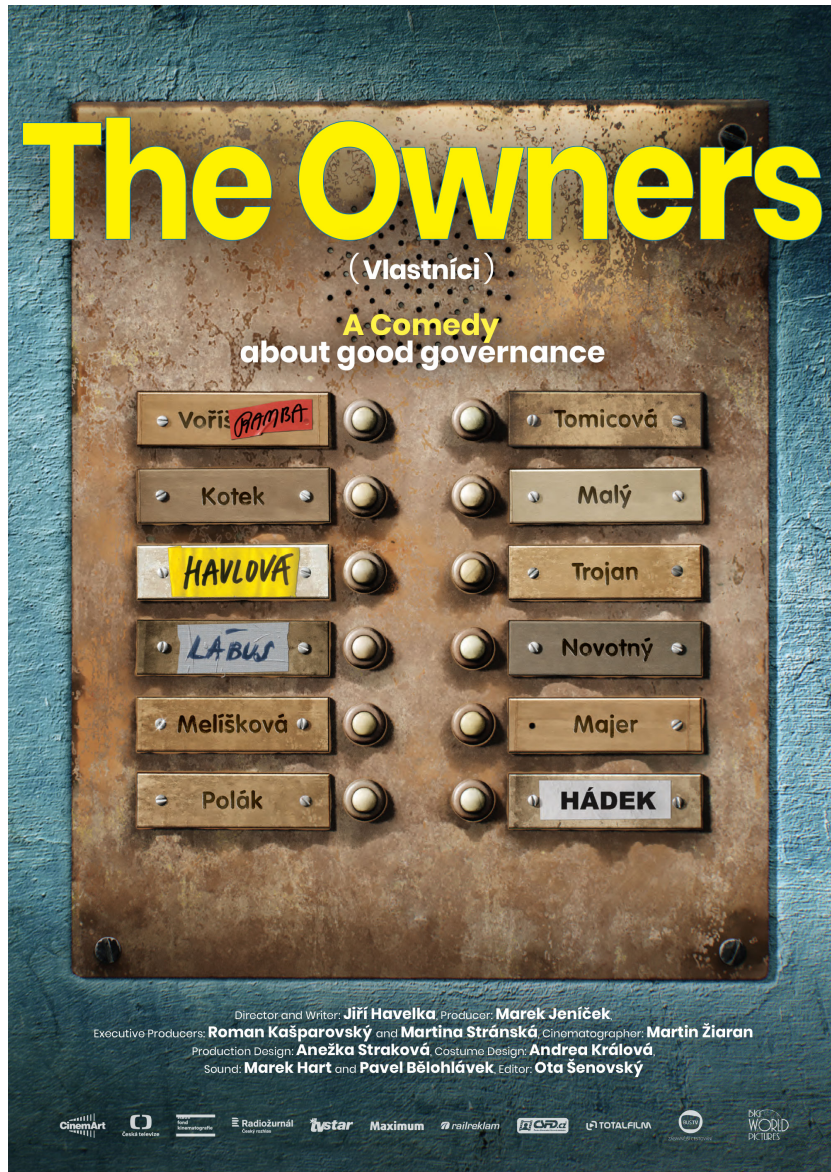


BIG
WORLD
PICTURES
bigworldpictures.org

presents



Booking contact:
Jonathan Howell
Big World Pictures
jonathan@bigworldpictures.org
Tel: 917-400-1437

NY/LA Publicity contact:
Sasha Berman
Shotwell Media
sashaberman@mac.com
Tel: 310-450-5571

SYNOPSIS

THE OWNERS

(Vlastníci)

Dir. Jiří Havelka

Czech Republic/Slovakia / 2019 / 96 min /

In Czech, with English subtitles

Color

Aspect ratio: 2.35:1 Sound: 5.1 Surround

A timely metaphor for failing democracy, *THE OWNERS* takes a seriocomic look at the most local form of self-governance: the co-op apartment building meeting. It includes a curious cast of characters, all of whom own apartments in the same building in Prague, as they attempt to tolerate each other's presence long enough to make some important decisions about the building's future.

Mrs. Zahrádková wants to save the old crumbling house she shares with other owners of the flats located in it. She might find supporters for her plan in young newlyweds with their idealistic enthusiasm, who have just moved in and are astonished by the co-owners' inability to agree on anything.

Mrs. Roubíčková vigilantly controls the proper course of the meeting, not allowing the slightest deviation from the rules; Mrs. Procházková and her proclaimed business partner Mr. Novak are looking for ways to increase the value of their property, including by subletting an apartment to African students; Mr. Nitranský tries to get hold of the attic to expand his flat; and frustrated Mr. Kubát sabotages any decision.

ABOUT THE MOVIE

A comedy for those who haven't experienced it.

A drama for those who live it.

Many apartment owners probably know this from their own experience. The heroes of the movie *The Owners* are just like them: They own apartments in an aging apartment building, and they are having a joint meeting at which they have to agree and decide on many things together. Among them there are idealists who act for the benefit of the whole, but there are also calculating profiteers or even subtle manipulators, and also people lost in feelings of their own insignificance. In the end, everyone has to agree together on the management of the building in which they have their apartments...

Mrs. Zahrádková (Tereza Ramba) and her husband (Vojta Kotek) idealistically want to save the house together. The newlyweds Bernášek (Jiří Černý, Maria

Sawa) join in with enthusiasm. Mrs. Roubíčková (Klára Melíšková) meticulously checks the proper protocol of the meeting. Ms. Horvátová (Dagmar Havlová) comments on everything proactively. Naive Mr. Švec (David Novotný) represents his mother. Mrs. Procházková (Pavla Tomicová), represented by Mr. Novák (Ondřej Malý), is looking for ways to enhance her property's value. Mr. Nitranský (Andrej Polák) longs for more space in the building, and Mr. Kubát (Jiří Lábus) consistently sabotages any decision. And the Čermák brothers (Kryštof Hádek, Stanislav Majer) are lurking in the background, but old Mr. Professor Sokol (Ladislav Trojan) is not saying a word yet...

The film's producer, Marek Jeníček (CinemArt), said about the creation of the film: "When I read the text with the working title SVJ (a Czech abbreviation for "Society of Owners") in the spring of 2017, I thought that it could finally be the right material for Jiří's film debut, which we talked about several times together. The support of the Cinematography Fund for further literary development confirmed the quality of the text, in parallel with the preparation of the film, Jiří prepared a theater play with VOSTO5, which met with great reception. The final version of the film script was then completed in June 2018."

The film was co-produced by Czech Television. The creative producer of Czech Television, Jaroslav Sedláček, said about the film: "What bothers me about contemporary Czech films is that they are a little out of time and space. They are not *The Owners*. In these characters, our present era can be seen in all its tragicomic nakedness. Sometimes you laugh, sometimes you freeze. Everyone wants more than they have. Everyone claims their rights, but no one claims their duties. This is Czech society today. Jiří Havelka wrote it brilliantly and the actors played it brilliantly. I wonder what the audience will think."

When choosing the topic, Jiří Havelka was inspired by his own experiences from meetings of apartment unit owners and tells the audience: "The film is a comedy. And I think for all age categories and for voters of all political parties. Hopefully the whole spectrum is there today..."

PRESS

"The film took home three Czech Lions and two Czech Film Critics' Awards, and with fine performances from the leading cast, sharp dialogue, and painfully relevant political overtones, it's not difficult to see why. Beneath the dry wit and jaded, world-weary cynicism, and even before we reach the obligatory bittersweet, tragicomic ending, there is some profound allegory at work in *Vlastníci*, familiar from the brave and subversive Czech comedies of the 1960s, by which, with a choice phrase here, a verbal nod-and-a-wink there, Havelka holds a mirror up to Czech society... and doesn't reflect its best side."

- *Czech Film Review*

BIO & INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR

JIŘÍ HAVELKA (b. 1980), director and screenwriter

Respected theater director, playwright, actor and presenter. Founding personality of the TV station Óčko. He is also the main creative personality of the Vosto5 theater based on improvisation (Pérák, Proton or the Society of Owners) and also organizes the Festival of Cute Playwrights. He is also one of the founders of the civic association JSAF - the organizer of the International Documentary Film Festival in Jihlava, where he comes from. After graduating from the Jihlava grammar school, he studied directing at the Department of Alternative and Puppet Theater at the DAMU in Prague. Already during his studies he started acting and directing in Prague's Ypsilonka and in several other theaters, e.g. Dejvické Divadlo. In 2007, he won the Alfréd Radok Award as talent of the year. He appears as an actor in many films, e.g. in the tragicomedies *Desperate People* (2009) and *Tiger Theory* (2016), in the comedy *Po čem muži touží* (2018) or in the tragicomedies *Mars* (2018) or *Prague Orgies* (2019). Viewers also know him from the TV series, e.g. *Up to the ears* (2014-2017). *The Owners* is his film debut under which he is signed as a screenwriter and director.

***The Owners* is an apt and humorous image of contemporary Czech society with all its strengths and weaknesses. Were you inspired in your writing by personal experiences from meetings of owners of apartment units?**

Of course, there are personal experiences in it. During the time that I've lived in Prague, I've experienced several meetings of owners of apartment units, and it occurred to me that it is rare to see so much about us, about people, in such a small space. The scenario was created in my head for a long time - or rather - at many meetings and sessions and consultations and commissions, I discovered incredibly similar reasons why it is impossible to reach a logical consensus on some common issue. How many irrational moments prevent reaching an agreement. And it is a fact that it was perhaps the most striking at the gatherings of apartment owners, because everyone owns one apartment, but at the same time you have to take care of the whole house together. And that personal property - that housing unit - gives you a certain percentage of power that you otherwise don't have in normal civil life, so it's at meetings of housing unit owners that you can let more hidden character traits fully resonate.

Conversational comedy is built on dialogues, acting and the absolute interplay of actors. How was the casting and selection of the exact types of actors?

It was done by combining various options in my head and then I approached the actors, sent out the script and talked with them about it. It is difficult to single out anyone from the well-coordinated acting team, because this really was primarily a joint performance, rather than individual solos, but I was certainly surprised by the passion with which Dagmar Havlová returned to the comic role, or the way Tereza Voříšková, now Tereza Ramba, with humble professionalism, tightens the engine of the entire meeting in the position of the unstable mother of three children. And also that Vojta Kotek can transform into a father, who really has nothing to do with *Snowboarders*. And Jirka Lábus has a hedgehog. On his head and in the role. But I could really mention everyone. Klára Melíšková is so perfectly irritating in her role that I couldn't stand her anymore in the editing room and sometimes had to pause her. And David Novotný made us laugh on the set so much that we almost didn't have time to film it. There really wasn't a weak link, from my point of view.

Whose idea was it to change the visage of Jiří Lábus? You had him cut his hair for the film, he has an incredible hedgehog on his head and he is said to have gotten younger in this role...

Together with the costume designer Andrea Králova, we knew that we wanted to "upgrade" Jirka Lábus as much as possible. And I think that the idea with the hedgehog came about spontaneously for everyone at the same time, it was even promoted by our mutual friend and Jirk's favorite bartender, Petr Hojer.

There are many funny sayings in the film that may even become popular. It was heard here that David Novotný made you laugh on the set. Did the actors not laugh during the filming itself, did they maintain the "seriousness" of the text?

Of course, yes, it could not be avoided. At one point it seemed that instead of the character played by Jirka Lábus, only a raven - *Rumburak* - was really present on the chair the whole time.

Filming took place in Prague's Holešovice in a limited space, where the viewer watches a group of people talking over each other. How was the preparation for filming and mastering such a demanding text with the actors?

It was difficult. We had about two reading tests, I tried to meet with the actors in various smaller groups, but everything important happened only during the filming. It was a big risk to put this group together without making any extra effort to play before, but luckily it turned out great, the atmosphere was immediately good and creative. But of course, even if one location seems like an ideal simplification of the shooting schedule, the opposite is true. You can't shoot by scenes, you need all the actors all the time, ideally without any commitments, all in one small room, with all the camera and lighting equipment. For the first two days, we got along a bit, with each other as people, as actors, and in the way of filming, but then things really got going. It turns out that the ideal method is to shoot as long takes as possible, which required a high level of acting, but it kept everyone on their toes and managed to maintain authenticity even during retakes. I think it was quite a different way of filmmaking for everyone.

And was there room for improvisation on set, or did the actors project their own experiences from the meetings into the resulting form of the text?

Unfortunately, there wasn't much time for that. I always tell our students at DAMU who complain that they need more time to rehearse, that they will always have that feeling and that it is good to take the time we have available as one of the dramaturgs. I think this is doubly true for the film. The number of shooting days is one of the significant moments that affects the entire concept. And you have to decide whether or not it makes sense under those conditions. We chose a method that was feasible under the given conditions, and we went ahead with it, even if something simply couldn't be handled, for example improvising the text. But I think the actors managed to project their own experiences, especially in how they approached those characters.

At the film meeting of the owners, a number of actors of different generations gathered, how did you manage to harmonize actors of such different ages?

It went well. Of course, some had to "sit it out" a little more, but I felt that no one there experienced any difference in the size of the role, in age, in anything. The entire crew helped with this, the cameraman Martin Žiaran, the two janitors, the sound guys, the production, simply no one "rushed" there.

Jiří Lábus plays Dagmar Havel's ex-husband here. Lábus revealed to me that he personally approached Ms. Havel to get another film comedy role after a long time. How was working with these two acclaimed actors?

Great. I also tried to cast in such a way that the individual couples or rather "alliances" had something in common and knew each other more than the other "alliances." And Mrs. Havlová even offered her villa as a place for the first reading tests. Jirka felt at home there, which also helped a lot.

Recalling the shooting itself, where did you shoot and how many shooting days did you have? How was the challenging image concept born in a limited space in collaboration with cinematographer Martin Žižan?

There were ten filming days in total, eight of which were for that one room and two days for touch-ups in the apartments. We met with Martin Žižan and producer Mark Jeníček long in advance about the script, Martin brought visual ideas from the beginning that would move the film towards greater dynamics, and finally we prepared a shooting concept that was directly based on the layout of the space. We wanted to gradually and unobtrusively get closer to our characters, from the initially objective and slightly alienated observation of the meeting to gradually fall into an emotionally subjective perception. We did short tests, but of course many things surprised us on the first day of filming. After all, the number of people, the alignment of two cameras, the meeting order - everything had an effect on the film language. I think we would do a lot of things differently today, but that's probably how everyone feels after finishing a movie.

The longest continuous take was a whopping 26 minutes, how much of it is used in the film? And how did you work in the editing room overall?

That's a really long story. During filming, it's complicated to change the concept; in the editing room, on the other hand, it goes on endlessly. So, editor Ota Šenovská and I enjoyed a rather long, stormy and creative period of searching for a way to do it. For me, it was probably the least interesting of all the stages, how small details change the tone. You'd think there's not much you can do from one room, but I was surprised at how many different paths there are.

In the middle of the film you used slow motion (in the scene about to give birth). Why?

Slow motion frames the film, it's used at the beginning, in the golden section and at the end. It has its place there as part of a kind of character probe. A face taken in slow motion reveals something completely different than at normal speed, when we are able to put on various social masks. It's pivotal in the birth scene, so I hope the audience doesn't see it as gratuitous. For me, it also functions as a metaphorical framework. Something completely mundane like a meeting is placed in an aesthetic frame so that we immediately perceive it as a parable, not as a documentary reality.

The film is your debut. What was the most difficult for you on the set or, on the contrary, what pleasantly surprised you?

I like things to change until the last moment, when they are open to new impulses as long as possible, so the filming itself is a rather difficult phase for me, because I would have liked to try it in many other ways, but there is simply no time. But I enjoyed the whole thing. It is a quite specific project in terms of film. Since it takes place almost entirely in one room, it has completely different requirements. There will certainly be talk about its theatricality, but that

temporal and spatial unity does not make it a theater. However, I would also like to try a completely different way of film narration, and that will certainly bring completely different difficulties.

What music will be played in the movie?

Almost none, only short excerpts from two compositions by Jan Dismas Zelenka, a Czech Baroque artist who rose from the ashes mainly thanks to the group Collegium 1704. The basic composition that sounds in the film is *De profundis* and I feel that it is great to look at the current meeting from a perspective spiritual baroque music that tries to describe "human depths."

The film depicts interpersonal relations and solidarity between neighbors with exaggeration, showing how difficult it is to come to an agreement, listen to each other while protecting one's property. In the film, Kubát (Jiří Lábus) utters an absurd statement: I am the owner and I don't need anything. Do you have a personal recipe for surviving such a casual meeting in real life?

Truth be told, not really. And my skepticism deepens as I observe the present. The only recipe is to have a dialogue, even if it is against a wall, and trust that every wall will soften sooner or later. To try to spread the ability of empathy, the ability to see the world through someone else's eyes.

The film is an extremely entertaining and at the same time accurate probe into our society, what would you like to attract the audience to the cinema?

The Owners is a comedy. And I think for all age categories and for voters of all political parties. Hopefully the whole spectrum will be there. So it would be ideal to have fun in the cinema...

You are incredibly active, writing, directing, hosting, acting and constantly trying out new and different genres. You do improvised things in the theater, but also classics, in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, what are you up to right now?

I am currently rehearsing a play from the period of November 1989 at the Slovak National Theatre, so it is mainly about the moment when the actors decided to join the students and start a strike. Which means to stop playing repertoire and provide theaters as a space for social discussion. I'm curious to see what will come of it, it should all take place mostly in the auditorium. But don't worry - without the need to physically involve the viewer.

What are you currently working on as an actor, what can the audience look forward to?

Next year I should have roles in two interesting series prepared by Czech Television. One directed by Tomáš Mašín and Tereza Kopáčová and one directed by Jan Hřebejk.

CAST

Tereza Ramba
Vojta Kotek
Dagmar Havlová
Jiří Lábus
Pavla Tomicová
Ondřej Malý
Klára Melišková
Kryštof Hádek
Stanislav Majer
Andrej Polák
David Novotný
Ladislav Trojan
Jiří Černý
Maria Sawa

CREDITS

Director
Jiří Havelka

Writer
Jiří Havelka

Producer
Marek Jeníček

Cinematography
Martin Žiaran

Set Design
Anežka Straková

Editor
Otakar Šenovský

Sound
Marek Hart
Pavel Bělohlávek