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The Encyclopedia of Film: Roman Polanski

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THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
FILM

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Polanski, Roman • Director, screenwriter; also actor. • Born Paris, August 18, 1933. *Educ.* Łódź Film School. Roman Polanski was born in Paris of Polish-Jewish parents. At the age of three, he and his family returned to their native Poland. A few years later, with the onset of WWII, Polanski's parents were taken to a Nazi concentration camp, where his mother perished. Growing up in war-torn Poland, the young Polanski found solace in trips to the cinema and acting in radio dramas, on stage and in films. His early screen acting credits included work with famed Polish director Andrzej Wajda. In 1954, he was accepted to an intensive five-year program at the Lodz Film School. One of his student films, *Two Men and a Wardrobe* (1958), won five international awards, including a Bronze Medal at the Brussels World's Fair. In 1962, Polanski directed his first feature-length film, *Knife in the Water*. Poorly received by Polish state officials and some domestic critics, the film was a sensation in the West, awarded the Critics' Prize at the Venice Film Festival and nominated for an Academy Award.

Polanski moved to England to make his next three films: *Repulsion* (1965), a psychological terror story of a young woman's disintegration; *Cul-de-Sac* (1966), a dark comedy of mobsters and a mismatched couple set in an isolated castle; and a horror film parody, *Dance of the Vampires/The Fearless Vampire Killers* (1967), in which Polanski costarred with American actress Sharon Tate. In 1968, Polanski and Tate were married; that same year saw Polanski's American film debut, the enormously successful "gynecological horror story," *Rosemary's Baby*. The following summer, Polanski's new-found success was dealt a shattering blow when Tate and three of Polanski's friends were murdered by members of the Charles Manson cult.

Polanski made his next film, *Macbeth*, in 1971. A brutally realistic adaptation of an already violent play, it was seen by many critics as a form of catharsis for Polanski after the Manson slayings. Polanski himself, however, downplayed the link between the film and the tragic murders.

In 1974, Polanski was back in Hollywood for his greatest triumph, *Chinatown*, a tale of greed, corruption and

incest set in 1930s Los Angeles. The director made a memorable impression on-screen, too, as the cocky gangster who slices Jack Nicholson's nose. Two years later, Polanski undertook his most arduous acting role, the lead in his film *The Tenant*. Like *Repulsion*, this was a harrowing tale of psychological disintegration, with the director playing a man who comes unraveled when he moves into the apartment of a woman who recently committed suicide.

In 1979, Polanski was arrested in California on charges of unlawful sexual intercourse with a thirteen-year-old girl. He spent forty-two days in prison under observation. Before further criminal proceedings could get underway, Polanski fled the United States. He made his next film, *Tess* (1979), an acclaimed version of the Thomas Hardy novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, in France. In 1981, he returned to Poland to direct and star in a stage production of *Amadeus*. Polanski's most recent film, shot in Paris, was the suspenseful *Frantic* (1988), with Harrison Ford as an American visitor searching for his abducted wife.

As an artist who exerts tremendous control over his films, often co-writing the screenplays and sometimes acting in them, Polanski is able to instill in his work his unique personal view of the world. Recurring Polanski preoccupations include violence and victimization, isolation and alienation, and a profound sense of the absurd.

The relationship between Polanski's personal life and his work has received a great deal of attention. While there are some strong parallels, focusing on this relationship has unfortunately tended to overshadow the surprising diversity of his films and eclipse his achievements as a filmmaker. DFD • *Pokolenie* 1954 (a); *Dwaj Ludzie z Szafa/Two Men and a Wardrobe (short)* 1958 (a,d,sc); *Gdy Spadaja Anioły/When Angels Fall (short)* 1959 (a,d,sc); *Lotna* 1959 (a); *Niewinni Czarodzieje* 1960 (a); *Le Gros et le Maître/The Fat and the Lean (short)* 1961 (a,d,sc,ed); *Samson* 1961 (a); *Noz w Wodzie/Knife in the Water* 1962 (d,sc); *Ssaki/Mammals (short)* 1962 (a,d,sc); *Les Plus belles escroqueries du monde/The World's Most Beautiful Swindlers* • 1964 (d,sc—"Amsterdam"); *Repulsion* 1965 (a,d,sc); *Cul-de-Sac* 1966 (d,sc); *The Fearless Vampire Killers* 1967 (a,d,sc); *Rosemary's Baby* 1968 (d,sc) (AANBSC); *Cinéma Different* 3 1970 (d,sc—"La riviere de diamants"); *The Magic Christian* 1970 (a); *Macbeth* 1971 (d,sc); *Weekend of a Champion* 1972 (a,p); *Che?* 1973 (a,d,sc,ed); *Blood For Dracula* 1974 (a); *Chinatown* 1974 (a,d) (AANBD); *The Evolution of Snuff* 1976 (a); *Le Locataire/The Tenant* 1976 (a,d,sc); *Tess* 1979 (d,sc) (AANBD); *Pirates* 1986 (d,sc); *Frantic* 1988 (d,sc).