



## Finding Your Way: The Films of Peter Weir

# The Way Back

### The Way Back

Director: Peter Weir

Production Company: Exclusive Films

Presented by: Exclusive Media Group,  
National Geographic Entertainment,  
Imagination Abu Dhabi

Executive Producers: Keith R. Clarke, John Ptak,  
Guy East, Simon Oakes, Tobin Armbrust, Jake  
Eberts, Edward Borgerding, Mohammed Khalaf,  
Adam Leipzig, Scott Rudin, Jonathan Schwartz

Producers: Joni Levin, Peter Weir,  
Duncan Henderson, Nigel Sinclair

Co-producer: Roe Sharon Peled

Casting: Lina Todd, Judy Bouley

Written by: Peter Weir

Inspired by 'The Long Walk: The True Story of a  
Trek to Freedom' by: Slavomir Rawicz

Director of Photography: Russell Boyd

Editor: Lee Smith

Production Designer: John Stoddart

Costume Designer: Wendy Stites

Music: Burkhard Dallwitz

Cast:

Jim Sturgess (*Janusz*)

Ed Harris (*Mr Smith*)

Colin Farrell (*Valka*)

Saoirse Ronan (*Irena*)

Mark Strong (*Khabarov*)

Gustaf Skarsgård (*Voss*)

Alexandru Potocean (*Tomasz*)

Sebastian Urzendowsky (*Kazik*)

Dragos Bucur (*Zoran*)

UK-USA-UAE 2010

133 mins

Digital

With a night-time blizzard as cover, seven prisoners, caught up in Stalin's Reign of Terror, escape a Soviet Gulag in 1940. They are now free men and, almost certainly, dead men... for their impending trek to safety defies any reasonable chance of success and the landscape they must cross is unforgiving.

With little food or equipment, and no certainty of their location or intended direction, they embark on a journey that will present unimaginable hardship and drama. Driven by base animal instincts – survival and fear – while relying on evolved human traits – compassion and trust – the group endures transformative experiences that are profound and abysmal, anguished and ecstatic. All the while, they abide by one unceasing mandate: keep moving, keep moving, keep moving...

Peter Weir says, 'Our film is inspired by the Slavomir Rawicz novel, *The Long Walk: The True Story of a Trek to Freedom*, which I thought was a wonderful combination of a prison story and survival tale. We travel with our characters across four seasons, 12 months and some 10,000 kilometres, seeing how their behaviour and personalities are affected by such harsh circumstances. Self-reliance is a requisite in the Gulag, but on this trek the men will have to depend on each other and break down the walls each has built around himself, if any are to make it through alive.'

As in such acclaimed films as *Master and Commander*, *The Truman Show*, *Fearless* and *Gallipoli*, Weir again places human nature under the microscope of duress. Ordinary people are subjected to extraordinary events and environments, forcing them to peel away facades and peer inside themselves.

Says producer Joni Levin, 'Peter is wonderfully adept at using compelling narratives to examine human behaviour. After many years of development, and continual hurdles on this project, it is thrilling and fortuitous that it wound up in the hands of the one director who can best tell the story.'

The narrative commences in the harsh confines of the Gulag before moving to the frozen forests of Siberia, the vast plains of Mongolia and the scorching torment of the Gobi Desert – the characters struggling against the elements and each other. Set against stunning geographical vistas, the plot centres around a young Polish outdoorsman, Janusz (Jim Sturgess), whose keen survival skills will make him the fugitives' de facto leader.

An officer in the Polish cavalry, which was fighting the Nazis, Janusz is one of thousands of Polish soldiers imprisoned when the Soviet Red Army advanced into Poland from the east. Arrested as a spy for having come into contact with Germans, and for speaking English, Janusz is tortured, sentenced, and force-marched to Siberia. A signed statement from his wife, also extracted under torture, sealed his fate.

'Everyone in the group has his own reasons for wanting to escape, and my character's arrival sort of puts the final piece of the puzzle in place,' says Jim Sturgess. 'Janusz is well-educated but he's also a woodsman who knows how to find his way through the forest. He believes escape is possible, and is absolutely determined to do so because he wants to get home to forgive his wife of the horrendous guilt he knows she's suffering. He must get free to free her.'

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## **Finding Your Way: The Films of Peter Weir**

### **The Cars That Ate Paris**

Mon 30 Mar 14:30; Tue 31 Mar 18:10;  
Sat 11 Apr 20:40

### **Picnic at Hanging Rock (Director's Cut)**

Mon 30 Mar 18:00 (+ extended intro by season curator Elena Lazic); Thu 16 Apr 20:50

### **The Plumber**

Tue 31 Mar 14:30; Wed 1 Apr 20:55; Thu 9 Apr 18:10 (+ discussion about Peter Weir as an Australian director, with academic Dr Stephen Morgan and film critic Tim Robey, hosted by season curator Elena Lazic); Sat 25 Apr 20:45

### **Witness**

Tue 31 Mar 20:40; Sun 5 Apr 12:00; Tue 14 Apr 20:40 (+ intro by season curator Elena Lazic)

### **The Last Wave**

Wed 1 Apr 18:20; Sat 18 Apr 20:40 (+ intro by producer Jeremy Thomas)

### **Gallipoli**

Thu 2 Apr 18:20; Sat 25 Apr 18:10 (+ intro by Dr Stephen Morgan, King's College London)

### **The Truman Show**

Fri 3 Apr 18:10; Wed 8 Apr 20:45; Wed 22 Apr 20:40

### **The Year of Living Dangerously**

Sat 4 Apr 14:40; Mon 20 Apr 20:30

### **Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World**

Sun 5 Apr 14:40; Sun 19 Apr 11:00 BFI IMAX (+ Q&A)

### **The Mosquito Coast**

Sun 5 Apr 18:20; Fri 24 Apr 20:35

### **Green Card**

Mon 6 Apr 14:40; Tue 21 Apr 20:40

### **Fearless**

Tue 7 Apr 18:15; Thu 23 Apr 20:30

### **Dead Poets Society**

Sat 11 Apr 14:45; Fri 17 Apr 20:30

### **The Way Back**

Sun 26 Apr 18:10; Thu 30 Apr 20:25

### **With thanks to**

Peter and Ingrid Weir

*The Cars That Ate Paris* and *The Plumber* will be released on BFI Blu-ray on 25 May

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Janusz's accomplices include a taciturn American structural engineer, Mr Smith (Ed Harris), and a violently unpredictable Russian, Valka (Colin Farrell). Valka belongs to a vicious stratum of convicted street criminals, 'Urki,' who are allowed to run the Gulags and intimidate the 'political' inmates.

'The Gulag was a hierarchical society ruled by fear and intimidation,' says Farrell. 'There was some form of ethics of the Urki's own design, but it was very harsh and violent. The guards lived in awful conditions, not much better than the prisoners. Paperwork was a nightmare. From their perspective, the more control they could bestow upon the Urki over certain elements of the system, the better.'

About his character he adds, 'Valka grew up an orphan on the streets and has been institutionalised for most of his life. He's quite capable of functioning within the Gulag. However, he has a penchant for playing cards, and, more problematic, losing at cards. So even though he is himself a dangerous man, he's increasingly consumed by fear of reprisal over his substantial debts.'

Overhearing plans of the escape, Valka offers the services of his knife as a 'negotiating point' with Janusz, who agrees to let him join the breakout. 'A deal with the devil,' Mr Smith judges.

An enigmatic and quiet man, Mr Smith had travelled to Russia with his son to work on Moscow's metro system. Arrested in the night, he was sent to Siberia. Says Harris, 'I hadn't been aware of this, but during the Great Depression, jobs in Russia were advertised in US newspapers. Thousands of Americans went there seeking work. When they arrived, the Russians would take their passports and require them to become Soviet citizens in order to be employed. When the purges started, they'd go for help to the American Embassy and be told, "Sorry, you gave up your citizenship, there's nothing we can do for you." So they were stuck.' (Seven thousand Americans disappeared in the Gulags.)

Says Peter Weir, 'Our characters, nearly all of whom are innocent of the charges for which they were sentenced, have been physically and mentally damaged even before arriving at the Gulag. Now they are on the run, coping with nature, and trying to avoid conflict with anyone in their path, knowing there is a bounty on their heads.'

Production notes