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The Encyclopedia of Film: Roman Polanski

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Recommended Citation

Polanski, Roman • Director, screenwriter; also actor. • Born Paris, August 18, 1933. Educ Łódz Film School. Roman Polanski was born in Paris of Pol¬ish-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 Łódz Film School. One of his stu¬dent 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-of¬ficials 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, Mac¬beth, 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 Holly¬wood for his greatest triumph, Chinatown, a tale of greed, corruption and incest set in 1930s Los Angeles. The di¬rector made a memorable impression onscreen, too, as the cocky gangster who slices Jack Nicholson's nose. Two years later, Polanski undertook his most ardu¬ous acting role, the lead in his film The Tenant. Like Repulsion, this was a har¬rowing tale of psychological dis integra­tion, with the director playing a man who comes unraveled when he moves into the apartment of a woman who re¬cently committed suicide.

In 1979, Polanski was arrested in Cal¬ifornia on charges of unlawful sexual in¬tercourse with a thirteen-year-old girl. He spent forty-two days in prison under observation. Before further criminal pro¬ceedings 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 re¬turned to Poland to direct and star in a stage production of Amadeus. Polanski's most recent film, shot in Paris, was the suspensful Frantic (1988), with Harry¬son Ford as an American visitor search¬ing 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 preoccupa¬tions 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 rela¬tionship has unfortunately tended to overshadow the surprising diversity of his films and eclipse his achievements as a filmmaker. DFD • Pokolenie 1954 (a); Dwa Ludzie z Szafl/Two Men and a Wardrobe (short) 1958 (a,d,sc); Gdy Spadaja Anioly/When Angels Fall (short) 1959 (a,d,sc); Lotnia 1959 (a); Niewinni Carodzieje 1960 (a); Le Gros et le Maitre/The Fat and the Lean (short) 1961 (a,d,sc,ed); Samson 1961 (a); Niewinni Carodzieje 1960 (a); 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) (AANBC); 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); Pir¬ates 1986 (d,sc); Frantic 1988 (d,sc).