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Save the Last Gdansk for Me

By J. Hoberman

MAN OF MARBLE. Directed by Andrzej Wajda. Written by Aleksander Scibor-Rylski. Produced by the Polish Corporation for Film Production (Production Group "X"). Released by New Yorker Films.

Krystyna Janda, a Polish Eve Democracy, embodies Wajda's keyed-up style.

Let the chips fall where they may, Andrzej Wajda's *Man of Marble* is the Polish *Citizen Kane*—with all that implies about the film's structure, scope, ambition, impact, influence, and choice of protagonist. The film is by no means flawless. Indeed, its weaknesses of characterization and inconsistencies of tone are as boldly telegraphed as its virtues. But even Wajda's lapses contribute to the rough-hewn, heroic quality that infuses this dynamic, brilliantly structured and continually engrossing work with the immediacy of a battlefield dispatch.

Man of Marble was an enormous cultural and, ultimately, political event in Poland when it was first released in 1977, and if last year's *Angi Vera* established an audience here for the new East European cinema, this film should confirm it. Opening with apposite timing, *Man of Marble* offers a crash course in post-war Polish history (although it certainly helps if you bring some prior knowledge to the film). With its prismatic assemblage of pseudo-newsreels, fictional archive footage, and fixed-camera flashbacks interpolated into a hand-held present, the movie skitters back and forth in time to make numerous parallels between the 1950s and the 1970s, reflecting a startling prescience in the light of Gdansk.

Wajda's narrative is an epic, two-tiered fiction that follows a neophyte filmmaker as she dodges official flak to make a TV documentary on a forgotten Stalin-era "model worker" who subsequently ran afoul of the authorities. Her subject is Mateusz Birkut, an idealistic bricklayer singled out as exemplary while working on the construction of Nowe Huta, the showcase socialist city of Poland's post-war rebuilding. The filmmaker never meets Birkut (in the end we discover that he is dead), but she manages to piece his story together through official documents, "classified" film clips, and interviews.

During the early '50s, Stakhanovites (as model workers were called, after their Soviet prototype) were national propaganda heroes. Birkut is celebrated as a newsreel star, a model for socialist realist sculpture, and the husband of a professional gymnast, until someone short-circuits his career by passing him a handful of burning hot bricks during a demonstration of his increased productivity techniques. Ordinary members of the proletariat, the film makes clear, are not uniformly enchanted by having his mind-blowing quotas to emulate.

Birkut is less a true believer than a holy innocent—he inadvertently crosses himself before embarking on some titanic labor, causing one of his documentary chroniclers to groan in disgust. And when a friend is framed for the incident of sabotage, Birkut runs amok, buttonholing high Party officials, disrupting union meetings, and finally chucking a brick through the window of the local police headquarters. The authorities have no choice but to frame him as well, pressuring his wife to make a public denunciation. Released from prison during the 1956 thaw, Birkut gives perfunctory support to the reformist Gomulka regime, then (unlike his wronged comrade, who rises in the new apparatus) turns his back on the Party and drops from sight.

Wajda handles this material with a barely controlled frenzy. One of the most physical of directors, he has a taste for low angle shots and mannerist spatial distortions. Actors lean aggressively into his lens, bull the camera back down long corridors, or drag it after them in their wake. Typically, Wajda underlines one character's reversal in fortune by playing out a key scene in a cramped helicopter as it pirouettes over the awesome Katowice steelworks. For all his visceral talent, he can be terribly uneven. *The Orchestra Conductor*, shown at last fall's New York Film Festival, was an inert, ill-conceived film that left the dismal impression of a veteran boxer trying to k.o. a punching bag. *Man of Marble*, on the other hand, gives him a theme that's large enough to contain his drive. It's like watching a run downfield for an 80-yard touchdown, complete with disco soundtrack (used in the contemporary scenes) on the instant replay.

The film's keyed-up, hyperbolic style is perfectly embodied by its denim-clad heroine (Krystyna Janda)—a lithe, pale-eyed blonde who plows through Birkut's past like a force of nature, two camera crews (her own, and Wajda's invisible one) perpetually in tow. Totally driven and all but

insufferable (she's the Polish version of Godard's Eve Democracy; a film-school equivalent to the manic journalist Sam Fuller propels through *Park Row*), Janda distills her character's *Youth Wants to Know* militance into the very spirit of kinesis. She animates her close-ups with bouts of frenzied lip-chewing; fragments the most static compositions with her casually dramatic, flamingo-like moves.

Like Krzysztof Kieslowski's recent *Camera Buff*, *Man of Marble* is as much an essay on the vicissitudes of socialist filmmaking as an actual "expose." But whereas *Camera Buff* concentrated on detailing the manifold hidden pressures and counterpressures that shape Eastern Europe's critical cinema, Wajda takes film world politics as a given and turns his attention to the dialectics of the image. Embedded in his film's first half is a 20-minute exercise—half recreation, half parody—of Stalinist propaganda: the film, *Architects of Our Happiness*, which originally made Birkut a star. (With admirable wit and candor, Wajda gives himself a credit line as assistant director—he did, in fact, serve his apprenticeship making similar glorifications of Nowe Huta.) Not the least of *Man of Marble*'s ironies is the fact that Birkut was initially "created" by an ambitious young filmmaker who needed a new Stakhanovite to launch his career. Now a fat and sassy world-famous director, he expansively tells Janda that "Birkut was my greatest coup." The implication of course is that Birkut will be hers as well.

Not unexpectedly, Janda's producers eventually pull the plug on her film, which is delving through all strata of Polish society and opening a number of closed doors. Only momentarily deterred, she goes on *sans* camera to discover Birkut's son working in Gdansk's Lenin Shipyard. (This is not as much an act of prophecy as a reference to the bloody events that brought down the Gomulka government.) According to some accounts, the film originally implied that the elder Birkut was killed during the Gdansk "disturbances" of 1970. As it stands, the ending is ambiguous. Wajda's final shot has Janda and her new-found worker ally striding purposefully back down the corridor of her former TV studio.

Harshly abrupt, this conclusion is apt to throw Western viewers for a loss. Perhaps it was for our benefit that Wajda included a strange, vaguely surreal sequence in which Birkut, newly released from prison, loses his way in the streets of Nowe Huta. Asking a woman why the roads aren't marked, he's told, "We don't need street signs. We natives know where everything is." And so it is in a sense with *Man of Marble*. There are references and levels of criticism in this film which must necessarily elude us. But so far as contemporary Poland is concerned, Wajda's masterpiece is more than likely the truest street sign we now have. ■