

INTERVIEW WITH AGNIESZKA HOLLAND

DIRECTOR OF "SPOOR",
A FEATURE FILM SUPPORTED BY EURIMAGES

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BY TARA KARAJICA



Agnieszka Holland © Karolina Poryzala

Born in Warsaw, Poland, in 1948, Agnieszka Holland graduated from the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU) in Prague and began her career assisting Krzysztof Zanussi and Andrzej Wajda. She collaborated with Krzysztof Kieślowski on the screenplay of his trilogy, "Three Colours". Her film, "Gorączka", was screened in the Competition at the Berlinale in 1981, the year in which she emigrated to Paris. Since then, she has made over 30 films, won many awards, including the Golden Globe and a Berlinale Silver Bear, and has been nominated for a BAFTA and an Emmy. Her films – "In Darkness", "Europa Europa" and "Angry Harvest" – were all nominated for an Academy Award.

Tara Karajica talks to Agnieszka Holland about her award-winning film, "Spoor", a cross-genre story that premiered at the 2017 Berlinale, where it won the Silver Bear – Alfred Bauer Prize – for a feature film that opens new perspectives, and about women in film.

HOW DID "SPOOR" COME ABOUT? WHAT ATTRACTED YOU TO OLGA TOKARCZUK'S NOVEL "DRIVE YOUR PLOUGH OVER THE BONES OF THE DEAD"?

Well, I knew the writer, the content, the message and also the challenge – the fact that it is a very capricious and mysterious piece and it wasn't evident to find a

way to translate it to the screen. We did spend a lot of time searching for the form of the story because the genre is not obvious; it's very mixed. It's a combination of genres and this kind of storytelling is always more complicated to deliver.

IN THAT SENSE, CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE ADAPTATION PROCESS?

I have always liked Olga's writing very much, but most of her novels don't have a classical storytelling structure – they are more a mix of essays, reflections, meditations and a lot of small stories that are intertwined. So this one seemed to be quite a simple piece to adapt because it's a psychological thriller with detective story elements, suspense as well as certain psychological elements, and humour and grotesque. Olga wrote the first draft and it was the first time she had adapted her own writing and she was pretty sure that it would be quite simple. She did it in two months or even faster and when we read it, we found it really awful! It didn't work at all! It was stripped of all the bits of mystery and ambiguity and it was a very flat journalistic statement. So we then sat together, made a new structure and wrote some scenes, trying to find a common style. We were sure then that it would be the final script in three months' time but, two years and eighteen drafts later, we were still battling to find the right one.



Agnieszka Mandat © Robert Palka

Finally, it was a friend of mine, Štěpán Hulík, a Czech screenwriter who wrote “Burning Bush”, who did a quiet and discreet bit of script doctoring and suddenly it started to work. I would say that we had the house built and practically finished, but the windows were dirty so it was impossible to look inside or out, and he washed the windows. But the final decisions were made during the editing because, after working on the script for such a long time, we didn’t solve all the possible problems and the dynamic of the shooting and the search for the shooting style took the story in a slightly different direction than we had expected at the beginning. It was a pretty elaborate task. In the end, maybe it’s not perfect in terms of storytelling efficiency, but I think it has life, originality and importance.

IN WHAT WAY DID THE EXPERIENCE OF MAKING “SPOOR” MAKE YOU LEAVE YOUR COMFORT ZONE? WHAT WERE THE CHALLENGES?

I wanted to make this film because it was very different from my previous films. My last film had quite a classical story and I found the way to make it simple and complex at the same time, as well as accessible and efficient. And I felt that I was working in a comfort zone and I had to leave that comfort zone and not take advantage of the craft of the storyteller, which I actually am. Mostly, I know from day two or three how to shoot the piece, but here, we’ve been shooting different versions of a scene for a week or maybe longer. Kasia Adamik, who was my co-director – she was the second unit director and then she became the co-director because of the complexity of the shooting – brought another point of view. It was really a process. It wasn’t the execution of the concept that was ready before we started to shoot; it was the dynamics with mistakes and achievements, failures and little victories.

CAN YOU DELVE A LITTLE DEEPER INTO YOUR WORK WITH KASIA ADAMIK? HOW WAS SHE INVOLVED IN THE FILM? HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN COLLABORATING WITH HER?

We did some TV series and “Janosik: A True Story” together. Quite often, she did extended second-unit directing on most of my films from the past 20 years when she was available, a very extended second unit that wasn’t the classical second unit, but more in terms of the development of scenes. She has a slightly different style but, at the same time, it’s complementary and comes from a similar sensibility but from a different point of view. I always found it very interesting to use this polyphony, this duality in points of view, trying to merge it into a film without making it fall apart, but adding value to the storytelling. She’s very generous and quite often she gives me a lot of her ideas that work without her really being the co-author. Here, her involvement was really extensive and really important. It was obvious that we should be presented as co-directors. We weren’t co-directing in terms of directing together by sitting in front of the monitor and directing, but we were dividing the scenes into two units. She was shooting one kind of scene and I was shooting another kind of scene in a different way.

YOU DENOUNCE THE WAY RELIGION, AGGRESSION AND MASCULINITY OPERATE IN THE RIGID SOCIAL HIERARCHY OF THE RURAL WORLD OF THE VALLEY, A PLACE RULED PREDOMINANTLY BY MEN’S PRIDE, GREED AND THOUGHTLESSNESS. IT FEELS THAT WOMEN AND ANIMALS JOIN FORCES AGAINST PATRIARCHY. IS THAT RIGHT?

Well, I hope so. Of course, it’s a kind of metaphor. On a very practical level, it means that hunters are hunters and they are blind to the suffering of animals and they also have disdain for the weaker, and women are



Agnieszka Mandat & Miroslav Krobot © Robert Palka



Agnieszka Mandat & Marcin Bosak © Robert Palka

weaker. Older women are even weaker and animals are powerless. But the subject also works on a metaphorical level and the hunters are not only hunters, but hunting is an attitude towards the world, which is heavily enforced by the Catholic religion à la polonaise. It means that we have power. It means that we can do with the air, the planet, the animals and weaker people whatever we want. We want them to serve us, not to be the servants to a common good, to higher values such as solidarity, equality, freedom and respect for everything that is alive. We tried to catch the moment of the rebellion which, of course, is ambiguous because what Duszejko, the heroine, does is not something I would advise you to do now. We also show a sort of fantasy about revenge and the trap of anger, because anger is also, I think, the main subject of this story. And there's a duality, an ambiguity to anger, because it can be very constructive in that it can push people to fight for a better world, but it can also lead them to destroy and to kill. It's a bit like fire. Fire also has this double function – it can warm you, but it can also burn and destroy you. It's a sort of moral tale but, at the same time, it is also a form of intellectual provocation as every revenge story is. If you look, for example, at revenge in Tarantino's films, you have a similar ambivalence.

CAN WE TALK ABOUT WOMEN AND THE “FEMINIST ANARCHISTIC” SUBGENRE OF THE FILM?

I think that women have had enough. I think that the moment when women accepted that they will always be submissive and somehow secondary to the values of men and that they will be fulfilling a masculine, patriarchal agenda, always pretending to be happy when they are not, to be free when they are not free, is passing, is going away. It's also why we can observe a kind of backlash because men feel that they are losing the remains of power and they are very nervous

about it. And this power also, of course, in our times, touches the reproductive rights of women. Women who are emancipated procreate much less than those accepting the patriarchal system. So, suddenly, the demography is changing, which is also changing everything. It's one of women's rights and part of the fight for freedom and feminism. Misogyny and political reactions like that of the Catholic Church, that of Donald Trump or the reaction of the Polish governing party are a reaction to this deep change and the danger is, of course, that they want to take from us, women, the rights that we have already gained. They are not taken for granted. We have to fight for them all the time because we can lose them, something you can see in dystopian novels, films and TV series like, for example, “The Handmaid's Tale”.

WAS IT A RISK TO MAKE THE FILM BECAUSE IT TACKLES NOT ONLY THE SACROSANCT DOCTRINES OF HUNTING AND THE CHURCH BUT ALSO WOMEN'S FIGHT?

We were making the film before the political change in Poland. The film opened just as this change happened, which was actually both sad and funny because suddenly we could observe the same hate on a much higher level within the new government. The Minister of the Environment behaved exactly like the hunters from our film, destroying everything around them and hating ecologists. The government initiated anti-women measures so, somehow, what we didn't anticipate was the political reality in my country. But censorship didn't exist at that point, so the film was distributed normally and a big part of the population – because society is very divided now – was very angry with the film and believed that it was immoral propaganda and eco-terrorism. We were attacked by the right wing media and people but, at the same time, it gave some kind of satisfaction to the others, to the left, to the more feminist part of the population.



Agnieszka Mandat & Miroslav Krobot © Robert Palka



Agnieszka Mandat © Robert Palka

We wanted the film to exist not only on this ideological and political platform, we wanted there to also be a human mystery to it, so we tried to avoid being too politically vocal and tried to show different sides of reality. But it *is* a political film and I think that today is a time when making political films is a necessity.

THE FILM DENOUNCES THE CULTURE OF CRUELTY, WHICH BEGINS AT A VERY EARLY AGE. WHEN DID YOU START TO BE SENSITIVE TO THE PLIGHT OF ANIMALS? DID YOU THINK THAT THE FILM WOULD SOMEHOW CREATE A RISE IN ACTIVISM CONCERNING ANIMALS?

It certainly supported activism. We had a lot of meetings before the premiere and the first screenings of the film with pro-animal and ecological activists, and they've been mostly very grateful. They found they were able to identify with the ideas in this film, even if they were afraid that they could be judged as extreme or radical, based on the main character's activity and decisions. But what was funny is that when this new government started with its very destructive actions against forests and animal rights, there were several demonstrations in Poland and, in a few of them, I've seen posters saying: "Duszejko will not forgive you", which was a funny allusion to what Janina Duszejko did to the hunters. Somehow, she had entered not only literary or film culture, but also activist culture, becoming a kind of symbol. My sensitivity towards animals was always quite high, but it is far from what Olga feels and did with her actions and her activism, with her political view and with her very human view and practice in the everyday world. For example, I still eat meat and she is absolutely vegetarian, and it means she puts her solidarity and love for animals into practice in her everyday life whereas I am less committed.

CAN YOU TALK ABOUT JANINA? HOW DO YOU SEE HER?

She is strong, but fragile. She is very opinionated, but at the same time very open, very empathic – so empathic that it becomes a weakness, a fragility, because she cannot accept the world of oppression and cruelty. And she always finds those who are weak and persecuted, but at the same time, she has this arrogance that when she believes in something, she believes in her right to execute it. She is a strong woman with very archetypal women's traits and, at the same time, a woman who is the product of her generation, of the first generation of real emancipation, when women were really having professional careers, were able to follow their own paths and to think that their vision of the world is as good as that of men, maybe even better.

THE FILM IS A TRUE EUROPEAN FILM, A TRUE EUROPEAN CO-PRODUCTION. CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THAT? WHAT ADDED VALUE DOES IT GIVE IT?

It is written by a famous Polish writer, it is a Polish story and it's set in Poland. But it's set in Poland on the border, in the Kłodzka basin, which is this pocket between Germany and the Czech Republic that belonged to Germany before the Second World War. I studied in Czechoslovakia at FAMU and Czech culture and sensibility are familiar to me, but so are the Slovak ones. I speak Slovak, my ex-husband is Slovak and my ties with Slovakia are very emotional. This sensibility from the south of Poland has been an important part of this story. We also shot part of this film on the Czech side, which is a few kilometers away from the main filming area, and we shot the church scene in the Czech Republic because it was impossible to get permission to shoot in a Polish church, so it was practical and creative. As I have already mentioned, a Czech screenwriter helped us with the final version



Agnieszka Mandat © Robert Palka

of the script and several cinematographers who shot animal footage also came from Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The animals were trained in the Czech Republic and the same studio that worked with me on “Burning Bush” did the wonderful visual effects. The film has a Czech feel and part of the humour we’ve been using is a bit like Czech humour. It was a very natural co-production. The Germans came on board a little later. We shot a few scenes in Berlin and we used some opportunities from this country as well. The Swedish Film Institute very quickly accepted the subject and Olga Tokarczuk is very popular in Scandinavia. Her writing has received awards several times there and they are very much in sync with her sensitivity towards women’s rights and animal rights, so it was also somehow natural. We did the final sound design in Stockholm and in the studios close to Gothenburg and I was really happy. I thought that the sound mixer and designer appreciated in a very clear and artistic way what the sound of this film had to be like. These European co-productions are not always very logical from a creative point of view, but here it really worked.

THERE HAS BEEN A LOT OF TALK ABOUT WOMEN IN FILM FOR THE PAST YEAR AND A HALF. WHAT IS YOUR OPINION OF THE SITUATION AND HOW IS IT IN POLAND?

My opinion is that changes are coming, but very slowly. There is a very powerful male lobby among the financiers, producers, distributors and festival organisers who are against giving women too much space, and they are using economic and artistic arguments that women’s films are not on average as good as men’s films. I don’t believe it. I think they mostly have lower budgets and different sensibilities, but the women’s point of view has been totally neglected for centuries, so it suddenly seems to be inferior. But it’s not inferior – we are half of humanity and I think that our views today are more important than men’s views because we have something really important to say about the situation of the world. To present different sensibilities is altogether necessary to understand humanity. I am in favour of quotas and I think that we really have to keep pressurising and persuading, especially distributors and festival organisers, to open up to another agenda. In Poland, the situation is mixed because we are still not present enough in cinemas, but this is actually a generation of very

powerful and talented female directors. There’s such a powerful group of women in film that we could speak of a new wave and we have shown real solidarity; we are helping each other, promoting our agenda and trying to influence different institutions to introduce quotas. I hope it will work because several young women who are making films in Poland are strong personalities and they will not be silenced.

“The opinions expressed in this interview are those of the director concerned and in no way reflect the official position of the Council of Europe or the Eurimages Film Fund.”