

# THE DODALS

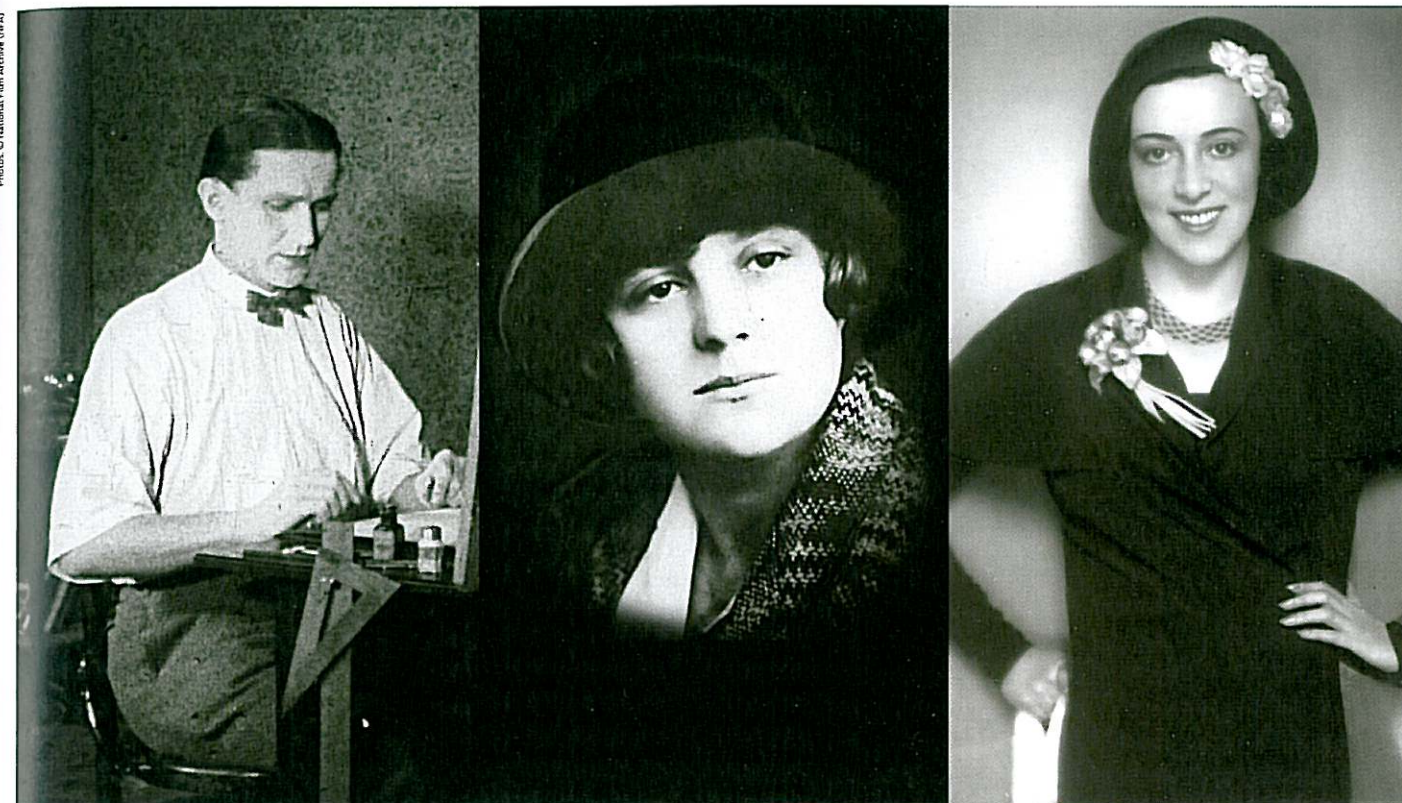
## OR, A LOVE TRIANGLE OF CZECH ANIMATION

**THE DODALS, SUCH IS THE LACONIC TITLE OF A BOOK BY EVA STRUSKOVÁ PUBLISHED LAST YEAR THAT EXPLORES THE STILL UNFAMILIAR EARLIEST PERIOD OF CZECHOSLOVAK ANIMATED FILM IN THE 1920S. IT IS FORTUNATE THAT THE BOOK HAS NOW BEEN TRANSLATED FROM THE CZECH AND IS AVAILABLE IN ENGLISH. RECENT RESEARCH HAS SHOWN THAT THE DODALS, FIRST AS A DUO AND LATER AS A TRIO, WERE THE FIRST CZECH PIONEERS TO DEVOTE THEMSELVES ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY TO ANIMATION. STRUSKOVÁ'S WORK IN THE NATIONAL FILM ARCHIVE IN PRAGUE REVEALS THE EARLY HISTORY OF CZECH ANIMATION ALONG WITH THE REMARKABLE STORY OF TWO WOMEN AND ONE MAN, WHO AT ONE TIME OR ANOTHER SHARED THE SAME NAME, AND WERE ALL BORN AT THE TURN OF CENTURY, CIRCUMSTANCES WHICH IN THEMSELVES COULD SERVE AS THE SOURCE MATERIAL FOR A SCREENPLAY.**

So far our closest and most famous connection to the earliest of Czech animation has been Hermína Týrlová (1900 – 1993), one of the most eminent directors of Czech animated film, and one who became world-famous for her work for young audiences. She was also able to win the affection of adults by using materials entirely new for animation, such as wool and gingerbread. Though well-known, she always remained reticent about how she began in animation. She was the first wife of Karel Dodal (1900 – 1986), a prime mover and animation enthusiast during these early years. Both came to professional animation through the Elekta Journal studios, where Karel Dodal started to work in the second half of the 1920s and where he was in charge of the special effects section. Apart from creating the first Czech animated commercials, his job was also to “add” animated graphs or diagrams to various documentary, educational and live action films. The mostly anonymous and commissioned work did not satisfy Karel Dodal and so he handed over his responsibilities at the Elekta Journal to his wife, to whom he had taught the principles of animation and who had been assisting him in the studio. Dodal, who suffered from severe vision problems caused by the intense lighting during the animation process, nevertheless had the ambition to try and set up his own studio. The venture proved a financial failure and had a direct effect on his relationship with his wife leading to their divorce in 1932.

### COMMERCIALS WITH FELIX THE CAT

The initial period of the Dodals' work consisted mainly of commercials featuring the famous Felix the Cat character created by Pat Sullivan. These were typical commercials of that time - whether they had simple or overly complicated storylines they always concluded with a clear lesson and an endorsement of this or that product



↑ Karel Dodal in front of a working sheet

↑ Hermína Týrlová

↑ Irena Rosnerová (later Dodalová)

or service. Their commercial work still left them time to make their own films together, starting with the uncompleted *A Water Sprite in Love* (*Zamilovaný vodník*, 1928) followed shortly by *Tommy and the Mermaid* (*Tommy a mořská panna*, 1930), which has not been preserved, and *Bimbo's Unfortunate Adventure* (*Bimbovo smutné dobrodružství*, 1930). This last is a grotesque silent black-and-white film obviously drawing inspiration from the popular animated series *Out of the Inkwell* (1918 – 1929) by the Fleischer brothers. In a way similar to the series a sketched figure comes to life and the animation is combined with moving action in which we can see the artist Karel Dodal and his then wife Hermína.

### A LOVE TRIANGLE, HURVÍNEK AND BUBBLES

A new chapter in the history of the trio began in 1932 following Karel's and Hermína's divorce, when Karel Dodal met the divorced Irena Rosnerová-Leschnerová (1900 – 1989), an opera singer who was acquainted with the production process and quite keen on animated film<sup>1</sup>. Before embarking on jointly producing animated films, the new couple took a “study tour” of Europe during which they became familiar with the contemporary Avant-garde and met with other filmmakers such as Oskar Fischinger, Lotte Reininger or Vladislav Starevich. Afterwards, they brought to life the ambitious IRE-film studio, where Dodal's first wife Hermína Týrlová took up work as an animator and drawer.

After making several successful slapstick audio advertisements Karel and Irena got perhaps the most important contract of their careers for the film – *The Adventures of a Ubiquitous Fellow* (*Všudybylovo dobrodružství*, 1936), which was begun in 1935 the same year that they were married. It was a promotional film for the Czechoslovak public radio program Radiojournal which explained

the principle of radio waves. The film utilizes the techniques of both animation and puppetry and combines them with documentary footage. Perhaps even more importantly, the main character of the film is Hurvínek, a popular figure of Czech puppet theatre. With only slight exaggeration, it could be said that the group who worked on the film, though never getting the chance to work together on one project again, was the dream team of Czech animation. The group included: the Dodals, Karel and Irena, the great animator Hermína Týrlová, Josef Skupa who created the character of Hurvínek, the world-famous puppeteer Jiří Trnka (who manipulated the Hurvínek puppet for the film) and the outstanding composer Jaroslav Ježek. *Všudybyl* was widely distributed abroad and it represented Czechoslovak cinematography at the Venice Biennale in 1936.

Although the ambition of Irena and Karel Dodal and Hermína Týrlová was to make creative, artistic films, the studio survived on revenues generated from their commercial productions. Between 1934 and 1938, their IRE-film studio made 25 commercials. And step by step their craft improved. They experimented with rare colour material, utilized metaphors and a variety of animation techniques. They turned ponderous screenplays into well-constructed, elaborate and humorous advertisements. Their commercial productions should definitely not be overlooked in their filmography. As their foreign colleagues were also discovering, these pieces gave them a chance and space to experiment and allowed them to clarify unfamiliar principles.

Eva Strusková points to an advertisement by Oskar Fischinger titled *Circles* (*Kreise*, 1934) as an example. This piece was an inspiration for Dodals' spot for Schicht's brand soap *The Play of Bubbles* (*Hra bublinek*, 1937). A colourful abstract play of shapes and circles, suggesting soap bubbles, was accompanied (as with most of



AN AUTUMN SONG (PÍSEŇ PODZIMU, 1937) by Irena Dodalová, Karel Dodal (animation by Hermína Týrlová)

their commercials) by the music of their composer Bedřich Kerten. The resemblance to the German artist Oskar Fischinger also lies in the fact that in the same year the Dodals introduced the “second version” of *Bubbles* as an abstract film *Fantaisie érotique* (1937) with slight changes and most significantly without any advertising message. “Coming from the context of IRE-film’s work, everything had probably begun with the idea of *Fantaisie érotique* which as if embodied the current harmonious love affair between the authors.” [Eva Strusková, *The Dodals* (NFA, Prague, 2013), p. 204.] The film was dispatched to the World Exhibition in Paris and included in the Czech collection of films for the Venice Film Festival for that year.

Today looking back, the IRE-film studio’s plans seem fascinating and ambitious. We know about their plans for other early films through documents relating to the Dodals’ request for support for them from the Film Advisory Board. Taking into account the post-war development of Czech animation and the work of Jiří Trnka, which was acclaimed throughout the world, it is interesting that the Dodals had been seriously planning a film about Czech folklore making use of puppets. On the basis of several clips from film shootings Eva Strusková points out that “Several frames of the reel as if anticipated the journey taken several years later by Jiří Trnka in *The Czech Year* (*Špalíček*, 1947).” [Eva Strusková, *The Dodals* (NFA, Prague, 2013), p. 192.] Among other unfinished themes and planned films we note the adaptation of the Čapek brothers’ play *The Life of the Insects* (*Ze života hmyzu*), which is currently being made by Jan Švankmajer, and *Beetles* (*Broučci*) by Jan Karafiát. Due to various and mainly historical events they failed to realize their plans, even though they enjoyed a reputation as innovative and unique artists due in large part to their festival successes. Miloš Havel,<sup>2</sup> a member of the then Film Advisory Board, remarked that “the company in question makes colour cartoon films using special technology which we do not have in the Republic yet.” [Eva Strusková, *The Dodals* (NFA, Prague, 2013), p. 197.]

The last joint project the team completed was *Ideas in Search of Light* (*Myšlenka hledající světlo*) in 1938. It is an abstract black-and-white film which drew attention to the impending war events, communicating with the audience through glints and shadows. In no way did its form resemble anything from the Dodals’ previous



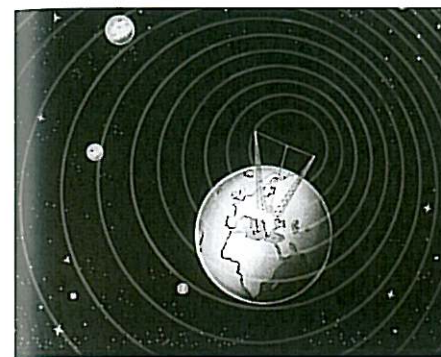
Poster of THE ADVENTURES OF A UBIQUITOUS FELLOW (VŠUDYBYLOVO DOBRODRUŽSTVÍ, 1936)

work. Instead of Fischinger’s colour compositions we find a different inspiration from Berthold Bartosh and his film *The Idea* (*L’Idée*, 1932), which shared the same appeal and humanism as the Dodals’ work. The style of *Ideas in Search of Light* is quite modern. Though, the film has never been shown in Czech cinemas and, according to Strusková, it excited little interest when shown at the Venice Film Festival.

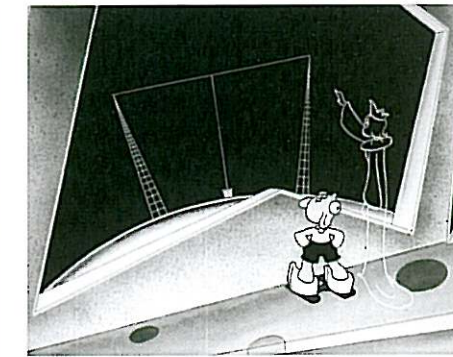
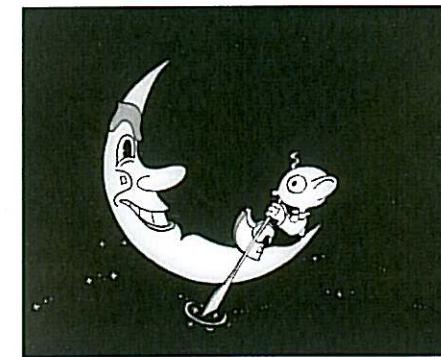
### THE DODALS IN THE WORLD

That marked the end of the Dodals’ Czechoslovak careers. They tried to revive it in Paris, where they had a studio, but when the Second World War broke out the trio split up. Karel Dodal reached the U.S., while Hermína Týrlová moved to Zlín and Irena Dodalová was arrested and sent to the Theresienstadt Ghetto. Their future careers, which were anything but dull, are also mapped in the book. The historian Eva Strusková and her team from the NFA have managed to put together a new, more complex image of the film-making and theatre work in Theresienstadt in which Irena Dodalová was involved.

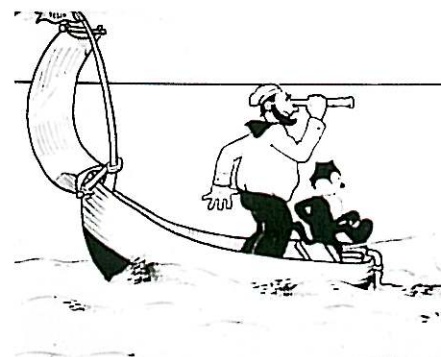
After the war, the married couple reunited in New York, where they operated a studio for some time and made several instructional and promotional films. On the DVD that comes with the book only *There Were Three Men* (1947) is from their stay together in the



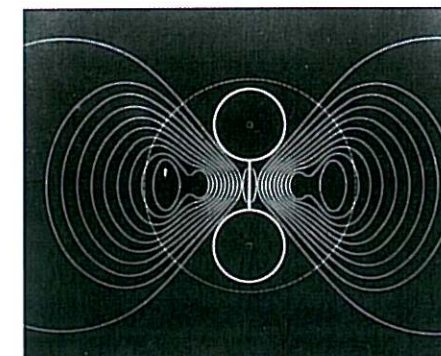
THE ADVENTURES OF A UBIQUITOUS FELLOW (VŠUDYBYLOVO DOBRODRUŽSTVÍ, 1936) by Irena Dodalová, Karel Dodal (animation by Hermína Dodalová)



Promotional film SIX WOMEN IN SEARCH OF AFRICA (ŠEST ŽEN HLEDÁ AFRIKU, 1934) by Leo Marten. Animated sequences by IRE-film



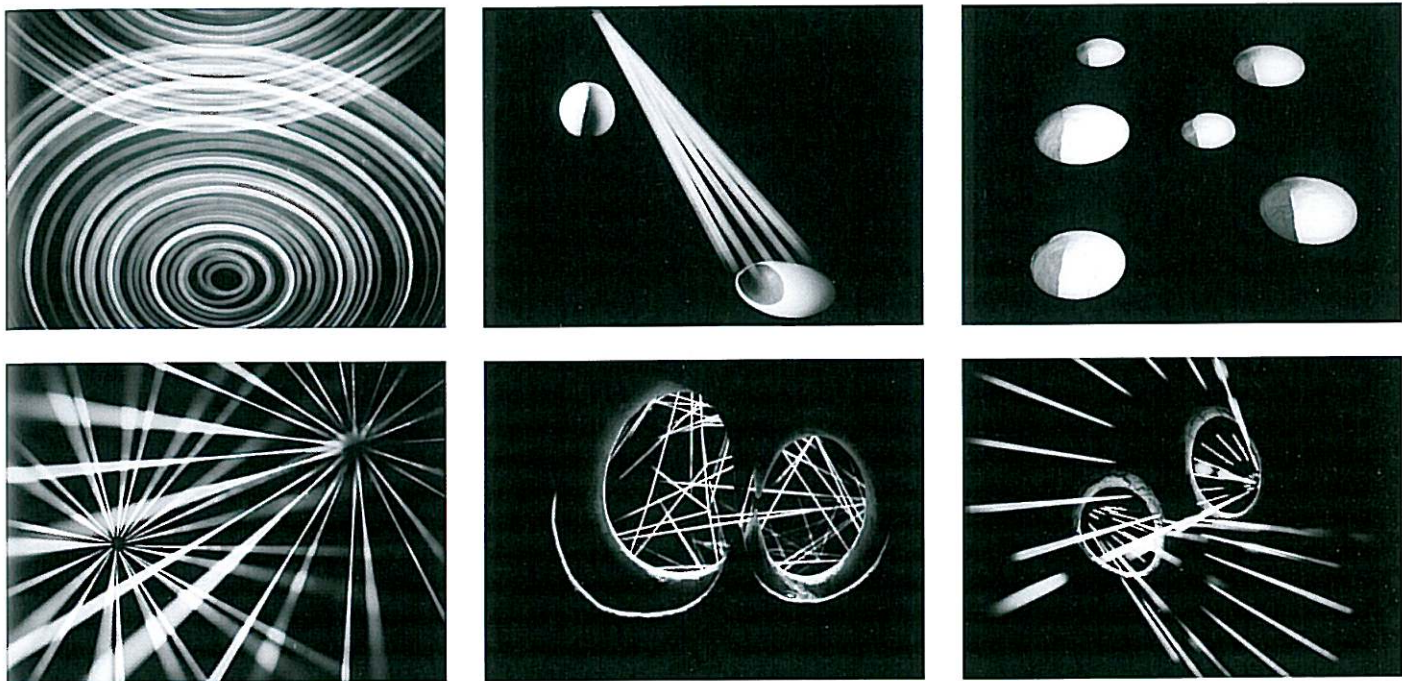
A CABIN BOY ON SALTY WATER (PLAVČÍKEM NA SLANÉ VODĚ, 1929) by Karel Dodal (animation by Hermína Týrlová)



An example of employing a moving diagram which Karel Dodal created for the educational film *ELECTRIC WAVES* (ELEKTRICKÉ VLNY, 1928, dir. J. Tuma)



Shots from the film **FANTASIE ÉROTIQUE** (1937) and from its simultaneous advertising version, **THE PLAY OF BUBBLES (HRA BUBLINEK)**, 1937) by Irena Dodalová, Karel Dodal (animation by Hermína Týrlová)



**IDEAS IN SEARCH OF LIGHT (MYŠLENKA HLEDAJÍCÍ SVĚTLO)**, 1938) by Irena Dodalová, Karel Dodal (animation by Hermína Týrlová)

United States. Though the film is a naive collectivization propaganda piece typical of the time the graphic design and humorous ideas stand out as hallmarks of their work. In exile, the Dodals kept in contact with their homeland. A delegation from Czechoslovak State Film visited their American studio for inspiration and offered them a chance to come back, which they declined. But the dismal financial situation due to lack of contracts led them to accept an invitation from the Argentinean Minister of Education for a two-year stay in Argentina. The minister wanted them to make a range of animated educational films in Buenos Aires, but their work from that period has unfortunately not been preserved. Tensions rose between the couple and their stay in Argentina began to resemble a local television soap opera. In 1960, the couple broke up for good and Karel Dodal returned to live in the United States permanently working for NASA. Irena remained rooted in Argentina, devoting herself to theatre, dance, teaching and ballet filming.

This blank in the history of Czech animation was only filled due to the determination of Irena Dodalová. She not only sought to make their group's efforts become part of Czech film history and ensured that the films and the archive of IRE-film got into the right hands, but she was also the first Czech animated film theorist. Her lectures with slides and her essays such as **What should be done with Czech animated film?** and **Animated film and its opportunities in Europe** discuss themes such as the search for a place for animation in the Czech environment, and the European

animated Avant-garde and at the same time define her own view of the aesthetics of animation and its merits. She consistently called for thinking about animated film to break free from the restrictive views that understand it as a medium intended only for entertaining, or at most for educational purposes. Through her texts she argues that an animation studio is not limited to films for children but can efficiently convey serious ideas.

Irena Dodalová was certainly the most distinctive of the trio, thanks to the variety of her work which ranged from production through to PR to her own creative ideas. She must have been a complicated person and dealing with her was not always easy, as Eva Strusková objectively reveals. The author takes a level critical approach more or less throughout the whole book; one which refuses to adore her subjects unreflectively. In addition to being a readable assessment of her research results, her book is an inspiring historical and theoretical interconnection of pre-war and post-war Czech animated film.

Another story is the book's layout by Markéta Jelenová, which was created completely in the spirit of the examined material. Abstract compositions of Dodals' films are a significant element, which together with the truly comprehensive and well-arranged visual material render the book an impressive publishing achievement of the highest level. As a bonus there is an accompanying DVD with selected films by the Dodals and Hermína Týrlová. The book is also available in English.

1/ Irena Dodalová gained an awareness of animation thanks to her alleged acquaintance with Paul N. Peroff, who was a creator of animated films from Russia, who made films during his various journeys through the U.S., France and Germany.

2/ An influential film producer, the founder of Barrandov Studios and the uncle of President Václav Havel.

Eva Strusková, **The Dodals** (National Film Archive and Publishing House of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, Prague, 2013). 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 376 pages, binding V4, DVD. Czech and English editions. Those interested in the book can order it via the NAMU e-shop at [www.namu.cz](http://www.namu.cz).