



The Hourglass Sanatorium

Sanatorium pod klepsydrą

Director: Wojciech Jerzy Has

©: Cyfrowe Repozytorium Filmowe

Production Company: Zespół Filmowy 'Silesia'

Production Manager: Urszula Orczykowska

Based on the novel by: Bruno Schulz

Cinematographer: Witold Sobociński

Editor: Janina Niedzwiecka

Production Designers: Andrzej Płocki,

Jerzy Skarżyski

Music: Jerzy Maksymiuk

Cast:

Jan Nowicki (Józef)

Tadeusz Kondrat (Jakub)

Halina Kowalska (Adela)

Gustaw Holoubek (Dr Gotard)

Irena Orska (Józef's mother)

Mieczysław Voit (blind conductor)

Bożena Adamek (Bianka)

Ludwik Benoit (Szloma)

Poland 1973©

119 mins

Digital 4K (restoration)

The Long Strange Trips of Wojciech Jerzy Has

The Hourglass Sanatorium

The Hourglass Sanatorium began life as *Sanatorium pod klepsydrą* (the film's Polish title), a 1937 novella by the writer and painter Bruno Schulz (1892-1942) that is so elusive and elliptical that it's had two strikingly different feature-film adaptations, the other being the Quay Brothers' largely animated *Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass* (2024). Has also drew upon other Schulz stories, notably *Spring* (1936), as well as his graphic art, and also by his life as a Polish Jew who lived in the now-vanished multicultural melting-pot of Galicia, subsequently absorbed into post-1918 Poland. Has was technically a Galician too, as his home town of Kraków was once the region's largest city.

What Has also brings to this material is hindsight: Schulz himself had been shot dead in the street by an SS man in November 1942 while returning home from a routine trip to the baker, and was therefore unaware of the full extent of the Holocaust and the accompanying near-total destruction of Jewish Poland. In sharp contrast, Has and his audience can hardly not be aware of this (there's nothing neutral about an opening sequence set in a packed train full of visibly Jewish people), and this sense of a vanished – indeed, deliberately obliterated – part of Polish history seeps into every corner of the film frame, the hallucinatory treatment underscoring its evanescence.

The film begins as per Schulz's story, with Józef (Jan Nowicki) travelling on a train that at times resembles a sprawling Jewish tenement. He's visiting his father in a mysterious sanatorium which, like Alice's rabbit-hole or looking-glass, is the portal to a world that's based as much on Józef's fears and long-suppressed memories as it is on objective reality. It also plays host to what Schulz called 'the highly improper manipulation of time, the shameful tricks, the penetration of time's mechanism from behind, the hazardous fingering of its wicked secrets.' (Has' version is often just as wickedly eroticised.) One aspect of the novella that made it into both the Has and Quay versions is the notion, explained by Dr Gotard (played by Gustaw Holoubek in the Has film), that the sanatorium obeys different temporal rules from those holding sway over the outside world. In other words, someone who has in theory already died may, inside the sanatorium, still be about to die, or indeed effectuate a recovery – a metaphor that of course has wider resonance than its immediate application to the situation of Józef and his father.

Józef's befuddlement will certainly be shared by the first-time viewer, and untangling the astonishingly rich visual and thematic tapestry and time-bending structure of the Has/Schulz universe would need a PhD thesis rather than a brief programme note; it's easiest just to go with the flow. Props, images and themes recur throughout: an ancient catalogue, a stamp album, exotic birds and mechanical automata resembling historical figures (from Buffalo Bill to Habsburg luminaries), as well as Joseph's relationship with two women, the lusty Adela (Halina Kowalska) and the mysterious Bianka (Bożena Adamek), each refashioned by his increasingly feverish imagination into the protagonists of various fantastical scenarios. There are also echoes of earlier Has films – for instance, the symbolic biting into an apple, as seen at the end of *Farewells* (1958) and the start of *One-Room Tenants* (1959) recurs here.

The film's formal virtues are far easier to appreciate without footnotes. Stylistically, it's perhaps the most floridly Wellesian of all Has's films, its

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The Long Strange Trips of Wojciech Jerzy Has

The Saragossa Manuscript + intro

Rękopis znaleziony w Saragossie

Tue 1 Apr 18:40

The Noose Pętla

Wed 2 Apr 20:00 (+ pre-screening discussion);

Wed 16 Apr 18:15

Farewells (aka Lydia Ate the Apple) Pożegnania

Fri 4 Apr 18:10; Fri 18 Apr 20:40

One Room Tenants Wspólny pokój

Mon 7 Apr 20:45; Fri 18 Apr 18:15

Goodbye to the Past Rozstanie

Fri 11 Apr 20:50 (+ intro); Mon 21 Apr 16:10

The Doll Lalka

Sat 12 Apr 19:50; Sat 19 Apr 12:00

Gold Dreams Złoto

Mon 14 Apr 20:50; Wed 23 Apr 18:00

The Hourglass Sanatorium

Sanatorium pod klepsydrą

Thu 17 Apr 18:00

In Cultural Partnership with



This retrospective is presented in partnership with the ICA, which will also be hosting exclusive screenings of Has' works.



The 23rd Kinoteka Polish Film Festival is part of the UK/Poland Season 2025.



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sprawling, cobwebbed and object-strewn sets filmed in a series of elaborate sideways low-angle tracking shots. Images of decay and impermanence abound, as well as eye-catchingly incongruous details such as the brief appearance of elephants (this brevity annoying fellow filmmaker and de facto executive producer Kazimierz Kutz, as the elephants were procured at no small expense to his Silesia Film Unit). Cinematographer Witold Sobociński was one of Polish cinema's great visual stylists, and while his relationship with Has was occasionally fraught (Sobociński, a keen jazz musician, was an inveterate improviser, while Has was a meticulous storyboarder), their collaboration gave rise to some of the most extraordinary images not only in their creative careers but in Polish and European cinema as a whole. And Jerzy Maksymiuk's atonal score is brilliantly integrated into the overall sonic texture, coexisting with recurring aural leitmotifs such as flapping wings and clockwork mechanisms.

Has was so fascinated by Jewish culture (which he drew upon for many of his other films) that it was widely assumed that he was himself part-Jewish. He did little to correct that impression, although posthumous genealogical research has failed to turn up any concrete roots. The film is extraordinarily (in terms of postwar Polish cinema, uniquely) detailed in this respect – in her book *Intimations: The Cinema of Wojciech Has*, Annette Insdorf quotes one of his former students, Małgorzata Burzyńska-Keller, who wrote her master's thesis on *The Hourglass Sanatorium* in which she cited it as 'the only Polish film with no mistakes about Jewish religion', citing such details as the correct candles being used in specific rituals.

But the film's focus on Jewishness, then not merely unfashionable but actively discouraged in Poland (the explicitly anti-Semitic crackdowns of 1968 under Władysław Gomułka were still a recent memory), meant that the film took an unusually long time to be produced – prior to then, Has had made roughly one film a year, with more lavish productions like *The Saragossa Manuscript* (1964) and *The Doll* (1968) understandably taking two. But five years separated *The Doll* from *The Hourglass Sanatorium*, and there'd then be a creative silence of a full decade, allegedly as a direct result of Has sanctioning what the Polish authorities regarded as an illicit presentation at the Cannes Film Festival, where it jointly won the Jury Prize. (Polish critic Bolesław Michałek was on the jury, headed by Ingrid Bergman.) More recently, it's been the most easily available of Has's films in the English-speaking world (alongside the inevitable *Saragossa Manuscript*), with which it shares its cult midnight-movie ambience as a head-swiveller to rival *El Topo* or *Eraserhead* – it would also make a great double bill with Harry Kümel's almost exactly contemporary *Malpertuis*.

Michael Brooke, season curator