

Taming the World

Interview with Kinga Dębska, a film director, and Zbigniew Domagalski, producer (of feature and documentary films, including hers), and her husband

By Bożena U. Zaremba

You just got back from the Polish Film Festival in Gdynia. They say it was quite controversial.

Kinga Dębska: I have a feeling this Festival was—to a great extent—groundbreaking. As the chair of the selection committee and chair of the short film jury, I was deeply involved. I had the impression that everybody sensed the need for a change. Of course, it was great to see our colleagues' films and to see them, but generally speaking, the atmosphere was not joyful.

Is it because of political divisions?

KD: Yes, I think so. Poland is divided, and so are the filmmakers. Everyone tries to find themselves in this new situation. I think a new status quo of the Festival is emerging.

Zbigniew Domagalski: Kinga is looking at this from her perspective because as a member of the selection committee, she was entangled in politics. We are not talking about the so-called “hardcore politics,” however, but about what relates to the film industry, where the divisions are not necessarily along the same lines. I noticed a considerable gap between the films made by the new generation and those made by older artists: The young are unable to understand the old and vice versa. The political processes have brought revolutionary changes in the film industry. The film community is divided, for example, over what is going to happen to the state-owned film studios, such as Zebra and Kadr. Together with the Documentary and Feature Film Studios (WFDiF), these studios merged to form one entity. It was a ministerial decision, and some say dictated by ideological factors. Others claim that the idea

behind this decision was to create one big institution which would make big productions.

KD: The authorities want to make American movies with American stars and directors but with Polish money, which seems to be completely absurd to me.

ZD: The Polish film budget is too small for such films. In Gdynia, the filmmakers discussed the vision and the future of Polish cinematography, as well as the selection process, which has been murky in the last few years. This year, the sponsors of the Festival did not want to accept some of the films chosen by the selection committee, which resulted in a scandal. Eventually, the films that had been initially selected were brought back, thanks to people like Kinga.

KD: I am delighted that the film *Supernova*, which they did not want to accept, won in the debut category. It was a little success of mine. We showed that the future belongs to the young.

You started your career as a documentary maker. In your feature films, you touch on crucial social problems: *Hel* talks about drug addiction, *Playing Hard*—alcohol addiction, while the TV series *Szóstka* talks about kidney transplants and related dilemmas. Is this a kind of continuation of your journalistic interests, if you will?

KD: Yes, indeed, I am inspired by life; for me, this is the best starting point. I am also interested in the emotional side of this all. Sickness in the family, death of the parents, family relations, or addictions—these are “my” topics. I also like to do extensive research and have consultants on the set. Only then am I confident that the context is true. At that point, I can engage the actors creatively to make sure the film is both credible and interesting.

Do you help your wife choose the subject matter?

ZD: In the case of *These Daughters of Mine*, yes, because the story presented in the film also concerned me—we were already married, and the film was inspired by actual events: the sickness and death of Kinga’s parents. I knew this was a very important subject for her, and that is why I made sure the project would quickly go

into production.

KD: The moment in which the film was created was critical, too. Sometimes, the filmmakers pass that due point, after which they lose passion for the project. In the case of *These Daughters of Mine*, I was processing the inability to mourn my parents, a sense of total loss, and what I considered universal injustice. It was great to see the impact of this film on the audience and the bonding effect on our family.

Although it is based on particular events and family relations, the film is universal. Everyone can relate to the relationship with their parents, especially when they are dying; many can also identify with the family relations as a brother, sister, mother, or father.

KD: I am very much interested in the family as a subject matter. But, please don't assume that the film shows my sister and me. I have created these characters.

Rumor has it that your sister did not recognize herself in the movie.

ZD: This is what we did: Before the premiere, we decided to show the film to Kinga's sister to avoid any surprises at the opening. Kinga went for a walk with her sister's kids; I opened a bottle of wine and carefully watched her reaction. After the film, she said, "No, this is not me. Our father would never bang on the ceiling like that!" [*laughs*]. I have always encouraged Kinga to draw from the surrounding reality because she does it best. However, it is not as easy as some people may think.

Creating a universal message from a real event is typical and indeed fascinating in the documentaries.

KD: Yes, it's true. In documentaries, an idea makes its way through the facts and becomes universal. Marcel Łoziński is known for making such films.

ZD: His film *Anything Can Happen* [*produced by ZD*] was hailed as the best documentary of Poland's centennial. It was released quite some time ago, but it is still in high demand around the world—from Japan to the United States and South America. It shows a story of a small child who is asking adults about the most fundamental things—things we do not consider on an everyday basis.

Another example is Krzysztof Kieślowski, who superbly went from the particular to the general, both his documentaries and feature films. Do you consider him your master?

KD: Yes, in the same way as he was a master for our whole generation. Of course, in the beginning, I wanted to make films just like him. Fortunately, I quickly realized that this is not the right way because I needed to find my own method, my own voice. I graduated from FAMU, the film school in Prague, so the Czech inspirations are vital for me, too. The Czechs used to make brilliant movies. I started the film school as an adult, with one degree in my pocket and some accomplishments—I had already had several documentaries on my resume, so I was a fully formed individual.

ZD: Just like Kieślowski.

KD: You are not comparing me to Kieślowski, are you?! [*laughs*]

ZD: I am not, but he did revolve around the themes you are interested in; in a sense, you make similar movies.

In the past, to apply to the Film School in Łódź, one had to have a college degree.

KD: Not any longer. It was actually good because people who had a degree in psychology or culture studies or language studies knew something about life.

Or physics, like Zanussi.

KD: Or visual arts, like Wajda. I happened to have a degree in Japanese language and literature.

ZD: I am often approached by artists of different age groups, and I must say that those who have had some life experience offer much more exciting ideas.

How did you come up with the idea of making *Playing Hard*?

KD: It all started with the documentary *Actress* about Elżbieta Czyżewska, which I made together with Maria Konwicka and which touches on alcohol addiction. I talked to many people who knew her, and it was interesting to see that in the eyes of

every friend of hers, she seemed like a different person. It turned out that this is exactly the mentality of an alcoholic—they are fantastic liars and easily adapt to every situation. I started to notice women who were like her; I also encountered the problem in my family and realized how often it is women who are alcohol addicts, and that this is a subject for me.

Is alcohol addiction among women, especially those who are successful, such a big taboo in Poland?

KD: Yes, it is, and this is what makes Poland different from the West and the US, where it is normal, even admirable when someone says, “I am a former alcohol addict,” which implies that this person has overcome some difficulty. Here, such a person is being blamed. I wanted to demythologize the issue, and I think I succeeded in doing just that because the film has a life of its own and is very popular. It has been seen by over 440,000 viewers, and new screenings are constantly being organized. Even today, I received an invitation to a conference, “Women and Alcohol.” Its organizers say they cannot imagine the event without my film. I think I touched on something significant and relevant. Actually, I sensed this would happen, though I had a feeling it was only the tip of an iceberg. Just before the premiere, when I was on the train, I got a note: “I am waiting for your movie. It is very important to me. I hope it will change my life.”

ZD: But it did not happen at once. Kinga prepared for this film thoroughly and conducted in-depth research.

KD: Correct. I read and watched everything on the subject. I wrote the screenplay together with Mika Dunin, who knows the problem from inside-out—she is a former alcoholic, a writer, and blogger. Thanks to her, I had a chance to meet many wonderful women, who no longer drink, and who are not afraid of talking about the addiction. I remember a meeting in Poznań, where I met those women, and I could not believe they had been alcohol addicts. We met at the house of one of them. They were all beautiful, well-cared-for. One of them brought a meringue cake; another brought cherries. I put my iPhone on the table, just like you have, and asked about when they hit the personal bottom and how they bounced off. I heard incredible stories.

We don't know why the women in the movie started to drink. The character played by Agata Kulesza suggests it was because of her husband's affair, and she drinks so that she won't go crazy, but this is all marginal.

KD: Because this is not the subject of the film. Those women will always find an excuse for drinking. An alcohol addict claims millions of reasons to justify the drinking.

ZD: I once asked Mika how she became an alcoholic. She said she had thought about it, too, but that you never really know when you cross the line. I don't believe analyzing the causes makes any sense.

But if you don't know the cause of the problem, how can you fix it?

KD: It does not work that way. One needs to hit bottom. Do you think that if a woman says she drinks because her husband had an affair, it will somehow fix the issue? I don't think so. Can you imagine that in Poland, 1/3 of pregnant women have an occasional drink? The awareness of the society about what harm alcohol does to a woman's body is still deficient.

Not to mention the fetus.

KD: But of course. Fetal Alcohol Syndrome is irreversible and is directly related to drinking by a pregnant woman.

ZD: It is worth mentioning that medical consequences to women are much worse than to men. Research shows that the lifespan for women who drink is 30 years shorter.

KD: Let's note how many liquor stores are in Poland! Probably more than the pharmacies. They say that until noon, three million "monkeys"[1] are being sold in Poland. It is an incredibly critical social issue. Many more people have an alcohol problem than statistical data claims. Alcohol addicts drink differently than those who drink occasionally. Mika told me that when she went to a party, she always checked out how much alcohol was available. If there was little, she did not even start to drink. Or, she would hide a bottle between the books for later use.

The movie does not accuse anybody; there is no preaching or making excuses. Why did you make the movie?

KD: I wanted to show those women with a drinking problem how it can potentially end. I also wanted to show that women who are addicts are not necessarily from lower classes. We live in a world of strong women, who are presidents of companies, heads of corporations, who are at the top of the social ladder, but this comes with a price. Drinking alone at night until they drop is often the price they pay.

There are some humorous moments in the film—I am talking about the two policemen. What was the purpose of introducing these two characters?

KD: They were supposed to represent the public opinion and the stereotypical thinking about alcohol addicts. Those two policemen, who are unable to cope with the drinking women, tie the film together, subtly binding these separate stories. If I made those women meet at an AA meeting, it would be so banal. This disease separates people; it does not bring them together. Each woman is terribly lonely.

ZD: Marta Meszaros told me that, to her, the film represents the same woman at different stages of her life. The youngest gives us the biggest hope. The judge has not hit bottom yet, but we feel she is close, and the physician is already there.

The movie also deals with relationships.

ZD: Right, it talks about people who are close by and who are also touched by the problem. It's about the community surrounding the addicts—people who don't know what to do.

KD: The doctor's daughter, played by Basia Kurzaj, is my favorite character, and I love the scene when the daughter is trying to help, and the mother insults her.

In your movies, you cast the same actors—Agata Kulesza, Gabriela Muskała, Dorota Kolak, Maria Dębska, Marian Dzięziel, Marcin Dorociński, and Barbara Kurzaj. Why them?

KD: I like working with good actors, those I know well, just like in the saying that "we like best the songs we know best." The meetings on the set are always very

intimate, so knowing and trusting one another is crucial. Of course, I invite more and more actors to collaborate with me. Moreover, while writing a screenplay, I like to imagine specific actors.

ZD: The screenplay with characters behind which you see a particular face reads much better. Let me add that the actors like working with Kinga, too; they even ask to be cast.

Why?

ZD: Because Kinga gives them freedom. On the one hand, she is merciless on the set; on the other hand, she gives the actors a chance to contribute to the film. The actors are not only mere executors of the acting tasks but co-creators.

KD: I like working with people, and I particularly like actors. I am curious about them. I have this method—experimental if you will: The scene seems to be over, but I don't say, "Stop." The actors have finished playing the scene, but at this point, they don't know what is going on and begin to improvise. This leads to wonderful outcomes. For example, the finale of *Playing Hard* was partially improvised.

ZD: Obviously, the director is the boss on the set, but he or she needs to listen to other people and draw from their ideas. Then, everyone has a sense of co-creation.

KD: Recently, two film schools have offered me to teach the art of directing actors, and I have been wondering about the key lesson I would like to pass on to young directors. I want to teach them not to be afraid of the actors, nor of themselves. They need to talk frankly to the actors, even about their own doubts. I was taught that the director is always right. It is not true. Director is only human, and if you open to what others have to offer, if you invite them to be co-creators, it will be only beneficial to the film. Wajda worked this way.

Paweł Pawlikowski once said he does not like working with actors with a huge ego. I don't see big egos in your movies, either. For example, Marcin Dorociński, who is a well-known and distinguished actor, plays very discreetly as if completely trusting you and the character he plays.

KD: I don't have a problem with the ego of the actors. Good actors are very humble.

But they need to see that the director has respect for them.

ZD: Actors trust Kinga.

Behind the camera, I see a motherly attitude to your characters—warm, affectionate, and protective. How do you do it?

KD: Perhaps it is my personality? I would like to tame the world with my art. Critics don't always appreciate that. But when I go to some remote place, whether in Poland or around the world, and someone comes up to me and says, "Can I give you a hug? I love your movies so much and can't wait for the next one," this is more precious to me than an award at a festival.

ZD: Because we make films for people, not for experts.

What is your role as a producer?

ZD: Do you know what a producer does?

From what I know, a producer can do a lot of different things—takes care of the finances, can try to exert influence on the screenplay and control the direction the movie is taking, or have a say in the casting.

ZD: I will tell you this: It is all of the above. Raising funds is the producer's fundamental role, but the essential aspect of the process is that he or she takes responsibility for the final product. It is no longer possible to make movies in Poland with public money only. You need always to have private investors, who demand from the producer that the promises made at the beginning be delivered. Sometimes I want to influence the screenplay, the casting, and the line-up of the creative team because these decisions affect a chance of getting a good investor or distributor and eventually, the future of the film. I need to plan the whole process.

KD: For me, a good producer—and Zbyszek is a good one—believes in the director, lets me be myself and not succumb to commercial pressures, lets me speak through my films with my own voice.

ZD: True, but the producer needs to have a right to intervene...

KD: ...but only to a certain extent.

ZD: After all, we both work towards the same goal.

Does the fact that you are married help or just the opposite?

KD: Both [*laughs*].

What about working with your daughter, Maria Dębska?

KD: This is a different story—on the set, she is not my only beloved daughter, but an actress. In *Playing Hard*, she had awfully challenging, even extreme, scenes. After we shot that rape scene, I, of course, hugged her tightly, as a mother, but otherwise, I was a tough director. Marysia is a talented actress and appreciates that I don't cut her any slack.

ZD: It is worth noting that Marysia first received recognition in the theater, without her mom, and proved to be a wonderful actress.

The movie *Black Mercedes*, with your daughter in the lead role, has just had its premiere. What was your impression?

KD: The truth is that you get more emotional about your child's successes than your own. When I saw her at the opening gala, in the golden designer dress, I felt like a princess's mom [*laughs*]. It is lovely that she got to play under such a great director as Janusz Majewski, who, by the way, adores her. I am proud of how her career is flourishing. But, of course, I am worried about her. I don't want her to pay the price that so many actors pay when they achieve success early.

What are you currently working on?

KD: We are about to start the casting process for a film about growing up in communist Poland, about how this period shaped our adult life. It's about two girls who live in a typical communist apartment block and their parents, who take trips not just to have a vacation but also to engage in trading goods, so customary for those times. It will be a bitter-sweet story. The two girls, Marta and Kasia, correspond to the characters from *These Daughters of Mine*. One might say, this will

be a prequel.

[1] A “monkey” is a slang for a small bottle—100 or 200 ml—of clear alcohol.

See Polish version of the interview and the accompanying photos here:

<https://www.cultureave.com/oswoic-swiat/>