The Price of Truth

Interview with Agnieszka Holland about her film „Mr. Jones”



Agnieszka Holland, photo by Joanna Sokołowska-Gwizdka

Translation by Joanna Gutt-Lehr

Joanna Sokołowska-Gwizdka:

The film you directed, “Mr Jones”, tells a story of an unyielding Welsh journalist, Gareth Jones, who tried to bring attention to the great famine in Ukraine. What was it in the screenplay of the American journalist, Andrea Chalupa, that moved you to make this film?

Agnieszka Holland:

Certainly I was intrigued by how incredibly relevant it was to the present-day. Because the screenplay is not only about the famine in Ukraine, but mainly about the relationship between media and politics, the corruption of the media, the partisan media, meaning those that serve a certain political or ideological agenda without regard to the consequences. The film shows the reaction of Western governments to the truth about crimes committed in the world, to the silencing or disrupting the distribution of the information if it is inconvenient for economic or political reasons. *Fake news*, also a subject of this film, not invented just recently or because of the Internet, was a propaganda tool already in the beginning of the 20th century. In the 1930s, this type of propaganda was very effective, even though the means of communication then was relatively primitive, like the printed press and radio. Falsifying reality led to the impunity of crimes and to more tragedies.

Andrea Chalupa graduated from the University of

California with a degree in History and studied Ukrainian at Harvard and in Lviv. Her grandfather, born in the Donbas region, survived the Great Famine in Ukraine. He was a witness to Soviet totalitarianism. Andrea is also the author of the book "Orwell and the Refugees". The screenplay of "Mr. Jones" is a result of many years of research, journeys to Ukraine and Wales. Is the final version in the film close to the screenplay, or were there changes introduced during the making of the film?

Andrea contacted me with an advanced draft of the screenplay. Later, we worked on it together, trying to make it better, improve the flow, but most of the documentary parts were already done. Her grandfather was one of the main witnesses of the Holodomor, as the Ukrainians call it, who testified in front of the American Congress. She was undoubtedly inspired by what he went through and by his sensitivity. Not only is she a journalist by profession but also by temperament, and a very politically engaged one at that, so it was natural for her to choose a journalist as a protagonist. She uncovered the story of Gareth Jones and researched it deeply. When I read the screenplay, I thought that this film needs to be made. Timothy Snyder, one of the most prominent historians of this period and region, was our consultant. The first time I read about Gareth Jones was in Timothy Snyder's book, "Bloodlands". There is a chapter in it about Holodomor and a mention about the story of

Gareth Jones, a practically unknown hero.

He was a very young man, thirty years old, when he was murdered.

When he went to the Soviet Union and to Ukraine, he was 27 years old. He was educated and spoke several languages – Russian, German, and French. He was also well versed in matters concerning Ukraine as well as Germany and attuned to the political realities at play. He turned out to be more insightful than far older and experienced politicians.

Apparently, he was not afraid to look ahead and to imagine the consequences of denying the existence of certain facts.

People tend not to expect the worst. Let's remember that WWI was only a dozen years earlier, the most horrible experience until then for Western Europe. A sense of absurdity and defeat was still lingering because there were no winners in that war.

Gareth Jones is played by a British actor, James Norton. In an interview, he said that he did not know about the person whose role he played. What was the reason to cast him?

James Norton won the audition, and I am very happy about that

because working with him was fantastic. He gave the character an authentic innocence and naivety; at the same time, he is a very aware actor and very intelligent. He decided to choose a minimalistic acting style. Gareth Jones was not a particularly expressive personality, so he could not be played expressively since he was a common guy, a bit rigid, somewhat British, a little egocentric, and at the same time stubborn and nosy. He had all the traits that allowed him to get to the truth.



James Norton as Gareth Jones in Agnieszka Holland's film „Mr. Jones „(2019)

The film's cast includes famous stars, like Peter Sarsgaard, and Vanessa Kirby. There are also Polish actors like Beata Poźniak, Michalina Olszańska, and Krzysztof Pieczyński. What is it like to work with such an international team of actors?

I am used to working with actors from different countries and diverse status, from provincial actors from small theaters to great Hollywood stars. And, in fact, there is not much difference between them at work. Surely, there are celebrity type actors, who mainly care to look good on photographs, but I do not work with such actors. Actors in my team are extremely generous and want to give as much as possible, so they offer their emotions, their bodies, their efforts, and a part of themselves remains in the characters they create.

What is the role of George Orwell and his "Animal Farm" in the film? Is including his character supposed to be a warning about the totalitarianism?

This motif was in the screenplay from the very beginning, and it was also one that seduced me. No doubt Orwell was inspired by the history of Ukraine, The Great Famine and perhaps also by Gareth Jones' articles about Soviet Russia. Andrea's grandfather at the end of the war ended up in a camp for displaced persons. He fought at the front and together with a group of Ukrainians decided that they were not going back and correctly so because they would have ended up in Siberia. While waiting in the camp for visas, they read Orwell's recently published book, "Animal Farm". It made an incredible impression on them. They recognized this book to be about them and about what they went through in the 30's. They decided to translate it into Ukrainian

and published it in a small publishing house in exile. This is how the Ukrainian version was the first foreign-language edition of "Animal Farm". A copy of it has always been in Andrea's grandfather's house and now, in hers.

Using the book's story as a metaphor is perhaps a bit risky artistically, but it is needed for sure. There is no proof that Orwell and Gareth ever met, but it is highly probable. They were more or less the same age, had similar interests, moved in the same literary and journalistic circles of London, had the same agent – they could very well have met.

Many elements in the film concern the notion of truth and the integrity and responsibility of journalists. Walter Duranty, a New York Times correspondent in Moscow was awarded a prestigious Pulitzer Prize for his series of reportages gloryfying communism and nobody verified the accuracy of its content. Is there one truth, or are there many? How to distinguish truth from myth?

I think that it is difficult, both then and now, to distinguish the truth from a lie or from *fake news*. I believe in the existence of so-called objective truth, although I prefer the word "fact". "Truth" is a fuzzy notion that has been robbed in Orwellian ways multiple times. The largest propagandist newspaper of the communist party in the Soviet Union was called "Truth".

Relativization of truth has become a commonplace. When presenting facts that, for example, are not beneficial to some political party, one says – well, it's only an opinion. Such fuzziness is extremely harmful, because then everything is the truth, while nothing really is. Unfortunately, the so-called journalism of the middle is disappearing, the type that is credible to people of different political leanings, reliable, and not influenced by any political agenda. And this is also what this film is about; it shows what happens when journalists start serving some deity instead of reporting facts.

To get to the truth one needs courage; Gareth Jones is undoubtedly courageous and nothing seems impossible to him. Do you think that courage is something one is born with or rather is it a privilege of youth? Can we expect someone to courageously defend others when one's own life is in danger?

I think that it is easier for a young person to be courageous because they feel more certain of themselves, and they think they are immortal. For instance, the extreme sports are a domain of mainly young people because they believe that nothing bad will happen to them. I remember myself when I was young; I was very brave. However, later I started calculating and fearing different consequences. It happened after I gave birth to my child. No longer was I able to ignore inner warning signs and

assume that everything will be OK somehow. Gareth Jones is not cautious, but he is motivated by more than just the courage that comes with a young age. He has an uncanny journalistic instinct – he can sense something that is shrouded in mystery, and he feels compelled to uncover what hides behind this veil.

Can Jan Kuciak, the young Slovak investigative journalist who was murdered because he was writing the truth, be called a present-day Gareth Jones?

Jan Kuciak was exactly Gareth Jones' age, 27 years old, when he and his fiancée were murdered. I have close ties to Slovakia, my ex-husband is Slovakian, I spend a lot of time there, I speak the language, know its culture, have friends there. The fact that a journalist could be murdered in the middle of the European Union, and not in Russia, or in a different regime, only because he was investigating ties between the Italian mafia and the Slovakian government, was shocking. Unlike the case of Gareth Jones, whose truth nobody wanted to listen to, this crime spurred a social movement, especially among young people in Slovakia. This movement caused the prime minister to resign and the young female lawyer and environmental activist, Zuzanna Czaputova, to be voted in.

Focusing on Gareth Jones in the film, you not only showed a historical character, but his story has a clear parallel to

the present day.

I think that the film poses the questions that are not only relevant today but also unusually urgent.



Agnieszka Holland receives The Honorary Citizen of Austin certificate issued by the City of Austin, on stage with Joanna Gutt-Lehr, the APFF 2019 Director, photo by Joanna Sokołowska-Gwizdka

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Our conversation took place during the screening of your film at the Austin Polish Film Festival in Austin, Texas in November 2019. Listening to your statements now a

couple of years later, it is surprising how relevant today almost every sentence is and not only the ones about the very story of the film or the fate of the protagonist, but also about the role of the media, attitudes of the West toward what is happening in Europe. Do you receive comments about the meaning of the film in the context of the war that is taking place in Ukraine now?

Since our conversation, the film premiered in several important countries; in some unfortunately only online because of Covid-19. But in France – under the title "In Stalin's shadow" – it appeared in theaters between two waves of the pandemic and was very successful, provoking also fairly large-scale discussions of a political and historiosophical nature. In Russia, the organization, Memorial, banned by Putin right before the war, tried to show it but fascist militia groups broke into the theater and prevented the screening. The reaction to the film in Putin's Russia (I had a taste of it based on the reaction of Russian journalists after the premiere in Berlin) should give me satisfaction, because it is a testament to the relevancy and power of the film. Instead, it is rather terrifying to me. This relevance is a testament to the repeatability of evil.

In the current situation, the film gained a new context. Do you think history will ever teach us anything?

History teaches but not always the right people. Our film tells a story, among other things, about intentional starvation of the Ukrainian people by Stalin. Putin learned from history how to break defiant people and how to use hunger as weapon. Preventing harvest and transport of Ukrainian grains, Putin generates hunger in Africa and in the Middle East. This will cause a wave of refugees, incomparably larger than the one in 2015, that can completely destabilize the European Union and discourage it from helping Ukraine.

It is we, today's democratic nations, who should learn from the 1930's that one must not give an inch to dictators like Hitler, Stalin, or Putin because such concessions will cost millions of lives and do nothing to stop their imperialistic craziness and future conquests.

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