





THE FIREMEN'S BALL

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CAST

Head of Committee: **Jan Vostrčil**

Committee Members: **Ladislav Adam, Vratislav Čermák, František Debelka, Václav Novotný, František Paska, Josef Řehořek, František Reinstein, Josef Šebánek, Josef Valnoha**

Josef: **Josef Kolb**

Retired Fire Chief: **Jan Stöckl**

Karel: **Stanislav Holubec**

Ludva: **Josef Kutálek**

Old Man Havelka: **František Svět**

Standa: **Antonín Blažejovský**

Waiter: **Stanislav Dytrich**

Josef's Wife: **Milada Ježková**

Růženka: **Alena Květová**

Jarka: **Hana Hanusová**

Marie: **Anna Liepoldová**

Drunk: **Hana Kuberová**

Beauty Contestants: **V. Bartošová, Alena Freiburgová, V. Janusová, E. Šnajdrová, Marie Slívová, Miluše Zelená**

Olda: **Miloslav Balcar**

Rescuer: **Jiří Líbal**

Wives: **Marie Kovářová, Jarmila Kuchařová**

Husband: **Vlastimila Vlková**

CREW

Directed by **Miloš Forman**

Screenplay by **Miloš Forman, Jaroslav Papoušek, Ivan Passer**

Script Editor: **Václav Šašek**

Cinematography by **Miroslav Ondříček**

Production Design by **Karel Černý**

Costumes by **Zdena Šnajdarová**

Edited by **Miroslav Hájek**

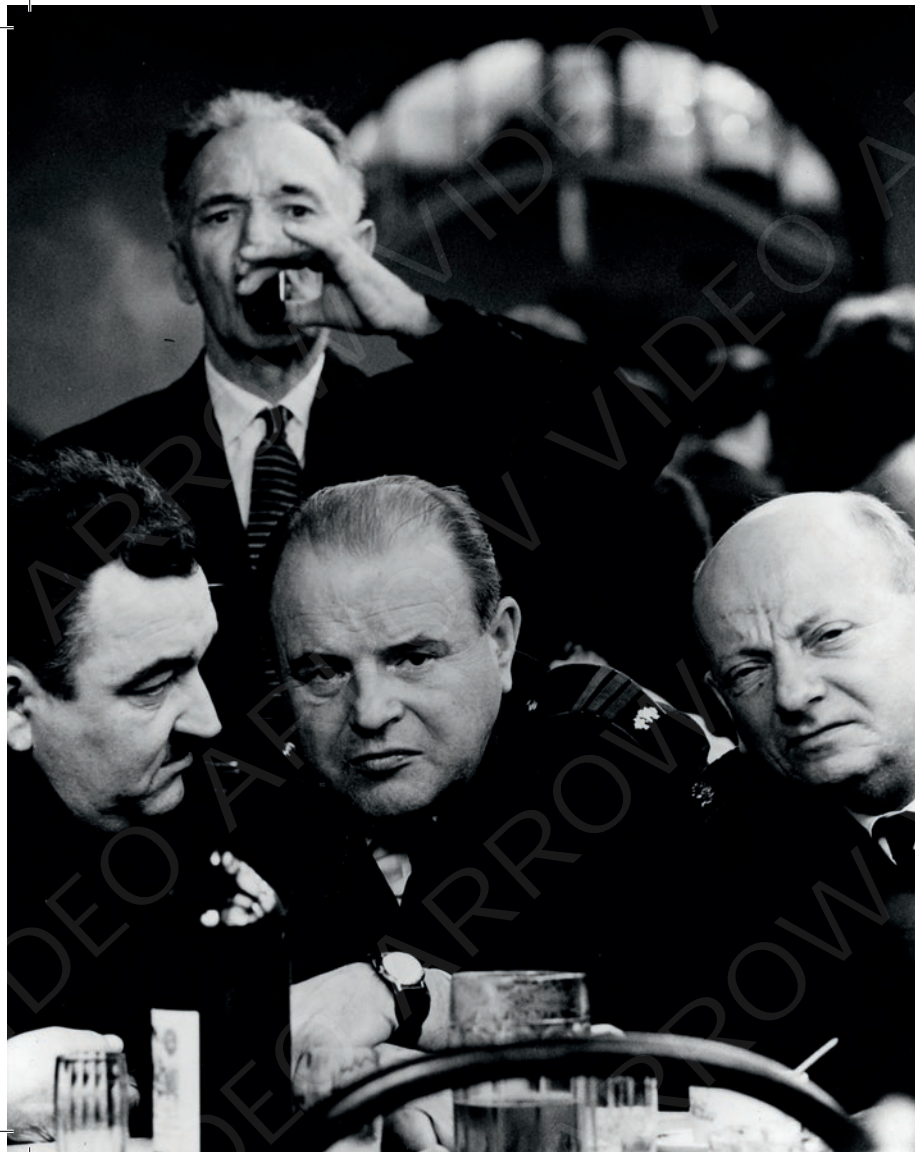
Sound by **Adolf Böhm**

Music by **Karel Mareš**

Production Manager: **Jaroslav Solníčka**

Executive Producers: **Rudolf Hájek, Carlo Ponti**

Carlo Ponti Cinematografica, Filmové Studio Barrandov, 1967



THE FIREMEN'S BALL

by Peter Hames

After emigrating from Czechoslovakia following the Soviet invasion of 1968, Miloš Forman became best known as the Oscar winning director of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) and *Amadeus* (1984), two of his ten English language films, the last of which was *Goya's Ghosts* (2006). His last completed film was, ironically, a film record of his Czech stage production *A Walk Worthwhile* (*Dobře placená procházka*, 2009). His most recent project, a planned production of Georges-Marc Benamou's novel *The Ghost of Munich*, which had been adapted in conjunction with Jean-Claude Carrière and the former Czech president, Václav Havel, collapsed shortly before going into production.

It is often forgotten that Forman's American films were preceded by a 14-year career in Czechoslovakia and that he was one of the leading directors of the Czechoslovak New Wave (1963-69). In 1963, his film *Black Peter* aka *Peter and Pavla* (*Černý Petr*) triggered a cinematic breakthrough alongside the work of Věra Chytilová (*Something Different/O něčem jiném*) and Jaromil Jireš (*The Cry/Křik*). The wave continued throughout the 60s with such Oscar winning titles as *A Shop on the High Street* (*Obchod na korze*, Ján Kadar and Elmar Klos, 1965) and *Closely Observed Trains* (*Ostře sledované vlaky*, Jiří Menzel, 1966). Other directors to make their debuts in the same period included Jan Němec, Pavel Juráček, Evald Schorm, and Juraj Jakubisko.

Forman trained at FAMU, the Prague film school, as a screenwriter, and served his apprenticeship with the stage and screen director, Alfréd Radok, whose multi-media productions helped create the Magic Lantern (*Laterna magika*) theatre in the 1950s. Forman worked with him on his Expo 58 productions in Brussels. He also worked on three feature films, most notably *Puppies* (*Štěňata*, Ivo Novák, 1957), based on his own script, before completing two short films, released under the collective title of *Talent Competition* (*Konkurs*, 1963). He directed two more feature films following *Black Peter*. Both *A Blonde in Love* aka *Loves of a Blonde* (*Lásky jedné plavovlásky*, 1965) and *The Firemen's Ball* (*Hoří, má panenko*, 1967), received Academy Award nominations for Best Foreign Language Film.

Forman's Czech films were made in collaboration with his friends, Ivan Passer and Jaroslav Papoušek, both of whom became directors in their own right. Passer made his debut with *Intimate Lighting* (*Intimní osvětlení*, 1965) and Papoušek with *The Best Age* (*Nejkrásnější věk*, 1968), and all of their 1960s work could be said to have a family resemblance. Passer followed Forman to the United States where his films included *Cutter's Way* (1981). Papoušek remained in Czechoslovakia where he specialised in comedies, in particular the popular Homolka series. The cinematographer on *Talent Competition*, *A Blonde in Love*, and *The Firemen's Ball* was Miroslav Ondříček, who also worked with Forman on five of his English language films, receiving Oscar nominations for *Ragtime* (1981) and *Amadeus*.

Forman's first three films were notable for their use of non-actors, their close resemblance to everyday life, their episodic nature, and apparently accidental sense of observation. It is no surprise that Ken Loach has frequently described *A Blonde in Love* as his favourite film and Forman's work clearly had a significant influence outside Czechoslovakia. After the falsities associated with Communist propaganda, Forman has often described how he 'salivated' at the prospect of putting real life on the screen.

"A comedy in colour involving dancing, thieving and putting out fires"

The Firemen's Ball, Forman's first film in colour, was a logical extension from his early films and, while it used a number of 'non-actors' from his previous films, it also drew on an extensive cast of non-professionals. But while it grew organically from his previous work, it also moved in a more self-conscious direction, prompting the critic Antonín Liehm to describe it as a satire on the level of Gogol.

When Forman, Passer, and Papoušek originally conceived the film, they planned it as a commentary on the organisation of a dance at the Lucerna ballroom in Prague (which was featured in *A Blonde in Love*). When they went to the mountains to write the script, they decided to treat their collective writers' block by visiting a dance organised by the local fire brigade in the town of Vrchlabí, the 'gate' to the Krkonoše mountains in northern Bohemia. What they saw, Forman recalls, was so unbelievable that they couldn't stop talking about it, and it became the basis for their film.

The film's action centres on an annual firemen's ball, which promises a dance, a beauty

competition, and a raffle. The narrative concentrates on two main developments – the abortive attempt to organise the beauty competition, and the progressive theft of the raffle prizes. When the fire siren goes off, the result is chaos. The fire engine gets stuck in the snow, a house burns down, and an old man is left homeless. A collection of raffle tickets donated to him by his fellow villagers proves to be worthless since all the raffle prizes have been stolen. Even the ceremonial hatchet designated as a gift for the brigade's ageing president (who is dying of cancer), has also been stolen. At the end of the film, the homeless old man and one of the firemen together climb into a bedstead left over from his former home. The fireman is instructed to make sure that nothing is stolen.

Black Peter and *A Blonde in Love* often looked as if they had been improvised but they were, in reality, carefully constructed with minimal scope for improvisation (the last scene of *A Blonde in Love* being one of the exceptions). *The Firemen's Ball* has a more obviously constructed screenplay and clearly reflects an imagined reality. Forman has recounted how he never allowed his cast to see the script, but acted out the scenes for his 'actors' and then allowed them to create their own dialogue.

There are some familiar faces from his previous work – Jan Vostrčil, the father from *Black Peter*, Josef Šebánek and Milada Ježková, the father and mother from *A Blonde in Love*, and Josef Kolb, the factory social director from the same film. Not only do they take some of the film's leading parts but they are arguably more conscious of their roles as 'actors' (in fact, both Vostrčil and Šebánek were to appear in films by other directors). But the film's rich gallery of portraits depends on its observation of the townspeople, the diversity of facial and bodily appearance, asserting their values as well as their vices.

Here it should be remembered that local fire brigades were made up of volunteers and that most of the cast had full time jobs. Consequently, they moved straight from work to the hall where the film was shot. For a period of seven weeks, they worked all day (mainly in factories) and then filmed from four in the afternoon until ten or eleven at night. The film team formed close relations with their actors, drank with them and, as Forman has said, when they began filming, he was working with people he liked and people who liked him. The film was shot in Eastmancolour (then expensive and in short supply) and Ondříček had the hall repainted and the firemen's uniforms specially

adapted. The intention was to create a warm and intimate atmosphere but also, as Ondříček put it, a single space allowing portraits of people.

Film critics (and the Communist Party) inevitably interpreted the film as an attack on the Party, its incompetence, and the kind of society it created – somewhat distant from the idealised portraits the film industry was supposed to provide. Yet Forman, like other Czech directors of the 1960s, has always denied any intent to make a direct political comment. While this could be interpreted as a defence mechanism, the film would also be diminished by such a simplistic interpretation.

Forman is frequently criticised for making fun of ordinary people. The beauty competition is perhaps a prime example. The teenage contestants forced to walk up and down behind closed doors are far from the ageing firemen's fantasies but it is the absurdity of male lechery that is the principal target. As Forman has correctly observed, those who most criticised his approach to 'the common man' were those who knew least about them. Like Jaroslav Hašek, author of *The Good Soldier Švejk*, he was able to tap into a deeper reality

Unlike *Black Peter* and *A Blonde in Love*, the film has no central character – and Forman once saw this as a weakness as there was no focus for audience identification.

On the other hand, this is also a matter of convention. The firemen's committee as such can be seen as a group hero. Unlike previous examples in the work of Sergei Eisenstein or Jean Renoir, they do not have the same positive connotations. But, on the whole, they are incompetent, short-sighted, and well-meaning rather than malicious, providing examples of small town organisation with which most can identify.

Perhaps surprisingly to some, the film was much admired by the Czech Surrealist Group. Its leader, the poet Vratislav Effenberger, described Forman's humour as vicious, dangerous, and explosive and striking at the "spiritual wretchedness out of which, essentially, spring various kinds of fascism and Stalinism". This relates very much to Effenberger's concept of objective humour, the notion that absurdity existed in everyday reality and was merely waiting to be exposed or presented. While, the film undoubtedly presents a small town (and Švejkian) mentality, these are realities with a universal relevance and not restricted either to Czechoslovakia or to so-called

Communist societies.

There is, of course, the scene where Josef Kolb attempts to return a stolen raffle prize (a headcheese - i.e. brawn) and is caught in the act. Another member of the brigade berates him for his stupidity, accusing him of putting his honesty before the reputation of the brigade. While the film consistently draws attention to the gap between official rhetoric and everyday reality, this episode was (unsurprisingly) seen as a direct reference to the debate within the Party about whether or not to admit the truth about the political trials of the 1950s.

The Communist Party did not like the film and immediately sought for a pretext to ban it. They arranged a screening for the townspeople of Vrchlabí, convinced that they would react adversely to what were seen to be the negative portrayals on screen. Instead, they recognised and appreciated the reality, citing similar examples from real life. Despite this, a ban was imposed (apparently "for ever") but followed by a release the following year during the Prague Spring of 1968. Nonetheless, following the Soviet invasion, the film was again banned (along with over a hundred others). In 1970, the head dramaturgist at the Barrandov Film Studios stated that "this is no satire, but a premeditated attack on our people and their social order. The intent is clear – to make our people hate themselves and to make them hate our social system". In 1973, it was one of four films "banned forever" but, ironically, it was one of the first films to be reinstated 20 years later and was showing in cinemas in the summer of 1989 only months before the November 'Velvet Revolution' that signalled the fall of the conformist government.

The film was a Czechoslovak-Italian co-production made in association with Carlo Ponti, producer of many epics including *Doctor Zhivago*. Ponti also disliked the film, which he felt to be "mocking the common man". More likely, he didn't appreciate its commercial potential or the deliberately deglamourised beauty competition. The result was that he withdrew his investment on the grounds that the contract had been broken when Forman delivered a film running only 73 minutes instead of the specified 75 (other sources suggest 93). Forman could have ended up with a jail sentence of ten years as he became liable for the missing funds. Luckily, the film was smuggled to France with the assistance of Jan Němec and Pavel Juráček, and Claude Berri, François Truffaut, and others were able to raise the missing money.



Another interesting footnote to the film is the fact that, in 1968, it was one of three Czech films selected for the Palme d'Or competition at the Cannes Film Festival. It is unusual for there to be multiple competitors from the same country (the other films were Némec's *The Party and the Guests/O slavnosti a hostech*) and Menzel's *Capricious Summer/Rozmarné léto*). However, it was the year of the May strikes and protests in Paris when Jean-Luc Godard and his colleagues closed down the festival in sympathy. Three months later, Warsaw Pact troops entered Czechoslovakia and suppressed the democratic reforms of the Prague Spring. The Czechoslovak New Wave soon came to an end.

When Forman moved to the United States, his first film *Taking Off* (1971) was very much in the tradition of his Czech work, and inspired by the world around him. Despite winning the Special Jury Prize at Cannes in 1972, it failed to resonate with American audiences, with some critics even raising objections not far different from the Czech Communist Party's criticisms of *The Firemen's Ball* (John Simon's review was entitled 'Forman Against Man'). He decided to work with more conventional scripts and with American subjects such as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Hair* (1979), and *Ragtime* (1981). Nonetheless, his choices remained unusual and, with the exception of Jack Nicholson (*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*) and Jim Carrey (*Man in the Moon*, 1999), he tended not to work with established stars. With *Amadeus*, filmed in Prague in 1983 under a press blackout, *Valmont* (1989), and *Goya's Ghosts* (2006), he returned to 'European' subjects. He also worked with Jean-Claude Carrière on an adaptation of Hungarian novelist Sándor Márai's *Embers*, but abandoned it when Sean Connery withdrew from the project. His last two American subjects were the idiosyncratic *The People vs. Larry Flynt* (1996), and *Man in the Moon*, the story of the comic, Andy Kaufman. He returned to Czech cinema with *A Walk Worthwhile* (2009) but one of his more unusual enterprises was as an executive producer on the Kazakh epic, *The Nomad* (2005), co-directed by Ivan Passer and Sergei Bodrov.

Peter Hames is author of The Czechoslovak New Wave (2005), Czech and Slovak Cinema: Theme and Tradition (2009), Best of Slovak Film 1921-1991 (2013), and editor of The Cinema of Central Europe (2004), The Cinema of Jan Švankmajer: Dark Alchemy (2008), and Cinemas in Transition in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989 (with Catherine Portuges, 2013). He is Visiting Professor at Staffordshire University and a programme advisor to the BFI London Film Festival.

CONTEMPORARY REVIEWS

The Firemen's Ball didn't open commercially in Britain until a few months after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, which is why more than one critic made a point of highlighting that it was made the previous year, in the dying days of the Antonín Novotný regime, immediately preceding the tragically short-lived 'Prague Spring'. Forman already had a sky-high reputation thanks to his previous feature *A Blonde in Love*, and in general the critical reception was very positive indeed, with one or two dissenting voices.

Miloš Forman's new film sounds as though it should be a sort of jolly Czech Ealing comedy (it sounded even more so under such whimsical earlier English titles as *Like a House on Fire* and *Go to Blazes*). [...] But that is not quite how it turns out. The film is indeed extremely funny. But it is not really, when you come down to it, very genial. Little by little all the characters are shown as, in one way or another, mean, petty and grasping. The comedy is comedy of human foibles, but the foibles are not prettified; instead they are observed with a cruel accuracy which gives the film a flavour all its own. The placing of the fire, which leaves an old man homeless and makes him, with shallow sentimentality, the hero of the hour, is masterly: nothing is directly stated, but all the necessary points are made.

(John Russell Taylor, *The Times*, 21 November 1968)

With so much good cheer around to depress the spirits at this time of the year, it's occasionally very heartening to find a completely heartless film. For a comedy that takes a low view of its fellow men, I doubt if *The Firemen's Ball* can be beaten. [...] I suppose it is a cruel film - the way it pokes fun at physical awkwardness is an odd throwback to the days when people in the pillory were pelted with rubbish because it was the done thing. Non-professionals play the firemen - they are in fact real firemen - and sometimes you feel they're being exploited in ways they may not have guessed at the time. The truth is, it's a film that's hard to like - but impossible not to laugh at.

(Alexander Walker, *Evening Standard*, 21 November 1968)



For 10 minutes or so the film springs to life and shows its innate melancholy and bitterness. A dazed old man in his pyjamas watches his house burn. The firemen show a jovial courage and humanity. But all too soon they are back at the ball, plodding through humour as though it were a sea of porridge. I am sorry I didn't like it more, because Mr Forman is a remarkable director, and after *Blonde in Love* one had high hopes. Perhaps his next film will avoid the folksiness that weighs this one down.

(Penelope Mortimer, *The Observer*, 24 November 1968)

A small film with an enormous theme. Underneath the cosy façade of small-town respectability, Forman exposes a bourgeois society that is ruthless and corrupt, self-seeking, and insensitive. [...] With the splendid help of his matchless players, Forman paints a plausible (and cynical) portrait of humanity. Yet he is also extremely humorous, like the joyful scene in which eight local girls prepare for an impromptu 'Miss Fireman' beauty contest. In fact, it is *through* humour that Forman always arrives at the bitter truth of the situation.

(Clive Hirschhorn, *Sunday Express*, 24 November 1968)

A Blonde in Love, for all its ironies, was a romantic comedy. The new film is miles away from that. Indeed, when you come to the end, after the wholesale plundering of the prizes and the fiasco over the presentation to the ex-president and the burning of the old peasant's house, you might well wonder whether to regard it as a comedy at all; grief has crept in. I still think of it as comedy, but black: not the black comedy of corpses in cupboards, but of real human desolation.

(Dilys Powell, *Sunday Times*, 24 November 1968)

Admirers of Miloš Forman's earlier essays in the bitter-sweet may be disconcerted by the present offering, which some will think of as bitter-cruel; yet it has such a deftness of touch and such a fascination in the ugliness and follies it exposes that its putative cruelty seldom arouses distaste. To say that the firemen, who arrange the ball, look like a bunch of fleabitten scrimshankers doesn't allow for Forman's agility of perception: how he can see a boyish slyness in the most bloated face (so many corpulent figures at the dance - was an awful anthem against beer-drinking intended?), an owlish

sense of humour beneath the authoritarian mask. [...] I have heard it said that *The Firemen's Ball* should be read as an allegory of Czechoslovakia at the time when the Novotný regime was cracking up, but its petty thieving and randiness seem to be true of communities elsewhere. The firemen stand as comic creations in their own right.

(Eric Rhode, *The Listener*, 28 November 1968)

Although the film is enormously engaging, its humour is by no means all comfortable; nor is it meant to be. It comes out of Novotný's Czechoslovakia, and it's very stringent. The drab village hall, bulging with ageing incompetence, bafflement and self-righteousness, is a sad and funny place on any terms. But one doesn't doubt that Forman had more on his mind than the humours of the village fire brigade.

(Penelope Houston, *Spectator*, 29 November 1968)

This film must rank as the worst I have ever seen. It is plain, it is dowdy, and it is a complete drag. Presumably meant to be comedy, it is unfunny, boring and sick - supposedly intentionally, but pointlessly so. [...] One point in favour: the natural aspect. The firemen are not actors but firemen in real life, and the construction of the scenes is not forced at all. The film is from Czechoslovakia, subtitled. But really, I cannot imagine why anybody thought it worth exporting - or importing.

(Celia Holt, *Daily Telegraph*, 30 November 1968)

ABOUT THE RESTORATION

The Firemen's Ball was restored in 4K resolution by the Czech National Film Archive, under the supervision of the film's original cinematographer Miroslav Ondříček.

The primary aim of the restoration team was to achieve the appearance of the film as it was screened during its first run in the Czechoslovak distribution in 1967 and 1968. Historical research revolved around three key questions: the film stock that was used for distribution copies (Orwocolor, from East Germany), the aspect ratio of the projected image (1.37:1, or Academy ratio), and whether this initial version included an onscreen explanation that the film was not intended to offend firemen (this turned out to have been added to distribution copies in March 1968).

The original materials for the restoration were from the NFA and from the laboratories of Barrandov Studios, and carefully examined to establish which contained the best image and sound quality. The data for the images was generally taken from the original negative, with a few exceptions. When the technical state of the negative turned out to be too poor, the intermediate positive was used. Both elements were scanned in 4K and 10-bit colour depth. The resulting digital intermediate went through a simulation of the original laboratory procedure for the setting of colours in distribution copies. The original 1967 Orwocolor copy served as a reference, and the restoration team and Miroslav Ondříček made the final assessment during a calibrated screening and comparison of the 35mm copy and the new digital version. Marks from mechanical damage and dirt were also removed – first automatically through the computer software, and then on a much greater scale manually.

Digitisation of the sound started from the optical soundtrack on a 2009 copy held by the film laboratories in Zlín and from the preserved magnetic tapes at Barrandov Laboratories. While magnetic tapes are usually preferable as a source material for digitisation, in the case of *The Firemen's Ball*, only one fifth of the whole film survived in usable form (i.e. as a complete sound mix), and so the optical soundtrack from the 2009 copy was used for the greater part of the restoration. During the digitising process, the parts that originated from the optical soundtrack turned out to be especially in need of considerable modification, generally in the form of noise reduction and the elimination of unwanted sounds caused by damage to the element. Sibilants and a few distorted

points were treated individually. The final mix was spectrally and dynamically unified so that the use of different source materials was not audible.

The film was restored with the participation of the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival, the National Film Archive of Prague, and Czech Movies Foundation. The restoration took place at Universal Production Partners (UPP) and Soundsquare, and the following people participated in the project:

NFA: Michal Bregant, Jitka Kohoutová, Vladimír Opěla,
Jeanne Pommeau, Jana Přikrylová

UPP: Jiří Čvančara, Ivo Marák, Jan Zahradníček

Soundsquare: Marek Klasna, Pavel Rejholec

FAMU and Association of Czech Cinematographers: Marek Jícha, Jiří Myslík

Plus: Anna Batistová, Tereza Frodlová, Miloslav Novák

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by Michael Brooke

Executive Producer: Francesco Simeoni

Technical Supervisor: James White

Production Assistant: Liane Cunje

QC and Proofing: Michael Brooke and Michael Mackenzie

Blu-ray Mastering and Subtitling: David Mackenzie

Design: Jack Pemberton

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Peter Hames, Anna Kopecká, David Sorfa, Daniel Vadocky



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