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Poles Apart

SINS OF THE FATHER

PAN TADEUSZ

Directed by Andrzej Wajda

At the Clearview Cinemas, East 59th Street

January 21 through February 5

Andrzej Wajda's career has been inseparable from themes of Polish history. His new film, *Pan Tadeusz, the Last Foray in Lithuania* (did Mel Brooks supply the title?), is based on an epic poem by Adam Mickiewicz, set in Lithuania on the eve of Napoleon's expedition into Russia in 1812. It concerns a family feud among the Polish country nobility. Tadeusz (Michal Zebrowski), an orphan of 20 with pure soul and virile charm, comes to stay with his uncle, Judge Soplica. He's not really an orphan — Daddy has become a monk to expiate his sins. There's a lot of expiating to be done, for the Soplicas, and their neighbors, the Horeszkos, are the Hatfields and McCoys of Polonized Lithuania and have been at each other's throats for generations. After tons of byzantine plot, not often easy to follow, and a good many scenes of cruelty to man and beast, Tadeusz woos and weds Sophie (Alicja Bachleda-Curus), who is a Horeszko on her mother's side, putting paid to the bitter feud.

Bachleda-Curus is a tad too modern as the Romantic heroine. Zebrowski is a winning hero, but the film is stolen by Daniel Olbrychski as the monstrous Gervais, a rabble-rousing fanatic who urges Count Horeszko to acts of vengeance. Olbrychski was chosen by Wajda to play the lead in *Ashes* (1965) when the actor was 20. His angelic good looks have been put to good use in a number of Wajda's films since then. It's a shock to see him here as a spooky, decrepit old man who speaks with an otherworldly voice and seems a character out of the Middle Ages, and whose scalp bears scars from a dozen saber wounds.

This is a talky film, but if you tilt your eyes up from the subtitles from time to time, you'll note that it's also quite handsomely turned out. There are echoes of *Smiles of a Summer Night* and *Rules of the Game*, but they're faint echoes—it's not in their league. Wajda has made some great movies, but he's an erratic talent and this is one of his lesser works. It becomes a lumpy mélange of revenge melodrama, low comedy, and pale romance; far too much time is taken up by the dull humor of village dolts. Wajda completists will not want to miss it, but *Tadeusz* is unlikely to make any converts. — Elliott Stein

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