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Tadeusz Huk in *Provincial Actors*: a sad, subtle comedy that presages the contraction gripping Poland now

By J. Hoberman

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PROVINCIAL ACTORS. Directed by Agnieszka Holland. Written by Holland and Witold Zatorski. Produced by Zespoly Filmowe (X Unit). Released by New Yorker Films. At Film Forum 2 through March 8.

Down at Film Forum 2, movies from the late '70s Polish renaissance strike New York eyes like the light from some extinguished star. This week, following the exciting *Camera Buff* and preceding Zanussi's crystalline *Constant Factor*, the attraction is *Provincial Actors*—the third feature by 34-year-old Agnieszka Holland, a Wajda protégé and one of the most promising women directors in Europe.

Holland supposedly served as the model for the Krystyna Janda dynamo in *Man of Marble*, but her style here is fairly muted. Far from frenzied, *Provincial Actors* is a more subtle and, in some ways, even sadder comedy of careerism behind the Curtain than *Contract*, *Camouflage*, or *Without Anesthesia* (a film she co-scripted). Less direct than Wajda or Zanussi, Holland lets her narrative emerge gradually—lit by little flares of temperament and punctuated by Godardian shards of music—from the hurly-burly of onstage rehearsal, backstage gossip, and offstage marital stress.

An actor from the Warsaw theater takes temporary charge of a small-town company to stage an avant-garde version of a Polish nationalist classic, Stanislaw Wyspiański's baldly titled *Liberation*. For Tadeusz Huk, the troupe's 32-year-old leading man, the production seems his best—maybe last—chance to attract some attention and escape this backwater for the city. But, maddeningly, the smooth, self-assured director keeps chopping out Huk's best lines, a few at a time. As Huk's future fades, the past unravels: his half-careerist, half-idealistic obsession with the play drives his wife (Halina Labonarska) nuts and precipitates the disintegration of their marriage.

A graduate of the Prague Film School, FAMU, Holland has a Czech knack for sudden shifts into surreal overstatement. Our one glimpse of *Liberation's* production (nudes parading in gas masks) ends with comic fatality as a huge prop bell crashes down from the rafters. Things everywhere are falling apart: an old man

who has been attacked by a dog, then humiliated by the police, hurtles past the window as Labonarska does her ironing. In the film's most disconcerting scene, Labonarska considers slitting Huk's

throat with a razor while he pretends to sleep.

Of course, no East European could look at a group of frustrated "provincial actors" and fail to see a political microcosm, and Holland's film is layered with social satire. The importance of good connections is played off the etiquette of

veiled threats; the sullenness of lackadaisical workers illuminates the pretensions of their vainglorious leaders. On opening night, Huk declaims all of his deleted part anyway; afterwards the di-

rector meets him in the urinal and observes that it didn't even matter: "I know when and where to toe the line, and so do you." Still, the prevailing atmosphere is less keyed to cynicism than to waste and defeat. The film is enlivened by the suffering of wardrobe harpies who used to be stars, haunted by the stupid innocence of a prop man who longs to be an actor. Labonarska, too, is a thwarted thespian who, having failed out of drama school, works in puppet theater and reads Heidegger for consolation.

Provincial Actors's flaws are mainly in the realm of performance. Huk's characterization is vague and overshadowed by lesser players. Labonarska, though also flat, has more to work with. Bitter wives—a metaphor, perhaps, for the tormented social order—figure prominently in the late '70s Polish films. But here, unlike in *Camera Buff* or *Without Anesthesia*, the wife is something more than a caricature of bitchiness. Her dissatisfaction and inability to play the game presage the fearful contraction that may be gripping Poland now.