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Some Recent Polish Films

—Steven P. Hill

Around the end of the 1950's, Polish cinema began to move away from World War II subjects and to branch out into a variety of other themes from a very modern viewpoint. A number of these fascinating and varied Polish films of the sixties are now available from Audio Film Classics: *Mother Joan of the Angels*, *Eve Wants to Sleep*, *Innocent Sorcerers*, *Siberian Lady Macbeth*, and *Salto*. The first of these, Kawalerowicz's religious drama, *Joan* (1961) and Chmielewski's satiric comedy *Eve* (1959), are unqualified artistic and popular successes, and both are a sure bet for any film group which has not yet shown them. They are too familiar to need further comment. Although the other three films are less familiar and less completely successful artistically and popularly, they are certainly no less interesting as works of modern cinema.

Siberian Lady Macbeth (1961, 90 min.), based on the 19th century Russian writer Leskov's story, was made by Andrew Wajda in Belgrade, using a Yugoslavian crew and Serbian-speaking cast. A top Yugoslavian actress, Olivera Markovic, plays the title role of Katerina Izmailova, one of the bitchiest mankillers to emblazon the pages of Russian literature, as she takes a lover who makes her pregnant, then proceeds with him to poison her snooty father-in-law, beats her boorish husband to death, suffocates a child rival for her inheritance, is caught and nearly lynched, and, after conviction and exile to a Siberian prison camp, tries to drown a lady convict who has stolen her lover. Needless to say, this is heavy-weight melodrama liberally dosed with acts of violence and passion, and, typical of Leskov (the leading Russian picaresque writer along with Gogol), has plot and incident taking precedence over character and psychological nuance. The film is done straight, without humor, and thus it makes a good program blender for film series which are overbalanced toward light-inconsequential or plotless-ambiguous fare (neither of which *Lady Macbeth* is).

The *Lady Macbeth* story was also used by Shostakovich for his famous 1934 opera, which after a Stalinistic ban for over 20 years has been rehabilitated and filmed in the USSR under the title *Katerina Izmailova* (1966), with Galina Vishnevskaya acting and singing the title role. Wajda thus preceded the Russians in rehabilitating the story and music — some motifs from which he uses here, especially in one grotesque and impressive scene shot through a staircase, where Shostakovich's ominous rhythms accompany the husband's dead body as it is being carried upside down by the lover.

Steven P. Hill teaches at the University of Illinois and is a distinguished student of the Russian film.