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Cold War (15)

Dir: Pawel Pawlikowski

Starring: Joanna Kulig, Tomasz Kot, Borys Szyc

Sponsor: The Cheese Society

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Synopsis: Poland, 1949. Wiktor and Irena tour the war-ravaged countryside with their manager Kaczmarek, recruiting young villagers to audition for their folk culture group Mazurek. One candidate is Zuzanna Lichon, known as Zula, a young woman who is on probation for murdering her father.

Warsaw, 1951. Mazurek is a national success. But Kaczmarek follows political orders to add pro-Soviet songs to its repertoire. Irena resists, and is soon gone. Zula and Wiktor become lovers; she tells him that she has been asked to spy on him. An invitation to perform in East Berlin offers the opportunity to defect, but Zula chickens out and Wiktor crosses to the West alone.

Paris, 1954 Wiktor plays piano with a Jazz quintet, and has a brief reunion with Zula one evening.

Yugoslavia, 1955. The stateless Wiktor visits Croatia to see a Mazurek show. Kaczmarek tips off the Yugoslav police: Wiktor is detained and deported.

Paris, 1957. Wiktor is working on a film score when Zula shows up, now with a legal Italian passport. They begin cohabiting and Wiktor gets her gigs as a Polish *chanteuse*. But they rile each other and Zula returns to Poland. Wiktor follows her and is arrested when he enters Poland. Zula visits him in jail.

1964. Zula has married Kaczmarek and given him a son in exchange for his help in getting Wiktor released. Reunited Wiktor and Zula take a bus to the area where they first met. In a ruined church they enact a 'wedding' and then swallow mouthfuls of pills.

Pawel Pawlikowski probably doesn't know it, but his second Polish film (after *Ida*, 2013, also shot in monochrome and Academy ratio) is a virtual shadow of Jia Zhangke's second feature (*Platform*, 2000) a film about romantic relationships in and around a song-and-dance troupe which is buffeted by changing political times. Obviously there are several big differences. Jia's film, set across the 1980s, shows its troupe abandoning its communist repertoire as China shifts from hardline Maoism to state-controlled capitalism (Taiwanese pop gets it going) and the film comes to focus on the enervation and disappointments of life in the new 'liberal' era. Pawlikowski's episodic film, set between 1949 and 1964, charts the opposite political trajectory, from the slow but sure imposition of communist imperatives and methods on post-war Society to the impossibility of living honestly in hardline Communist Poland. The relationships in Pawlikowski's film are a lot more torrid and volatile than anything in Jia's film, but both movies are rooted in a love for music and both end sadly, pessimistic about an authoritarian state's effortless ability to hobble personal relationships.

The starting point for *Cold War* was Pawlikowski's desire to make a film about his parents, named Wiktor and Zula (he describes their relationships as 'a never ending disaster'), both of whom died in 1989 just before the fall of the Berlin Wall began toppling East Europe communist regimes. He says the only way he could make it work was to turn both of them into fictional characters – though he still dedicates the film 'to my parents'. So his Wiktor becomes a middle aged musician, clearly with time in the West under his belt, who rallies from the nightmare of World War II by somewhat half-heartedly joining a woman musicologist in recording regional folk songs and recruiting villagers to perform them in a new 'folk culture' troupe. (In the opening scenes they are Poland's answer to Iona and Peter Opie, albeit more interested in love songs and nursery rhymes.) And the film's Zula becomes a survivor of sexual abuse who poses as a villager to infiltrate the audition for the troupe; she is soon established as the star of its shows, as Wiktor's lover, and, she cheerfully admits, as a spy on Wiktor's attitudes and behaviour. The troupe itself, named Mazurek, is quite closely modelled on the real-life Maszowsze ensemble which was forced into cheerleading for Stalinist policies in the 1950s and still exists today as a bastion of supposedly traditional folk culture.

The film's Wiktor and Zula (like, apparently, their real life prototypes) suffer from the 'can't live together/can't live apart' syndrome, divided by opposite temperaments, incompatible ambitions and different responses to Poland's communist regime. Wiktor wants to defect to the West at the first opportunity - it comes when Mazurek is invited to perform in East Berlin – but Zula doesn't see the need or point. She eventually marries an unseen Sicilian to get the Italian passport that will allow her to join Wiktor in his attic in Paris, but she doesn't rate her chances as a French *chanteuse* and anyway finds émigré Wiktor to be an enervated shadow of the man he was in Poland. Back in Poland, though, Wiktor is thrown into jail for defecting and Zula has to marry again to access the 'connections' that will get him released. Pawlikowski details the catch 22s with a bluesy intensity.

The title suggests a political thrust, but this is a movie in which the political is personal; what separates Wiktor and Zula is less the Iron Curtain than an intractable cold war of the heart. Pawlikowski again proves himself a director of remarkable economy: for a filmmaker who insists that his projects begin in "chaos" he has a very sure sense of how much or how little is needed to carry the emotional threads of individual scenes, and of how fragmentary narrative can yield an emotionally and musically credible arc. His cast is unimprovable (Joanna Kulig as Zula more than fulfills the promise of her brief scenes in *Ida*), but other collaborations are

equally remarkable: the production design is consistently spot on, right down to a framed photo photo of Shostakovich, and Marcin Masecki's score is skilled and varied enough to work as a non-visual 'film' in its own right. Lukasz Zal's lovely cinematography here is the opposite of his work on *Ida* - elegant circular tracking shots, chiaroscuro interiors - but entirely in the service of a narrative which picks out key episodes across a span of 15 years and trusts the viewer to read the signals and cues which fill in the gaps.

Credits

Zusanna Lichon, 'Zula'	Joanna Kulig
Wiktor	Tomasz Kot
Kaczmarek	Borys Szyc
Irena	Agata Kulezsa
Michel	Cédric Kahn
Juliette	Jeanne Balibar
Director	Pawel Pawlikowski
Story/screenplay	Pawel Pawlikowski, Janusz Glowacki
Editor	Jaroslav Kaminski
Cinematography	Lukacs Zal
Production design	Kataryzna Sobanska, Marcel Slawinski
Music	Marcin Masecki
Sound	Miroslav Makowski, Maciej Pawlowski

Poland/UK/France/India 2018
88 mins

Another View

Nationalism, or the question of how and why we love our country, feels extremely apropos in a political moment dominated by demagogues and loonbags. Furthermore, do we love a country with the same fervour, the same illogical impulse, the same sense of tenderness and longing, that we might love another human? This question is posed, albeit obliquely, in Pawel Pawlikowski's immaculately crafted and highly personal sixth fiction feature, his follow-up to 2013's massively successful meditation on identity and the legacy of the Holocaust, *Ida*.

As with that film, *Cold War* is photographed in smoky monochrome shades and within the stifling, boxy confines of the Academy ratio. The black and white serves the film perfectly as a visual shorthand, as it is a story which straddles the binary divide of Eastern and Western Europe in the years directly following World War Two.

Wiktor (Tomasz Kot) is a Polish musicologist on a mission to preserve the folk songs which offered those on the margins the smallest scintilla of hope during times of conflict. The plan is then to refine and stylise the music by transforming it into a public display of national pride. It is while formulating the show that he meets the enigmatic ice blonde Zula (Joanna Kulig) – arrested but not convicted for killing her father.

As Wiktor falls in love with Zula, he falls out of love with Poland, particularly as the Stalinist propaganda machine is looking to co-opt his work to build a romantic image of the suffering masses. The pair make a plan to flee together and this is when the clever crux of Pawlikowski's emotionally tumultuous drama is revealed.

Where *Ida*'s small-scale story had far-reaching ramifications, here the narrative feels much grander as the characters hop between countries in an attempt to find a place where their love feels natural. Yet the film's curtness (it runs at an extremely swift 84 minutes) and the liberal use of ellipses between scenes (which expect the viewer to fill in a lot of blanks) serve to stymie the overall impact of a yearning romance which feels displaced from the classical Hollywood era. This is one of those very rare cases where it would have been nice to see some more colour and texture. It is also frustratingly difficult to get a sense of time passing, of things having happened, of events taking their toll on the psyche of the characters. Physically, neither lead seems to age across the film's two-decade-plus timeframe.

That said, on a moment-by-moment basis, *Cold War* is often breathtaking, and Pawlikowski has clearly laboured over each and every shot to finesse camera movement, timing, choreography and shot length. A sequence in which Zula, having joined Wiktor in Paris, starts to dance to 'Rock Around the Clock' in a nightclub, explodes with energy and passion. It pushes the director's subtle thesis on the insidiously alluring nature of Western culture and capitalism, and it's perhaps the film's most moving moment, even though the intention might not be there. These amazing moments aside, it's hard not to think that this film needed a little less cold and a little more war.

Our next screening - Friday, September 13th, 7.30pm **American Animals (USA 2018. Cert 15)**

The heist movie has its own special place in the cinema canon. Usually such films reflect the meticulous planning, spectacular action and a climax in which the perpetrators either get away or get found out. *American Animals* is not the usual type of heist film. It's the unbelievable but true story of four young men who brazenly attempt to execute one of the most audacious art heists in US history. Determined to live lives that are out of the ordinary, they formulate a daring plan for the perfect robbery, only to discover that the plan has taken on a life of its own.