



70th Internationale
Filmfestspiele
Berlin
Encounters

SERVANTS

A FILM BY IVAN OSTROCHOVSKÝ

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SERVANTS | SLUZOBNICI
DRAMA | 2020 | 80 ' | SLOVAK
B&W
4:3 | 5.1

A film by IVAN OSTROCHOVSKY

PRODUCTION

Punkchart films (SK)
Point Film (RO)
Radio and Television of Slovakia (SK)
Negativ (CZ)
Film and Music Entertainment (IE)
Libra Film Productions (RO)
Hai Hui Entertainment (RO)
sentimentalfilm (SK)

SUPPORT

Slovak Audiovisual Fund (SK) Eurimages (EU)
Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic (SK)
CNC (RO)
Czech Film Fund (CZ)
Bratislava Municipality Fund (SK)
Romanian Public Television (RO)

CONTACTS

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SYNOPSIS

In Czechoslovakia, 1980, the totalitarian Communist regime demands allegiance from all its subjects, including the clergy. *Servants* follows Michal and Juraj, two conflicted novitiates whose seminary is under increasing pressure by the Party to mold its students into satisfactory citizens. With the school on the brink of dissolution, and its head priest a target for blackmail, Michal and Juraj will have to choose between collaborating with the government as informants, or becoming targets of the secret police. Shot in striking, atmospheric black-and-white, *Servants* is both a brooding morality tale and a taut political thriller "that jitters and shivers with anti-authoritarian sentiment beneath its serene monochrome aesthetic" (*Variety*).



HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Since 1948, when the Communist Party took over Czechoslovakia, the secret police persecuted priests who were unwilling to adapt to the new conditions. In order to control and manipulate the church, the state created *Pacem in Terris*, a collaborationist clerical organisation implanted into the ecclesiastical structures.

In response, an underground church was formed with the goal of maintaining spiritual purity, ordaining secret priests and serving informal mass in private homes, all the while staying independent of state affairs.

The film takes place in the early 1980s. Three decades into Communist rule, Czechoslovak society is undergoing steep moral decline, but still no one dares to believe that the regime could one day come to an end.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

We wanted to tell a story from the totalitarian Communist era – a time when the human character was conquered by creeping manipulation and the promise of a more comfortable life. Many people feigned approval of the regime so they would become invisible and therefore invulnerable. If you were not part of this invisible crowd, you risked conflict with a power that used existential intimidation and paranoia to control and stifle people's free will. We considered this story to be relevant for today's society, where people are being scared into fear and uncertainty by the media, political parties, preachers, and intellectuals alike.

This coming-of-age story introduces us to a pair of seminarians who are faced with the reality of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia. Both have to decide whether they will join the crowd of invisibles and thus compromise their ideals, or whether they will expose themselves to a confrontation with the political apparatus.

We are all servants of some ideology or other. We are constantly under the influence of more or less visible powers, be they politics or religion, wealth or poverty. Whether or not we realise it, these powers control us, and slowly but surely, they transform our values and attitudes.

We decided to set the story in a theological seminary for several reasons, the most important one being that the moral conflict between the two friends/protagonists is much more intense among theologians because ethical behaviour is a major theme in Christianity.

The black-and-white form of the film supports the universality and timelessness of the narrative. Czech and Slovak films depicting the end of the Communist era typically feature pastel colours. Similarly, the historicising effect is often achieved through the overuse of contemporary props and conspicuous fashion items. All of this is logically absent from our film because most of the story unfolds between the walls of the seminary and because the students wear cassocks, whose appearance has not changed much over the past few centuries.

In the seminary premises, students have struggled with temptation since time immemorial. All throughout, temptation has been changing its form and content. At the time when our story takes place, it has taken the shape of Communist normalisation. The devil always works in familiar ways, irrespective of the nuances of prevailing social and political systems. He relativises and blurs the distinction between good and evil, blinding us, rewarding us, sowing among us seeds of doubt and distrust.

We tried to emphasise the emotional condition of the characters with the architecture and the locations. In *Servants*, the characters' stiffness evokes spiritual paralysis and fear, which is the narrative engine of the story. The question that the seminarians and the audience are faced with is simple: will I give in to temptation and choose the path of least resistance? The sense of totalitarian control issues not from the use of props but from the peculiar behaviour of the characters.



BIOGRAPHY

Ivan Ostrochovsky

The Slovak director Ivan Ostrochovsky is born in 1972 in Zilina. After several documentary shorts and series, Ivan directed his feature documentary debut *Velvet Terrorists* (2013), which premiered at Berlinale 2014, where it won the Tagesspiegel Readers' Award.

Ivan's feature debut, *Koza* (2015), celebrated its world premiere at Berlinale 2015. It was selected by the festival director to be a nominee for the Best First Feature Award. It was also shortlisted for the 2015 European Film Awards and was the Slovak Oscar Entry for 2016.

Ivan is also the co-writer of *Censor*, the latest project by Peter Kerekes, which was presented in the Works in Progress sections of Karlovy Vary IFF and Odessa IFF, winning awards for best project at both. His latest film *Servants* (2020) is presented in a World Premiere at the brand-new Berlinale competition section Encounters. He is also a co-owner and producer at sentimental film and Punkchart films.

CAST

Samuel Skyva	Juraj
Samuel Polakovic	Michal
Vlad Ivanov	Doctor Ivan
Vladimir Strnisko	Dean
Milan Mikulcik	Spiritual
Tomas Turek	Ductor
Vladimir Zboron	Secretary
Martin Sulik	Physician
Vladimir Obsil	Coufar
Zvonko Lakcevic	Secret policeman



CREW

Director Ivan Ostrochovsky
Story Marek Lescak
Script Rebecca Lenkiewicz
Marek Lescak
Ivan Ostrochovsky
Cinematography Juraj Chlpik
Sound Tobias Potocny
Editing Jan Danhel
Martin Malo
Maros Slapeta
Costume Designer Katarina Holla
Make-up Artist Lukas Kral
Composers Miroslav Toth
Cristian Lolea
Producers Ivan Ostrochovsky
Albert Malinovsky
Katarina Tomkova
Co-producers Oana Giurgiu
Tudor Giurgiu
Ivana Kurincova
Petr Oukropec
Pavel Strnad
Sam Taylor
Mike Downey
Marek Urban
Executive Producer Albert Malinovsky



