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Chilling film from Poland

By Walter V. Addiego

"Man of Marble," opening today at the Clay Theater, played in the 1979 San Francisco International Film Festival. The Examiner's review is reprinted here.

ANDRZEJ WAJDA'S "Man of Marble" skillfully and chillingly evokes the destructive political atmosphere of Poland in the 1950s by focusing on the rise and fall of a state-manufactured "hero."

This Polish film, certainly among the strongest Film Festival entries this year, is structured as a kind of historical detective story, with many ironic parallels to "Citizen Kane." In both films, a reporter reveals a man's life to us through interviews with the subject's friends, co-workers, ex-wives and others, each of whom has a different bit of the story to tell.

The reporter in Wajda's film is an aggressive young woman student at the Polish Film Academy who encounters an outsized statue (in the ugly "socialist realist" style of Iron Curtain art) locked away in a museum basement. It is a representation of a bricklayer named Birkut who, in the early 1950s, was set up by the state as a model for workers by virtue of his record-breaking labor output.

But a few years later, she learns, his picture was removed from the state pantheon and he dropped out of public view. Why? The young woman, Agnieszka, is intrigued by Birkut, "perhaps," she says, "because he'd toppled over."

Wajda reveals, through recreated newsreels and flashbacks, a moving story of an innocent man whose happiness is destroyed because of the state's political requirements.

A newsreel director tells Agnieszka that Birkut was a simple laborer chosen, because he was strong and not terribly bright, to set a record in bricklaying as an inspiration for other workers (and, incidentally, to justify the government's raising of work quotas). Birkut, the director says, "was my biggest coup."

Birkut becomes a celebrated hero, until one day on the job someone passes him a burning hot brick, ruining his hands. A friend of Birkut's is accused of the crime and charged with being part of a sabotage ring. When Birkut, a rather naive man, comes to the friend's defense, he is deprived of his job and sent to prison for "rehabilitation." His wife denounces him and leaves.

While Agnieszka is uncovering these facts, all of which implicate the government, she begins running into problems of her own. Necessary newsreel footage is discovered to be "classified." Interview subjects won't talk for the record. The Film Academy withdraws permission to use cameras and film stock (ironically, just as she's about to contact Birkut's son, who in the end decides to cooperate with Agnieszka). The innocent Birkut encountered heavy-handed governmental control mechanisms in the 1950s; the young woman faces a softer version of the same thing in the 1970s.

One of the film's ironies is its suggestion of the way things have and haven't changed between Birkut's time and Agnieszka's. The busy Film Academy, with its sophisticated, bustling, blue-jeaned workers and mildly anti-authoritarian air, might be located in any American big city. But the Poland of Birkut's day celebrated simple men of muscle, the "volunteers" who did the brute labor of post-war reconstruction.

The central irony, of course, is that of the title, suggesting Birkut's statue with its implications of what the state wants man to be, contrasted with the reality of Birkut's human frailty. But "Man of Marble" also implies the fortitude of Birkut in defending his friend and in attempting to tell the



Jerzy Radziwilowicz as the naive state 'hero' in 'Man of Marble'

REVIEW highlights

"Man of Marble," a Polish film distributed by New Yorker Films; directed by Andrzej Wajda; written by Aleksander Scibor-Rylski; photographed by Edward Klosinski. With Krystyna Janda, Jerzy Radziwilowicz, Tadeusz Lomnicki, Jacek Lomnicki and Krystyna Zachwatowicz. A penetrating investigation of the rise and fall of a state-manufactured "hero" in the Poland of the 1950s, and a sharp critique of the constant difficulties and compromises forced on those living in police states. No MPAA rating. Evening admission \$4. At the Clay Theater, Fillmore near Clay.

★ ★ ★ ★

truth after his imprisonment.

Wajda, at age 53, is perhaps Poland's leading film director. He first came to international attention with "Ashes and Diamonds" (1958), and his "Everything for Sale" (1969) had a recent commercial run here. "Man of Marble" displays the fruits of almost 25 years of film-making.

Commendations are due to Jerzy Radziwilowicz for his portrayal of Birkut, fully capturing both the man's simple friendliness and goodwill, and his later disillusionment. Krystyna Janda is good as Agnieszka, although Wajda has allowed her so many nervous, assertive mannerisms (note her compulsive smoking and walking) that the characterization soon become annoying.