woman of iron

Before making her international hit *Europa, Europa* and the new, acclaimed *Olivier, Olivier*, Polish director Agnieszka Holland survived many personal traumas, including censorship and exile. So, **Alexis Jetter** finds, she's well prepared for her first Hollywood movie

Personae non dramatis: director Agnieszka Holland, ABOVE LEFT, and some scenes from her films, many of them based on actual events. TOP TO BOTTOM: *Olivier, Olivier; The Secret Garden; To Kill A Priest* (with Ed Harris, center); *Angry Harvest*, with Armin Mueller-Stahl and Elisabeth Trissenaar; and *Europa, Europa*.

Holed up in her tiny Paris flat in the early 1980s, exiled Polish director Agnieszka Holland was growing desperate. Warsaw censors had banned all her films, and no one in the snooty French film establishment would even return her calls. On top of that, she was broke, separated from her husband, and struggling to raise her young daughter alone. She had, it seemed, no future and no past. So she did what any self-respecting character in an Agnieszka Holland movie would do: she pretended to be someone else.

Dialing a top French producer, "I told the secretary that I was calling from Los Angeles," Holland recalls with a sly chuckle. "That minute I was connected. And after that I found an even quicker way: I said I was calling from my *car* in Los Angeles."

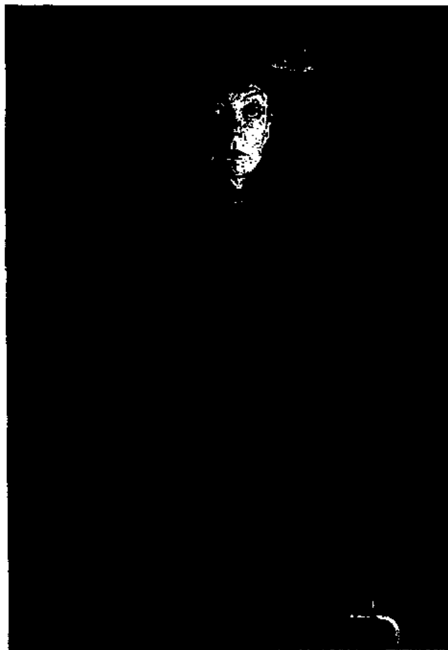
But Holland's impersonating days are over: the Zelig of Poland is now the darling of Hollywood. *Europa, Europa*—Holland's gripping and darkly funny real-life account of a Jewish teenager who survived the Holocaust by joining the Nazi army—is the second-highest-grossing German film in U.S. history (after *Das Boot*). Her newest movie, *Olivier, Olivier*—another ripped-from-the-headlines identity bender—drew accolades at the New York Film Festival and is slated to open this month. And after sifting through a deluge of studio offers, she is directing the children's classic *The Secret Garden* for Warner Bros. and Francis Ford Coppola's American Zoetrope.

Holland might still be toiling in the shadows, however, were it not for the sensational publicity provided by her censors and detractors. Her Polish films, banned for nearly a decade and only recently released, are cult classics among Polish university students. *Europa, Europa* sparked an international fire storm last year when Germany refused to nominate it as its entry for the foreign film Oscar. And *Olivier, Olivier*, an irresistibly subversive look at parents, children, and evil, was denied a French slot at Cannes—only to be hailed by U.S. critics as a perverse, spooky triumph. "Since I have been making films in the West," she has said, "I both enrage and enchant people."

At Dartmouth College to accept an award recently, Hol- ▶ 98

land emerges from her hotel room wearing black, fretting that there is no double espresso to be found in Hanover, New Hampshire, at 8:00 A.M. She is a small, Harriet-the-Spy-looking woman with probing eyes, oversize glasses, and a disarmingly childlike appearance. It is easy to see why she might identify with her precocious protagonists. But steel glints just below her surface. "This is a very sweet place," she muses, gazing out the window. "Perhaps it is dangerous to live in such a sweet place."

In her newest movie, menace lurks just beneath a bucolic landscape not unlike Hanover's. *Olivier, Olivier* is Holland's *Blue Velvet*—a lovely pastoral snapped by a twisted mystery: a coddled little boy bicycles off into the countryside to bring his invalid grandmother her lunch and disappears. Years later, a very different Olivier returns, a young hustler who emotionally seduces both his father and mother—and elicits a more ambivalent, though steamy, response from his suspicious sister. Holland drills beneath the surface of this seemingly perfect, middle-class family and extracts a fascinating array of diseased relationships. Love may conquer all, but not before some baffling transformations, an erotic, supernatural duet, and an explosive climax.



Maggie Smith as Mrs. Medlock in *The Secret Garden*

"By the time she's finished undermining our sense of reality," writes *New York Newsday*'s John Anderson, "white could be black, and day could be night." She's been compared with Hitchcock and Dostoyevski, but Holland says her driving force is impatience. "I hate obvious things," she explains in a rapid-fire, no-nonsense tone. "If a story stops on the surface, I don't see any reason to finish it."

Like most Holland productions, her own story—*Agnieszka, Agnieszka,* if you will—is a riddle of conflicted identity, black humor, and tragedy. "And I don't know," the director adds mischievously, "if the double title would be enough."

She was named for the young rebellious heroine of Poland's favorite epic novel, *Nights and Days*, but she wasn't always drawn to the fight. Born into a half-Jewish, half-Catholic family of politically active journalists, young Agnieszka so disliked unhappy endings that her mother had to alter the endings for her of every plot from children's fables to *La Traviata*. But at 13, that idyll ended.

"Polish directors are permeated by memories," says Holland's friend Czeslaw Milosz, the expatriate Polish writer and Nobel laureate. And one particular frame is frozen in Holland's imagination: a man plunging to his death from an apartment building as secret police watch from his open window. This is a mental snapshot of the 1961 death of her father, Henryk Holland, a Jewish survivor of the Warsaw ghetto, whose early passion for Communism soured into outspoken dissent. Police claimed that he jumped during an interrogation; Agnieszka's family will always suspect he was pushed.

Her father's fate, which still reverberates in her films, brought her childhood to an abrupt halt. It soon became clear that Henryk's family would be made to pay for his dissidence; Agnieszka was barred from attending film school in Poland and denied a visa. "I realized that just to have the name of Holland was like carrying a mark on my forehead," she says. Characteristically, though, she most resented being a hand-me-down persona non grata. "I wanted to have problems of my own choice."

She found them in Prague, where at 17 she became the youngest student at the Czech Film Academy. She quickly joined the ground swell of students active in 1968's Prague Spring, the short-lived crusade to create "socialism with a human face." She married fellow film student Laco Adamik, organized an underground press, and spent every spare moment at the movies. But that August, when a generation's hopes were crushed under the wheels of Soviet tanks, Holland was thrown into prison. She emerged six weeks later, her illusions gone but her will reforged. "I was alone, completely alone and isolated, and I could stand it," she said later. "I am free because I could stand it."

Holland returned to Warsaw in 1971 and found that her reputation had preceded her. In four years she wrote 12 scripts; all were turned down by government censors. But her work did not go unnoticed. Andrzej Wajda, the legendary dean of Polish directors, invited her to join his avant-garde Film Unit X. For 10 years, Wajda battled the censors on her behalf, enabling her to launch several feature films; she, in turn, added punch to his screenplays, including the acclaimed *Man of Iron*.

"Wajda was a father figure for me," Holland says. "And when he understood that part of my problem was because of my father, he proposed to adopt me." But Holland, who had not even taken her husband's name, refused. "I kept this name exactly *to* have trouble," she explains. "It was a provocation. I wanted to be my father's witness, to show that I was alive."

And kicking. Holland's early movies—relentlessly gray depictions of despair and moral disintegration—would shock audiences used to the lush sensuality of *Europa, Europa*. In *A Woman Alone* (1981), the protagonist is murdered—or perhaps has herself killed—by her crippled lover after she steals pensioners' money. *The Fever* chronicles the lives of doomed revolutionaries after the abortive Polish revolt of 1905. And in *Without Anesthesia*, which Holland wrote for and about Wajda, a celebrity reporter inexplicably burns to death after being fired for a candid TV interview.

The early 1980s work of Holland, Wajda, and others, labeled Poland's cinema of moral concern, swept top awards at the Gdansk, Berlin, and Cannes film festivals. But outside of a select circle of international critics and government censors, few got to see Holland's films. Completed the year martial law was declared in Poland, *A Woman Alone* was immediately suppressed. *The Fever*, shot the previous year, was tossed onto the censor's shelf alongside it. "Agnieszka portrayed a vision of reality that was almost unimaginable in its cruelty," says Wajda. "For that kind of creative freedom, one has to pay heavily. She paid with five difficult years in exile."

Holland was stranded in Sweden when Polish generals crushed the fledgling Solidarity movement in December of 1981. Several filmmakers were arrested, and Holland—whose condemnation of the crackdown appeared in many foreign newspapers—was warned not to return. She kept up a desperate vigil at the airport, hoping that her husband and daughter, Kasia, then eight, would be permitted to join her. They were not.

Alone, she moved to Paris and waited for six months, and her health deteriorated. She began to experience inexplicable fainting spells. Under pressure from Holland's friends, Polish authorities relented and issued Kasia a visa, but Adamik's was denied.

Holland's malady disappeared the moment her daughter arrived, and they've rarely parted since. Now in art school in Bel- ▶100

gium, Kasia—a political-comic-book artist—still returns to Paris each weekend to spend time with her mother. "In some ways she is stronger than I am," Agnieszka says. "She accepts better the role of the daughter than I do the role of the mother. She's really a very good partner." But Holland's marriage to Adamik did not fare as well. After years of being separated by Polish authorities, the pair split on their own. Holland, who bristles when questioned about her personal life ("Darling," she says acidly, "I have no need for confession"), does not readily talk about Adamik, who remained in Poland and is now a successful television producer. But friends say the two are amicable, and Holland appears to be at peace with her solitude. "My profession demands total immersion," Holland has declared. "No husband would be able to tolerate this for any length of time."

Ten years ago, a young single mother and a stranger in Paris, Holland was not nearly so confident. "When you lose your language," she says, "you lose 80 to 90 percent of your identity. It's like being a painter without pens. If you are a genius, you can paint with your mouth. But you must be a genius." After a few quiet years, however, Holland set to work with a fury. She wrote for French television, translated novels, and—against all odds—returned to filmmaking.

In Germany, with only two weeks to work and virtually no money, she shot *Angry Harvest,* which won an Academy Award nomination for Best Foreign-Language Film in 1986. In France, she wrote and directed *To Kill a Priest*—perhaps her only artistic failure—about the assassination of popular Polish priest Jerzy Popieluszko. The film was hobbled by her own fondness for the priest, whom she had known. "It was difficult for me to have such an angelic character," conceded Holland, who prefers stained souls.

Critics said she was also too close to the subject of her screenplay for Wajda's *Korczak* (1990)—about a Polish doctor and educator who died protecting Jewish orphans during the war. One of those youngsters was Henryk Holland, who had written for the children's newspaper that Janus Korczak operated in the Warsaw ghetto. Agnieszka had greater success with more complex and historically distant characters, like the lusty but doomed title character of *Danton* which she helped create for Wajda in 1983.

But it was *Europa, Europa,* the remarkable story of Solomon Perel, that won Holland world acclaim. The idea for the film came, like many of her movies, from a newspaper article. Perel, a German Jew who now lives in Israel, was cast adrift in war-torn Poland at the age of 13. He escaped the ghetto, found a temporary haven in a Soviet orphanage, then hid in the Nazi army and an elite Hitler Youth academy—all the while concealing the feature that marked him as a Jew: his circumcised penis.

The double title, like that of *Olivier, Olivier,* reflects the film's sinister duality. "There's an ambiguity surrounding the word *Europe,*" Holland wrote in the preface to her screenplay. "Alongside [its] rich heritage is the Europe that nurtured this century's greatest evil."

The movie was a natural for Holland, for Perel's dilemma pricked identity questions of her own. Half-Jewish in a country that is profoundly anti-Semitic, she could have hidden in the safety of her mother's Catholicism. But she wears her dual legacy like a brand. "When the Jews are attacked, she's with the Jews," says Milosz. "When the Poles are attacked, she's with the Poles. That's a very vulnerable position."

She is equally vulnerable as a Polish director who makes films on foreign soil. Last year, Germany's Oscar committee chose to nominate no film rather than select *Europa, Europa.* The committee members labeled it "junk" and "an embarrassment"—and when that didn't wash, simply "not German enough." Holland exploded. "They hate this subject, they really do," she bitterly told reporters. "This generation hates all those people who put them through the official guilt. What is left is arrogance and stupidity."

Germany's top filmmakers and actors—including Werner Herzog and Hanna Schygulla—rallied to her side, sending an open letter to *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter* expressing their dismay. (The committee's director quietly resigned a few months later.) On this side of the Atlantic, critics handed Holland everything but the Oscar: the Golden Globe, the New York and Boston film critics awards, and the National Board of Review award.

The wounds didn't heal, however, until Holland brought *Europa, Europa* home for its Warsaw premiere. "The people felt as if I, a Polish girl, had fought with the Germans and won," she says, smiling at the memory. Perel himself was on hand, and greeted the crowd, "Shalom"; uncharacteristically they rose in a standing ovation, and responded, "Shalom, Shalom." Americans, too, responded powerfully to the film; in the United States, the film grossed more then $6 million. But Lucy Fisher, executive vice president of feature productions at Warner Bros., wasn't first on line. "I thought: 'Oh no, concentration camp movie.' I felt like it was going to be an oppressive downer," she says with a touch of embarrassment. "When in fact it was incredibly uplifting and entertaining."

Warner and Zoetrope had been looking for someone to direct Frances Hodgson Burnett's classic children's story *The Secret Garden,* adapted by *Edward Scissorhands*'s screenwriter Caroline Thompson. Fisher wanted a director with a sensual touch who could coax compelling performances from young actors. "When I saw *Europa, Europa,*" she says, "I just flipped out. I knew she was the perfect person." *Olivier, Olivier*—in which both the teenage Olivier and his seductive sister mesmerize the camera—only reconfirmed the choice. After 20 years of filmmaking and two hurried days of negotiations, Holland had her first Hollywood contract, and she happily pushed aside the mountain of scripts that studios had sent her about Berlin in the thirties. "I loved this book when I was a kid," she says earnestly. "And I wanted to do something light and full of hope after the films I've done. I was tired and needed a break."

So did her composer, Zbigniew Preisner, who had previously created scores for *Europa, Olivier,* Kieslowski's *The Double Life of Veronique,* and a host of other heavy Polish films. Watching early rushes of *The Secret Garden*—starring Maggie Smith as the forbidding housekeeper Mrs. Medlock, and set on the windswept moors of England—Preisner turned to Holland, his eyes bright with tears.

"And this guy," Holland says with tender amusement, "who is big, like Orson Welles, he just cries, 'Oh, how beautiful.' In reality he wasn't happy with all these complicated and black films he wrote the music for. I thought: why cannot we have these sweet moments of tenderness?" Immediately, Holland catches herself leaning toward sentimentality. "Of course, you must be careful," she adds. "Because if they are not tears of catharsis, they are tears of shit."

Fellow Eastern European Milos Forman believes that Holland will succeed for the same reasons he has. "We are people who, once we decided to leave our country, we couldn't go back. Once you are thrown into the water, if you don't want to drown, you learn how to swim."

Holland sees her new job in philosophical terms. "When I was younger," she says, "I believed that if I showed people how terrible the world was, they would awake. Now I know that humanity doesn't change. I'm older and tired and sometimes sad. And I think that, you know, you can give happy endings because the people need it.

"I *have* to give them a bit of happiness," she says with a small, self-conscious smile, realizing she sounds more like Frank Capra than Poland's Woman of Iron. "Maybe that's why I'm ready to do American movies." ●

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