



Andrzej Wajda: Portraits of History and Humanity

Korczak

Korczak

Director: Andrzej Wajda
Production Companies:
Zespół Filmowy 'Perspektywa'
Regina Ziegler Filmproduktion,
Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen, Erato Films,
BBC Films, Telmar Film International
Executive Producers: Wolfgang Hantke, Lew Rywin
Producers: Regina Ziegler, Janusz Morgenstern,
Daniel Toscan Du Plantier
Production Manager: Barbara Pec-Slesicka
Production Assistants: Krystyna Grochowicz,
Ryszard Wierkowski
Assistant Directors: Andrzej Kotkowski,
Ami Drozd, Andrzej Wdowicki
Screenplay: Agnieszka Holland
Director of Photography: Robby Müller
Pyrotechnics: Jacek Jelinski
Editor: Ewa Smal
Production Designer: Allan Starski
Set Decorators: Anna Kowarska, Magdalena Dipont
Costume Designers: Wiesława Starska,
Malgorzata Stefaniak
Uniforms: Jan Rutkiewicz
Make-up: Ewa Symko-Marczewska,
Jolanta Puszyńska
Music: Wojciech Kilar
Music Performed by:
Wielka Orkiestra Symfoniczna Polskiego
Jewish Song Performed by: Nina Gajewska
Orchestra Conductor: Antoni Wit
Jewish Song Arranged by: Wojciech Kaleta
Music Consultant: Malgorzata Krupa
Sound Recording: Janusz Rosól
Sound Effects: Bogdan Nowak
Stunts: Janusz Chlebowski, Robert Brzezinski,
Józef Stefanski, Ryszard Janikowski
Cast:
Wojciech Pszoniak (*Dr Janusz Korczak*)
Ewa Dalkowska (*Stefania Wilczyńska*)
Piotr Kozłowski (*Heniek*)
Marzena Trybala (*Eстера*)
Adam Siemion (*Abrańek*)
Karolina Czernicka (*Natka*)
Agnieszka Kruk (*Ewka*)
Aleksander Bardini (*Czerniakov*)
Robert Atzorn (*German doctor*)
Teresa Budzisz-Krzyżanowska
Zbigniew Zamachowski
Jan Peszek
Marek Bargielowski
Maria Chwalibóg
Andrzej Kopiczynski
Krystyna Zachwatowicz
Jerzy Zass
Wojciech Klata (*Szloma*)
Michał Staszczak
Maria Weymayr
Anna Mucha
Wojciech Radecki
Janusz Bukowski
Stanisława Celinska
Edgar Hoppe
Bernhard Howe
Ewa Isajewicz-Telega
Piotr Kazimierski
Grzegorz Klein
Zygmunt Kestowicz
Agnieszka Kumor
Olaf Lubaszenko
Katarzyna Laniewska
Alicja Migulanka
Włodzimierz Press

The screening on Monday 2 March will include a Q&A with filmmaker Agnieszka Holland

Andrzej Wajda's *Korczak* (1990) paid tribute to a man who spent most of his life in pursuit of an ideal. Although a recognised doctor of medicine and a committed pedagogue who in 1911 had founded an orphanage for Jewish children, it was through his writings that he became internationally known. Set mostly in 1942, three years after the German invasion of Poland, the film covers the last tragic chapter of his life at the Jewish orphanage which was relocated to the Warsaw Ghetto.

Henryk Goldszmit, better known as Dr Janusz Korczak (1878-1942), was already well known in intellectual circles when, in 1972, he was posthumously awarded in Frankfurt the Peace Prize of the German Book Publishers. The award cited the books he had written for and about children, a series that began with his popular children's play *Kłorecy* (published in 1899) and continued almost uninterrupted over the next 40 years. Also, German playwright Erwin Sylvanus had dramatised the last year of Korczak in his play *Korczak und die Kinder* (*Korczak and the Children*), which premiered in 1957.

Throughout the troubled 1980s, with martial law declared in Poland and many of the country's artists in exile, Wajda only had slim hopes of making a film about the life and deeds of the doctor-pedagogue who had gone freely into the gas chambers of Treblinka together with the Jewish orphans entrusted to his care. Worse still, he could not resolve the question of film rights to two separate screenplays owned by a British producer – one of which had been written by Agnieszka Holland, Wajda's colleague who shared his exile in Paris. Nor did he have much hope either of ever receiving government permission to shoot in Poland at an extermination camp.

The climate changed in 1989: Solidarity leaders returned again to power and gave a green light to the *Korczak* project. At this juncture, too, Regina Ziegler stepped into the picture: the Berlin producer had collaborated with Wajda on a televised version of the Polish director's production of Dostoyevsky's *Schuld und Sühne* (*Crime and Punishment*) (1987) at the Berliner Schaubühne, and now she asked if the relationship could continue. Fine, responded Wajda, but you will never get the rights to Holland's script on the story of Janusz Korczak. She did – by purchasing both screenplays from the British producer.

Wajda immediately signed Wojciech Pszoniak to play Janusz Korczak – Poland's eminent stage actor had also played the title role in Wajda's *Danton* (1983). Robby Müller, one of Europe's premiere cinematographers with a special talent for shooting in black-and-white, was engaged to heighten the feel of documentary realism on the set. When the Polish-German-French-British production had finally completed its long odyssey to the screen, *Korczak* was immediately invited to the Cannes festival (running out-of-competition, at the wish of the director), later played to packed houses in Paris, and was invited to the film festivals the world over.

Production notes courtesy of Ziegler Film

Jan Prochyra
Danuta Szaflarska
Aniela Swiderska-Pawlik
Zbigniew Suszynski
Tomasz Traczynski
Jan Walczak
Maciej Winkler
Jacek Wojcicki
W. Bielinski
Stanislaw Brudny
Jacek Domanski
T. Hanusek
Hanna Kossowska
G. Bawlowski
Teresa Szmigielówna
A. Trabczynski
R. Walentynowicz
Poland-West Germany-France-UK 1990
118 mins
Digital (restoration)

The Cinema of Agnieszka Holland: Anger and Ethics (Routledge, 2026) by Agnieszka Piotrowska is available in the BFI Shop

With thanks to

Marlena Łukasiak, Michał Oleszczyk,
Jędrzej Sabliński

Presented with the ICA and Ciné Lumière, who will also be hosting screenings of Wajda's works in February and March

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**SIGHT
AND
SOUND**

Trailing one of the 20th century's greatest filmmaking careers behind him, Andrzej Wajda is not, in toto, an easy artist to pigeonhole. His 40-plus films have varied stylistically, tangled with varying degrees of rage with Poland's post-war political messes and aimed at ambivalent themes – hardly a recipe for auteurist neatness. Wajda has always made films like a battlefield doctor takes pulses, whether exploring the messy present or the scars of the past, reaching for the disarming detail and conjuring unpredictable rhythms, and if the story of Holocaust saint Henryk Goldszmit (famous all over Poland as a radio personality and as the children's author Janusz Korczak) is a vital thread in Polish 20th-century history, than Wajda owns it.

Coming three years before *Schindler's List*, which thieved an entire palette of visual schema, *Korczak* returns once again to the streets of Warsaw 1939-40, for decades Wajda's ground zero, and experiences the harrowing daily collapse of Polish-Jewish life under the Occupation from the perspective of the eponymous doctor-hero, whose only priority is his orphanage of 200 Jewish children. Wajda studies this fiercely holy man as a cultural anomaly, a fiery and passionately devoted non-compromiser who refuses even to wear a Star of David armband, smack in the middle of the most thoroughly compromised historical place and time conceivable.

Of course, from where we sit now we know that Korczak's trajectory will be brief and tragic, that his righteous nobility stands no chance of surviving, and Wajda captures this drama in majestic visual depth (Robby Müller's pearl-and-ebony cinematography is breathtaking) but with a dry-eyed sobriety. As Korczak, veteran thesp Wojciech Pszoniak is properly indignant, humane and appalled, imbuing the man with a gravity that amply suggests how much his dedication to his charges defines and emboldens him. Wajda is not afraid of idealising Korczak, and as the march to the Treblinka train is slow and steady and filled with children of all ages, the film in effect dares us to believe that such a selfless and pure-hearted hero existed (he routinely turns down opportunities to save himself). But Korczak freely accompanied his orphans to the camps and died there with them, and the tale backlights like few others the complete darkness represented by the Nazis – crystal-clear goodness was swallowed up with every other human quality and there was nothing to be done about it. The film about the most defiant and heroic Pole of the WWII years leaves behind a devastating sense of hopelessness, of watching evil easily win, on a cosmic scale if only for the time being.

Michael Atkinson, *Sight and Sound*, November 2012