milkman, a hairdresser and a Jewish hotelier. They're overseen by a functionary (Rudolph Hrusinsky) with a working-class background (who, naturally, does very little actual work).

Nearby, a group of young women, who had all tried unsuccessfully to escape the country, live in a makeshift prison. There's regular contact between the two groups, and a young bourgeois falls in love with a pretty prisoner. Eventually they marry, but by proxy. He's been arrested for daring to ask a party bigwig the whereabouts of his missing friends.

A running joke through the film has a sinister black car and two men arriving periodically to take away anyone who asks awkward questions. The young hero winds up a victim in the same way as the others, and the film's extraordinary last image shows the political prisoners descending into a seemingly bottomless coal shaft. It's a chillingly prophetic fadeout, yet with a glimmer of hope as the former professor remarks: "I'm happy,

I've found myself."

No doubt that "Larks On A String" was a daring and provocative film to have been made in Czechoslovakia at that point in history. Menzel mocks the slogans of the '50s (banners with 1984-style messages like "We Will Surpass The Norm") and the destructiveness of the era (hundreds of typewriters and crucifixes wind up on this symbolic scrapheap). A funny scene has a film director staging a scene of apparently happy workers, and another shows that Hrusinsky, a rigorous enforcer of the Hygiene Act, uses the law to bathe pretty young girls.

Unfortunately, "Larks On A String" is not as successful as the famous films that preceded it. A couple of scenes (the women fighting among themselves, their chief guard's strange honeymoon with his gypsy bride, where they simply run around their apartment turning the lights on and off) go on too long and have little point. The film is at its best when it's at its blackest; "This man will not die a natural death," says Hrusinsky, chillingly, of the rebellious Jew.

Despite its flaws, the film is sufficiently amusing, provocative, and in the end, uncannily prophetic, to make its mark in the art houses around the world. The singing is great, and the cast contains several familiar faces from this period of Czech cinema. Technically, the film is excellent.

"One day we'll see where the truth lies," says one of the characters. It took a long time for the truths in Menzel's film to be revealed to the outside world, but his anger at the destructive system imposed on his country is as valid as ever.

Expectations are that other banned classics of the late '60s will be unveiled at fests this year, including Karel Kachyna's legendary "The Ear." Meanwhile, Menzel's film, despite its flaws, can be enjoyed at last. — *Strat.*