

REVIEW

Dead End

Petr Václav's *We Are Never Alone* (*Nikdy nejsme sami*, 2016)

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France-based Czech helmer Petr Václav's new film *We Are Never Alone* starts off as a black comedy and hurtles towards a disastrous cul-de-sac. Adding some well-known faces (Karel Roden) to the no-pro Roma cast (Kludia Dudová and Zdeněk Godla) of his highly successful *The Way Out*, the film focuses on the desolate life of a bunch of oddball villagers the post-Communist transition appears to have run over and left behind. Switching frequently from black-and-white to color, the film's retro-style (1960s opening titles) and overall austere aesthetics make it seem as if Eastern Europe were eternally trapped in provincial ennui, tolerable only because of the occasional irony the director himself has described as "Gypsy humor". Dudová plays Sylva (all other characters are nameless), a single mother whose partner is in jail. She works in a nightclub where Godla woos her without much success. He, in turn, is the unlikely object of desire of a middle-aged woman (Lenka Vlasáková) who works in a small grocery shop. She is married to a fiery hypochondriac who wastes his days in self-loathing and/or conspiring with an ultra-nationalist prison guard (Miroslav Hanus). Part of this social microcosm is assembled like a baroque comedy, where A loves B, B loves C, etc. Thus Vlasáková, to fit the tastes of Godla, decides to disguise as a prostitute and starts working in the nightclub. Albeit not passionately in love, Godla at least accepts to sleep with her and for a while, the bottom of society seems to peacefully coexist in an unusual pact of solidarity. Widespread discrimination against the Roma recedes into the background, and only the violent obsessions of the neighbor's children may give away that bliss will not last forever. And so, when Vlasáková's husband and the prison-guard find out about her parallel life, things fall back into place, with knife, gun, and rifle providing for the expected rampage. However, Václav's not-so-funny-after-all approach hardly feels tragic. Perhaps his characters are simply not likeable enough to stir our sympathy for their hopeless destiny. This makes the film differ from his previous, highly emotional *The Way Out*, which some have criticized for being overly heart-wrenching. It seems unlikely, though, that cynicism can amply smooth over the tragedy at the center of *We Are Never Alone*. While Václav's "gypsy humor" surely provides for some laughs, they capitulate to more than liberate from the dead ends the film so creatively illustrates.