

Mariusz Kotowski & Pola Negri – the Union of Souls

With his *Life is a Dream In Cinema: Pola Negri* movie, Mariusz Kotowski conjured up an epoch,

a personality and the roots of cinema – the silent film.

There is an old Polish saying: “show me your friends and I will tell you who you are”.

Obviously, Kotowski’s artistic and spiritual friend is the biggest silent film star – Pola Negri.

Digging deeper into Kotowski’s life story, we understand the roots of that spiritual similarity, and the drive behind the pursuit of a grand, wonderful, fabulous and regal life. Kotowski is from Poland, as was his hero – Pola Negri.

Before he left Poland, Kotowski was a teacher and a master of dance. Having graduated from college with a master’s degree in artistic education, he devoted himself to studying ballroom dancing. Mariusz worked both with children and adults. Because of his visionary imagination and leadership talents, he immediately became wildly popular in ballroom dance salons, as well as the most renowned dance studios in Poland.

In no time he also acquires a judge certification. His mentors, who left a strong imprint on Mariusz’s works, were professors Maria Jolanta Falska, Piotr Galiński, and judge Iwona Szymańska. Finally, Mariusz becomes a member of the Polish Dance Society presided over by the great Andrzej Golonka, whose presence adds splendor to the beloved and popular “Dancing with the Stars” show broadcast in Poland and abroad.

As part of his teaching career, Mariusz devotes two years to study ballroom dance choreography at the Dance Studio run by the Ministry of Culture and Arts at Elektoralna Street in Warsaw.

As a choreographer, he puts together routines for dance groups “exported” by Pagart to Italy, Cyprus, Lebanon, and the United States. In 1994 Mariusz takes his first ballroom dance exam in Poznań, and becomes a judge. In 1996 he lectures in Koszalin, and in 1996-1998 at the Baltic College of Humanities. In 1998 Mariusz leaves Poland to continue his ballroom dancing studies.

Overall, in Poland he received three certifications in ballroom dancing: one in the so-called Standard Ballroom dance (English waltz, Vienna waltz, tango, foxtrot and quickstep), one in Latin American dance, and one in Vienna waltz.

Also, as part of his ballroom dancing studies he pursued historical dance. In Poland, he taught and organized dancing competitions in Kielce, Warka, Białobrzegi, Szydłowiec, Olsztyn, Poznań, Koszalin, Bartoszyce and Krakow.

While continuing to teach and simultaneously expanding his skills and mastering his performance, Mariusz establishes a regular dialogue with Ann Lingard from England.

Following the suggestion of professor Lingard of the Imperial Society of dance teachers in London, he leaves for the United Kingdom to improve his English. At first, Mariusz

protested: “I am a dance teacher; I don’t need to know the language. Dance speaks louder than words”. But professor Lingard replied: “Either you go my way, and follow the fastest track, or you take your own path - but that will cost you at least seven years”. Naturally, Mariusz followed the path suggested by his teacher. At this point, I must quote the sentence that kept on repeating throughout our interview: “the most accomplished people owe their achievements primarily to hard work, and to the right life-changing decisions they made.”

Kotowski’s decision did indeed turn out to be the right one, as he successfully passed his dance teacher exams in London becoming a Dance Teacher Fellow. Over time, he obtains a total of three dance teacher certificates, and becomes known as the only Pole in London holding as many teacher certifications in dancing. It should really come as no surprise that such a thoroughly educated dancer and choreographer would fall in love with an extraordinary artist who also was a dancer.

This is where we should say a few words about Pola Negri.

Pola was only eight years old when, together with her mother, she had to leave their happy family home in Lipno, and move to an apartment in Warsaw’s Powiśle at 11 Browarna street, where their small dwelling consisted only of a section of the attic. At the time, that region of Poland was under Russian rule. Allegedly as a result of some patriotic affairs her father, Mr. Chalupiec, a Slovakian Gypsy, is thrown into a brutal tsarist prison on Pawiak. During the Second World War the prison will become notorious as one of the most torturous prisons of the Nazi regime. Initially, Pola attends a monastery school but later, with the support of her heroic mother, she is accepted to the tsar’s ballet school at the Warsaw Opera.

It should be mentioned that in the tsar’s Russia the entire education system, including universities, was free, and anyone could study as long as they wanted. No limit of five-year course of studies existed at that time. At the ballet school, Pola met the great Pavlova, and, while still a student, she had a chance to watch Fokin – the second most famous dancer after Nizynski, and the great Karsavina, the second most famous ballerina after Pavlova, perform on stage.

And so the tragedy of tsarism was ingrained into Pola’s personal experience and gave her, on the one hand, the opportunity of a top ballet education for free, but on the other hand, on the day of her first communion her father was taken in chains straight from Pawiak to Siberia, along with other prisoners. So the future artist had already endured incredible drama through her teenage years. Pola was on the path to becoming a classical dancer when a pulmonary disease thwarted her plans.

Her lung problems, healed in Zakopane, eventually led Pola to the theater stage. Persuaded by her guardian Kazimierz Hulewicz, Director of the National Theater, she takes up her second course of studies at the drama school in Warsaw.

While in Zakopane, reciting a poem by the Italian poet Ada Negri to other patients one evening she adopts the stage name of Pola Negri.

There are many reasons why the great Pola Negri and the talented dancer and choreographer Mariusz Kotowski enjoy such a special spiritual bond.

Like Pola, Mariusz Kotowski leaves Poland as a highly educated and experienced dancer and ballroom dance judge. Pola, under an adopted name, also highly educated in ballet and drama, is carried off to Germany and is soon under contract.

For Pola it was the director Aleksander Hertz who, having filmed the “Yellow Passport”, served as a bridge between Poland and Germany, and for Mariusz – similarly, his British teacher was the bridge between his Polish teaching and judging career, and his UK career in dancing. Furthermore, the brilliant Pola Negri builds excellent relationships, both on an artistic and personal level, with Reinhardt. Subsequently, they all work together – Max Reinhardt, Ernst Lubitsch and Pola Negri, to establish the UFA (Union Film Alliance) – the biggest film production company in Germany. So, in a nutshell, one could say that from ballet through theater to film, young Pola follows a path strewn with sweat, but also with tears of adoration and admiration shed by her audience. And just like Pola, Mariusz Kotowski, having obtained three teaching degrees in dance in the UK, crosses the Atlantic to settle in the traditional film Mecca – the United States. There he studies at a film school in New York while teaching at various dance studios. And after graduating with a master’s degree from the New York University Film School, Mariusz sets up Bright Shining City Productions at the Entertainment Center in Austin, Texas.

Since his move from New York to Texas, this creative dancer, dance teacher, judge and movie director takes up three challenges in the form of full-length features, with the first one being an excellent feature documentary devoted to Pola Negri. The second movie, *Esther’s Diary*, tackles the psychological aspects of coexistence and cohabitation of Polish emigrants with Christian and Jewish roots. A very subtly presented storyline shows us that Christians and Jews may collaborate, understand, respect, and appreciate one another.

Open above the storyline of *Esther’s Diary* is the umbrella of forgiveness. In an international environment, particularly in the United States, there is very little awareness of the history of Jews in Poland (which, it should be noted, in Hebrew is pronounced Polin, which means “sweet dwellings”). It was because of Poland and Poles that Jews survived the atrocities of the Second World War not only as individuals, but also as a nation. The beginning of the special relationship between Poles and Jews dates back to 1264, when the Polish king issued the so-called Statute of Kalisz, which awarded absolute sovereignty to the Jewish minority in Poland, granting exclusive jurisdiction over Jewish matters to Jewish courts. That was an unprecedented occurrence – it’s hard to imagine that in the United States or anywhere else in the world any minority could enjoy its own judicial system, and not be governed by the jurisdiction of the country of their residence. History does not know another such event. Only in Poland were Jews granted such extraordinary rights.

The Jewish population in Poland increased 75 times between the 16th and 17th century,

which reaffirms that the minority, generally discriminated against in Europe, found their safe haven in Poland. Unfortunately, the Second World War was a tragic experience for Poles, including Poles of Jewish descent. Very often good relationships turned rocky, which neither the Poles nor Jews could comprehend. *Esther's Diary* is worth recommending because it subtly and carefully shows the pain, suffering, grudges and the final arrival at a consensus in the cohabitation of Polish Christian and Jewish immigrants. The film premiered in Los Angeles in April 2008, and was very well reviewed.

Kotowski's next movie, *Deeper and Deeper*, soon to be shown in Los Angeles, is a psychological thriller, along the lines of a Hitchcockian in-depth analysis. It puts its finger on the pulse of the greatest problem of modern times – the relations between men and women.

The main characters are a very strong and dominating woman and a lost frightened man who, feeling an eternal attraction to the weaker sex - not so weak in the case of the movie's female character - moves from fascination to obsession – it is often the case that unrealized fascinations turn into insanity. He wants to possess his chosen one, and yet lives in fear of her, and the electricity that used to flow naturally between the sexes now encounters the great obstacles of civilization in its path. Kotowski paints a beautiful picture of those obstacles, calling at the same time upon unpredictability by blurring the lines between watching and being watched, making the movie a very interesting thriller.

As was the case for Pola Negri, manifested in the works and the personality of Mariusz Kotowski is his quest for the absolute beauty and absolute truth in the social conditions surrounding the artists.

And perhaps that's where this affinity of souls comes from. Personally, I think that Mariusz Kotowski's movie *Pola Negri* should be included in every film archive, available at every Polish school and every library; we have contributed to that by recommending the film to Mediateka and fifteen libraries in Warsaw.

Let's hope that just like Pola became one of the most popular and beloved Hollywood stars, the film of Mariusz Kotowski will become one of the most popular features in Mediateka of Warsaw. By now it has almost become a tradition that outstanding Poles are discovered abroad, and also in this case our great movie star was discovered and brought to life by an American artist with a Polish soul.

Mariusz Kotowski is also a founder of the Pola Negri Foundation in the United States. It is our intention to set up a subsidiary of the foundation in Poland. We strongly encourage all movie lovers, fans of Pola Negri and Mariusz Kotowski to join in that project.

Mira MODELSKA-CREECH