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Werckmeister Harmonies

A FILM BY
BÉLA TARR & ÁGNES HRANITZKY

One of the major cinematic achievements of the past quarter century, Béla Tarr's mesmeric parable of societal collapse is an enigma of transcendent visual, philosophical, and mystical resonance. Adapted from a novel by the celebrated writer László Krasznahorkai, and codirected by another frequent Tarr collaborator, Ágnes Hranitzky, *Werckmeister Harmonies* unfolds in an unknown era in an unnamed village, where, one day, a mysterious circus—complete with an enormous stuffed whale and a shadowy, demagogue-like figure known as the Prince—arrives and appears to awaken a kind of madness in the citizens that builds inexorably toward violence and destruction. In thirty-nine of his signature long takes, engraved in ghostly black and white, Tarr conjures an apocalyptic vision of dreamlike dread and fathomless beauty.

Hungary | 2000 | 145 minutes | Black & White | In Hungarian with English subtitles | 1.66:1 aspect ratio

Booking Inquiries: Janus Films
booking@janusfilms.com • 212-756-8822

Press Contact: Courtney Ott
courtney@cineticmedia.com • 646-230-6847



DIRECTORS' BIOGRAPHIES

BÉLA TARR

Béla Tarr was born on July 21, 1955, in Pécs, Hungary. The son of a theatrical set designer and a prompter, Tarr was steeped in the arts from an early age and, at ten years old, played the title character's son in a television adaptation of Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. He gravitated toward filmmaking in his teens, when he produced several 8 mm shorts that influenced Balázs Béla Studios to hire him. It was there that Tarr directed the short *Hotel Magnezit* (1978), about a workers' hostel, and his debut feature, *Family Nest* (*Családi tűzfészek*, 1979), about a young couple who must live with the husband's parents; the latter was awarded the Hungarian Film Critics' Award for best first feature. Both films were made in the style of the "Budapest school," in which low-budget productions achieved a sense of cinema-verité authenticity through the use of real locations, quotidian story lines, and nonprofessional actors.

Following *Family Nest*, Tarr enrolled at the University of Theatre and Film Arts in Budapest. There he directed *The Outsider* (*Szabadgyalog*, 1981), which continued the aesthetic of his previous efforts, and *The Prefab People* (*Panelkapcsolat*, 1982), his first collaboration with leading professional actors. A 1983 television adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* inaugurated Tarr's signature style—though a little more than an hour long, this *Macbeth* contains just two shots.

Almanac of Fall (*Őszi almanach*) was released in 1984, and four years later, Tarr embarked on a new phase, during which he would work in fruitful collaboration with pioneering novelist László Krasznahorkai. The initial results of this partnership were original scripts for the feature *Damnation* (*Kárhozat*, 1988) and the short *The Last Boat* (*Az utolsó hajó*, 1990); their subsequent projects would prove to be among the most ambitious and demanding films in cinematic history. The first of these, a monumental adaptation of Krasznahorkai's own 1985 novel *Sátántangó*, lasts seven-plus hours and is mainly composed of intricately choreographed tracking shots that run between five and ten minutes long. Depicting in gorgeous black-and-white photography the bleak, duplicitous lives of villagers who inhabit a former collectivist farm, the film was greeted with critical hosannas upon its 1994 release and garnered its director worldwide acclaim.

The short *Journey on the Plain* (*Utazás az Alföldön*) followed a year later, but it wasn't until 2000 that *Sátántangó* received its true companion piece. Once again adapting Krasznahorkai's own work (this time 1989's *The Melancholy of Resistance*), Tarr—alongside Ágnes Hranitzky, his wife and longtime editor—directed *Werckmeister Harmonies* (*Werckmeister harmóniák*), a hypnotic tour de force portraying the unraveling of a small Hungarian town upon the arrival of a mysterious circus attraction. Though it is "only" two hours and twenty-five minutes in length, *Harmonies* contains just thirty-nine shots, many of which run for extended durations and demonstrate stunning technical complexity.

Tarr's final two narrative films were yet again cowritten with Krasznahorkai and codirected with Hranitzky: the Georges Simenon adaptation *The Man from London* (*A londoni férfi*, 2007) and *The Turin Horse* (*A torinói ló*, 2011). Since then, he has retired from fiction filmmaking but has directed two documentaries and executive-produced several other movies. Throughout his career, Tarr's films have won numerous awards from various international film festivals, including Cannes and Berlin, and for more than a decade he has served on the board of directors for the Cine Foundation International.

ÁGNES HRANITZKY

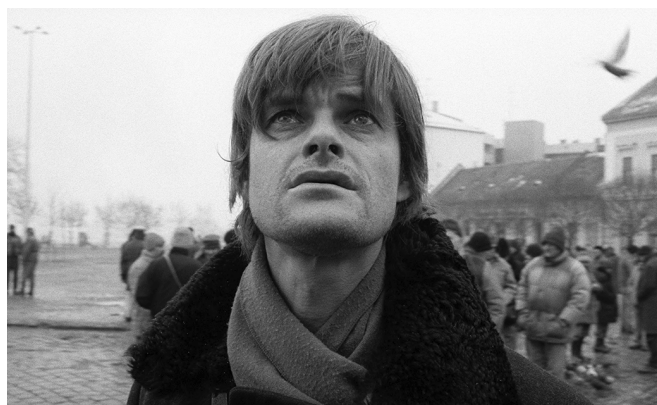
Ágnes Hranitzky was born on July 4, 1945, in Derecske, Hungary, and attended the University of Theatre and Film Arts in Budapest. She began her career in the Hungarian film industry in the mid-1960s, as an assistant editor, and by the early 1970s, she had ascended to the role of editor. It was in this capacity that Hranitzky first collaborated with her husband, Béla Tarr, on the director's 1981 film *The Outsider* (*Szabadgyalog*). Hranitzky edited all of Tarr's films from that point forth and, starting with 2000's *Werckmeister Harmonies* (*Werckmeister harmóniák*), worked alongside him as codirector. (Hranitzky also served as assistant director and production designer on other Tarr features.) Hranitzky's final film was 2011's *The Turin Horse* (*A torinói ló*).

PRODUCTION HISTORY

Artists often find themselves at a crossroads after completing a masterwork: What does one do for an encore? And should one even attempt to top a creative zenith? In the case of Hungarian director Béla Tarr, the source material for his follow-up to the gargantuan, career-defining *Sátántangó* (1994) appeared ready-made in the form of *The Melancholy of Resistance*, the 1989 novel by László Krasznahorkai, which would become *Werckmeister Harmonies* (*Werckmeister harmóniák*). Tarr had been collaborating with Krasznahorkai since the two cowrote the script for 1988's *Damnation* (*Kárhozat*). Then, for *Sátántangó*, they had adapted Krasznahorkai's debut novel of the same name into a seven-plus-hour epic that was immediately hailed as a high-water mark of art-house cinema. A screen version of *Melancholy*, Krasznahorkai's second novel, would have seemed a more than logical successor to *Sátántangó*.

And yet *Melancholy* was not an immediately obvious choice. As Tarr explained to Bright Lights Film Journal after the premiere of *Harmonies* at the 2000 Cannes Film Festival, he and collaborator Ágnes Hranitzky had “read the novel and thought it was good, but we didn't want to make a movie [based on it]. And about five years ago, we met in Berlin with Lars Rudolph . . . and we immediately thought that we had our [János] Valuska, and that we had a reason to read the book again . . . We were influenced by his personality, and afterward we started to work on the script.”

Notable for his compressed facial features and haunting gaze, Rudolph had acted in almost two dozen projects, most notably the German hit *Run Lola Run* (1998), in the seven years prior to *Harmonies*, but his creative roots were in the world of avant-garde music. By discovering in Rudolph the inspiration to adapt *Melancholy*, Tarr was drawing upon his early experiences as a director, when he would often employ nonprofessionals to imbue his films with inimitable authenticity. In this sense, Rudolph's gaunt physique was an extension of the bleak, ominous world of *Harmonies*, not far removed from those of Tarr's previous films. Rudolph was so crucial, in fact, that the script was restructured from the novel to more closely align the audience's viewpoint with that of the character. Fellow German actors Peter Fitz and the legendary Hanna Schygulla were chosen to play, respectively, János's uncle György Eszter and his estranged wife, Tünde Eszter.



CAST

János Valuska	Lars Rudolph
György Eszter	Peter Fitz
Tünde Eszter	Hanna Schygulla
Man in the broadcloth coat	János Derzsi
Man in western boots	Đoko Rosić
Man in the sailor cap	Tamás Wichmann
The police captain	Péter Dobai
Director	Ferenc Kállai
Factotum	Mihály Kormos
Porter	Dr. Putyi Horváth
Aunt Piri	Éva Almássy Albert
Mrs. Harrer	Irén Szajki
Lajos Harrar	Alfréd Járai
Mr. Nadabán	György Barkó
Mr. Volent	Lajos Dobák
Mr. Árgyelán	András Fekete
The Prince	Sandor Bese

CREDITS

Codirector and associate producer	Béla Tarr
Codirector and editor	Ágnes Hranitzky
Screenplay	László Krasznahorkai, Béla Tarr
Additional dialogue	Péter Dobai, Gyuri Dósa Kiss, György Fehér
Associate producers	Ralph E. Cotta, András Vágvolgyi B.
Producers	Franz Goëss, Paul Saadoun, Miklós Szita, Joachim von Vietinghoff
Composer	Mihály Vig
Director of photography	Gábor Medvigy
Cinematographers	Patrick de Ranter, Miklós Gurbán, Erwin Lanzensberger, Emil Novák, Rob Tregenza
Steadicam operator	Jörg Widmer
Set designers	Sándor Katona, Zsuzsa Mihalek, Béla Zsolt Tóth
Costume designer	János Breckl
Production managers	Lajos Gerhardt, Gábor Téni
Unit manager	Gábor Koncz
Assistant directors	Jeroen Frantzen, Sebestyén Kodolányi, Roland Vranik
Second assistant director	Csaba Bagossy
Sculptors	Éva Karczag, András Rose
Whale mock-up designer	Iván Pohárnok
Special-effects technician	Péter Pozsonyi
Script supervisor	Orsolya Vercz

Once the screenplay was complete, Tarr initiated preproduction and began assembling a crew. Many members of his previous filmmaking teams returned for this latest adventure, but in several important respects, *Harmonies* would prove singular in how and with whom Tarr worked on set. Although he had collaborated with his wife, editor and production designer Hranitzky, on every project since 1981's *The Outsider* (*Szabadgyalog*), on *Harmonies* she became the codirector, alongside her husband. Tarr told Bright Lights about his creative partnership with Hranitzky: "We decide everything about the cutting during the shooting. She is always there and watches everything on the video monitor. She checks the rhythm of the scene, how two scenes will interact, and things like that." Meanwhile, Gábor Medvigy reprised his role as Tarr's trusted director of photography, along with the film's five other cinematographers: Patrick de Ranter, Milós Gurbán, Erwin Lanzensberger, Emil Novák, and Rob Tregenza. Such a large roster was necessary over the course of the three-year shoot, as well as for the execution of *Harmonies'* thirty-nine complex and technically demanding long takes—the opening shot itself runs more than ten minutes.

One of the film's most significant characters is its setting, a small town with a desolate central square. This place becomes inhabited by a traveling circus attraction—the world's largest whale—that exerts a disturbing, maddening power over the villagers, who eventually transform into a violent mob. Tarr spent over a year searching for the right square, until he found one in Baja, Hungary. Filming there and in other locations proved difficult. Many of *Harmonies'* long takes required extensive and time-consuming reshoots, and various on-set illnesses, some of them occasioned by below-freezing weather, also stalled proceedings. However, money proved the biggest factor behind repeated and lengthy pauses in the

production schedule. As Tarr has explained, "We started the movie without the whole financing. If we had some money, we ran and shot. Then it stopped. It was very difficult for the actors, you know, because they are Germans, they are used to a normal life, to shoot a movie for certain days, finish it, and then everybody goes home. So it was not like shooting a movie, it was like a part of life."

Funding for the almost \$1.5 million production came from various international sources, including German companies Arte and Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF). Another source was French producer Paul Saadoun, who entered the picture in 1998, a year into *Harmonies'* three-year conception. As Saadoun told Bright Lights, "Someone told me that Béla Tarr [was having] some difficulties with his film, so I went to Budapest and screened five takes. It was so completely crazy, unbelievable, that I decided to help him. The film was stopped at that time. You know, during the screening of the rushes, I don't speak German or Hungarian, but I could see and feel what could be the film . . . I was so impressed that I could only help him."

When *Harmonies* was released in Hungary at the beginning of 2001, and then in numerous other countries over the next several years, critics (including Jonathan Rosenbaum, J. Hoberman, and Roger Ebert) and audiences alike heralded it as the latest triumph by one of international cinema's seminal auteurs—a master of a uniquely exacting style and a director in possession of a sorrowful, tragicomic vision of humanity, in all its cruelty and compassion. The film won two Hungarian Film Critics' Awards as well as awards from the Chicago Film Critics Association and the Berlin International Film Festival. It is now considered a classic of the past quarter century of cinema.

