Cultural Daily

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Pawel Pawlikowski's Haunting IDA

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, May 28th, 2014

IDA is a film that demands careful consideration.

Acclaimed director Pawel Pawlikowski (*Last Resort*, *My Summer of Love*) herein examines the aftermath of the Holocaust and its impact upon the faith and identity of Jewish survivors of the Nazi occupation in Poland. Set in 1962, the film is Pawlikowski's evocative tribute to the homeland of his remembered youth.

IDA tells the story of a young novitiate, Anna, who on the verge of taking her vows, discovers the secret of her Jewish identity. When her Mother Superior insists that Anna visit her sole surviving relative, Wanda, a Communist party insider and secular Jew, Anna learns her birth name, Ida Lebenstein, and journeys with Wanda to uncover dark truths of her family history.

I had an exceedingly conflicted reaction to *IDA*. I was taken in by the haunting stillness and gaze which newcomer Agata Trzebuchowska imbues Anna/Ida. I was struck by profound sadness for all that her character had lost, robbed of her immediate family and her birthright, the Jewish faith of her ancestors. In what constitutes a metaphorical "holy rape," Ida had unwittingly been reassigned for indoctrination as a Catholic. For me, Ida's story resonates squarely as a tragedy. Yet, none of the distress that I experienced at the plight of the character ever seems to register for the character Anna/Ida herself.

In the film, Anna's upbringing within the structure of the monastery and her faith practice within the Catholic tradition imbues her with great strength and a moral authority beyond her years. Her habit confers upon her a respect that is denied to her Marxist-Leninist-Jewess Aunt Wanda (Agata Kulesza). We witness how Anna is better equipped to navigate the affairs of the world into which she was born than Wanda, who meets with a tragic end. Judaism as a positive spiritual framework or tradition lies beyond the scope, imagination, interest, and quite probably experience of Polish-born auteur Pawlikowski and the characters he has conceived. Pawlikowski takes us by the hand to intimately experience the dark truth of anti-Semitism in Poland of that time and by extension, the anti-Semitism that is reputed to prevail in present-day Poland.

The following is a conversation that I had by phone with director Pawlikowski, shortly after his film screened in the Spotlight program at Sundance Film Festival 2014.

Director Pawel Pawlikowski, *IDA*.
Photo courtesy of Sylwester Kazmierczak and Sundance Film Festival 2014.

Sophia Stein: You have commented: "I come from a family full of mysteries and contradictions and have lived in one sort of exile or another for most of my life." How so?

Pawel Pawlikowski:. In 1971, when I was around 13 years old, my [divorced] mother married an English guy. I came to England, but I didn't treat England as my home. As far as I was concerned, I was on holiday. I lived in Germany, England, Italy, Paris, but I never returned [to Poland] until just last year. So I made a bit of a profession of exile. A couple of years ago, I settled into the flat right next door to where I had lived in Warsaw before I'd left.

Both my parents were secular Poles. My mother's family, with whom I spent all my holidays and Christmases, was a traditional Polish-Catholic family. On my father's side, his mother was Jewish and died in Auschwitz. So I was a quarter Jewish, but I didn't know that for a while.

Sophia: How did you first learn that you were Jewish?

Pawel: I am not Jewish. My grandmother was Jewish. It wasn't a big drama. I just I looked through the papers once, and there it said she died in Auschwitz. But I don't want you to see the film through the perspective of my life – because journalists tend to explain the film away in terms of somebody's biography. I think it is more universal than that.

Sophia: You set out to make a film about faith —

Pawel: About faith, about memory. The whole film is an effort to bring back to life something that is lost [to me]. Poland of that time. It was an idyllic youth that I had. Though it might look grim and bleak to those who grew up in the west, actually I find it was a very glamorous world, as the film portrays. The characters are tested by history. The moral choices were not just choices because you are a liberal and you read stuff in the newspaper and you agree. History forces people to do stuff. You see sometimes huge contradictions within a character.

Sophia: You have observed that the Poland of 1962 was so much "cooler and more original than the Poland of today."

Pawel: Poland, like most of the Western world to which we belong, has become globalized – overrun by corporate interests and consumerism, with these virtual fantasies of ourselves and of our politics. We have lost a sense of what is at stake, of the danger of life. The way young people talk and behave is often shaped by American sit-coms and T.V. series. The same shops are everywhere; the same clothes are everywhere; the same attitudes are everywhere.

Poland, this country that was traumatized by the war and by Stalinism, suddenly emerges from all that in the 1960's. There are stirrings of joie de vivre, of music, of hip attitudes, of youthful optimism. One of the reasons that I made this film was because I wanted to bring to life that Poland … which is possibly half-imagined, but this is how I remember it. Suddenly, in the early '60's, there was a tiny margin of freedom. There was still a communist dictatorship, but it was no longer this state of terror. Young people grabbed with both hands and started to invent themselves. The stuff that came out of Poland at that time! The theatre, the cinema, modern classical music, and jazz – all shook up the world. Poland was a huge cultural influence on the world for a while – with its mixture of state-sponsored culture that was rebelling against conformity in a very original, local, Polish way, with all the awareness of history and all the anarchic potential that Poland possesses. There is this streak of anarchy in the Polish soul. Suddenly Polish films were conquering the world. Great Polish theatre directors were spreading

all over Europe – despite censorship and poverty. There was really great jazz music and great jazz musicians. My film pays a bit of an homage to that sense of confidence that Poland once had in its culture. Doing something that was original, without any compulsion "to imitate." The one thing I can say about this film: it's not like a Western film, and it's not like a Polish film. It is my way of kind of reconnecting with the firmament.

Sophia: How did you approach the music for the film? The score was terrific.

Pawel: The pop songs are my favorite songs from my childhood. I thought they were really good at reverberating against this kind of grey stone world. I used to play jazz myself, and Coltrane was one of my favorites. It was the music of liberation in Poland. Ida falls in love with the young saxophonist Lis more through the music (with its enveloping sound) than through his presence as a man. The Mozart is a way for Wanda to pep herself up. The only piece of music that is non-ambient (from outside the world of the film – that is not on the radio or played by a band) is the piece of Bach at the end. I was a bit desperate with the final scene, and I tried it out in the mix. It's in a minor key, but it seems serene and to recognize the world and its complexities.

Agata Trzebuchowska (Anna/Ida) and Agata Kulesza (Wanda), "IDA."
Photo courtesy of Sundance Film Festival 2014 and Music Box Films.

Sophia: The character of Ida in your film faces a choice between taking her vows as a Catholic nun or leaving behind the nunnery and embracing a secular life and her Jewish ancestry. Ida must chose between the religion that saved her from the massacres of the Nazi occupation in Poland or the religious identity of her birth and her ancestors. The film seems to suggest that the only way for a Jew to have survived the Holocaust in Poland was to have become a holy Saint.

Pawel: That is a very particular angle. It's not wrong for you to see it like that. For me, both Wanda and Ida are Polish; I try not to do what Polish nationalists and their counterparts do in talking in terms of ethnicity. The real choice for me with Ida, is not whether she chooses to rejoin her Jewish ancestors, but whether she rejoins the world. Whether she wants to engage in life or not. Because she is a genuine believer (she is really in good with God, unlike most sisters at that monastery), this journey actually reinforces her faith. In the end, Ida opts out of life. Life doesn't have much to offer to her.

Every film is a kind of crooked mirror, so whoever looks at it can take away different things. I made this film open to all sorts of interpretations.

The lesson of the film is not that one should disengage with life and follow a spiritual path. There is no lesson in the film at all. There are characters. I look on every character on his or her own terms and just think through their own logic. I made a film which is rich in character and ambiguous possibly, full of paradoxes – but that's how I see life. I didn't make it as a think piece about Jews and Poles and stuff to debate. There is an ongoing debate, as you know. I tried to cross the line and show something that I wanted to show.

Sophia: Some of the feelings that your film stirred up in me as a Jewish spectator, was the kind of guilt that I felt as a young person for examining the notion that given the hardships of anti-Semitism, why stay Jewish, why not convert? I felt that was an active tension in the film. Is this young woman either going to embrace this historical identity, or is she going to

stay with what she has been indoctrinated to believe and practice throughout her entire life. So it did make me curious about your perspective, as the storyteller.

Pawel: Ida doesn't feel hatred for the murderer of her family. She doesn't feel hatred full-stop. So it doesn't give her a kind of energy to jump anywhere.

Sophia: A principal Christian tenet is forgiveness?

Pawel: Not Christianity as understood by the Polish church – which is very exclusive and tribal and sometimes lacks spirituality. Catholic and Polish seem to be synonymous to the point where the spiritual dimension often gets lost. *IDA* is trying to counteract that.

I had an experience in Toronto with a lady in the first row at the Q&A, who was in tears. Her daughter raised her hand and said, "You know my mother here saved a family of Jews through the war, and she was really upset seeing this film. I hope you can for once make a film about some nice Polish people who did that. You know, it happened!" I said, "Ok, it's not a film about that. I'm sorry, but I wasn't dealing with that issue." Then I had an experience in New York at this recent screening at the Jewish Film Festival, where *IDA* was the closing night film. Some older gentleman asked me: "Why doesn't Ida chose the right path? You have a choice and you made her choose the wrong path." Another lady who was Jewish answered on my behalf, "Now what would happen if a family of Orthodox Jews would discover that actually they have Catholic blood flowing through their veins? Would they abandon their faith?" It became like a debate. Anyway, basically, that wasn't my scope.

Sophia: What has been the reception to your film in Poland?

Pawel: From the critics, very good. There were some national voices here and there, very occasionally, that it's an anti-Polish film. "How many more films do we have where Poles kill Jews?" – I got a bit of that. I just tried not to engage with it because it is not a film on that subject. There have been films, a little bit more crude than mine I'd say, that dealt with that issue head-on and dramatized it in a very obvious way. I didn't want to engage with those voices. The majority of the audiences and critics took the film on its own terms and went with it.

Agata Kulesza (Wanda) and Agata Trzebuchowska (Anna/Ida), *IDA*.
Photo courtesy of Sundance Film Festival 2014 and Music Box Films.

Sophia: You were writing from the point of the truth of the characters. Did they ever do anything in the film that surprised you or was a revelation for you?

Pawel: Well, no, because I was in control, pretty much. Wanda's suicide, I suppose, is kind of a surprising thing. But when you think about it, it is logical too.

Sophia: The suicide is shot in a way that was shocking to me, because the character just prances out the window. I wasn't even sure she had actually committed suicide? I questioned, did that just actually happen? It was like a dream.

Pawel: Yes, because Wanda doesn't make a big deal of it. She has no time for sentimentality or self-pity. She puts on a coat; she puts on her shoes. The Mozart symphony gives her a kind of momentum to do it, and she just does it. No big deal. That was very much in Wanda's character.

Agata Trzebuchowska (Anna/Ida), *IDA.*
Photo courtesy of Sundance Film Festival 2014 and Music Box Films.

Sophia: You chose to cast a non-actress in the lead role of Ida, and she is stunning. Not only had the young woman whom you asked to play Anna/Ida never previously acted in her life, she never had been motivated by a desire to act. It was your colleague, director Malgorzata Szumowska, who quite literally discovered the strikingly present Agata Trzebuchowska in a Warsaw café. I am curious about why you did not reach out to a trained actresses in casting this role?

Pawel: They didn't have what I was looking for. The funny thing is that Malgozata Szumowska didn't actually know what I was looking for. She thought she had found a really cool, night-clubbing chick. She didn't realize that I was looking for a nun. So Agata was sitting there, dressed up in hipster-ish clothes and looking the opposite of what I was seeking. Agata would have made a great character in Malgorzata's films because Malgorzata makes films about all these sorts of crazy, dynamic women, but I was looking for the very opposite. Paradoxically, behind this hipster exterior, there was a very thoughtful, serious girl. Strong, principled, a student of philosophy and history of art. I thought she was great because she didn't feel like an actress. She has a really photogenic face, a young face, almost the face of a child, but at the same time, she is really intelligent. There was stuff going on in her head. So that paradox was great. Agata was very disciplined and intelligent. She took direction really well. She became part of the team. She came to the audition, maybe not because she wanted to be in the film, but just to meet me because she had seen my films and liked them. She was curious about how it all works. If anything, I think she'll be more interested in directing and writing, than acting, in the future.

Sophia: Are you mentoring her as a filmmaker?

Pawel: Well, she has to finish her exams … As her friend, I definitely will. We are living not far from each other. We meet up quite a lot.

Sophia: You have commented that "Most scripts are really bad and the awful thing is that a lot of directors … shoot whatever is in the script without realizing that the film is a living organism. You have to constantly revise it, rethink it, make sure that it actually works on screen." How did the story of *IDA* change throughout the process of shooting and editing?

Pawel: The story didn't change. It was more like the film changed. There was a script – which you need to raise the budget. There was a script with some good scenes — and some problematic ones that I knew I would have to deal with, but I couldn't sort them out on paper, so I just left that for the process. I kept writing and rewriting — trying to get rid of stuff that wasn't working, that was clunky or too expositional, where there was no magic or no humor, where something was missing. It's a process of refinement rather than throwing in radical changes. Once you start shooting a film and the whole thing starts living through you, and you start seeing more clearly. During a scene that is established, I redo it from take to take. I add something; I take something away. My Polish producer was at first freaked out by this way of working. Then she accepted it because she saw that the results were strong. She let me do it my way. She kept telling everyone that Pawel writes the script with a camera — which is a bit exaggerated, but there is an element of that. Of course, the story is there, the characters are there, the turning points are there, the end is there, and the beginning … But there is always a way of improving different segments, sections,

scenes or lines.

Sophia: *IDA* has won numerous festivals and has earned you the best reviews in your career to date. Yet, I read an interview in Film Forum in which you claim that this might be your last film. Why is that?

Pawel: Every time I make a film, I think to myself, “Ok, if it’s my last film, then that’s fine. Let’s just make it without any compromises and just go all the way.” It’s basically a good mentality to have because inevitably when you make a film that is a little bit different and not formulaic, people start getting nervous around you. For example, the British financiers, they didn’t like the actress. They were worried that she was not a professional actress, that she was not emoting enough. They were worried that the camera was not moving. They were worried about the black-and-white format. So I have to tell myself, “This is what I want. If I never make another film, I don’t make another film.” In the end, you know, there are all sorts of ways to make a living … It gives me a crazy courage to keep going and a certain calm.

Top Image: Agata Trzebuchowska (Anna/Ida), “IDA.” Photo courtesy of Sundance Film Festival 2014 and Music Box Films.

“IDA” Official Website

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