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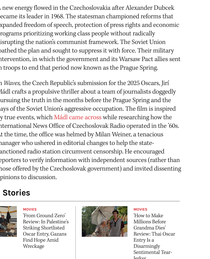
'Waves' Review: The Czech Republic's Oscar Entry Is a Thrilling Affirmation of the Importance of Independent Journalism

Inspired by the true story of a Czechoslovakian public radio station, the Jiří Mádl-directed drama centers on two young brothers during the Prague Spring and the aftermath of the Warsaw Pact invasion.

BY LOVIA GYARKYE | DECEMBER 8, 2024 11:58AM



'Waves' | MARFA ŽIŽKA

A new energy flowed in the Czechoslovakia after Alexander Dubcek became its leader in 1968. The statesman championed reforms that expanded freedom of speech, protection of press rights and economic programs prioritizing working class people without radically disrupting the nations communist framework. The Soviet Union loathed the plan and sought to suppress it with force. Their military intervention, in which the government and its Warsaw Pact allies sent in troops to end that period now known as the Prague Spring.

In *Waves*, the Czech Republic's submission for the 2025 Oscars, Jiří Mádl crafts a propulsive thriller about a team of journalists doggedly pursuing the truth in the months before the Prague Spring and the days of the Soviet Union's aggressive occupation. The film is inspired by true events, which Mádl came across while researching how the International News Office of Czechoslovak Radio operated in the '60s. At the time, the office was helmed by Milan Weiner, a tenacious manager who ushered in editorial changes to help the state-sanctioned radio station circumvent censorship. He encouraged reporters to verify information with independent sources (rather than those offered by the Czechoslovak government) and invited dissenting opinions to discussion.

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Waves

THE BOTTOM LINE
A stirring portrait of principled reporting

Cast: Vojtěch Vodochodský, Ondřej Stupka, Tatiana Pauhofová, Stanislav Majer, Vojtěch Kotek, Marika Šoposká

Director-screenwriter: Jiří Mádl

2 hours 11 minutes

With its focus on the news gathering process, *Waves* affirms the importance of independent and ethical reporting. Mádl's film, which as of now is still seeking U.S. distribution, might have particular resonance with American audiences wrestling with the reality of misinformation and the shifting image of the journalist in the public imagination. How the press research and present their stories has never been more important.

Waves probes its moral concerns through an intimate tale of two brothers trying to survive. After the death of their parents, Tomáš (an excellent Vojtech Vodochodský), a politically aloof young man, assumes guardianship of his teenage sibling Paja (Ondřej Stupka). Their situation is precarious: Early on, in a sign of the household's impoverishment, Tomáš cuts around the mold on a piece of sourdough bread to supplement a paltry meal. At any point, representatives from child services can separate the brothers.

But Paja isn't as concerned about that kind of state intervention. The youngest wants a revolution; he participates in clandestine meetings and demonstrations with other student activists fighting for free speech. They are inspired by the work of Weiner (Stanislav Majer) at the radio station.

Mádl begins *Waves* with a deft staging of the brothers' diverging interests. The opening montage introduces a thrilling tension that the director wisely maintains throughout the film, interspersing chaotic scenes of protestors, Paja somewhere in their midst, fending off police, with quiet, domestic ones of Tomáš toasting bread and calling neighbors in search of his brother.

Upon returning home, Paja tells Tomáš in an excited burst of energy about an opening at the Weiner's radio show. There's an audition — a test of sorts — for the coveted position the next day, and Paja wants to apply. Tomáš forbids it, but Paja, in the style of rebellious teens and younger siblings everywhere, ignores him. Somehow both brothers end up at the test and, in an ironic twist, Tomáš gets the job.

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Waves moves quickly and efficiently after these establishing moments. Mádl uses a handful of time jumps to build momentum and translate the dizzying pace with which the political climate changed. Tomáš, at the encouragement of his current boss, takes the job as a technician at Weiner's station. (He keeps the news from Paja in a manner that requires some suspension of disbelief.) Once embedded within this team of intrepid reporters, Tomáš learns more about newsgathering and radio broadcasting methods and starts to appreciate the value of what Weiner and his comrades are fighting for. He becomes friends with Weiner, who serves as a distant inspiration, and becomes intimately involved with Vera (Tatiana Pauhofová), a translator whom everyone finds cold.

But just as Tomáš acclimates to his new life, he is asked by his former boss (and then threatened by state police forces) to essentially become an informant. He reluctantly agrees, and Vodochodský's performance soars in these moments where the soft-spoken Tomáš finds himself in ethically murky territory. A visceral sense of hurt and anxiety flash across the actor's face as his character weighs the pain of snitching on his colleagues and the grief of losing his only surviving family, which complicates our understanding of his character.

There are times, though, when Mádl's screenplay undercuts this work by briefly abandoning Tomáš and Paja to consider secondary plotlines (office affairs, general politicking). There are moments when Mádl leaves Paja for so long that his re-entry into the story feels abrupt. One wishes that the brothers were given more screen time to wrestle with how their respective political leanings challenge and change their relationship.

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Still, *Waves* excels in other areas, particularly when it comes to Mádl's use of archival footage. The director scatters these clips throughout this film, sometimes making the grainy footage of Czech citizens storming the streets during a protest or the Soviet Union tanks rolling into Prague seem indistinguishable from this fictionalized retelling. The effect is dizzying in a good way. It elegantly connects *Waves* to the real-life past, making it easier for viewers to leave understanding why protecting this kind of principled reporting will be necessary to the future.

Full credits

Production companies: Dawson Films, Wandal Production
Cast: Vojtěch Vodochodský, Ondřej Stupka, Tatiana Pauhofová, Stanislav Majer, Vojtěch Kotek, Marika Šoposká, Petr Lněnička, Matyáš Řezníček, Petr Halíček, Martin Hofmann, Jacob Erftemeijer, Jan Nedbal, Tomáš Maštalír, Igor Banó
Director-screenwriter: Jiří Mádl
Producers: Monika Kristl, Vlasta Kristl
Director of photography: Martin Žiaran
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Costume designer: Katarína Štrbová Bielková
Editor: Filip Mašlaňek
Music: Simon Goff
2 hours 11 minutes

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