



# Little Otik

(Otesánek)

a film by  
**JAN SVANKMAJER**

a Zeitgeist Films Release

ATHANOR Film Production Company  
in co-production with  
ILLUMINATIONS FILMS  
in association with FILMFOUR, London  
and BARRANDOV BIOGRAFIA a.s.  
HELENA ULDRICHOVÁ, Prague

present

a film by  
JAN SVANKMAJER

# Little Otik

(Otesánek)

featuring

VERONIKA ZILKOVÁ  
JAN HARTL  
JAROSLAVA KRETSCHMEROVÁ  
PAVEL NOVY  
and  
KRISTINA ADAMCOVÁ

animation  
BEDRICH GLASER  
MARTIN KUBLÁK

film editing  
MARIE ZEMANOVÁ

sound  
IVO SPALJ

artistic direction  
EVA SVANKMAJEROVÁ  
JAN SVANKMAJER

cinematography  
JURAJ GALVÁNEK

production  
JAROMIR KALLISTA

story, screenplay and direction  
JAN SVANKMAJER

# Cast

VERONIKA ZILKOVÁ as Bozena Horakova

JAN HARTL as Karel Horak

JAROSLAVA KRETSCHMEROVÁ as Mrs. Stadlerova

PAVEL NOVY as Franisek Stadler

KRISTINA ADAMCOVÁ as Alzbetka

DAGMAR STRIBRNA as the caretaker

ZDENEK KOZAK as Mr. Zlabek

JITKA SMUTNA as social worker Bulankova

JIRI LABUS as the policeman at the station

Produced with financial contributions from

State Fund of the Czech Republic for  
the Support and Promotion of Czech Cinematography

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-Tokyo-

Czech Republic • 2000

In Czech with English subtitles

35mm • Color • Dolby Digital Surround

Aspect Ratio: 1:1.33

Running time: 127 mins

a *Zeitgeist* Films Release

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## Synopsis

Nature has not been kind to Mr and Mrs Horak. They long for a baby. While digging in the garden one day, Mr Horak pulls up a tree-stump that looks very much like a small child. After minor work in the toolshed, the resemblance is made more perfect.

Mrs Horak, now the proud mother-to-be, brings the tree stump to life with her longing and love. At last they have a child of their own. Nevertheless, their happiness is short-lived. Otik (as they call the baby) is always hungry and the Horaks are soon unable to keep up with his appetite. Otik begins to cater for himself.

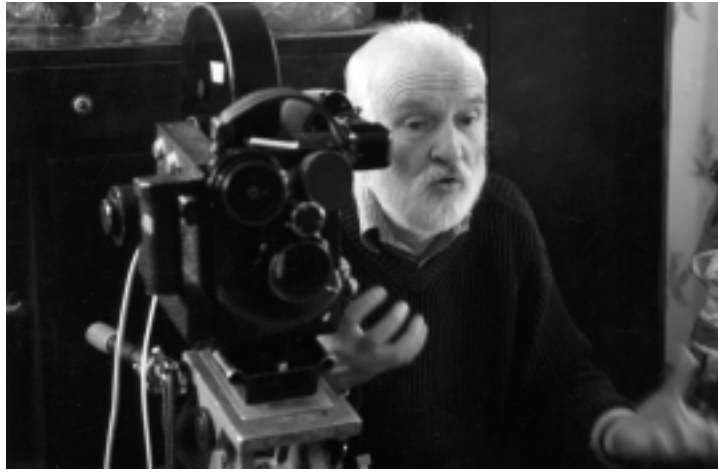
First, he eats the household cat. But this is not enough. He develops a taste for people—and eats the postman. Horak, in despair after a social worker becomes Otik's second victim - and despite the protests of his wife - ties Otik up. With the intention of starving him to death, he locks him in a potato-storage box in the cellar. There the neighbours' daughter, little Alzbetka, knowing the old folk tale about Otesanek, enters the story.

Alzbetka takes over the care of the abandoned Otik and assures him that she will never let him starve to death. She steals food from the fridge at home and sacrifices her savings to try to feed him, but this is still not enough. His hunger and gluttony continues to grow. According to the folk tale, Otik will not meet a happy end: he will devour an old woman's cabbages in her vegetable patch, and she will strike him a fatal blow in the stomach with her hoe.

Prepared to do anything to avert Otik's sinister end, Alzbetka offers him other tenants to eat from the building, including Otik's own parents, but in vain. The old myth has come alive, and approaches its inevitable macabre conclusion.

a note from  
**JAN SVANKMAJER**

As we know, folktales are old myths retold. What myth is hidden in the tale of Little Otik? A childless couple rebels against fate and creates, from nature, a child. They literally extract the secret of creation. For this rebellion against the natural order they suffer a bitter punishment, directed not only against themselves, but against those around them. As we can see, we have touched on one of the basic myths of this civilization: the myth of Adam and Eve, or, if you wish, a myth analogous to that of Faust. I think that now, after the mapping of the human genome, such myths are becoming increasingly relevant.



## JAN SVANKMAJER

**“The movie-going world is split into two unequal camps: those who have never heard of Jan Svankmajer, and those who happen upon his work and know that they have come face to face with genius.”**

*–Anthony Lane, *The New Yorker**

One of the great Czech filmmakers, Jan Svankmajer was born in 1934 in Prague where he still lives. He trained at the Institute of Applied Arts from 1950 to 1954 and then at the Prague Academy of Performing Arts (Department of Puppetry). He soon became involved in the Theatre of Masks and the famous Black Theatre, before entering the Laterna Magika Puppet Theatre where he first encountered film. In 1970 he met his wife, the surrealist painter Eva Svankmajerova, and the late Vratislav Effenberger, the leading theoretician of the Czech Surrealist Group, which Svankmajer joined and of which he still remains a member.

Svankmajer made his first film in 1964 and for nearly three decades (with a gap in the mid seventies when he was banned from filmmaking by the Czech authorities) created some of the most memorable and unique animated films ever made, gaining a reputation as one of the world’s foremost animators, and influencing filmmakers like Tim Burton and the Brothers Quay. His brilliant use of claymation reached its apotheosis with the stunning 1982 film **Dimensions of Dialogue**. In 1987 Svankmajer completed his first feature, **Alice**, a characteristically witty and subversive adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland*. With the ensuing feature films **Faust** and **Conspirators of Pleasure**, and now **Little Otik**, Svankmajer has moved further away from his roots in animation towards live-action filmmaking, though his vision remains as strikingly surreal and uncannily inventive as ever.

# a SVANKMAJER filmography

- 1964 **THE LAST TRICK OF MR SCHWARZEWALD AND MR. EDGAR** (10 min)
- 1965 **J.S. BACH: FANTASY IN G MINOR** (8 min)  
**PLAY WITH STONES** (8 min)
- 1966 **PUNCH AND JUDY** (10 min)  
**ET CETERA** (8 min)
- 1967 **HISTORIA NATURAE** (10 min)
- 1968 **THE GARDEN** (19 min)  
**PICNIC WITH WEISSMANN** (11 min)
- 1969 **THE FLAT** (12 min)  
**QUIET WEEK IN A HOUSE** (13 min)
- 1970 **THE OSSUARY** (10 min)  
**DON JUAN** (35 min)
- 1971 **JABBERWOCKY** (12 min)
- 1972 **LEONARDO'S DIARY** (10 min)
- 1979 **THE CASTLE OF OTRANTO** (20 min)
- 1980 **THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER**
- 1982 **DIMENSIONS OF DIALOGUE** (12 min)
- 1983 **TO THE CELLAR** (16 min)  
**THE PIT, THE PENDULUM AND HOPE**
- 1987 **ALICE** (84 min)
- 1988 **VIRILE GAMES** (15 min)  
**ANOTHER KIND OF LOVE** (4 min)
- 1989 **MEAT IN LOVE** (1 min)  
**DARKNESS, LIGHT, DARKNESS** (8 min)  
**FLORA** (MTV clip) (1 min)
- 1990 **THE DEATH OF STALINISM IN BOHEMIA** (11 min)
- 1992 **FOOD** (17 min) \*
- 1994 **FAUST** (97 min) \*
- 1996 **CONSPIRATORS OF PLEASURE** (83 min) \*
- 2000 **LITTLE OTIK (OTESANEK)** (127 mins)\*

\* a Zeitgeist Films release

# The New York Times

SUNDAY, JULY 1, 2001

## Wielding a Magic of Uncanny Images

By ANDREW JOHNSTON

**T**HE Czech filmmaker Jan Svankmajer is known primarily in this country for feature films that combine meticulous stop-motion animation and live action in bizarre, dreamlike narratives. Perhaps his best known is "Alice," a 1987 adaptation of "Alice in Wonderland." But as impressive as his use of puppets in "Alice" and "Faust" (1994) may be, his features contain only a fraction of the imagination that can be found in his short films, a body of work that articulates one of the most individual and fascinating world views in the annals of animation.

Although Mr. Svankmajer's shorts have received relatively little exposure in the United States, appearing only sporadically at film festivals and in hard-to-find video compilations, they've exercised a strong influence on the work of filmmakers like Tim Burton and Terry Gilliam.

Fifteen of these shorts will be shown at Film Forum, along with his four features, in a retrospective that begins on Friday and runs through July 12. Together they make a powerful case for Mr. Svankmajer as one of cinema's most visionary surrealists.

The shorts will be presented in three programs loosely organized by theme: "Nature and Nightmares," "Art, Music and the Theater of Violence" and "Unnatural Acts." But the diversity of Mr. Svankmajer's interests defy easy categorization. He's as



*A postmaster played by Barbara Hrzanova snorts bread in Jan Svankmajer's 1996 film "Conspirators of Pleasure."*

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comfortable mining the works of Edgar Allan Poe as he is exploring traditional Czech puppet theater, and as inclined to satirize the culture of soccer as he is to make an abstract film illustrating a piece by Bach.

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An imaginative Czech filmmaker has an eye for human conflict and a genius for animation.

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But while his films are rife with cultural and scientific allusions, his unusual imagery possesses an accessibility that feels anchored in the shared language of the subconscious, making his films equally rewarding to the culturally

hyperliterate and to those who simply enjoy visual stimulation.

Born in Prague in 1934, Mr. Svankmajer studied puppetry and theater arts at the Prague Academy of Performing Arts and concentrated on a career as a stage director and visual artist before turning to the cinema in 1964 with his first short, "The Last Trick." From the very beginning, two elements would turn up in almost every Svankmajer film: pitch-black humor and an obsession with the human body as a source of horror, which anticipates the films of David Cronenberg.

"The Last Trick" depicts two magicians (puppets in some shots, actors dressed as puppets in others) trying to top each other with increasingly elaborate feats.

One pulls a fish from his hat and uses machinery inside his head to reduce it to a skeleton. His rival responds by extracting a violin from his own head and making a wooden horse dance on a tightrope. After a number of tricks in which the magicians sprout increasingly bizarre mutations as they try to outdo each other, they tear each other limb from limb before their component parts strike an uneasy truce.

Mr. Svankmajer's second short film, "Punch and Judy" (1966), is basically a reprise of "The Last Trick." Here, two hand puppets take turns killing each other and escaping from a coffin before it's revealed that the two hands controlling them belong to a single puppeteer. While "The Last Trick" and "Punch and Judy" seem a bit crude next to Mr. Svankmajer's later films, they show that his artistic sensibility was fully formed at the beginning of his career. His technique of combining puppets with found objects was already in place, as was a theme that would turn up again and again over the years: the idea of conflict as a fundamental component of both communication and creation.

The most fascinating take on the theme comes in two of his shorts from the 1980's, "Dimensions of Dialogue" (1982) and "Manly Games" (1988), which are also among his most technically dazzling. "Dimensions of Dialogue" begins with a pair of asexual, two-dimensional human profiles — one composed of silverware and china, the other of fruits and vegetables — attacking each other and merging into single being before the cutlery figure reconstitutes itself and regurgitates the one made of food. The cutlery figure is then devoured in turn and regurgitated by one made of pens and paintbrushes. At that point an epic rock-paper-scissors game of sorts ensues, with the increasingly

damaged figures devolving into clay. Ultimately, only a clay man and woman remain, and they merge into an amorphous blob in a metaphorical sex act before destroying each other just like the puppets in "The Last Trick."

The film ends with two clay heads having a "conversation" by means of objects that emerge from their mouths: one projects shoes, the other laces, one toothpaste, the other a toothbrush — and these objects engage in their own dance of destruction.

"Manly Games" is Mr. Svankmajer's first piece of unambiguous social commentary, but its heavily didactic nature is made tolerable by humor: it's easily his funniest film. The short has frequently been described as a response to the epidemic of soccer violence that swept Europe in the 1980's, but it's really an attack on sports culture as a whole. The actor Miroslav Kuchar plays a typical soccer fan watching a game on television while consuming beer after beer. The players and referee in the game are animated paper cutouts of Mr. Kuchar, which proceed to attack and mangle each other in ways so elaborate that they make the ultraviolent cat and mouse enemies in "The Simpsons," Itchy and Scratchy, seem like models of civilized behavior. Eventually, the players leave the field and take their conflict into the fan's apartment, which gets thoroughly trashed as he sits there in drunken obliviousness, hypnotized by his television set. The realistic, contemporary setting of "Manly Games" with its combination of live action, stop-motion and special effects, makes it the short closest in tone to Mr. Svankmajer's features. It also anticipates his most recent films, which are increasingly preoccupied with exploring the darkness underlying daily life.

**T**HOUGH "Alice" and "Faust" equip their familiar stories with signature Svankmajer motifs (most notably creatures that invent themselves), they feel more like showcases for his technique than real reflections of the issues that concern him. His latest features, "Conspirators of Pleasure" (1996) and the brand-new "Little Otik" (which will be shown once during the retrospective and is scheduled for release next year) are highly distinctive films suggesting that Mr. Svankmajer might be poised for a move out of the animation ghetto and into the ranks of major international filmmakers.

The largely live-action "Conspirators of Pleasure" consists of a series of seemingly unconnected threads that gradually converge, dealing with the unorthodox fetishes of a group of Prague residents whose paths intersect as they go about their everyday business; they comment on sexual pathology with the same irreverent humor used to deal with violence in "Games."

"Little Otik," on the other hand, sees Mr. Svankmajer coming full circle. Based on a Czech folk tale about a childless couple who "adopt" a vaguely human-shaped tree stump as their "baby," only to see it turn into an all-devouring monster, the film rivals "The Exorcist," "Rosemary's Baby" and "Eraserhead" as a disturbing treatise on the fear of parenthood. At the same time, it evokes the original "Little Shop of Horrors" as it both incorporates and lampoons B-movie horror conventions. Combining familiar themes and his signature animation techniques with his most complex narrative yet, with full-bodied performances from a large cast of actors, it's a film that feels like both a valedictory and a new beginning. □