

# SOMETHING LIKE HAPPINESS

TORONTO  
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OFFICIAL SELECTION  
2005

written and directed by Bohdan Slama



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## Synopsis

Monika, Tonik and Dasha grew up together in the same housing project on the outskirts of a small industrial city. Now the childhood friends are adults, each struggling with feelings of desire and loneliness, longing and failure.

While her boyfriend pursues wealth and success in America, Monika waits, ever-hopeful that he will arrange for her to join him. Tonik has fled his stifling conservative family and lives with an eccentric aunt: together they struggle to defend her derelict farmhouse against the encroaching industrial development nearby. Dasha has two small children and a feckless married lover. Fragile, unpredictable, edging ever nearer to the brink of despair, she turns viciously on those closest to her. Though none would admit it, each craves something the other has and it's these unspoken longings which bind them in difficult, complex, passionate friendships.

Dasha's mental state worsens dramatically, and she is committed to an asylum. Afraid that they will be taken into care, Monika looks after her kids. And when Tonik readily offers his support - and his home - she discovers his unspoken love for her. For Tonik himself it's a new beginning, a new chance. But, whatever he tells himself, this game of happy families is only that - a game. Monika is waiting to escape to the Land of Opportunity, the children are only on loan, and there's always another leak in the farmhouse...

By turns poignant, absurd and profoundly moving, beautifully directed and featuring a host of flawless performances, SOMETHING LIKE HAPPINESS is the second feature from award-winning Bohdan Slama, whose WILD BEES was the Czech 2002 Academy Award candidate. Vibrant and deeply affecting, SOMETHING LIKE HAPPINESS is a funny, tender and very human drama of passions and lives half-understood and veering out of control, shadowed by tragedy, shot through with hope.

## Bohdan Slama

### A few words on SOMETHING LIKE HAPPINESS

SOMETHING LIKE HAPPINESS is about the search for love, and the mysteries of change that love causes in us. The fight for life, for ourselves, and for others.

#### Casting

The basic casting was clear to me even before I wrote the script. For me this film is very personal, and it is equally personal for those starring in the main roles. We wanted to make a film about what we actually live. Actors interest me as living beings who reflect their characters in a way integral to the perception of the film. It is impossible to portray a character other than from within.

#### Camera

We were seeking a style in which the camera allowed the viewer to witness living unrepeatable moments, to be as close as possible to the actors themselves, and to be in intimate rapport with them. In order to enable the actors to express the fragility of their characters' worlds, through themselves, through their entire emotional potential.

#### Location

The story takes place in the north of the Czech Republic, a region known for its factories, electrical cables and concrete viaducts. A modern desert, one of the negative products of human progress, destroyed by coalmines and acid rain. Yet, at the same time, this region is a place for people to live in: they live their life in this everyday hardship and don't even notice it...

## Interviews

### **BOHDAN SLAMA - WRITER & DIRECTOR**

#### ***What is SOMETHING LIKE HAPPINESS about?***

Basically it's about young people maturing into adults. Monika grows from a girl into a woman and Tonik from a boy into a man. They run into difficulties and face these problems together, and in this way they change. They try to find themselves, to discover what they are really made of.

#### ***Is this theme something very close to you?***

It's a common theme. Everyone asks themselves, "Who am I? What am I doing here?" Each of us deals with this. It shouldn't be considered a specific theme of mine.

***How did you decide on the actors?*** I wrote the script specifically with Tatiana Vilhelmova, Pavel Liska, Anna Geislerova and Marek Daniel in mind.

#### ***Is the film pure fiction, or is it based on material from real life?***

The relationship between Tonik (Pavel Liska) and Monika (Tatiana Vilhelmova) came more from my imagination than from any real experience. But their situation - boy really likes a girl with whom he is best friends; she really likes him too, but she doesn't love him because she has someone else - this is an archetypal relationship. Dasha's story is their catalyst. The problems that afflict Dasha (Anna Geislerova) also lead Tonik and Monika, through their having to deal with her, to get to know each other much more deeply. Monika sees how Tonik rises to the occasion in critical moments, sees the man in him revealed. Tonik has it easiest in a way because he has loved Monika since childhood - he's loved her from the first moment he saw her and he'll love her forever. For him it has been a situation of waiting patiently.

#### ***In the course of shooting, your script went through numerous changes. Did you write these changes by yourself? Were you communicating with the producer and actors? Are you open to collaboration?***

I always leave things open, torturing both myself and others. It's not some concept I have. I just don't think I have all the answers. I'm not a professional, more of a permanent film amateur.

#### ***Tonik faces a dilemma: stay with his aunt on the farm or return to the tower block where he lived with his parents.***

Tonik doesn't in fact face this dilemma. He's happy with his life on the farm. His concept of happiness, a dream he's had since a child, is that he will live there with Monika. At the end of the story he understands that this dream is nonsensical. The farmhouse has always been falling apart, from the beginning. It's surrounded by factories, dumps and mines shafts - there isn't any nature left. Tonik matures out of his childhood dream.

#### ***And what about you? City or country life?***

I personally prefer life in the country. I like the fresh air, views of nature and the quiet that surrounds everything. People don't have to be around hundreds of other people on a daily basis.

#### ***They say never work with animals or children... Good advice?***

It was difficult. We didn't film much with the animals. In the beginning we wanted to feature one goat but fortunately we dumped that idea early on. After some problems I cut him out of the screenplay. Doing the same with the kids was out of the question. Filming with children is difficult because you have to adapt to them, to come to understand them, if you want them to perform naturally. They are the ones who determine the rhythm and tenor of a scene. We never tried to teach them how to react. Every reaction is spontaneous. It was necessary to create for them an atmosphere in which they could act naturally. It was incredible work. An adventure. Truly, we never really knew how it was going to turn out. For the actors it was exciting and inspiring to have to react to concrete unexpected actions. Every scene with the children went in unforeseen directions; they brought authenticity to the story, an inner forcefulness. I can say that right from the start, everything was filmed around them. The children are the most precious thing in the film, as they are in real life.

#### ***SOMETHING LIKE HAPPINESS is also a film about friendship. How important are friends to you?***

Friendship is one of the most basic positive forces man has in the world. Thank god I have many friends. Friendship and love are the basic things which help us overcome everything in life which is hard and difficult. Reasons for living.

## **TATIANA VILHELMOVA - MONIKA**

### ***Can you describe how you perceive Monika? Do you feel close to her?***

Close enough to play her. And I played her for quite a while: I spent a year and a half of my life with her. But Monika's nature is completely opposite to mine. The problems she faces I would handle completely differently. She's a pure person who will martyr herself for those closest to her, above all for her best friend, a friend who can't return such kindness. Monika is oblivious to her own life and her own love. I don't have that kind of self-abnegating nature.

### ***How was it acting with children? Did you miss them after shooting was over?***

I often think about them... fondly. Actors suffer every time they get either a child or an animal to 'manage', and are supposed to act as if they love them, while the child perceives them as a stranger! We spent a good deal of time together before shooting as well as off camera during production. Children are simply very individualistic and when they don't want to do something, they don't do it. It was demanding. Fortunately it didn't bother Bohdan at all.

### ***This is your second film with Bohdan Slama. You've worked fairly often with Anna Geislerova and Pavel Liska. Do you prefer to work with people with whom you've established a relationship?***

#### ***How was it in this case?***

Certainly I like meeting new people to work with. But I also like working with people where we've already developed a way to communicate. Everyone has their own language and sometimes it takes a lot of effort to express your point of view. I simply prefer working with people where both they and I are enriched. And I think that in this film it was like that.

### ***You have worked with many directors. Is working with Bohdan somehow specifically different?***

Yes, absolutely! Bohdan is unique, as a man and as a director. I really don't know if it's possible to speak at all about him as a director. He strikes me as a spoiled child who has set his mind on something and then gets it by sulking. Fortunately he's really got something like happiness about him! He always surrounds himself with people who can deal with him or at least try to deal with his ideas. Truth is, he's a sort of a kind-hearted terrorist.

### ***What for you was most difficult during filming, and what did you enjoy the most?***

The hardest thing certainly is the waiting. Working with Bohdan is something which no one should have to experience... you've already been working and preparing for a tough scene, all day you're really holding it together and then he tells you that they'll shoot that scene in a month. What I enjoyed the most was the crew - the people who slowly turn into friends.

### ***Why did you take this role?***

It was enough that Bohdan called and said that we'd shoot something together. I knew from the beginning it would be extremely difficult, but I also knew what the outcome would be. The poetry and language with which Bohdan expresses himself I simply love and for that I'll put up with anything.

## **PAVEL LISKA - TONIK**

### ***Is the character of Tonik close to yours? How would you describe the role?***

Tonik's a completely average guy, a bit of a slacker, but with a romantic and honest soul. He resists his family because they want him to work in a factory as if he were already a family man himself. He's simply a guy like me, a guy who really ought to be responsible by now, but isn't. He drinks, smokes joints and enjoys life. Notwithstanding this slacker life and all the beautiful moments it's given him, he's turning into an adult, into a good man. A romantic who proves he is capable of building a house and raising a family.

### ***He's a bit of a slacker, but doesn't he act responsibly in his relationships with his aunt and Monika?***

Yes, it's the development of these relationships that Tonik passes through. This we all have in common with Tonik. I'm now thirty-three but I still feel as I did ten years ago, with all the negative things relating to responsibility and sensible decision-making. At the same time, I think that even in this immaturity there's something positive and beautiful... at least in Tonik's case.

### ***Tonik is in love with Monika with whom he often looks after the children of their mentally-ill friend Dasha. Was it hard for you to put yourself into that character?***

Above all, Tonik is extremely happy about this situation, happy that he can be with Monika, whom he loves. He's reconciled to the fact that Monika's love lies elsewhere. He takes it as a given. I think that he has a great inner strength. When I was in love with someone I would rather avoid them, because I never knew how to behave. And often it happened that the girl in question didn't love me. That's one thing that still bothers me. The advantage in film or theatre is that there you can be your most courageous. In the film I'm a much bigger hero than I am in reality. And, just like me, Tonik really loves kids. It was often easier to act with the boys because they were so natural and innocent and they made me react the same way when we were in front of the camera.

### ***You worked with Bohdan Slama on his first feature. You also know Anna Geislerova and Tatiana Vilhelmova very well. Is it easier for you to work with people you know well, whom you trust?***

I like to work with people I know, people I like, who understand me and I them. I also like meeting new people and trying out something new. But I've known Bohdan, Tatiana and Anna a very long time: they are people I understand and who, I think, have similar feelings about things. Working with them is a joy.

### ***Is working with Bohdan different than with other directors?***

It's really an organic process. SOMETHING LIKE HAPPINESS is, for me, a piece of life. There wasn't only the year of shooting. We also spent a year with him before shooting, when he first told us the idea. We spoke about the story for a long time, got together often and prepared. The process advanced very calmly and pleasantly. We'd sit in a pub, chat, smoke some grass, and already I was working on my character. By the time filming started, I really knew a great deal about this guy I was going to play. And this is what it's like collaborating with Bohdan. It's different than with other directors where the script is finished, the parts are totally worked out and we sit down for a maximum of one read-through before we start shooting.

### ***How do you choose your roles? When Bohdan calls is it different than when someone else calls?***

With Bohdan the situation is certainly different. He doesn't just call me like some director who has a role for me. We're in constant contact because we're best friends. Our working together happens as part of the process of our friendship. All the same, if someone I don't know has a really important script, I'd be interested. That's the main criterion for me. That and what this someone is all about.

## **ANNA GEISLEROVA - DASHA**

***Your character is mentally ill, and as a result, often unable to take care of her two children. Was it difficult for you to get into such a role?***

Yes. The basic attribute of my character is her illness. For the first time in my life I devoted myself to doing research. I spent time in a sanitarium. I observed the inmates, their behaviour, how they spoke. Having a maternal instinct, it's that much more difficult to act so harshly towards children. So I had some problems. At the same time I enjoy challenges...(laughs)... and this challenge really turned into a big one because during the shooting I became pregnant and as a result, grew overly sensitive towards the children and everything around them. I said to myself, this is the last chance I have to be a monstrous mother unless it happens that I really am one.

***You play the irresponsible mother of two growing boys. Did they sometimes dislike you?***

It was difficult to get them to understand why I was sometimes sweet and then, all of a sudden, terribly vicious or frightening. I had a problem every time I had to betray their trust. Once the camera stopped, we would always smooth things over. Those boys were incredible! At the same time it was hard. They were so spontaneous and natural, nobody knew what they were about to say.

***SOMETHING LIKE HAPPINESS was your first film with Bohdan Slama. Is there anything special about working with him?***

For me, the fact that it was never completely certain what we would shoot. There were many, many changes, but I think they always improved the film. All the time, Bohdan would say, "Come, talk to me". So we would talk. I think that he's a very sensitive person, not particularly interested in what people have, but in the emotional side of things.

***What was the most difficult part of the shooting for you?***

Because I was always only around for the shooting of my parts I felt unprepared, completely unrehearsed. Tatiana, with Pavel and Bohdan, helped me greatly with this. Sometimes I feel as if they manipulated me like a puppet.

***The film is also about the strong friendship between Monika, Tonik and Dasha. How important are friends to you?***

Friendship is a spiritual necessity. You need to have friends who are on the same path in life, who can participate in your joy and sorrow. But even friendships which don't last are important: they teach you that nothing is free, and that friendship must be treated delicately.

## Biographies

### Bohdan Slama - Writer and director

Slama was born in Opava, Czech Republic, in 1967, and after graduating from Czech Technical University, studied at the Film Faculty FAMU in Prague. His college film, GARDEN OF PARADISE, received several awards at international film festivals. His feature debut, WILD BEES, won a Tiger Award in Rotterdam, the SKYY Award in San Francisco and was selected as the Czech entry for the Academy Awards in 2002.

#### Selected Filmography:

- 2001 DIVOKE VCELY / WILD BEES  
(feature film, 94 mins)  
1996 AKATY BILE / WHITEACACIA  
(graduation film, 60 mins)  
1994 ZAHRADKA RAJE / GARDEN OF PARADISE  
(15 mins)

#### Selected Awards for DIVOKE VCELY / WILD BEES

##### Rotterdam IFF 2002

VPRO Tiger Award - international festival premiere

##### San Francisco IFF 2002

SKYY Award For First Film

##### Finále Pízen 2002 (Czech Republic)

First Film Prize, Best Czech Actress (Tatiana Vilhelmova)

**Sochi IFF 2002 (Russia)** - The Pearl Of The World,  
FIPRESCI Prize, Best Actress (Tatiana Vilhelmova)

##### ArtFilm Trencianske Teplice 2002 (Slovakia)

Trencianske Teplice Prize

##### Arsenal IFF 2002 (Riga, Latvia)

Forum Main Prize

##### Warsaw IFF 2002

Special Mention

##### Cottbus Festival of European Films 2002 (Germany)

Main Prize

##### Premiers Plans Angers 2003 (France)

Special Jury Mention

##### Valenciennes IFF 2003 (France)

Special Jury Prize, Best Actress (Tatiana Vilhelmova),  
Student Jury Prize

##### Nové Město Film Festival (Czech Republic)

Best Young Talent (Tatiana Vilhelmova)

##### Czech Lions 2002 (Czech Film Academy Award)

Best Supporting Actress (Zuza Kronerova)

##### Czech representative in 2002 for U.S. Academy Awards

Best Foreign-Language Film

### Tatiana Vilhelmova

Born in 1978 in Prague, Tatiana Vilhelmova was initially recognized for her acting in a stage production of Chekhov's THE CHERRY ORCHARD. She continues to work in the theatre, as a member of Prague's Dejvicka Theatre company, and has been nominated twice for the prestigious Alfred Radok Award. She made her feature film debut in 1995, in Sasa Gedeon's INDIAN SUMMER. She has been nominated six times for the Czech Lion.

#### Selected Filmography:

- 2004 DUSE JAKO KAVIAR / DIRTY SOUL  
Milan Cieslar  
nomination Czech Lion, Best Actress  
2004 MILENCI A VRAZI / LOVERS AND MURDERERS  
Viktor Polesny  
2003 JEDNA RUKA NETLESKA /  
ONE HAND CANŇOT CLAP  
David Ondricek  
2001 DIVOKE VCELY / WILD BEES  
Bohdan Slama  
nomination Czech Lion, Best Actress  
1999 NAVRAT IDIOTA / RETURN OF THE IDIOT  
Sasa Gedeon  
nomination Czech Lion, Best Actress  
1998 CAS DLUHU / A TIME OF DEBTS  
Irena Pavlaskova  
nomination Czech Lion, Best Supporting Actress  
1996 SEPTĚJ / WHISPER  
David Ondricek  
nomination Czech Lion, Best Actress  
1995 INDIANSKE LETO / INDIAN SUMMER  
Sasa Gedeon  
nomination Czech Lion, Best Supporting Actress

## **Pavel Liska**

Born in 1971, Pavel Liska studied acting at Brno drama academy, before joining the HaDivadla theatre company. His film career began in 1999 when director Sasa Gedeon cast him in the lead role in RETURN OF THE IDIOT. He has been twice-nominated for a Czech Lion.

### **Selected Filmography:**

- 2005 SILENI / LUNACY  
Jan Svankmajer
- 2004 HOREM PADEM / UP AND DOWN  
Jan Hrebejk
- 2003 MAZANY FILIP / SMART FILIP  
Vaclav Marhoul
- 2003 NUDA V BRNE / BORED IN BRNO  
aka SEX IN BRNO  
Vladimír Morávek
- 2003 PUPENDO  
Jan Hrebejk
- 2003 CERT VI PROC / THE DEVIL KNOWS WHY  
Roman Vavra
- 2001 DIVOKE VCELY / WILD BEES  
Bohdan Slama
- 2001 VYHNANI Z RAJE /  
EXPULSION FROM PARADISE  
Vera Chytilova
- 1999 NAVRAT IDIOTA / RETURN OF THE IDIOT  
Sasa Gedeon

## **Marek Daniel**

Born in 1971, Daniel - like SOMETHING LIKE HAPPINESS co-star Pavel Liska - studied acting at the academy in Brno, and is a member of the HaDivadlo theatre company. A familiar face of Czech stage and television, he made his feature film debut in Jan Sverak's international hit KOLYA.

### **Selected Filmography:**

- 2005 DOBLBA!  
Petr Vachler
- 2004 HOREM PADEM / UP AND DOWN  
Jan Hrebejk
- 2003 NUDA V BRNE / BORED IN BRNO  
aka SEX IN BRNO  
Vladimír Moravek
- 2001 DIVOKE VCELY / WILD BEES  
Bohdan Slama
- 2001 VYHNANI Z RAJE /  
EXPULSION FROM PARADISE  
Vera Chytilova
- 2001 PARALELNI SVETY / PARALLEL WORLDS  
Petr Vaclav
- 1996 KOLYA  
Jan Sverak

## **Anna Geislerova**

Prolific actress and former model Anna Geislerova was born in 1978 in Prague, and made her feature film debut at the age of 12. She has been nominated three times for a Czech Lion, winning twice: first for Best Actress in 1999 for her performance in Sasa Gedeon's RETURN OF THE IDIOT and again in 2003 for Ondrej Trojan's ZELARY, which was also nominated for the Best Foreign-Language Film Academy Award.

### **Selected Filmography:**

- 2005 SILENI / LUNACY  
Jan Svankmajer
- 2005 SHUT UP AND SHOOT ME  
Steen Agro
- 2003 ZELARY  
Ondrej Trojan  
Czech Lion (Best Actress)
- 2003 MAZANY FILIP / SMART FILIP  
Vaclav Marhoul
- 2003 SUPERTEX  
Jan Schutte
- 2002 THE VISITOR  
Miles Cook
- 2002 VYLET / SOME SECRETS  
Alice Nellis
- 2001 DER TOD FEIERT MIT /  
THE SWIMMING POOL aka THE POOL  
Boris von Sychowski
- 2000 KYTICE / BOUQUET  
F. A. Brabec
- 2000 ENGLAND!  
Achim von Borries
- 1999 PRAHA OCIMA / PRAGUE STORIES  
Various
- 1999 KURE MELANCHOLIK /  
THE MELANCHOLY CHICKEN  
Jaroslav Brabec
- 1999 NAVRAT IDIOTA / RETURN OF THE IDIOT  
Sasa Gedeon  
Czech Lion (Best Actress)
- 1994 JIZDA / THE RIDE  
Jan Sverak  
Czech Lion nomination, Best Actress nomination
- 1992 REKVIUM PRO PANENKU /  
REQUIEM FOR A MAIDEN  
Filip Renc
- 1991 PREME PISEN DOHOLA /  
LET'S ALL SING AROUND  
Ondrej Trojan

## Cast and Crew

### CAST

**Monika:** Tatiana Vilhelmova  
**Tonik:** Pavel Liska  
**Dasha:** Anna Geislerova  
**Jara:** Marek Daniel  
**Boys:** Patrik and Denis  
**Auntie:** Zuzana Kronerova  
**Souckova:** Simona Stasova  
**Soucek:** Bolek Polivka  
**Dad:** Martin Huba  
**Mum:** Anna Kocisova  
**Jiri:** David Dolnik  
**Heli:** Marie Ludvikova

### CREW

**Written and directed by:** Bohdan Slama  
**Producer:** Pavel Strnad (Negativ)  
**Co-producers:** Thanassis Karathanos (Pallas Film)  
Karl Baumgartner (Pallas Film)  
**DP:** Divis Marek  
**Editor:** Jan Danhel  
**Sound:** Jan Cenek  
**Music:** Leonid Soybelman  
**Art directors:** Petr Pistek, Jan Novotny  
**Dramaturgy:** Kristian Suda  
**Costume designer:** Zuzana Krejzkova  
**Wardrobe:** Iva Raskova  
**Make-up:** Veronika Riehs  
**Line producer:** Jiri Konecny  
**Production manager:** Pavel Cechak  
**Production co-ordinator:** Elke Steinweg  
**1st assistant director:** Karel Bezdek

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