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KATYN

(POLAND)

An Akson Studio, Telewizja Polska, Telekomunikacja Polska presentation, with the support of the Polish Film Institute. (International sales: TVPSA, Warsaw.) Produced by Michal Kwiecinsky. Executive producer, Katarzyna Fukacz-Cebula.

Directed by Andrzej Wajda. Screenplay, Wajda, Wladyslaw Pasikowski, Przemyslaw Nowarkowski. Camera (color; Panavision widescreen), Pawel Edelman; editor, Milenia Fielder; music, Krzysztof Penderecki; production designer, Kamil Przedecki; art director, Magdalena Dipont; costume designers, Magdalena Bierdrzycka, Andrzej Szenajh; sound (Dolby Digital Surround Ex), Jacek Hamela, Leszek Freund, Marek Wronko; casting, Ewa Brodzka. **Reviewed at Berlin Film Festival (noncompeting)**, Feb. 15, 2008. Running time: 121 MIN.

With: Maja Ostaszewska, Artur Zmijewski, Andrzej Chyra, Danuta Stenka, Jan Englert, Magdalena Cielecka, Pawel Malaszyński, Agnieszka Glinśka, Maja Komorowska, Wladyslaw Kowalski, Sergei Garmash, Antoni Pawlicki, Agnieszka Kawiorska.

(Polish, Russian, German dialogue)

By LESLIE FELPERIN

The 1940 massacre by the Soviets of some 15,000 Polish Army officers at Katyn, Russia, reps the hub from which spokes of drama emanate in the WWII epic "Katyn." First work in five years by Andrzej Wajda, Polish cinema's leading *eminence grise*, doesn't feel like the personal project one might expect from the son of one slain at Katyn. Instead, this plays almost like an academic master class, meticulously exploring the event's ramifications but only catching full fire at the end. Foreign-language film Oscar nominee did boffo biz domestically last year, and should make a victory lap around art-houses offshore.

Returning to the WWII period of the director's outstanding early trilogy of "Generation," "Kanal" and "Ashes and Diamonds," current pic assumes a typically Wadjaesque dispassionate stance toward the heroes and villains of history. Wadja himself lost his own father in the Katyn massacre at age 14 and lived through the years of Nazi occupation, Soviet repression and unrest as the Solidarity movement led to Poland's eventual transition to a free-market economy.

Wajda is now a mentor to a new generation of Polish filmmakers, and his interpretation of one of the key tragedies of Polish history takes on for domestic auds the stature of words from a prophet. It's in this context that one should understand "Katyn's" local success, reaping more than \$14 million on theatrical receipts alone.

Pic's criss-crossing storylines sympathetically unfold a full spectrum of experiences of those who lived and died during the period covered.

A key strand follows Anna (Maja Ostaszewska), whose story parallels that of Wadja's mother. It's 1939 when Anna arrives at the eastern border of Poland in search of her husband Andrzej (Artur Zmijewski), a Polish officer who resists her pleas to run away with her, preferring to stay with his calvary regiment. Having been captured by the invading Soviet army, the regiment is doomed to be shipped east for internment in Russia, where most of them will be killed at Katyn in 1940, per explanation in the opening credits.

Action crosscuts among Anna, Andrzej in the internment camp and other characters: There's also an interned general (Jan Englert) and his proud wife (Danuta Stenka), who refuses to knuckle under Ger-

man pressure to participate in their anti-Russian propaganda.

Andrzej's friend Jerzy (local star Andrzej Chyra) reps one of the few who will survive Katyn, but at the cost of his own soul, as he acquiesces after the war to attribute Katyn to the Nazis, lest the atrocity embarrass the Soviet overlords who were truly responsible. Jerzy's storyline intersects with that of sisters Agnieszka (Magdalena Cielecka) and Irena (Agnieszka Glinśka), who take opposing stances toward the new postwar regime.

Wajda, aided and abetted by co-scribes Wladyslaw Pasikowski and Przemyslaw Nowarkowski, demonstrates a masterful ability to convey plot points, illustrate character and create atmosphere with just a few lines of dialogue and spryly rendered visual brushstrokes. Precision-engineered editing (credited to Milenia Fielder) fluidly moves between time periods and locations, although non-Polish auds may struggle to keep up, especially as some thespians look physically quite similar (Ostaszewska and Stenka, for example, or Zmijewski and Chyra).

Some will admire the general absence of sentimentality, but for others, pic might seem too cold and lacking in emotional punch until the final, flawlessly rendered scene that shows (and this is no spoiler) the massacre itself, a near-mechanical series of shootings that's a veritable charnel house of horror.

Thesping throughout is of a piece with Wajda's restraint, and features fine work from all involved. Score by renowned Polish composer Krzysztof Penderecki rumbles and sighs with rich poignancy without swamping the action. Other craft contributions are quietly pro, reflecting what must have been a vast budget for a Polish movie.



Maja Ostaszewska searches for her husband in Polish helmer's Andrzej Wajda's epic "Katyn."