



The physician at the movies

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Ida

Starring Agata Kulesza, Agata Trzebulchowska, and Dawid Ogrodnik.

Directed by Pawel Pawlikowski. B&W. PG-13. Running time 82 minutes. In Polish with English subtitles.

This beautifully crafted film is set in Poland in 1962. It opens in a Franciscan convent where Anna (Agata Trzebulchowska) and her fellow novitiates are sculpting a statue of Christ to be erected on the road to the convent. They pray in Latin and then go to the refectory and eat in silence. Anna is on the verge of taking her final vows, but the mother superior tells her that before she does she should visit her only known living relative, Aunt Wanda (Agata Kulesza), who had repeatedly refused to take charge of her when she was in the orphanage or to even visit her. Anna reluctantly agrees. This reminded me of *Viridiana*, Luis Buñuel's very anti-Catholic film, in which a novice is persuaded to visit her relative, a *roué*, before taking her vows—the two films diverge widely after this common beginning.¹ Anna leaves the convent on a snowy winter day, rides a train and a bus, all foreign to her, and absorbs everything around her. A newcomer to acting and film, Trzebulchowska was spotted in a café by the director. She is reminiscent of Renée Maria Falconetti, who though an accomplished actress had never made a film before the 1928 silent classic *Passion of Joan of Arc*, and never did again. Both communicate using their luminous faces and eyes, radiating an air of pure innocence.¹

Anna receives a frosty welcome from her aunt, who is a hard-bitten communist known locally as Red Wanda, an alcoholic chain-smoking judge who has sent many of her fellow Poles to death. Wanda is amazed that the nuns had not told Anna that her birth name was Ida and that the family is Jewish, and says, "You're a Jewish nun." The rest of the film is a road trip back in time as they seek the family home and the grave where Ida's parents and brother were buried. Wanda tells her how sweet and lovely she is and that her dimple when she smiles would drive men wild. "Do you dream of carnal love?" Wanda asks her. When Ida says, "No," Wanda replies, "How can you know what you're giving up?" They pick up a hitchhiker, Lis (Dawid Ogrodnik), a member of a rock band who plays the alto sax and is on his way to a gig. Much of the score is jazz by Coltrane, with Mozart's *Jupiter*

Ida (2013). Shown in center: Agata Trzebulchowska.

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Symphony and some Bach thrown in.

In the hotel before bedtime, Ida is kneeling at her bedside praying when Wanda, whose life is filled with engaging men in one-night stands, asks Ida to join her. Ida refuses and Wanda tells her, "I won't let you waste your life. You're a saint and I'm a slut. Your Jesus loved people like me, Mary Magdalene." Unable to sleep, Ida sits on the stairs watching the young man and his band play. The next day, they continue their trip and find the house where her family lived. Apparently, the neighbor took them in and fed them and hid them, but later betrayed them for their property. The neighbor is dying in the hospital and his son tells them to leave his father alone and that he will show them where they were buried if they will go away. When the son digs up the bodies, Ida wonders why she was not killed and buried there. The son says, "You were tiny and they took you to the priest. Your brother was dark and circumcised and so he was killed along with your parents." The bodies are transferred to a Jewish cemetery. Ida returns to the convent and re-enters her regimented life. Not ready to take her vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience, she goes back to Wanda. I will stop here and let the director take you on the rest of the journey to its poignant conclusion.

The cinematography is exquisite. It is a very interesting film and a highly personal one for the director who also was a co-screenwriter. He had lived in Poland under the Communists and left with his family





Agata Trzebuchowska in *Ida* (2013). © Music Box Films.

for England.² It is an excellent taking-off point for discussion of what happened to the Poles and Poland, where Jews and Christians had lived in harmony since the 1300s beginning with the rule of Casimir the Great, before the Nazis and the Communists took over. I highly recommend it.

References

1. Dans PE. *Christians in the Movies: A Century of Saints and Sinners*. Lanham (MD): Rowman and Littlefield; 2009.
2. Douthat R. Into the past. *National Rev* 2014 Jul 7: 48

Calvary

Starring Brendan Gleeson, Kelly Reilly, and M. Emmet Walsh.
Directed by John Michael McDonagh. Rated R. Running time
144 minutes.

The picture opens with a saying from St. Augustine: “One thief was saved, so don’t despair; one thief was damned, so don’t presume.” The camera pans the rugged, harsh Irish

landscape of County Sligo and is followed by one of the most powerful film openings in recent memory. Father James (Brendan Gleeson) sits in an old-fashioned confessional box and slides the screen to hear the confession of a man whose voice he thinks he recognizes. The man says, “I tasted semen at a terrifyingly young age.” Momentarily taken aback, the priest shoots back, “Certainly, a startling opening line.” The man relates that he was the victim of sexual abuse by a priest for seven years. When asked if he reported it, he says no, and tells Father James that the priest is dead and that church superiors covered it up. He reveals his intention to take his revenge by killing a priest, but not a bad one but a good one—Father James. He gives the priest a week to straighten out his affairs and tells him to meet him at the beach on Sunday. As he leaves, he chuckles, “Killing a priest on Sunday; that’s a good one.”

The rest of the film is devoted to glimpses of Father James’ parishioners, as we meet the potential assassins one by one in a series of hit-and-run encounters as each day passes. The most human and in-depth scenes are with his daughter Fiona (Kelly Reilly). It turns out that after Father James’ wife died, he became a priest. We first meet the daughter visiting her father while recovering from a suicide attempt, evidenced by her bandaged wrists. Now in her twenties, she tells him that she felt traumatized and depressed by losing not just one parent but two when he entered the seminary. He replies that he has always been there for her as much as he could but that he felt the priesthood was a calling that he had to follow.

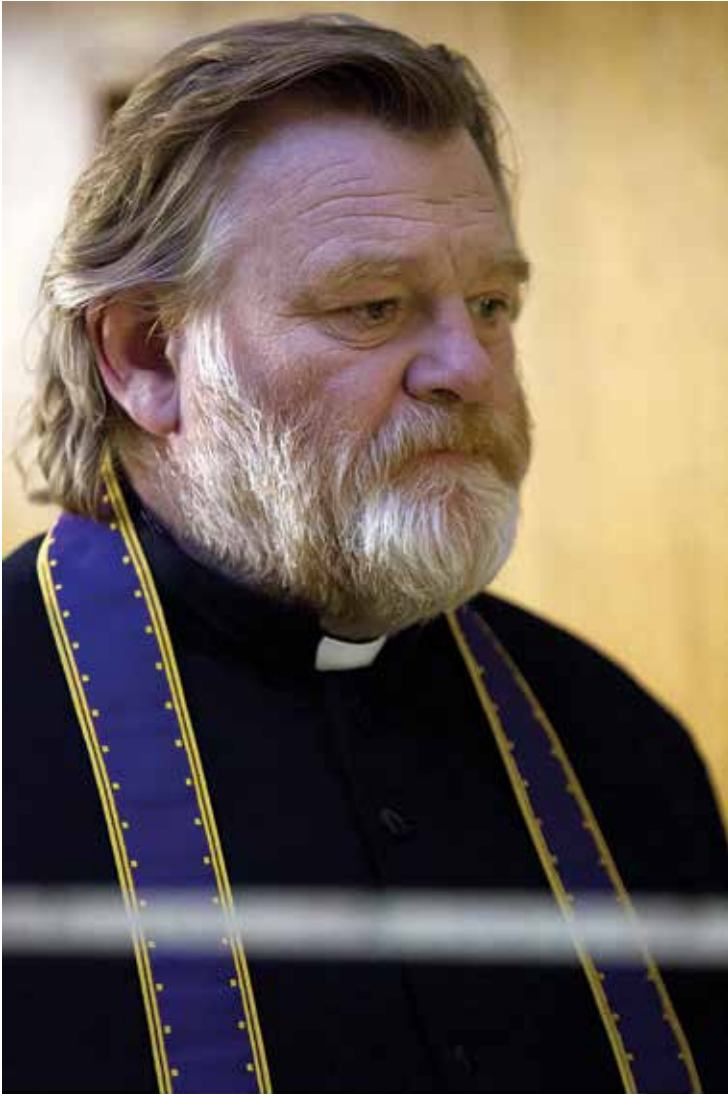
What is striking is that almost all of Father James’ parishioners seem to have severe problems. There’s the rich drunk (Dylan Moran), a corrupt financier whose wife has left him. To show that he doesn’t really have much respect for money or possessions, he takes down his favorite picture and urinates on it. He tries to get the priest to accept blood money, saying he will write a check for £5,000. Father James tells him to write £100,000. The weak, jejune curate (David Wilmot) who is with him can hardly contain himself. Father James tells the curate he has no integrity and walks out without the check.

A pretty woman (Orla O’Rourke) married to the butcher (Chris O’Dowd) has several affairs, most recently with an African mechanic (Isaach De Bankole), with whom she enjoys rough sex. The butcher also likes to batter her.

There’s the repressed young man who can’t make it with girls and is addicted to porn.

The local doctor (Aidan Gillen) is an atheist said by the screenwriter to be “like ninety percent of doctors” (where that stat is from I have no idea). He is a rather cynical man who likes to tell the priest sad stories about dying children and puts out his cigarette on a cadaver’s limb during an autopsy. Later at the Saturday night blowout, he snorts cocaine.

Father James visits the police chief at his home thinking that he might tell him his situation. The chief is shooting pool with his crucifix-wearing boyfriend who brags about servicing



Brendan Gleeson in *Calvary*.

© Fox Searchlight Pictures.

many in the community. The friend reprises Jimmy Cagney's greeting to his juvenile delinquents in the movie *Angels with Dirty Faces*: "Whadda ya hear, Whadda ya say?" When the police chief admiringly says "what a character" the boy is, Father James decides not to confide in him.

There's the wiseguy altar boy who the priest believes is drinking the unconsecrated communion wine.

Finally in this rogues' gallery, there is the serial killer whom the priest visits in jail where the man confesses to having cannibalized a victim.

One of the slightly more sympathetic characters is an aged, curmudgeonly writer (M. Emmet Walsh) who feels that he's dying and wants a gun to shoot himself. The priest does get the gun but does not give it to him and keeps it with the idea that he might need it to protect himself.

There's an attractive French widow who just lost her family in an accident, one of the few people to whom one can relate.

Two of the best scenes are set in Father James' rather austere room where he greets his dog Bruno, his main source of companionship, before he tumbles into bed. There he has a very warm telephone conversation with his daughter during which they both forgive each other.

At the Saturday blowout in the pub, Father James, who had been an alcoholic but had been free from alcohol for three years, goes off the rails, gets drunk and shoots up the pub. Who can blame him with that cast of unlovable characters he has to minister to? The owner beats him up. The church burns down. Bruno is killed. All I can say is that it has been a helluva week. It all culminates in a *High Noon* ending.

The acting is superb, especially on the part of Gleeson, who fills the screen exuding power and solidity. The film is worth seeing for his acting alone but also for some memorable scenes. Even Archbishop Chaput of Philadelphia called it an "unblinking, unforgettable film."¹

Reference

1. Chaput CJ. "Calvary" is an unblinking, unforgettable film. Crux 2014 Sept 12. <http://www.cruxnow.com/life/2014/09/12/calvary-is-an-unblinking-unforgettable-film/>.





The 39 Steps (1936) starring Madeleine Carroll and Robert Donat. Center, seated under the cameras, director Alfred Hitchcock.

© Gaumont British Picture Corporation of America/Photofest

The 39 Steps (1935)

Starring Robert Donat and Madeleine Carroll.

Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. Not rated. B&W. Running time 86 minutes.

The much overused word “classic” is nowhere more appropriate than when applied to Alfred Hitchcock’s films. Given his enormous output, it’s hard to pick favorites, whether it be the lighter films like *North by Northwest*, *Rear Window*, *To Catch A Thief*, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, *The Lady Vanishes*, or the more eerie ones like *Rebecca*, *Spellbound*, *Suspicion*, *Notorious*, and *Strangers on a Train*, or the downright scary ones like *Vertigo*, *Psycho*, and *The Birds*.

Often forgotten when Hitchcock films are discussed are *Foreign Correspondent* and *The 39 Steps*. The latter is based on a 1915 John Buchan novel and stars Robert Donat, whose career, which included such memorable films as *The Citadel* and *Goodbye Mr. Chips*, for which he won an Oscar, was cut short by asthma. Here he plays Richard Hannay, a Canadian tourist (a South African in the book) who has “made his pile” and is in London looking for excitement. He attends a musical production at the Palladium featuring Mr. Memory when shots are fired and he finds himself holding on to a woman who turns out to be British spy Annabella Smith (Lucie Mannheim). She tells him that two German spies are after her because she knows that they are trying to steal a British top secret. Hannay takes her to his apartment, feeds her, and safely tucks her away only to find in the morning that she has been murdered. He is now caught between carrying out her mission and being pursued by the German spies, as well as by the police when they find the dead woman’s body in his apartment. A

lot of the tricks that will later appear in other Hitchcock films are melded into this very taut chase story. Hannay is able to get to Scotland aboard the famous train *The Flying Scotsman*, which has run between London and Edinburgh since 1862.

He escapes detection by passionately kissing a woman named Pamela (a Hitchcock invention, played by Madeleine Carroll) as the police open their compartment door searching for him. She later becomes central to the film. Cornered on the train, he escapes when the train stops on the cantilevered railroad bridge over the Firth of Forth, and is off on a trek across the moors. The exhausting trek rings true because Buchan was a compulsive walker who covered ten to as many as thirty miles a day.¹ There are a lot of comic touches as Pamela re-enters his life believing that he is a murderer. She and Hannay are captured by the spies and are handcuffed together. How they manage to escape and get back to the Palladium is, as one critic described Buchan’s works, enjoyable for being so preposterous.

Reference

1. Kimball R. Re-reading John Buchan. In: Kimball R. *The Fortunes of Permanence: Culture and Anarchy in an Age of Amnesia*. South Bend (IN): St. Augustine’s Press; 2012: 95–119.

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