



NEWS

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Polish Cinema Visits Austin, Texas

by Gilbert Rappaport

Polish cinema has been one of the stars on the European cultural stage since World War II. The films of Andrzej Wajda (1926-), Krzysztof Zanussi (1939-) and Krzysztof Kieślowski (1941-1996) in particular have taken their places in the canon of world cinema. There is a strong supporting cast also, including not only such figures as Roman Polański and Agnieszka Holland, known for their work in Europe and the U.S., but many other accomplished filmmakers as well. Poland is home of the world-famous 'National Film School' in Łódź, founded in 1948, which has produced many actors, directors, photographers, camera operators and TV staff from Poland and abroad. Not only are ticket sales in Polish theaters on the rise, but the indigenous film industry is enjoying considerable, even surprising, success in competing with imports, producing both serious films and successful commercial products.

The city of Austin and the University of Texas have been fortunate over the past several years to have been able to partner with the Austin Polish Society (<http://www.austinpolschsociety.org>) to bring some of the many accomplishments of Polish cinema to the attention of our communities. In the past three years alone the Society has brought four outstanding directors from Poland to Austin to meet with appreciative audiences and screen their latest work.

The Austin Polish Society's 2008 Film Festival featured Jacek Bromski (1946-), director, screenwriter, producer, and current president of the Polish Filmmakers Association. Perhaps his best-known film in Poland is "It's Me, the Thief" (*To ja, złodziej*; 2000), a bitter contemporary comedy about teenage car thieves. His poignant film "In Heaven as Is on Earth" (*U Pana Boga za piecem*; 1998) about small-town life in Poland on the Belorussian border enjoyed such success that the director made two sequels. Mr. Bromski brought with him the second part of his trilogy, "God's Little Garden" (*U Pana Boga w ogrodku*; 2007), which was shown in the Bob Bullock Texas State Historical Museum, followed by a Q&A session with viewers.



Gilbert Rappaport, Beata Gmurowski (of the Austin Polish Society), and Krzysztof Zanussi

That same film festival made it possible to view Andrzej Wajda's recent film "Katyń" (2007) which was not yet in distribution in the U.S. The film masterfully tells a powerful

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story about one of the "blank spots" of history that for fifty years could not be openly discussed in the Soviet bloc: the secret murder of some 25,000 Polish officers and intelligentsia by the Soviet security police (NKVD) during the Red Army's occupation of Eastern Poland at the beginning of World War II. The last ten minutes or so of the film were so violent and shocking (especially on a large screen) that plans to have a panel discussion afterwards were wisely set aside ...

An unexpected treat was the opportunity to view a curious film called "Solidarity, Solidarity" (2005). In August 1980 the "Solidarity" movement was able to force the Communist government to recognize it as a self-governing and independent labor union. This historic development emerged from a successful strategy of peaceful negotiations and demonstrations centered in the Lenin shipyards of the Baltic port of Gdańsk. Twenty-five years after that famous 'Polish August', a retrospective seemed in order. After all, a new generation had grown up in a free and independent Poland, with no personal recollection of that dramatic period. So in 2005 Polish Television brought together 13 of Poland's leading contemporary filmmakers and asked each to contribute a short subject of 10-12 minutes on what Solidarity meant for contemporary Poland. (The title of the film comes from the chant used in the streets in support of the union: "*So-li-darność! So-li-darność!*"). Some of the films are serious, some are comedic, some are documentary, others are original dramas; the entirety serves as a textbook example of contrasting approaches to the same subject. There is a certain fascination with the Far East in Poland today (which, incidentally, found an early reflection in Andrzej Wajda's connections and collaborations with Japan even during Communist times), and it is natural to see this film as a collection of haiku.

During his visit to Austin, Mr. Bromski graciously agreed to meet with my "Poland in the Twentieth Century" class and discuss the video as an example of contemporary Polish film. While Mr. Bromski has his own piece in the collection, his influence is also found indirectly. The first short, "Sushi" (again Japan!) by Juliusz Machulski, serves brilliantly as an epigraph for the rest of the video, for it shows an enterprising and self-important director trying to convince his reluctant writers to put together a script for Polish television. "There won't be much money in this for us, but it is a matter of prestige: if we don't do it, people will think we weren't invited to participate!". Bromski told the class that Machulski was in fact using Bromski's own story about what he had to tell HIS people, who were reluctant to interrupt their ongoing work for this project.

In February, the Austin Polish Society was able to catch the renowned Krzysztof Zanussi on a visit to the US and lure him to Austin. Mr. Zanussi, an absolutely

charming figure, gracious guest, and brilliant polyglot, gave a lecture on the language of film in the College of Communication and screened his latest film "With a Warm Heart" (*Serce w dłoni*; 2008) at the Texas Union Theater. A wealthy if shadowy business figure needs a heart transplant and for a donor he is led to a young man who is such a loser that, after he lost his girlfriend and his job, even his attempts to commit suicide end in failure. Mr. Zanussi was a leading figure in the "cinema of moral unrest", a Polish cinematic trend in the 1970's, and this film is a natural continuation of his work from that period in how it treats the balancing of moral imperatives. Although not made explicit, there are indications that the businessman is from Russia or Ukraine (he is played by the famous Ukrainian actor Bogdan Stupka, who speaks excellent, but accented, Polish). And the director revealed to us that a strange feline figure intervening in events at the beginning and end of the film is intended to recall Bulgakov's demonic Begemot. When we recall how the film *Bromski* brought for us is predicated on how the chaotic and anachronistic world of Belarus spills over the border into "Europe" (i.e., Poland), we can see that Japan is not the only iconic geographic space in the Polish consciousness today.

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BALLET RUSSE

2009 marks the 100th anniversary of the founding of Ballet Russes by Sergei Diaghliev. In September 2009, CREEES will celebrate the centennial of this milestone in cultural history with a symposium of events, featuring films, talks, discussions, and an exhibition of original costumes and scene designs. More details will be available at the end of the summer.



Léon Bakst. Costume design for *Narcisse*, 1911. From a 1916 souvenir program for Serge Diaghilev's Ballet Russe. Dance Collection, HRC.