

Maxipes Fik – illustration by Rudolf Čechura, 2000, Albatros

JIRÍ ŠALAMOUN



Jiří Šalamoun, born in Prague 1935, is one of those original, multitalented, imaginative Prague artists of whom it seems that this city has a never ending supply. He works in book illustration, cartoon films, stage design and printmaking, and also as editor of publications about photography and film. He has also on several occasions worked closely with television studios in Prague and Bratislava. Šalamoun, who is fluent in five languages, has for a long time been a sought-after lecturer in both East and West. In 1990 he became a University lecturer on graphic art and illustration at the Prague School of Applied Arts, where in 1992 he was named professor. In 1990, 91 and 93 he led the class in drawing and illustration at an international summer academy of visual arts in Salzburg. In 1992 he lectured at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, and in 1995

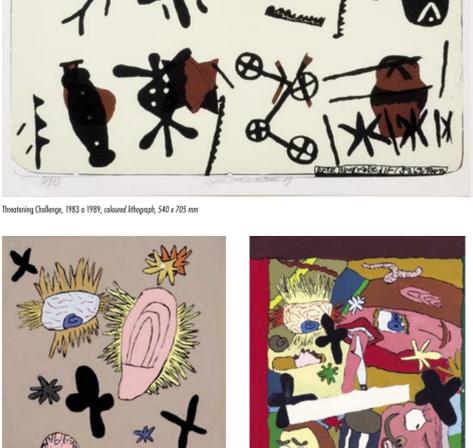
at the Technical University in Mainz. Jiří Šalamoun has illustrated and edited more than 100 books, designed maybe 40 cartoon films, and created more than 60 coloured lithographs, countless posters, stage sets and magazine illustrations. He has gained 50 prestigious international awards, mainly for illustration, and book and poster work, including the ADC in New York (1974,1987). He is a holder of the Gutenberg Prize of the city of Leipzig (1986), and has received awards at the Leipzig Book Fair in 1977, 1982, 2000 and 2001. He has won numerous awards for his book creation and illustration in specialised competitions such as the Most Beautiful Book of the Year and the annual awards of prestigious social institutions and publishing houses in the Czech Republic, Germany, Italy and Spain. Šalamoun's posters (mostly for the theatre) have also been successful. He has found his widest audience among (not only) children in his links with cartoon films. He has shared in more than thirty short and mid-length cartoon films of which the most famous have been the 26-part bed-time story series about Maxipes Fik between 1975 and 1984. From 1962 onwards his work in printmaking and books has been presented at major exhibitions of prints and illustrations throughout the world.

Milšte Kind, Novum, No. 4, Munich, 1996
(updated by the Editor)

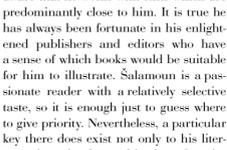
Oh library, foundation of the barricades... J.Š., Barefoot and spec-less, Weather for a Murder..., 2000

Jiří Šalamoun is thought of mainly as the creator of Maxipes Fik. This isn't wrong, but it essentially narrows his no less extensive career as a printmaker and film maker, which links up with his work on film and theatre poster and, not to be overlooked, his strikingly expressive poetic work. That last observation is possibly not the most precise; it will be more precise once we take his poetic texts as a very specific diary or notebook, as notes or commentary, which as far as it approaches anything, is a *fragment*, a special literary form in which with German Romanticism mixed poetry with philosophical observation. Or it can also be ironic, the original English *nonsense*, which in Šalamoun's case is tuned to a Central European note close to Kafka's aphorisms. "Who am I? Where do I come from? / What time is it?"

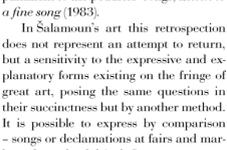
We can turn to the programme of fields in which we have in the meantime caught Šalamoun to acquire some sort of starter profile: if we examine his extensive work – the print, illustrations and drawings, films and posters, as well as his texts, we realise it is to a considerable degree the form of some sort of commentary. Certainly with books, because his illustrations are often associated commentaries, but not only with them – we notice for the titles of his prints often connect with or ironically comment on their stories: *Carthusian Greetings*, *Each for his Own*, *Threatening Challenge*, *Warning Reply*, *Heikles Schweigen*, *hinterlistiges Gedächtnis...* we don't find any called *Untitled*. With Šalamoun the relation of word and image is absolutely fundamental.



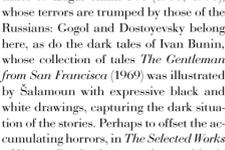
Threatening Challenge, 1983 x 1989, coloured lithograph, 540 x 705 mm



Silykovs Shchedyn, The History of Silytoven, Odont, Praha, 1990



The History of Silytoven, Odont, Praha, 1990



Warning Reply, 1996, coloured lithograph, 540 x 705 mm

Insofar as we return to the book, which is Šalamoun's domain, we will come closer to his concept of illustration if we are aware that he works with texts which are predominantly close to him. It is true he has always been fortunate in his enlightening publishers and editors who have a sense of which books would be suitable for him to illustrate. Šalamoun is a selective reader with a relatively selective taste, so it is enough just to guess where to give priority. Nevertheless, a particular key there does exist not only to his literary orientation but to his view of stories known worldwide. Heists and deaths reveal the greatness and fall of a man who wanted to rely only on his own intellect and to become an alternative to God. Whilst Šalamoun was not fortunate enough to be offered Goethe's Faust to illustrate, he did illustrate the *Faustside* of the Bohemian folk puppets. The volume in which we find *Johannes Doktor Faust / Jenovefka/Dan Sajn* (1976), leads us along one of Šalamoun's main paths. The work of anonymous artists can be found there, transposing great themes such as Faust or Don Juan into other forms which are called popular reading, into retelling forms in which a great story becomes smaller and, relieved of its ominous situations, it becomes more intelligible. Alongside the *Faustside* there are other great stories transformed into popular reading such as the Christian legends and Aesop's fables; Šalamoun is also attracted by other forms of rural and urban folklore. They include for example illustrated prints of songs and *marionets*, sung and read at fairs, whose stories were also presented as painted tables out from which it was acquired a precursor of comics.

This circle of Šalamoun's interest brings us round to a starting point which became immeasurably important for his work. The anonymous works, impressively called "folk", have a strong expressive quality, emotionally translating stories which are somewhat gruesome but not horrible. Their fatalistic or tragic qualities are lightened by humour, they have an inclination to the grotesque, they uncover the absurdity of life. This transformation of the great and overwhelming into the smaller and more intelligible has at the same time its distinctive expression, one could almost say style. It works with a reduction of shape which becomes more transparent, it trans-embodies inexhaustible variety into a simpler symbol, sometimes to the point of being schematic. Some prints, like *Threatening Challenge* or *Luminous Prophecy*, work just with simple abstract graphic marks, although it is possible to guess there is a direct Faustian source – at the same time they present post-modern play with magic charmed ciphers which it is better not to understand. In such a form it is strengthened not only by the effectiveness of its communication, its eloquence, but also its meaning, its symbolic quality.

This understandably is exemplified mainly by the collection of illustrations which derive from the expressive narrative quality of fringe literature: for example, the *Grabbedler* by Pastor Michael von Jung, published in Berlin in 1981, return to a popular but nevertheless apocalyptically harmonised *dance macabre*, in its own nature very expressive. The precipitate pictorial action, already approaching

comics, can be found in Šalamoun's illustrations for the *Songs of Jakub Jan Ryba* (1968), as well as in the generous accompaniment to the peddler's songs, *Listen to a fine song* (1983).

In Šalamoun's art this retrospection does not represent an attempt to return, but a sensitivity to the expressive and explanatory forms existing on the fringe of great art, posing the same questions in their succinctness but by another method. It is possible to express by comparison – songs or declarations at fairs and markets about the *Jahárek Gannars* uncovers the same horror as Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the Expressionists were also fascinated by folk art of this sort, the artists of *Der blaue Reiter*, who published folk paintings on glass in their almanac of the same name. They were thus evoking authentic sources, European or wider, uncovering the original deposited layers of the imagination and consensus of expression. Expressionism itself is attractive for Šalamoun, not so much having discovered it during his study visit to post-war Germany, but because he is by disposition an Expressionist. His sense for colour and drawing is born from an excitement with the nature and mystery of stories, a liking for the contrasting quality of black dramatic strokes on a white surface... He does not aim at the sort of sarcasm which in the case of Georg Grosz accentuates the tragic features of existence – but like an anonymous artist he too faces the impact of the weight of life and fate through a distinctive humour issuing in the situation of grotesques full of subtle gags. His author's books of the type *Dus grosse Pythagoreische Eisenbahnunglück* (1983) and *Die Hitzl-dos Einfalls* (1988), published in Berlin, follow mainly to this category: the book of texts and dreams in the bibliophile edition *Naked Giants* (1999), and a great many *laparellos* with the atmosphere of a *marionet*, such as *The Spell Book of Jack the Ripper* (1968); another of Šalamoun's recurring themes), *Bobogí Laca* (1971) and *Chilastika* (1982). And understandably both his books of poems, *Weather for a Murder...* (2000) and *Little Angel, my Chief Little Guardian* (2005), in which commentary and drawings mingle in one auto-commentary.

All these pictorial stories or accompaniments are carried by a special subtle sarcastic humour which allows the dark of the stories to disappear, or rather, be kept at a safe distance. Šalamoun's humour is not an Expressionist grimace; it is closer to the humour of Lawrence Sterne or Charles Dickens – lightly long-winded, intensified only by small situations being played out only in the gag of language. Games with words and expressions in English nonsense and limericks represent subtle shifts in language and its colourfulness, not only for illustrations to Sterne and his Honourable Tristram Shandy, and in Dickens's *Pickwick Papers*, J.R.R. Tolkien's *Hobbit* and D.H. Lawrence's *Rocking Horse Winner*. It is a very authorial method of telling essentially terrible things as lightly ridiculous, comic, since the striving of mankind is just as lightly ridiculous and comic. Insofar as we are concerned just with the books, then everything together already creates an exclusive enough library whose books to a certain measure merge with the illustrator. Šalamoun comments

on the furtive humour of Jaroslav Hašek and Bohumil Hrabal, and on the comic word play of Jiří Sychý. He returns several times to Edgar Allan Poe (1968, 1996), whose horrors are trumped by those of the Russians: Gogol and Dostoyevsky belong here, as do the dark tales of Ivan Bunin, whose collection of tales *The Gentleman from San Francisco* (1969) was illustrated by Šalamoun with expressive black and white drawings, capturing the dark situation of the stories. Perhaps to offset the accumulating horrors, in *The Selected Works of Kazema Prátko* he created an antithesis in a kind of stylised romantic diary. The climax of Šalamoun's illustrative work is created by an interpretation of murderous stupidity and obtuseness in *The History of Silytoven* by Mikhail Salykov-Schedyn (1990). This is a book representing a real and legitimate succession to Expressionism; however, projected into it is the devastating situation of Czechoslovakia after occupation by the Russians. The fear no longer has the Romantic colouring of the dark stories, but ominous features, "Mother of God, you don't say, so God is dead?"

Alongside these called illustrations, or interpretative sets of illustrations, are those of Šalamoun's view in a different direction, for example into the lightened landscapes of ironic rhetoric of Dickens's *Pickwick Papers* or the juvenile reminiscences of *The Last of the Mohicans* by J.F. Cooper. In these the story develops into the tiniest material details which are bizarre and slightly unbalanced but which are nevertheless particular characteristics of human life. Yet another story presents a particular characteristic of Šalamoun's work, one to which he devoted great attention from the mid-1970s: the story of Maxipes Fik. From his own experience of life with a dog, a Great Bobtail, a story developed which grew incredibly, mulling over quiet family events and creating a situation in which the animal shows itself to be the wiser creature. Rudolf Čechura's mid-1970s story of a dog went through many forms not only in one of the most enjoyable television children's stories but also in several books. After the tales of the Čapek brothers and of *Pučáček Amina*, an authentic civilian world appeared again, although full of phantasmagoria, in which the poles of good and evil in human and animal life are gently weighed.

Deep down, Šalamoun's work belongs to the Central European context. We already noted the closeness to the Kafka aphorism, but there is also his perception of the absurdity of life, finding expression in the grotesque. We know it from the work of his contemporaries, Jiří Sypko and Karel Nepraš, who likewise work with the double reflexivity of dread and laughter. One cannot draw a line between the fields of illustration, printmaking and film in Šalamoun's work. In everything the same question returns, to which the answers do not greatly differ. This vision is what enables Šalamoun to remain with cultural experiences of such differing expression as Sterne, Salykov-Schedyn and Pastor Jung. As though in the course of searching he always came across something similar and hidden.

"Listen – so who there in fact / around and around?"

Jan Rous
Art historian, Prague 2008



William Saroyan, Tracy's Tiger, coloured pen drawing, illustration, 1980, Odont



William Saroyan, Coffee, coloured pen drawing, illustration, 1980, Odont



William Saroyan, Police, coloured pen drawing, illustration, 1980, Odont

Long distance interview for Grapheion

Stefan Zvoníček 2008

In 1975 I interviewed the artist creator of the dog Maxipes Fik – the leading Czech illustrator and printmaker Jiří Šalamoun – for the journal *Kino*, and visited his legendary Prague studio at 10, Paris Street, Fik's prototype, a Bobtail, made itself comfortable on my right foot, and became Jiří Šalamoun had a deadline in a couple of days for his book *The Selected Works of Kazema Prátko*, he apologised for having to finish a drawing started before my arrival. (I think it was Fellini who said that one condition of inspiration is a deadline.) Meanwhile he gave me some copies of the journal *Grafijs* to look at, Šalamoun approached a pen drawing on his easel and *la prima* continued his work. My engrossed reading of *Grafijs* was interrupted by Šalamoun's wailing. An explanation of this accompanying phenomenon of pen drawing followed, when I looked at the finished drawing. The unruly expressiveness of Šalamoun's style is dependent on his *holotypránské grafiky*, including the participation of the vocal cords. One can see something similar in the Italian film *Ligabue* directed by Salvatore Nocita, and the artist Antonio Ligabue who, in the course of painting, sometimes tenses, hears bells, and breathes through his painting or during modelling.

Jiří Šalamoun joined the editorial staff of the monthly *Film a doba* (Film and Time) in 1965, as a designer. In time he established a visual section on Czech and foreign animated work, sometimes on film design as well (costumes, posters, sets). At a time when this country regarded the typographical profession as a mere offshoot of characterising appearance of the magazine. In illustration and content, *Film a doba* became an outpost of individuality and unparallelled *dobrotvorná* during the last years of late 1980s) of President Husák's socially toxic normalisation. He also edited a supplement devoted to Czech and international animated cinematography. He said himself: "I accompany the film in the same way as I do the book. I don't know how to approach the action with pictures, and I wouldn't want to. I am a commentator rather than an illustrator."

The sociologist of jazz Francis Newton mentioned in *The Jazz Scene* that the concept jazz originated from the slang word *pass*, which means *sex*. It still continues along this lower current, but the contemporary jazz of Charlie Parker shoots up higher in every dimension, justifying vertical. Jiří Šalamoun too professes that most spontaneous of the arts. He too, like some visual jazzman, improvises on a theme, creates its variations and improvises in a way which bypasses mechanisms, academicism, and any sort of mechanism in the field of the print. The end result surprises the author himself. When Jiří Šalamoun is not surprised by his own work, he usually spurns it and destroys it; otherwise his works would not be as thrilling and as often they are.

It was around his fortieth birthday when Šalamoun began to connect his free drawings with author's lithographs. He enjoys working in a lithography workshop or a film studio. "Printmaking is a personal battle against chaos, indifference and superficiality." In his personal life he has changed apartments twelve times, even though he would rather not have done. Once he lived in the haunted Storch House on Old Town Square, another time in a functionalist thirties' block. He always "tried not to destroy that space, to be open with it", but at the same time not to let the shape of his life be dictated by an architect. Order is important in Šalamoun's work; he becomes neurotic about wasting energy in searching for tools and materials while he is working. He doesn't like using a small table. His studio, in his own words, "always bore some resemblance to an Austro-Hungarian customs office shortly before its abolition, or the archive of a bodyguard of the Tsar."

And did you really see the Naked Giants?
Of course I did, otherwise I wouldn't have dreamed about her, but not so literally, she's a dream, just one offer from the possibilities of interpretation but I don't need to stylise it into closed testimonies and interpretations and defending myself against it, obviously it interests me, something perhaps betrays it, but I don't need to comment on it – that you chose precisely this dream episode? Everything means something, but what? I like most to quote St. Augustine: "I thank God I'm not responsible for my dreams..."

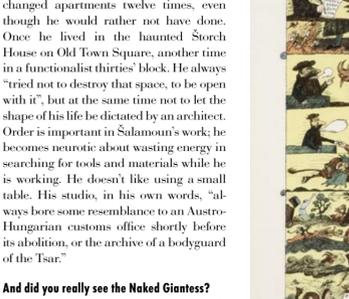
The publication seemed entertaining and justified to me at that time, the dangerous side of this publishing did not announce itself till later, but St. Augustine certainly knew what he was talking about, and dreams are not hard evidence... they're dreams!

Your father used to show you silent films at home, Popeye the Sailor, didn't he?

To take Popeye as an example, yes, he did, that was still during the war, pre-war American cartoons, mostly Walt Disney, that had been lying in cupboards just like old books on the shelves of second hand bookshops and furniture in flea markets, a torso of abandoned wisdom and quotations, fragments of reading or visits to exhibitions, catalogues, conversations and scenes, teatro mundi and anecdotes, sometimes entertaining, sometimes hard and painful, torn scraps of glimmering connections and impressions, a miscellany of secrets and situations and fears and pains and anxieties, simply a Lazarus of life, as maybe them out of context within ourselves, but as soon as you mention each of our carries the meaning of these fragments is enhanced – it is however a heap of puzzles and trinkets; so even Popeye the Sailor and Mickey Mouse and the cold washed hands of doctors in children and a wave of strange smells in Prague passages and so on... these memories of Popeye the Sailor with anchors tattooed on his too strong forearms and too high a value on the role of spinach remain forever, or almost forever, let us say for a long time, at the back of our eyes...

How old were you when you discovered visual art?

Relatively young, while I was still a child, only I didn't know at that time that it was or could be art, and then it was a while before I got round it in my head that for me it can be something different than for other people, and that we can be alongside without disturbing each other; my art can be different from other people's art, and it doesn't and mustn't matter; both can exist at the same time, even in an inverse meaning. In the case of a flat where I lived during the war in Vinohrady we had something on the floor that was called at the time... I don't know any longer... it was a mixture of ceramic material, black and white and grey. I used to sit there and saw in it what Leonardo once in his walls and ruined marbles, figurative scenes and dramatic inhabited landscapes, later Dubuffet's pictures as on the walls of St. Ignace's Ferda on Charles Square; but art was also Sokora's Ferda Mrazek. Ferda the Ant, in his ant heap; it was that time when Art with a big A began to work, with the two-volume coloured catalogue from the Louvre which father brought from Paris, and the black-and-white catalogue from the Munich Pinacotheca, something which was rather difficult to understand but recognisably already Art. And also sometimes delicately erotic and immoral; then came the illustrations to Julius Zeyer's *Amis and Anis* as a transient phase, whilst the Lada editions of



The Girl and the Fool, 1959, film poster



Touches, 1959, film poster



View of Jiri Šalamoun's studio: Work on paper, Kladno, 1986, exhibition poster



Půlku-Půlku, 1976, coloured lithograph

the publishing house Mánye were already something different, just like the illustrations to Vilímek's publications of *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo* belonged elsewhere, it was a little different from the situation today; then there were the books by Hais-Týnecký with coloured tables of books' stories from the Loučany *Paseka* by Otakar Štífl... That remainder appears through one's whole life, gradually or suddenly, changeably of itself, and with endeavour. The interior of architect Pločnick's big church of Sacred Coeur on George of Poděbrady Square in Vinohrady had a strange effect on me – the similarly mysterious name like the names of streets and battlefields of the Wehrmacht or the types of bomber planes and so on or of animals and beetles in *Birds, Trees, and*, and of Svobůdky's birds and flowers. And Wilhelm Kulmer's *Hunts* and paintings in savage Africa.

Do you still write down your dreams?

Always, I'm now on the ninth notebook, but I write in different ways, sometimes I simply cannot get it down and I'm sorry about this, but one can't do everything. And it's enough, plenty of them get left to lie on the way as in everything and evaporate; sometimes old dreams strike like lightning even later, they remind me of something which I cannot extract – but those sudden remind me of strange, mysterious, in that they reason somewhere in the memory, lie there apparently without reason and that usually scares me a little, flossam and jetsam for the Last Judgment, maybe evidence for the Great Psychiatrist and for disciplinary proceedings or mitigating circumstances or perhaps on the contrary, aggravating circumstances...? They are my Geste lightning... rains, a torso... of landscapes of life and night... I liked Karl Jasper's essay about that very much... "Antimony of Day and Night"... for example...

The author writes regularly on music and film
Translated by Barbara Spottelova



View of Jiri Šalamoun's studio: Work on paper, Kladno, 1986, exhibition poster