

New Films by Menzel
and Tarr
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Adapted from Bohumil Hrabal's novel, Jiri Menzel's "I served the king of England" (Czech-Slovakia, 2007, color, 120 mins) is composed of a series of flashbacks, where an old man recalls his ambitions of youth, serving royalty in palaces, before the Second War. Young Jan Dite (Ivan Barner) sells candies at railway stations, and fails to return change to the train guard, as the train chugs off. There is a red star over the gates of the Correction Facility, Prague, as Old Jan Jite (Oldrich Kaiser) is released, after serving fourteen years in prison. It is post Second War, and old Jan throws coins on the road, picked up by the affluent, crouching on their limbs. Searching for work near the border, Jan finds cottages abandoned by Germans. He reclaims an abandoned pub. Jan serves beer to the select society of patrons, composed of the Notary and the station master. He has a chance encounter with a girl, Manela, in the woods, and is thrilled by trees with melodies in them. But the trees are being cut to make instruments for music.

The flashbacks, some in black and white, travel to restaurants and hotels of the 1930s and early 1940s. When restaurant manager Jan slaps a waitress, she hits back; and Jan pours raspberry wine on her body. Jan is hired by Hotel Tichota, which is full of girls. The male patrons grab the girls, and a colonel enjoys the large food trays. When a girl throws food, people run and jump into a pool. The guests at the hotel did not ponder of what they were spending. Even with cognac and champagne, rich men crawl on floor to pick up coins. A girl dances in the hotel and drops her knickers on the table. Waiter Jan chats with Liza (Julia Jentsch), and scatters notes and coins on her body. The colonel is in bed with three girls, and fires at sculptures.

At Hotel Paris, Jan climbs over food, and jumps over a girl on a rotating table. The girl is covered with flowers. The emperor of Ethiopia arrives; and his cooks lead a live camel, meat and vegetables. For the excellent banquet, the emperor presents medals to waiter Jan. Hotel staff listen to political speeches on the radio. After Hitler's speech, Sudetenland is occupied by the Germans. When Czech hooligans try to strip a young girl on the street, Jan rescues her. At a graveyard in the forest, the Germans resettle. The Germans occupy Czechoslovakia, and new postage stamps are released. Jan tries to make a profit on the stamps. The Germans occupy Prague's Hotel Paris. Srivanek, the hotel chef Boss (Jin Labus) does speak German. Liza is reminded that races should not mix, and superior blood lines are to be respected. She does the 'Heil Hitler' salute. But English, French and Czech are spoken at the restaurant. While radio news carries lists of executions, Jan is medically examined by a buxom nurse, to ascertain whether he is suitable for marrying a German girl. Liza and Jan get married. Jan cannot speak German, but combs his hair like Hitler, and ports a moustache. The hotel manager is arrested by the Gestapo. Liza helps Jan in getting a job in a German hotel, which caters to pure German girls and Nazi soldiers. Liza proceeds to the front, and runs after a train with Jewish deportees. She brings stamps from deported Jews, collected from Warsaw and other places. A hotel is purchased

with the stamps. Crippled Germans play football. Aerial bombings set the hotel on fire. Liza dies on the falling embers. Jan retrieves the stamp box, but the stamps fly out in the winds and smoke.

There is a wall of currency notes at the hotel reception. After the war, the people's committee confiscate Jan's hotel. Everything belongs to the people, and exploitative capitalists are imprisoned. Against fifteen million currency in the bank, Jan is sentenced to fifteen years in prison. Menze maintains an ironic distance with snappy scenes and characters high in colour. A series of mimics and grimaces underline the narrative. Jaromir Sofr's camera preserves the monuments of touristic hotels during the Second War, and in the fixed frame sequences, retains the vigorous irony and light humour of the text.

TARR

Bela Tarr's "The Man from London" (Hungary/Germany/France, 2007, colour, 132 mins) is loosely based on a thriller by the French writer Georges Simenon. The opening long take of a dock, ships and railway tracks establishes the milieu. The white front of a ship appears in medium close-up. Adjacent to the dockyard is a railway station in France. A man gets off a ship, and boards a train. Another man who has alighted from the ship, throws a brief case into the sea. On the shoreline, three men accost this voyager, and he is pushed into the waters. There is mist and smoke around. Passengers from the ship, who are boarding a train, are checked by guards.

Maloin (Miroslav Krobot), the station master retrieves the suitcase, and pulls out the currency. The suitcase is burnt, and the cash is stored in a room. There is tension between Maloin and his wife Camelia (Tilda Swinton), who does all the household chores. They have a daughter, Henritee (Erika Bole), who plays in the lane, or sits quietly at home. It is a small town, and Maloin often visits the local bar-restaurant. While Maloin keeps pulling the train signal knobs, a man, on a small boat, comes to the shore. At the bar and billiard tables, there is talk of sale of the local theatre. The buyer has put down a deposit of 55,000 in cash. From Maloin's railway station office, everything appears in shadows, through the windows. The bill boards provide the neon lights in the darkness and haze. An old man at the pub relates that £60,000 is missing from the theatre safe, and money could have been robbed on a weekend. Mitchell who works in the bar is a suspect. Maloin walks along the quay, with a background of bleak houses and a cathedral. Enroute he stops by at a grocery-meat shop, where his wife Camelia works. There is a quarrel between Maloin and a shop supervisor.

Soon an inspector of police, Morrison, arrives from London to investigate into the circumstances of disappearance of a man, who left London without clearing his hotel bills. Enquiries are conducted at the bar and railway station office. Maloin buys an expensive fur for Camelia and the wife is displeased at the costly purchases. The police inspector examines life belts, the stationary ships and possibilities of drowning. Maloin is questioned. He keeps awake every night, but in winter all windows are closed. The frost stained windows of the station office are wiped, to see whether a man being pulled out of the sea waters, could be visible. One could only peer into the wagons and the dock. Mrs Bryan (Agi Szirtes), wife of Mr Bryan, the disappeared man, arrives from London. The plot is of burglary and murder. There are suspicions that Mr Bryan had stolen £60,000

from Mitchell's box. Mr Bryan's body is fished out from the waters. Maloin hears at the cafe, that police inspector, Morrison is willing to negotiate, if the money is returned. Morrison is seeking help from Mrs Bryan, who sits silently, motionless in grief. She is heart broken, on learning that her late husband led a double life.

Maloin confesses to inspector Morrison, of killing Bryan, and returns the cash. At the hotel the police inspector counts the retrieved cash. A case of self defense is constructed. An envelope with some cash is given to Mrs Bryan, who declines. Another envelope is given to Maloin. The silent, stoned face of Mrs Bryan gazes at the camera, and the film concludes with a spirit of 'forget the whole thing'. Tarr's "The Man from London" is stylized and points to a manner of looking at things, whether it be a man pushed into the sea, a suitcase stuffed with cash, boats, and railway lines in darkness, and human faces of agitated interaction or isolation. The cinematic tableau is full of perspective and contemplations. Arguments and gestures are choreographed in Fred Kelemen's camera. In the final sequence, cinema turns to sculpture as the camera focuses on Mrs Bryan's grief filled face. Tarr merges the interior emotions with the dark and obscure spaces of the dockyard. In the space of darkness and silhouettes, Mihaly Vig's music lights up the human movements, like the beacon of the dock lighthouse. □□□

The films were screened at the Kolkata Film Festival (Nov, 08)