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Family Matters: The Early Films of Alice Nellis¹

One of the recurrent themes across Czech media over the last ten years has been a sense of disillusionment with the development of the Czech Republic after an initial euphoria over the “Velvet Revolution.” This theme has taken a variety of forms, including scepticism about democratic political institutions, dissatisfaction with the new prevailing values of rampant consumerism, and a concern for the destruction of the general fabric of society. All these issues are at the forefront in the enormously impressive first two films of Alice Nellis.

Personal background

Nellis was born in 1971 in České Budějovice. She completed grammar school, then studied flute at the Prague Conservatory and, at the same time, English and American studies at the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University. She started studying scriptwriting at the Film Academy of the Performing Arts (FAMU) in Prague in 1997, but was expelled in her fourth year whilst filming *Some Secrets (Výlet)*, refusing FAMU’s offer to accept her back later the same year. By this stage she was already rather successful in the very career for which FAMU was to prepare her. She herself maintained: “When they throw somebody out, they should insist on their decision” (Pilát 1). Though she did return to FAMU in 2002, it was as a lecturer and she has since continued with this work.

In the first half of the 1990s Nellis worked as a translator and performed with different groups, such as the Michael Consort, the Duodena Cantitans, and the Collegium Quodlibet. Her continuing love for music is evident in her films; she wrote English-language songs and her voice is one of those we hear on the soundtrack of both of her films. From her first year at FAMU in 1997, Nellis started to work for Czech television. She wrote scripts and made a number of programmes, including the musical documentary *Follia, Certain Type*

of Madness (Follia, určitý druh bláznovství, 1997), *Necessary Regularity (Nutná pravidelnost, 1999)*, *Heroes of our Time (Hrdinové naši doby, 2000)*, part of the series *Miserable Prague (Praha mizerná)*, *The World According to Svěrák / The Making of Jan Svěrák's Dark Blue World (Svět podle Svěráka, 2001)*, a documentary *Christmas in front of the TV (Vánoce před televizí, 2001)*, and was also co-director of a documentary about the rebellion of some journalists that followed the appointment of a new General Director of Czech television in 2001—*Chaos (2002)*.

Nellis came to directing through scriptwriting. She wrote the script for her debut film *Eeny meeny (Ene bene, 2000)* as an exercise for a Film Academy scriptwriting class, where it won a prize. But as she claims: “I could not find anybody to direct it, so I had to try myself” (“Alice Nellis”; <http://www.stratosfera.cz/celebrity/clb.clanek.php?clID=17485>). She was lucky enough to get financial support from Czech television and she then continued to write and direct her second film, *Some Secrets (Výlet, 2002)*. Recently she cooperated with Martin Šulík on his film *City of the Sun (Sluneční stát, 2005)*, for which she collaborated on the script and in which she also appears in the minor role of a nurse.

In addition to her work in scriptwriting and directing for TV and film, Nellis also works in the theater. She has written and directed her own play *Floods (Záplavy; Divadlo Na Zábřadlí)*, as well as directed other plays such as *Play about Two Characters* (T.S. Williams; Studio Rubín, Prague), *Love* (Murray Schisgal; Divadlo Bez Zábřadlí), *The Human Voice* (Jean Cocteau; Černá Labuť), the hit production *Perfect Days* (Liz Lochhead; Divadlo Na Zábřadlí), *When She Danced* (Martin Sherman; Divadlo Bez Zábřadlí), and her most recent production was György Schwajda's *Pomoc (Help)* in Řeznické divadlo.

The focus of this article is on Nellis' two feature films, *Eeny meeny* and *Some Secrets*. Both films won numerous awards in the Czech Republic as well as abroad. *Eeny meeny* received, amongst others, the prize for Best Supporting Actress at the Czech Lions for Eva

Holubová, Best Actress Award at the Sochi IFF for Iva Janžurová, the SKYY prize award at the San Francisco IFF, and the FIPRESCI award at the Karlovy Vary IFF. Amongst the prizes *Some Secrets* was awarded is the prize for Best Actress for Iva Janžurová, Best Screenplay and the Critics Award at the Czech Lions, Best Screenplay Award and the FIPRESCI prize at the Thessaloniki FF, Best New Director at the San Sebastian IFF, and Igor Mareš received the Best Actor Award at the Tribeca FF in New York.

Both films appeared at numerous film festivals and were screened in independent cinemas, but neither had general distribution abroad. This is not only a problem for Nellis' films, since the majority of Czech films face similar problems. From time to time, there are exceptions, recently for example Jan Hřebejk's *Up and Down (Horem Pádem, 2004)* and Ondřej Trojan's *Želary* (2003). As Nellis herself acknowledges, this is partly due to the fact that these filmmakers make stories that resonate with international audiences (such as historical accounts of World War II. in *Želary*), but also partly because of their recent commercial success— Hřebejk's *Divided We Fall (Musíme si pomáhat, 2000)*, set during the Second World War, was nominated for an Oscar and paved the way for distribution of *Up and Down*, which deals with racism in contemporary Czech society (Pilát 2).

Nellis' films are mostly about intimate relationships. Although there are some regional differences, their stories find a response with people across the world. "Mothers are the same everywhere, so are problems with partners. But in every country people react to what is close to them" (Pilát 2). When *Eeny Meeny* was shown in the USA in 2001, the scene with torn election ballots made a big impression because of the disputed presidential election and the problems with ballots in Florida that were taking place at the same time.

Velvet Generation?

In his article about the last decade in Czech cinema, Peter Hames asks whether there is a “Velvet Generation,” to which Nellis could belong (“Velvet Generation” http://www.ce-review.org/00/41/kinoeye41_hames.html). Since 1989 two major changes have occurred within the Czech film industry—political constraints on freedom of expression disappeared and financial constraints, in particular the lack of state support, came to the fore.

In determining whether the young filmmakers who appeared after 1989 can be considered a coherent generation, a comparison can be made with the 1960s Czechoslovak New Wave generation. Essentially, according to Hames, these new filmmakers did not undergo the same development for “they lack production and distribution support and do not face the same common enemy.” In his analysis of the interviews with Czech film directors in Robert Buchar’s *The Velvet Hangover* (*Sametová kocovina*, 2001), Hames emphasizes that the aim of the cinema in the 1960s was more than entertainment; it was to learn the truth, to explore inner selves, and the issues of the times. In the 1990s and thereafter, the objective of cinema seems to have become entertainment dictated by market values, though this might, of course, be a world-wide phenomenon (Hames, “Wild Decades” http://www.ce-review.org/01/18/kinoeye18_hames.html).

Still, some parallels can be made, in particular in terms of the subject matter some filmmakers deal with, such as “the emphasis on everyday life, humour and irony; a distrust of ideology; and an avoidance of the consumer violence and obligatory sex of the mainstream” (Hames, “Finale” http://www.ce-review.org/00/17/kinoeye17_hames.html). Hames goes on to quote Nellis, according to whom: “the new directors have to concentrate on ideas and subtleties, because they don’t have the money to blow up cars.” He points out a further uniting influence amongst many of these directors (Nellis, Zelenka, Hřebejk, and

Gedeon)—the fact that they studied scriptwriting or were in some way involved in the writing process.

Contemporary Czech film critic and academic Stanislava Přádná suggests a useful, if somewhat simplified, categorization of serious young filmmakers in Czech cinema since the 1990s (“The Czech Cinema”

<http://www.artmargins.com/content/cineview/padna20020130.htm>). Some—such as Jan Svěrák, who is skillful in his treatment of subject matter, as well as technically adroit, but does not attempt any deeper reflection and portrays only the brighter side of life—have appealed to local audiences or sought international recognition. In a similar way, in his style and success, Jan Hřebejk has concentrated mostly on the past, but has trivialized history by emphasizing comedy and by avoiding any serious consideration of issues such as guilt and responsibility. A second group consists of filmmakers who have more overt intellectual ambitions. According to Přádná, young directors too often “simplify the problems; their heroes are losers and outsiders, but they are unable to draw any deeper reflection on the state of society as a whole from the failure of these aimless characters.” The exceptions are those directors who attempt this deeper reflection, such as Saša Gedeon, Petr Václav, and Alice Nellis.

Many critics have attacked Czech filmmaking of the 1990s, with Přádná, for example, accusing it of a lack of originality, provinciality of subject matter, and domination by commercial objectives (“The Czech Cinema” <http://www.artmargins.com/content/cineview/padna20020130.htm>). Peter Hames also sees all feature films in 2001 as avoiding direct social and political criticism “Wild Decades” http://www.ce-review.org/01/18/kinoeye18_hames.html). But there have been notable exceptions, films that have presented very personal matters as essentially political. This is what distinguishes Nellis’ approach and places her firmly in the second category of

contemporary Czech film-makers. She is a non-commercial filmmaker, personal and political.

Eeny Meeny and Some Secrets

In her feature films Nellis goes against the popular perspective by both looking into the past and attempting to portray contemporary Czech society. *Eeny meeny* and *Some Secrets* deal with similar subject matter: compassionate and intimate studies of family relationships through the affectionate portrayal of the eccentricities and whimsies of ordinary people. In both films the characters have to first face a crisis that eventually leads to a very understated, touching, and momentous resolution through reconciliation. Both films are essentially tragicomic, but whereas *Eeny Meeny* uses gentle satire and sly humor, the road movie *Some Secrets* is also combined with absurd drama.

Fig. 1: Jana and her mother

Eeny Meeny provides an intimate portrayal of an ordinary family against the backdrop of the elections in the Czech Republic. Jana Zachová (Theodora Remundová) is asked by her zealous mother Helena (Remundová's real life mother, Iva Janžurová) to come back from Prague to help on the election committee in her local town. She cannot do this herself because she is taking care of her husband Jan (Leoš Suchařípa) who is recovering after a stroke. The film principally focuses on the two days Jana spends on the election committee, slowly getting to know her colleagues, trying to sort out her relationship with a married professor, and establishing some means of communicating effectively with her mother.

Fig. 2: Family on the road

In *Some Secrets*, a group of six family members embark on a trip in two cars from Rakovník in the Czech Republic to neighboring Slovakia in order to fulfill the supposed last wish of the father, who had died six months earlier, to have his ashes be buried in his native

town of Nové Mesto nad Váhom. As the family travels through the Czech and Slovak countryside, their relationships come under scrutiny and many secrets start to come out (hence the English title *Some Secrets*, which comes from the theme song). It seems that the grandmother, Valda (Nad'a Kotršová), only made up her son's last wish in order to see Slovakia for the last time. The mother, Milada (Iva Janžurová, the real life mother of both actresses playing the daughters), is trying to make everybody happy, but only ends up irritating them all and especially her two daughters, neither of whom seem to be happy in their marriages: Zuzana (Theodora Remundová) is unfaithful to her husband Pavel (Igor Bareš) and the heavily pregnant Ilona (Sabina Remundová), who comes only with her son Leon (Jakub Chrbolka), feels unloved by her own husband.

Family

Fig. 3: Jana's parents voting

Though there are many relationships in both films, the focus is on two main ones; mother and children, and wife and husband. The mothers in both films are similar characters played by the same actress. Helena in *Eeny Meeny* is a mother who knows it all, and especially knows what is best for her daughter. But she does not realize that her dedication to her daughter is suffocating in its affect. She wants to find a way to speak to her daughter, but the only topics she can find are practical, such as the kind of skirt Jana should wear. Their tense and banal discussions stand in sharp contrast to Jana's relationship with her father. Jana clearly feels at ease with him and the two of them talk about *Ulysses*. In contrast to questions from her mother that are perhaps too personal and inquisitive, Jana answers her father more honestly, though with some irony. As the father does not push her as hard as her mother, she is prepared to reveal more aspects of her life in Prague. Only at the end of the film, when Zachová is coming to terms with the loss of her husband after his second heart attack, is her

daughter quietly reconciled with her. The father's death helps them to move beyond tension and banality, and their underlying love comes to the surface.

Similarly, Milada (the mother in *Some Secrets*) tries very hard to make everything perfect, to create an ideal, and this leads to many misunderstandings. However hard she tries, she and her daughters cannot find a way to communicate. An upset Zuzana sums up her and her sister's feelings towards their mother: "You were never interested in what we thought, only if we looked clean. We never told you anything because we were afraid to tell you." This outburst comes after Zuzana, answering her mother's question "Are you OK?" admits that she is unfaithful to her husband and the two of them have spent an evening together in a bar and seem to be getting on very well. The fragility of relationships is shown up by the fact that Zuzana obviously feels, even at this stage, that she is getting close to her mother. But old animosities bubble up under the surface and every small detail, such as the fact that Milada does not realize that Zuzana and her father have the same handwriting, remind one of those hidden feelings.

For Ilona, a mother herself, her relationship with her mother is even more difficult as they live together in the same house (and also with the grandmother), and whenever the mother hears arguments, she comes up, wanting to help, but instead makes the situation worse, driving her son-in-law crazy. At the same time, when Ilona starts singing to Leon in the car and the mother joins in, Ilona is surprised and stops, but then joins in again, and at that moment, the two could not be closer.

Moments of intimacy, such as the singing or Zuzana's heart-to-heart discussion, are followed by misunderstandings and a complete inability to talk, revealing the complex nature of the mother's relationship with her children. In opposition to this difficult and often painful relationship, both daughters reminisce about how close they felt to their father, who understood them, unlike a mother who was only interested in how they appeared to the

outside world. The depth, complexity, and opacity of such relationships emerge, in particular, in the final scene when the mother makes a series of surprising revelations that force both the daughters and the viewer to re-appraise her and culminate in their reconciliation.

Helena and Milada are prepared to sacrifice themselves for their children and the only thing they want to do at all stages is to help. In both cases, however, they realize that this is not enough, that they need to start treating their children like adults and to be honest and open with them.

Fig. 4: Laskoňcová at the election hall

The sacrifice that mothers are prepared to make for their children is mirrored by the sacrifice that daughters make for their mothers in their old age. The chair of the committee from *Eeny Meeny*, a teacher, Květa Laskoňcová (Eva Holubová), is taking care of her mother after being forced by her husband to choose between them. It is telling that Nellis wanted to portray "... the generation of my parents who lived all their lives under a different regime" and who, perhaps, more than any generation might have had to support their parents in such a way (Preskett; http://www.ce-review.org/01/21/kinoeye21_preskett.html).

There are two mother/son relationships in *Some Secrets* (Ilona and her son Leon; the grandmother and her son). This balances the focus on female relationships, but reveals little. Ilona brings up her son by explaining everything to him openly rather than using the white lies her mother might have done. This is stressed in one of the most amusing moments in the film, when Ilona admits in speaking about her father's ashes that while people do burn, it does not hurt when they are dead: "Remember, just like granny burnt the chicken last week." Milada is terrified: "Great, now he will be scared of me because I burnt father!"

The husband/wife (Jan and Helena) relationship in *Eeny Meeny* suffers from similar problems to those of Helena and her daughter Jana: Helena is overzealously taking care of

him. Janžurová brilliantly portrays the quiet, provincial woman whose decisions in elections are made instinctively rather than based on some political conviction. This relationship also provides a detailed study of the difficulty of coming to terms with illness and the consequential change in relationships. Janžurová's best scene comes at the climax of the film, when Helena discovers Jan's unused paper ballot, which she had prepared for him. Her normally calm voice slowly erupts as she honestly tells him how she feels. But she does not realize that at the same moment she is losing him because he is dying of another heart attack.

While the father, Milada's husband, is missing in *Some Secrets* he still plays an important role. Despite not being present, he is actually at the core of the whole family. He held the family together when alive and his absence is at the heart of their communication problems. But it is also because of him that this trip takes place and all the problems are revealed and resolved. The other wife/husband relationship that is explored in the film more fully, that of daughter Zuzana and Pavel, suffers from a lack of honesty.

Fig. 5: Facing the truth

It is clear in both films that relationships suffer when communication is lacking. Only when Milada opens up fully to her daughters do they start to understand her and accept her as she is; only when Zuzana admits her infidelity to her husband Pavel do they acknowledge their unhappiness and resolve to work things out. The same is true of Helena and Jana in *Eeny Meeny*. On the DVD release of the film, Nellis is quoted as saying: "It seems to me, that a lot of courage is needed in order for partners as well as parents and children to express their love for each other. And sometimes it would be enough to just clear the air with the most simple but so important 'I love you'."

The more positive message of *Some Secrets*, where even the couple that has experienced infidelity seems to be working it out, contrasts with the theme of *Eeny Meeny* and its concern with modern society, with the loneliness and instability of relationships. We

find out that none of the members of the election committee live in a satisfying relationship. Laskoňcová has been left by her partner; Kittnar has been left by his wife for an American teacher of English; one young woman lives alone and the other, though living with her husband, admits to bouts of crying. Only the mother/daughter relationship has been preserved.

Politics

Fig. 6: The campaigner

Eeny Meeny also makes a very clear statement about the attitude to politics amongst Czechs shortly after 1989. Through Helena's lament, the viewer hears about the main problem: for forty years of communism people complained about not having freedom to vote for whom they wanted, and now only 40% of them turn out to vote. Helena's fixation on politics and the election contrasts with the attitude of Jan in particular, who ridicules most of the politicians. Only the outcome of Jan's last act of rebellion against Helena's guiding hand leads to her realization of the complete futility of politics. In an act of recognition, she takes down all the posters for the elections and the voting results from the local board to put up her husband's death notice.

It does not matter, after all, who is elected because any politician is corruptible. So whether Jana tore up the valid paper ballots in her drunken rage by mistake or on purpose is not important; the committee just copies the results from another ward and nobody will know the difference. As Nellis herself said: "Immediately after the revolution, people were full of optimism and hope, and had an almost utopian attitude to democracy. Soon, though, they realised that the new system wasn't perfect and that politicians are human and make mistakes. The film is set a few years after the revolution, when many had already lost faith in the electoral process" (Preskett; http://www.ce-review.org/01/21/kinoeye21_preskett.html).

It is in this light that we should understand the scene where the young entrepreneur on the committee, Kittnar, suggests that the most important vote to be cast is in choosing between red or white wine. This is also the source of the film's title: when Laskoňcová is supposed to make this decision, she relies on the children's rhyme *Ene bene* (or the English *Eeny meeny miny mo*).

This is not to say that the film downplays the importance of certain politicized characters. Jana forces those around her to question their values and lives. She does not hide her contempt for the farce surrounding the committee's operation—from their obsession with the perfect positioning of the screen to a bureaucratic decision to turn away an old voter with an expired ID card. Her attitude and behavior, which culminates in tearing up the paper ballots, undermine the whole process, revealing it as strict, stale, and useless. In the end, there is the possibility of personal moral and political integrity, but this is in spite of (not because of) the new democratic system.

Fig. 7: At the customs

In *Some Secrets*, the political is secondary to the personal, but Nellis also touches on some subjects within the wider parameters of the story's social and political setting. Both the grandmother and the father are Slovaks, and the trip to scatter the father's ashes in a Slovakia (part of the same country before 1993) almost ends at the border. The main obstacle is presented by an overzealous Slovak female customs officer, who takes an immediate dislike to the family. This completely unnecessary bureaucracy—staleness and boredom masquerading as conviction and efficiency—only works against the interests of ordinary people who have to suffer the consequences. The family is helped by an older, more humane, Slovak customs officer, who probably performed the task under communism.

Fig. 8: Šulík and Nellis

These two customs officers represent stereotypical Czech images of Slovaks—slightly affected Slovak women and good-hearted, down to earth Slovak men. The age-old tendency of Czechs to look down on Slovaks as more backward is highlighted by the old Slovak officer who admits to Pavel that the reason he uses public toilets on the Czech side of the border is because the Slovak ones are broken and he does not want Czech customs officers to laugh at them and their underdevelopment. Many people remained critical of the split between the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and they are represented in the film by the voice of the grandmother: “My son was born in Slovakia. We were always like brothers and now you fight like cats and dogs.” Interestingly, one of the Slovak characters who appears in *Some Secrets* is the well-known Slovak director Martin Šulík, who directed *The Garden* (*Záhřada*, 1995) and who appears as a priest. Nellis is implicitly highlighting the ongoing cooperation between Czech and Slovak artists (Šulík’s appearance mirrors Nellis’ small role in his film *City of the Sun*).

Crossing borders and transgressing the importance of nationality for one’s sense of belonging is a persistent theme in Nellis’ films. The grandmother dies when the family is still in Slovakia and to the surprise of everyone wants to be buried next to her husband in the Czech Republic. Milada laughs at the irony of it all and warns her daughters that they will have to bring her back to Slovakia when she dies as she wants to be next to *her* husband.

But it is not only Czechs and Slovaks who are trying to cross borders. A poor Vietnamese family thinks it has arrived in Germany when they walk into a café in Slovakia, highlighting the plight of many people of different nationalities in their quest for a better future for their children in the West. A common theme across both films is scepticism about the ideals so dominant in Central Europe after 1989, ideals of democracy and nationalism.

Nellis' characters in *Eeny Meeny* try to provide a cross section of Czech society in the early 1990s. Helena and Jan Zachovi, though both teachers, represent different types. Jan is the intellectual, a philosopher with a simple but interesting insight into life. By comparison, though Helena clearly takes her position seriously, she seems more concerned with her pupils' psychological well-being than their academic abilities. Although Helena's serious commitment to the elections seems laughable, one sympathizes with her devotion to doing the right thing, both in voting and making everybody else vote, and in her relationship with her family.

At the other end of the spectrum is the representative of the new breed—the entrepreneur—that popped up at the beginning of 1990s. Kittnar has all the signifiers of this new breed: his own shop, a mobile phone, and a big foreign car. But none of this has brought him happiness and it has led indirectly to his wife's leaving him. The quiet scene of Kittnar sitting in his car, watching the windshield wipers, hints at his disappointment with capitalism, the new order in which the pursuit of more western goods has caused more heartache than pleasure. Further consequences of the new social order are unobtrusively introduced by another member of the committee, the youngish librarian, whose library is about to close due to lack of funding.

Fig. 9: Motherhood

All six main characters in *Some Secrets* are developed fully, but the focus is more on their relationships than their role within wider society. Not only is the film about mother/child relationships (through the two characters of the daughters), but it seems to be celebrating motherhood as something great and fulfilling. As Pavel says to the heavily pregnant Ilona, who feels too fat, and unloved by her own husband: "On the contrary. This is very sexy, it's wonderful." During the night of reconciliation with her husband, the unhappy and aimless Zuzana suggests trying for a child.

Though female characters are at the center of the story, the two main male characters are also important. The innocence and honesty of Leon, Ilona's son, serves as an antithesis to the adults' white lies and unexpressed feelings. Zuzana's husband Pavel is also noteworthy as something of a "new" man, who provides for his wife and takes care of her, but is also a sensitive, kind character.

The family, especially the figure of mother, stands out as a constant source of hope against a background of gloomy social change: bigger cars, nicer houses, more material goods, fewer books.

Actors

Nellis' choice of actors, in particular the use of a real-life mother (Iva Janžurová) and daughters (Theodora and Sabina Remundová) to play these roles on screen is rather unusual, but works very effectively. She was also fortunate to attract several leading Czech actors prepared to put themselves into the hands of a novice director when she was shooting *Eeny Meeny*. Iva Janžurová, who dominates as Helena, is well known for many roles, starting from the 1960s, including *...and the Fifth Horseman is Fear (...a pátý jezdec je Strach*; dir. Zbyněk Brynych, 1964). Leoš Suchařípa as the father is best known for *The Very Late Afternoon of a Faun (Faunovo pozdní odpoledne*; dir. Věra Chytilová, 1983); Eva Holubová, who won an award for best supporting actress, made *The Elementary School (Obecná škola*; dir. Jan Svěrák, 1991) and *Cosy Dens (Pelišky*; dir. Jan Hřebejk, 1999); and, last but not least, Vladimír Javorský, who recently appeared in Petr Nikolaev's *A Little Piece of Heaven (Kousek nebe*, 2005).

Fig. 10: Geislerová and Hádek

In *Some Secrets* Nellis also hired a number of very well known people for the small supporting roles. Apart from the Slovak director Martin Šulík mentioned above, famous

musician Dan Bárta plays the artist Lubor Šplechta with whom Zuzana has an affair; actors Jiří Macháček from David Ondříček's *Loners* (*Samotáři*, 2000) and Hřebejk's *Up and Down* plays Ilona's husband; Aňa Geislerová, whose recent major role was in Trojan's Oscar-nominated *Želary*, and Kryštof Hádek, best known from Jan Svěrák's *Dark Blue World* (*Tmavomodrý svět*, 2001), play a pair of youngsters whose car gets stuck in the mud and are helped by the family. As Nellis herself explains "I was not after big names. I needed distinct types. All those roles are small only in time, but not as far as the relationships are concerned. So when you look for example at Bárta, you can imagine that somebody will fall in love with him. It is the same with Jirka Macháček, Aňa Geislerová and Kryštof Hádek" ("Alice Nellis"; <http://www.stratosfera.cz/celebrity/clb.clanek.php?clID=17485>).

Technical aspects

Fig. 11: Greičius and Nellis

The camera work by Lithuanian-born Ramunas Greičius in both films is almost poetic. The attention to detail, but more importantly the exquisite shots (both long and close) of very simple subjects, accompanied by carefully selected music make watching both films an aesthetic joy. For example, Jana's arrival at the election hall on the first day opens with a great shot of a fountain, followed by her entry into the hall with its historical portraits. It sets the perfect tone for what is about to happen—the move from a sunny, fresh morning into stale, sleepy, long, and boring days. As Nellis herself has said: "We paid special attention to the smaller things, and were very careful with movement. We tried to film more static, simple pictures at the start, and thus give us more freedom for movement in the moments of passion. I spent three months with Ramunas trying to develop a language for the film, and we painted each individual scene ourselves on paper, paying attention to colors and asking

ourselves, how and why each shot should be filmed” (Preskett; http://www.ce-review.org/01/21/kinoeye21_preskett.html).

The scripts for each of the films that Nellis both wrote and directed are carefully crafted and it is not surprising that they have received so many awards. The characters are developed to perfection and ordinary relationships observed without any pathos or unnecessary illustration. Acting in both films is of the highest standard, perhaps more so in *Some Secrets*, but it is the screenwriting that is of such superb quality.

A Feminine Film?

As many feminists point out, it does not make sense to call a film feminine simply because the filmmaker is a woman, as it does not necessarily mean that attitudes towards gender stereotypes have changed.² It is the focus, the relationship with the actors and choice of actors that matters. *Eeny Meeny* has been praised as a feminine film in light of its emphasis on the mother as a classical prototype of a loving and caring woman, who suffocates all around her with her love (Hames, “Finale”; http://www.ce-review.org/00/17/kinoeye17_hames.html and Kubičková; <http://www.sever.cz/text.asp?clanek=1255>). More so than *Eeny Meeny*, *Some Secrets* can be considered a feminine film, as it deals with motherhood, with female relationships above all, and with the search of the three main female characters for their place in the world and happiness.

In the majority of the films and plays that Alice Nellis has directed, women are at the forefront. For her, there are two reasons for this. First of all, as a woman she feels it is more natural to understand women’s behavior and reasoning. She also believes that many Czech actresses, like Zuzana Bydžovská or Iva Janžurová, whom she admired as a child, are at an age when they should act more because they have so much experience from their own lives

and work. She wants to give them an opportunity to express this (Nejezchlebová; <http://www.svet.czsk.net/clanky/kultura/nellis.html>).

Nellis does not avoid gender issues despite the fact that this might cause some dissatisfaction amongst the still rather patriarchal and traditional Czech audiences. She took part in a Czech performance of Eve Ensler's show *Vagina Monologues* in which sexuality is discussed openly on stage. Nellis felt that it was important to do such as show to challenge taboos as "... embarrassment can stop women sorting out dangerous problems and psychological blocks. They experienced pain, were abused, raped, humiliated or ridiculed and embarrassment stops them from getting out of it" (Nejezchlebová; <http://www.svet.czsk.net/clanky/kultura/nellis.html>).

Fig. 12: Zuzana with her lover, Dan Bárta

In her own films, by comparison, Nellis does not use much eroticism. But she claims that she does not shy away from this; it was just not the most important part of relationships in any of her films. She does not want to use eroticism where it is unnecessary, just as she does not overuse melodrama. For example, in the initial scene in *Some Secrets* where Zuzana is with her lover, though both are naked, the focus is not on the erotic. "It is not very daring, and the attention turns to what a woman does after sex. There is a different atmosphere and practical matters [as to whether Zuzana should go on the family trip or with her lover] are dealt with" (Nejezchlebová; <http://www.svet.czsk.net/clanky/kultura/nellis.html>).

Right Today

In August of this year, Nellis started her third film, *Right Today (Právě dnes)*, again based on her own screenplay. This film is being produced by Jan Svěrák, who was supposed to direct a film of his own, *Dog (Pes)* based on another Nellis screenplay, that has now been put on hold. Nellis' new feature film deals with a forty-year old woman who, after finding

out that her favorite singer has died, starts her search for a new life, leaving everything: her husband, children, lover, and work. As Nellis has stressed: “In order to sort out her future, our main character is looking for a starting point; at first around herself, but then she realizes, that if she does not sort out her past, any future is doomed in advance” (Spáčilová; http://www.show.idnes.cz/alice-nellis-toci-film-s-ivou-bittovou-dh1-/show_rozhovor.asp?c=A060726_175202_show_rozhovor_mgb). The main character in this film will be played by “sensual” actress and musician Iva Bittová, who appeared in Dušan Hanák’ *Rosy Dreams* (*Růžové sny*, 1976) and who was specifically chosen for her connection with music, for this film “is based not only on its story, but also on a very subjective almost unrealistic perception of the world through music” (Spáčilová; http://www.show.idnes.cz/alice-nellis-toci-film-s-ivou-bittovou-dh1-/show_rozhovor.asp?c=A060726_175202_show_rozhovor_mgb).

Right Today is the second film that Nellis has worked on since *Some Secrets*. Her first project, called *Anna / Loving Hell*, which was to have been an international co-production with the UK and Germany, has been postponed due to lack of funding. *Anna* was the story of a musician caught in a love affair with a famous married foreign conductor living in Prague. The main actors were to have been from Germany and the UK, and for the main Czech female role, Nellis had chosen Zuzana Bydžovská, with whom she has worked in the theater and who, according to her, is the right type of woman—still beautiful but with experience, as well as being a trained pianist (Pilát 3).

Both of these projects show the development of Nellis’ work in a particular direction. First, there is a major emphasis on music, which has been an obvious interest for some time. In addition to writing songs and singing in her own first two films, she has also done so in other films, such as Martin Kotík’s recent light-hearted comedy *All the best! (Všechno nejlepší!*, 2006). In both *Eeny Meeny* and *Some Secrets*, Nellis has also indirectly explored a

number of aspects of the personal world—the purpose of one’s existence, one’s place in the world, and one’s direction in life. All these were explored within the context of family. In her new projects, there is a visible shift from a focus on familial relationships to an exploration of those aspects of life that are on the fringes of a family. The main character in *Anna* is pushed to the fringes of family by the nature of her situation, and the main character in *Right Today* arrives there by her own choice.

Both films by Alice Nellis discussed in this article, *Eeny Meeny* and *Some Secrets*, are clearly post-communist. She herself started to work in the post-communist era and the world she portrays is post-communist. One of the main features of both films is a scepticism about certain aspects of this post-communist world, from democracy, to capitalism, to nationalism. Nellis’ main emphasis though lies on the often complex and tortuous relationships we experience within the family. It will be interesting to see how this theme is tackled in her next two films, both of which involve figures who find themselves become alienated from that definitive aspect of our lives as depicted in her first two films.

In a recent interview, Alice Nellis admitted that in the four years since filming *Some Secrets*, she could not get any major film work, only small jobs (Spáčilová; http://www.show.idnes.cz/alice-nellis-toci-film-s-ivou-bittovou-dh1-/show_rozhovor.asp?c=A060726_175202_show_rozhovor_mgb). Should she continue to maintain the quality of filmmaking that she has shown in her first two feature films, in particular *Some Secrets*, this wait will have been worthwhile.

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² See, for example, Thornham.