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Koza

Ivan Ostrochovský

Producer Ivan Ostrochovský, Marek Urban, Jiří Konečný, Kamila Zlatušková, Maroš Šlapeta, Tibor Búza. **Production companies** Sentimentalfilm (Bratislava, Slovak Republic); Endorfilm (Prague, Czech Republic); Česká televize (Prague, Czech Republic); Punkchart films (Bratislava, Slovak Republic). **Director** Ivan Ostrochovský. **Screenplay** Ivan Ostrochovský, Marek Leščák. **Director of photography** Martin Kollár. **Sound** Tobias Potočný. **Sound design** Tobias Potočný. **Editor** Viera Čakányová.

Cast Peter Baláž (Koza), Zvonko Lakčević (Zvonko), Ján Franek (Franek), Stanislava Bongilajová (Miša), Nikola Bongilajová (Nikolka), Tatiana Piussi (Hitchhiker).

DCP, colour. 75 min. Slovakian, Czech, German.

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World sales Pluto Film

They call him Koza, the goat. His best days as a boxer are behind him. Sometimes he re-watches the video of his fight at the 1996 Olympics. Now he needs money because his girlfriend is pregnant. That's why he decides to return to the ring. His boss, for whom he otherwise collects scrap metal, accompanies him on this tour as a kind of boxing impresario – a tour that is sadly more of an ordeal than a triumph. Koza's body is barely up to the training and he loses most of his fights in the first round. Unlike life, however, the film shows mercy to its protagonist. In this melancholy road movie, the camera focuses less on the boxing matches than on the unglamorous action backstage. Drives through wintry landscapes, days on which it never really gets light and when the cola in the car freezes in the bottle, the inglorious end to the fights – the film shows all of this in exquisitely framed images, which gift the anti-hero another space than that of the boxing ring. Slovakian boxer Peter Baláž, who plays himself here, was a brilliant find for the film and easily stands comparison with other boxing film heroes.

Anna Hoffmann

"It's not necessary to emphasise the social aspects of the story"

What inspired you to make Koza? Did you hear about Peter Baláž first and then decide to build a film around his character, or did you first have the idea of making a film about that situation of social helplessness, and then found him as a symbolic character?

Ivan Ostrochovský: I have known Koza for about ten years. We both come from the same town in the south of Slovakia. But unlike me, Koza was, however, unfortunate enough to grow up in a Roma ghetto, close to my neighbourhood. I shot a short documentary about him in my first year at film school. I was fascinated by the fact that we had grown up on the same street, but somehow on a different planet.

Four years ago, Koza called me and asked for help. He was forced to borrow money for an abortion for his partner Miša, because they simply couldn't afford to have a third child. They had taken all their valuables to a pawnshop and Koza wasn't able to pay and get them back. Voluntary abortions cost about 300 Euros in Slovakia. Koza's disability pension is 150 Euros. So Marek Leščák and I paid for Koza's things at the pawnshop and started to write the screenplay.

Baláž is a symbolic character in a few senses: he is of Roma origin, and he took part in the Olympic Games in Atlanta in 1996. Today, the once-promising sportsman finds himself on the lowest rungs of the social ladder. In favour of a bleak, yet realistic atmosphere, you avoided creating any social pathos. What were the main thoughts behind this bleak and raw but authentic concept?

It was obvious that Koza's story is so absurd and sad, but straightforward at the same time, that it's not necessary to emphasise these aspects of the story. One could say we even deliberately repressed them, in order to avoid the pathos that emerges when misery is stressed.

Right from the beginning, we agreed with the cinematographer, Martin Kollár, that we didn't want to use a hand-held camera that would move along with our characters and which is a significant element of films focusing on people on the fringes of society or films with non-professional actors. We decided to go with a static camera and shooting in long shots. Simply put, we took a step back from the characters and their misery with the camera, and that's how we made a film that tells the story in long shots, but also keeps a bit of a psychological distance.

Films such as Zamatoví teroristi have made you quite famous for mixing elements of documentary with fiction. How much authenticity, how much fiction do we find in Koza? For instance, are the fights real; is Kálmans and Baláž's tour through Europe real? Is the relationship with Miška real; are the hospital scenes real?

Unlike *Zamatoví teroristi*, *Koza* features much more fictional storylines. The film was shot according to a screenplay based on Koza's life. Of course, the casting of non-professional actors gives the impression of documentary authenticity and a blurred line between fiction and non-fiction. The fact that the cast play themselves adds to this feeling. The fights in the film are a combination of authentic and fictitious matches, but Koza's tour through Europe with his manager is completely made up. Koza usually has one match in two months. The film features Koza's real girlfriend, but they split up during the shooting and Koza lives alone at the moment. The little girl, introduced as Koza's daughter, isn't in fact Koza's real child. He has two different children in real life.

How did you do your research in the boxing milieu, and find the locations? And was Peter Baláž involved when creating the atmospheres and the relationships between the protagonists? How did he react when you asked him to cooperate on the film?

We didn't look for locations at Koza's professional matches, nor did Koza collaborate on the story or the development of the characters. Koza read the final screenplay prior to shooting and we've adjusted a lot of scenes according to his acting disposition on location during the shooting. Koza has long felt that he doesn't deserve a life on the outskirts and he saw the film as an opportunity to reflect this problem.

Peter Baláž and his manager form a pretty offbeat business partnership. How did these non-professional actors work together?

We were considering a professional actor for the role of Koza's manager for a long time, but after a few rehearsals we realised it wasn't going to work out. We eventually cast a non-professional actor, our friend Zvonko Lakčević, but he had nothing to do with the world of boxing and didn't know Koza at all. So a different problem occurred – Koza understood what he was performing because he acted as himself, and in this combination, he was actually the professional. Zvonko on the other hand had to work towards his character. The tension between Zvonko and Koza grew thanks to their absolutely differing natures and of course, thanks to the instructions we gave Zvonko to be distant to Koza, as well. I think Zvonko handled his role above our expectations.

The relationship between the manager and Baláž bears a smell of sado-masochistic hierarchy between the cold-hearted manager and the naive dreamer, to put it in a very pointed way – though there are a lot of nuances between them. Is that a relationship that might be typical for a part of the society where everyone has to fight for his sheer existence?

I wouldn't like to generalise on whether the behaviour of our characters is typical for people living on the fringes of society. But I surely can say that most of the details were observed from reality, and therefore it's not a construction of ours.

I think that following dreams that are not realistic isn't just a feature of people of Koza's type, but applies to us all.

Interview: Bernd Buder, January 2015



Ivan Ostrochovský was born in 1972 in Žilina, Slovakia. He studied Documentary Film Directing in Bratislava, after which he completed his post-graduate studies at the Academy of Arts in Banská Bystrica. Ivan Ostrochovský is the co-owner of the Sentimentalfilm and Punkchart Films production companies, for which he also works as a producer, in addition to his work as a director. He lives and works in Bratislava.

Films

2004: *Menšie zlo / Lesser Evil* (co-directed by Pavol Pekarčík, 50 min.). 2004: *Vietor / Wind* (co-directed by Pavol Pekarčík, 26 min.). 2005: *Karakorum* (co-directed by Pavol Pekarčík, 26 min.). 2008: *Uli Blaho* (co-directed by Pavol Pekarčík, 58 min.). 2010: *Ilja* (30 min.). 2013: *Zamatoví teroristi / Velvet Terrorists* (Berlinale Forum 2014, 87 min.). 2014: *Pavol Simai* (26 min.). 2015: *Koza*.