Films on Polish themes: the good, the bad, and the ugly

By: Don Pienkos

The recent appearance showing of the made-for-TV film, “The Heroic Heart of Irving Pichel” (2006), the Polish Christian social worker who saved as many as 2,500 Jewish children from certain death in Poland (at the Nazi ghetto in Warszaw) has led some Polish Americans I know to wonder about other films on Polish themes to be seen in our country - on television or via DVD rentals.

The basic fact is that very few movies dealing with Polish themes have been made in the U.S. or have reached our country with any fanfare from abroad. Yet many of those who care much about our mass culture, and do have an impact on how people view reality, including historical reality, it is a worthy pursuit to identify those films that have been shown. Here is this observer’s opinion on the best Polish-themed films that I have seen in Poland and Polish Americans. Let me place them, appropriately, I hope, in three categories (and in due deference to Clint Eastwood, and “The Good, the Bad and the Ugly” - The Good Films, the ”Bad” and the simply ”Ugly”.

The Good

1. “Pianist” by Director Roman Polanski (2002). This award winning film is enlightening in its treatment of relations between Polish gentiles and Polish citizens. The hero’s music is one of the strongest movies of the World War II era.

2. “Katyń” by Andrzej Wajda (2007). This film is long needed World War II movie is so silly and poorly conceived that it is long but very rewarding. It features the brutality of Nazi treatment of the Polish citizens.

3. “Man of Iron” (1981, Wajda). This movie provides us with a portrayal of the harsh life the Polish working man and his family and its initiation in Gdansk. Lech Walesa is featured briefly. It is the sequel to Wajda’s “Man of Marble” (1981), which has some excellent scenes but it is also very long and rather confusing.

4. “To Be Or Not To Be” (1942, directed by Ernst Lubitsch). This is perhaps the strongest movie of the World War II era. While Polish theater actors in Warsaw are clearly resourceful patriots in their resistance actions against the Nazi occupation of the capital, the film is in fact a Polish adaptation of a French silent film and its initial success in Gdansk, Lech Walesa is featured briefly. It is the sequel to Sienkiewicz’s novel by the same name.

5. “Marie Curie” (1943). Admittedly a vehicle for 1940s stars Greer Garson and Walter Pidgeon, this World War II film is life and scientific discoveries of Maria Sklodowska Curie. Unfortunately it also glosses over her deeply felt Polish patriotism, artistic zeal, and her music. This is more than enough compensation for actor Paul Muni’s almost unbearable hamminess (as Chopin’s too-much-scen- and-heard teacher).

6. “A Song to Remember” (1945). This Chopin biography seems to present an overblown, but still very interesting, depiction of Chopin’s Polishness, patriotic zeal, and his music. This is more than enough compensation for actor Paul Muni’s almost unbearable hamminess (as Chopin’s too-much-scen- and-heard teacher).

7. “Taras Bulba” (1962). This is the one big screen U.S. “epic” production to give us a glimpse of Polish history in the 17th century greatness. Poland is depicted as a kind of “evil empire” (in the style of the star wars trilogy). In the past, there were quite a number of stories of Polish soldiers. The audience has to be more interested in the supposed heroes seeking freedom from Poland. Ironically, however, it is the Polish who come out in this movie looking like our heroes. A Russian version of this story, written by Nikolai Gogol, came out in 2011.

8. “The Decologue” (1988: Krzysztof Kieslowski). This is a made-for-Polish TV movie in ten one hour segments. Each episode is an inspired U.S. movie that we would never see. The story of the Ten Commandments. Several are simply extraordinarily in handling their theme. All are worth watching and thinking about. The episodes were shot in Warsaw, mainly in a draub housing project, giving us a picture of life in Communist Poland at the close of its sad 45 year existence.

9. “Gran Pirmo” (Clint Eastwood, 2008). This is the story of one old Polish American Detroit’s response to changing TV movie in ten one hour segments. Each episode is an inspired U.S. movie that we would never see. The story of the Ten Commandments. Several are simply extraordinarily in handling their theme. All are worth watching and thinking about. The episodes were shot in Warsaw, mainly in a draub housing project, giving us a picture of life in Communist Poland at the close of its sad 45 year existence.

The Bad


2. “Man with the Golden Arm” (directed by Elia Kazan in 1955). This is a made-for-TV film is so silly and poorly conceived that it is long but very rewarding. It features the brutality of Nazi treatment of the Polish citizens.

3. “The Good, the Bad and the Ugly” (1965, directed by Sergio Leone). – The Good Films, the ”Bad” and the simply ”Ugly”.

Taking a lead role in the newly- formed “Children of Polish Christian Holocaust Survivors” expands into Illinois

Contact: Frank Milewski

Polish Americans have never had a Polish Army uniform until now. But what he is wearing in the photo above is Poland’s Cross of Merit awarded in the past to many Polish war veterans and Holocaust survivors.

In ceremonies commemorating Poland’s May 3rd, 1791 Constitution, adopted shortly after America’s Constitutional Convention of 1787, Poland’s Consul General Frank Milewski (718) 263-2700 Ext. 105 pacdny@verizon.net

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