I Believe in Hard Work

Interview with Philippe Tłokiński, who plays the lead role of Jan Nowak-Jeziorański in *The Messenger*

By Bożena U. Zaremba

***The Messenger* is about one of the most tragic events in Poland's history, the Warsaw Uprising of 1944.[1] Still, the movie is more on the entertaining than the somber side, kind of a combination of James Bond and Indiana Jones.**

It's the first time I have heard the comparison with Jones [*laughs*]. As for the subject matter, the film indeed touches on an important chapter of Polish history. On the other hand, *The Messenger* does not depict the Warsaw Uprising itself but rather its background. We know how the story ended, but a question will always remain whether the decision to start the Uprising

was right. Despite the gravity of the subject, the goal of the movie was to entertain.

How did you end up being cast in the film?

I was invited to casting, which had several stages. The competition was tough. Eventually, I was offered the role. I like what I do, and for a long time, I did not reject any offer, including independent, artistic movies. What mattered to me was gaining experience. Thanks to this approach, I got the lead role in Marcin Bartkiewicz's film *Walpurgis Night*, which was significant for my career. In the beginning, we practically worked for free—we cared about this project so much—and it was only after some time that we got funding. Playing in *The Messenger* was fantastic, not to mention that it was under the masterly direction of Władysław Pasikowski.

What attracted you to the main character?

Before we started shooting the movie, I knew very little about Jana Nowak-Jeziorański, just like most Poles, I guess. For the casting, I had to prepare long monologues, including the one delivered at the Home Army headquarters. They were not easy to play, but I loved the script. Once I knew I got the role in *The Messenger*, I surrounded myself with lots of books, not just about Nowak-Jeziorański but also about his times.

You were born in France. How much did you know about Poland's history and culture?

My parents are Polish, and, at home, we spoke Polish. While all my friends took a vacation in Italy, we always spent it in Poland. In Geneva, where we lived, there is a sizeable Polish community and a Polish church, where people gather. My contact with the homily in Polish and the interaction with Poles gave me a chance to learn the traditions, culture, and language, which is the key to everything.

How did you decide to go into acting?

It was a process; it happened one step at a time. As a child, I did not know what I wanted to do in life. I don't want this to sound pretentious, because I am very humble about what eventually happened, but it wasn't me who made a choice—it was the theater that chose me. I always loved drama classes and was good at acting, and the thought of going into acting did cross my mind. My father, on the other hand, was a professional soccer player, and it was his dream for me to follow in his footsteps. Then, for a while, I considered being a lawyer. Still, whenever my friends asked me what I liked about this profession, it turned out that things which appealed to me most were rhetoric, oratory, and public speaking. They would tell me, "You don't want to be a lawyer; you want to be an actor" [*laughs*]. I timidly

asked my drama teacher what I should choose. He told me I would be a complete fool if I did not become an actor, after which he left, theatrically slamming the door [*laughs*]. It encouraged me to—finally—answer the question what I wanted. This professor was my mentor. My father, on the other hand, even though he did not succeed in helping me choose my professional path, did something else—he gave in and abandoned his ambition. He also managed to come into understanding of what I wanted and supported me in my decision.

Making a choice is one of the main motifs of *The Messenger*.

You could say that. The main character receives an order he strongly disagrees with. He creates an alternative proposition and does everything in his power to realize the second scenario. By the way, it shows the enormous divisions among the Polish authorities. Later, when Nowak-Jeziorański meets with young people who are already armed and recognizes that the Uprising cannot be stopped, he realizes that it is necessary to accept fate. At the meeting with the Home Army leadership, he expresses the opinion which is in accord with the initial order. This is a "post-uprising" opinion. The conversation never took place in this form—it is articulated from a specific, historical perspective. The content, though, is faithful.

This opinion is very mature.

Because it is prophetic. It is a reflection of what Jan Nowak-Jeziorański would write years later. The movie does not defend the decision to start the Uprising but shows in what spirit it was made. I especially like the last scene of the film, when the Uprising begins: I turn to Patricia Volny and, with a sort of regret, ask, "We're going?" Then, everybody runs to the light. The light means death. There is no surprise there because everyone knows history; everyone knows the outcome of the Uprising. We cannot change history, but we can try to understand it and draw conclusions. Today, from the perspective of all those years, it is easy to say that the Warsaw Uprising was a mistake—thousands of people died and the city was totally destroyed, but nobody could have predicted that.

What can appeal to non-Polish viewers?

This movie is supposed to be, first of all, an exciting, entertaining adventure, with elements of an action or detective movie. You mentioned the movie *Indiana Jones*. It is a good comparison because *The Messenger* has a lot of light-weight scenes, shot with a great sense of humor. There are also some made-up episodes, such as the sub-plot with the agent Doris.

She is the one who reminds me of the *Indiana Jones*

character from the third part, Dr. Elsa Schneider. The actresses look alike, and the plot develops in a similar way, though we will not spoil it here.

It was created for the movie to make it more attractive. To sum up—this is a dynamic movie, which at the same time can teach something about Poland's history. In other words, *The Messenger* fulfills these two fundamental functions: to entertain and educate the audience.

In your next movie, you play another famous Pole, Stanisław Ulam, a mathematician, who is known for helping the United States create a nuclear bomb. Can you say something about this film?

I have not seen the final version, so I can only judge from my experience on the set. This film has enormous potential. It is an independent movie, artistically ambitious, similar in style to *A Beautiful Mind*. The ever-present hydrogen bomb generates the tension, just like in [George Bernard Shaw's] saying: "No conflict, no drama." This bomb is the most lethal weapon humans have created, and it's a terrifying thought that the pressing of one red button can destroy the whole world. It is a paradox that since the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there has been no nuclear incident. Thanks to those terrible events, we can enjoy world peace

because the use of a hydrogen bomb would obviously mean the end of our civilization.

Did Professor Ulam face any moral dilemmas over the use of nuclear weapons?

But of course. The creators of the atomic bomb were shocked by Hiroshima; they could not fathom that their invention would be used in such a destructive way. And then, they were told to devise an even more lethal bomb. Ulam was hesitant about sharing the results of his research.

You are revolving around historical themes. Recently, in the Polish TV theater production, you played a Polish writer and member of the Polish Underground, Gustaw Herling-Grudziński.

This show was based on his novel *A World Apart* about the Soviet gulag. It deals with dark themes— filth, starvation, and violence. But in my next films, I leave history behind and get back to the contemporary world.

You are fluent in three languages: French, Polish, and English—

—and Italian.

The demand for such actors as yourself should be high.

It gives me an advantage [*laughs*]—if not in France, then in Poland; if not in Poland, then in Switzerland. An actor's work is irregular—sometimes, you are very busy, and then, you go into hiatus. Whenever I take up a role, I never consider whether it is big or small but whether it is challenging, or if I can at least have some fun. My logic is this: If the film is good, people will go to see it, and if not, it will be a great experience for me. There is one more principle I go by: I don't believe in talent; I believe in hard work. If you don't work on yourself, your talent will not be of much help. I have never heard of talent being destroyed by work though.

Still, talent can have different colors; it does not have to mean the ability to learn text quickly. You can also have a knack for work, analytical thinking, or determination. In this context, what is your talent?

It's no other than talent for work. I spend a lot of time memorizing the lines and preparing for casting. It is an obvious part of being an actor, just as practicing the piano for ten hours a day is for a pianist. I love it.

Practicing can be creative.

That’s what it’s all about. A recital is only a result of hours and hours of creative practice. In my profession, it is also crucial to meet the right people at the right time and be grateful for being given a chance. Everything I do is based on my faith in hard work and belief that everything will be fine. Whenever I had a dry spell, hope was essential for me. Eventually, an offer would always turn up.

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[1] The Warsaw Uprising was a devastating and disastrous operation organized by the Polish Underground during World War II to liberate Poland’s capital city from Nazi Germany before the approaching Soviet Army could assume control. It is not to be confused with the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

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

http://www.cultureave.com/wierze-w-ciezka-prace/