



Official Selection

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Toronto International
Film Festival 2019

CORPUS CHRISTI

A FILM BY JAN KOMASA
POLAND, FRANCE 2019



Corpus Christi is the story of a 20-year-old Daniel who experiences a spiritual transformation while living in a Youth Detention Center. He wants to become a priest but this is impossible because of his criminal record. When he is sent to work at a carpenter's workshop in a small town, on arrival he dresses up as a priest and accidentally takes over the local parish. The arrival of the young, charismatic preacher is an opportunity for the local community to begin the healing process after a tragedy that happened there.

SYNOPSIS



***Corpus Christi* was actually inspired by true events. Was it just one particular story?**

There was one case, which actually generated some headlines in Poland, of a boy who impersonated a priest for about three months. His name was Patryk and he was probably 19 years old at the time. Mateusz Pacewicz, who wrote the script, wrote an article about it and that's how this entire film came into being. We changed his name to Daniel, but the characters are similar and so is the way that led him to this small town. This boy performed weddings, baptisms and conducted funeral ceremonies. He was fascinated by all this and really wanted to become a priest. So we based the film on his story, but Mateusz added the part about the juvenile detention centre and the accident that shook up the entire town, although there were many similar cases that he tried to fix. The whole controversy arose from the fact that he actually turned out to be much more efficient than his predecessor. That's the thing – it was someone outside of the Church, who didn't care much for the official dogma, and people were happy with his work! Later some of them felt betrayed, but he managed to attract many new believers. Anyway, similar cases come to light every year, and not just in Poland – in Spain, one man impersonated a priest for over a dozen years! The reasons why they do it can be very different. Very often they just try to hide from the justice system and it's much easier to trick a small community that doesn't ask too many questions.

INTERVIEW WITH JAN KOMASA BY MARTA BAŁAGA

It's interesting that a person deprived of a traditional seminary formation would actually touch people on a much deeper level. Daniel's sermons in the film are very direct and honest – how did you develop them?

In order to avoid making another broad comedy à la [Whoopi Goldberg's vehicle] *Sister Act*, we needed to make sure the viewer would believe that these people believed as well. It was quite a challenge, both when it comes to the script and direction. One thing that helped us was that people always tend to forgive the young – newly minted priests often have these very "subversive" ideas, they try to incorporate contemporary music or singing. I mean; there is one priest in Poland who raps [laughter]. That's what the first part of the film was based on – these people actually seem to accept his shortcomings. He is a young man with a fresh take on things. Not to mention that Daniel, without having spent years in the seminary and any real involvement with the actual institution, talks straight from the heart. It's the only thing he has. There are many people who try to do it and fail, but he really has this "divine spark" about him. Suddenly, in the spur of the moment, he is able to find just the right words. And for these people, especially in that particular moment in their lives, that's more than enough. When we were looking for the right actor, we knew it has to be someone who is slightly different and Bartosz Bielenia emanates it very well. Because Daniel is no ordinary boy – he is special.

As you mentioned, the subject itself immediately brings to mind numerous comedies. But your film is quite dark, especially the scenes in the detention centre combined with graphic depictions of violence.

I think it was all about certain economy of the storytelling – if you only have few minutes to show some things, you better make an impression. If you make viewers feel uncomfortable, if you make them wince, in all likelihood they will remember this feeling. And when this troubled boy suddenly starts to sing in an angelic voice, there is a whole different energy. I decided to make these scenes even more violent – precisely to emphasize this contrast. Once you know what he has been through, when he leads a procession or talks to people you start to pick up certain words. They start to have an entirely different meaning, because we know what’s hiding behind them. When he tells people that the Kingdom of Heaven is here on earth, we know that for him it’s the only option. He needs to believe it – otherwise he could just as well commit suicide, because in the eyes of the society he is done for. It reminded me of *The Son* by the Dardenne brothers, another story of someone who did something terrible at a very young age; something that stigmatizes him for the rest of his life. What’s so tragic about it is that we are talking about committing a crime without really understanding its consequences – a bit like taking out a 50-year mortgage while still underage. For Daniel, spiritual guidance is the only pure thing left in his life. I see his actions as a desperate attempt to tell the world what he would do if he were given a second chance. Suddenly, it turns out this film is all about facing the cards we have been dealt, even when it seems so unfair. That’s why it could never be a comedy.

Daniel’s past makes *Corpus Christi* a rather unusual coming-of-age story. It’s not about him trying to find himself, as he already knows who he is. But he is denied his future.

When making a movie, you always need to get to know your protagonist. We spent a lot of time asking ourselves this question: If Daniel hadn’t committed a crime, would he even feel drawn to the Church in the first place? I can easily imagine that he wouldn’t. It was interesting for me to think that the Church is something he clings to because nothing else makes sense anymore. And when there is nothing, and all the facts are against you, what else is left? Faith. People with twisted past and shameful things on their conscience very often turn to religion.

Especially when they are lonely. Each of your characters seems to lead an isolated existence, meeting only in front of the chapel commemorating their children. Do you think your film is about loneliness too?

This makeshift chapel is a common space, one that helps Daniel reach out to these people. During his time as priest, he does a lot of things for this community. But we decided to focus just on the accident as it resonates with his own experience. This death he caused, although it’s a secret, becomes a part of his mission and something he has to face. He knows how it feels, so when he sees these grieving people he also knows that in order to heal they have to address their pain. And that’s what he gives them – it’s his biggest contribution. He tells them: “Don’t pretend that you are not angry, that something wasn’t taken away from you. Don’t pretend that you understand it.” But his idea of mourning is radically different and that’s what causes a conflict, because this town is like an open wound that just keeps on bleeding.

In Poland, we know that for some, mourning is all about commemorating. That's what the Church seems to be teaching and the Smoleńsk catastrophe [2010 plane crash in Russia that killed all 96 people on board, including president Lech Kaczyński and his wife Maria] has certainly proved it. The woman responsible for this chapel uses it to control others. She is more powerful than the priest and maybe that's why he cannot handle it anymore. He wants this young boy to take over. We wanted to show the mind of a fanatic, as it's not just some mysterious illness that people occasionally suffer from. Everyone can become one.

Would you say that this inability to move on is an inherently Polish trait, or something to do with religion?

I don't know if it's something specific to Poland, although it's certainly very common. We are deeply buried in this kind of narrative; we like to display our scars. It drives us and gives us our identity, because who can really oppose it? He will just seem like a soulless traitor. That being said, Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* told a very similar story about a small community in which the Church is very present, and that one person [Bess McNeill played by Emily Watson] who dares to do something different. Mostly out of love, at least according to von Trier, as he pretty much canonized her at the end. I don't want my film to be viewed as one more take on our troubled Polish Catholicism – I actually prefer to think of it as a Protestant film. About, say, a small community in Scandinavia and this clash with puritan way of thinking, giving solace to people who just can't find their place in the contemporary world.



In *Breaking the Waves*, Emily Watson's character faced immediate rejection, but Daniel is welcomed into the community. You don't even show him learn how to perform his duties, except for one scene when he tries to Google "how to conduct confession". Why?

I didn't want to waste my time. It could be interesting, but this film shouldn't serve as a textbook on how to deceive innocent people. Instead, I wanted to dive right into the moment when he brings reconciliation to this tortured town, but sacrifices himself along the way. I wanted to get to this point as soon as possible, because that's when he starts his real work and you see the whole hypocrisy of these supposedly very religious people. You can try to help them all you want, but chances are, they will just make you leave. Or you will choose to do it on your own.

Daniel doesn't even get to see what he has achieved. The biggest change happens when he is no longer standing at the altar.

Maybe that's why my film ends on a somewhat fatalistic note. The person who has done the most for this community is also the one that can't really count for any gratification. Daniel had his chance, but instead he chose to commit what could be described as a very slow suicide. It's tragic, yes, but also beautiful because he actually managed to achieve something. Andrey Zvyagintsev's *Leviathan* served as a reference point of sorts, but I tried to add some lightness to his pessimism. Mostly because regardless of anything else that has happened, these people still find enough strength to welcome another sheep to their flock. Which, incidentally, was also the working title of the film. What happens is not exactly a full-blown act of forgiveness – it's more of a quiet acceptance. We called it, perhaps a bit ironically, the "miracle of reconciliation".



BARTOSZ BIELENIA

Graduated from the National Academy of Theatre Arts in Kraków in 2016. He made his debut in 1999 on the stage of Teatr Dramatyczny in Białystok as the title character in *The Little Prince* directed by Tomasz Hynka. From 2014 – 2017 he belonged to the team of Narodowy Stary Teatr in Kraków, with memorable performances in *Edward II* by Anna Augustynowicz, *King Lear* by Jan Klata, *Hamlet* by Krzysztof Garbaczewski, *Podopieczni* by Paweł Miśkiewicz, and *Płatonow* by Konstantin Bogomołow. He has also appeared in films such as *Clergy* directed by Wojtek Smarzowski, *The Man with the Magic Box* directed by Bodo Kox, *I am Lying Now* by Paweł Borowski, *Disco Polo* by Maciej Bochniak and in *The High Frontier* by Wojciech Kasperski. For his main role in *The High Frontier* he received a special award at the International Cinema Festival Off Camera in Kraków and an award for new promising actor at the Młodzi i Film Festival in Koszalin. Bartosz Bielenia joined the Nowy Teatr ensemble in January 2018. He most recently played in a Netflix series *1983* directed by Agnieszka Holland and Kasia Adamik.



ALEKSANDRA KONIECZNA

For many years she appeared on the stage of theatres, cooperating with the best artists in Europe such as Grzegorz Jarzyna, Kristian Lupa or René Pollesch. She directed performances on multiple stages, among others – the National Theatre in Warsaw and Kochanowski in Opole. She has appeared in many movies, tv series and theatres. Aleksandra acted as Zofia Beksińska in the *The Last Family* by Jan P. Matuszyński and Iga Cembrzyńska in Janusz Kondratiuk's *A Cat and a Dog*. For each of these roles she was awarded at the Polish Film Festival in Gdynia. She is also a laureate of the Polish Film Award (Orły 2017).



CAST

ELIZA RYCEMBEL

Graduated from the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw. Her film debut came with *The Promise* directed by Anna Kazejak. She was also cast in *Carte Blanche* by Jacek Luskiński, *Innocent* by Anne Fontaine, a musical entitled *#Wszystkogra* by Agnieszka Glińska and a short film *Silence of the Polish Lambs* directed by Maciej Stuhr. In 2014 she received an award for the best actress for her role in *The Promise* at the Vienna International Festival of Films for Children and Youth. In 2016 she was one of the winners of the Talenty Trójki contest in the Film category for „the maturity and truth in acting: for proving one's talent in challenging roles; for an expressive and interesting screen personality; and finally for being an acting discovery of recent years”. She also played in a Canal+ produced series *Belfer*. Currently we can admire her talent in a main role in *Nina* directed by Olga Chajdas. Her most recent films are *Dark, almost night* by Borys Lankosz and *Piłsudski* by Michał Rosa.



TOMASZ ZIĘTEK

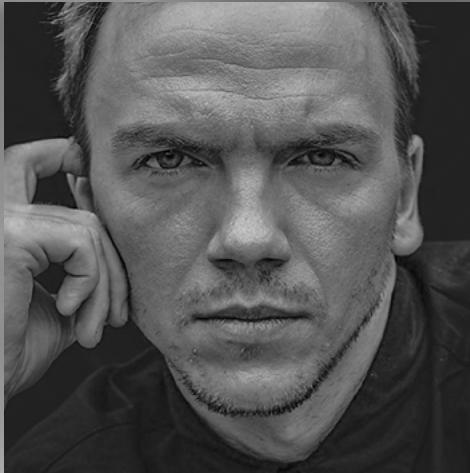
One of the most talented Polish actors of the young generation. Graduated from the D. Baduszkowa Vocal-Acting School of the Musical Theatre in Gdynia. He made his feature debut in 2011 in *Czarny Czwartek. Janek Wiśniewski Padł* by Antoni Krauze. He remains best known for his part in *Stones for the Rampart* by Rober Gliński, *Demon* by Marcin Wrona, *Carte Blanche* by Jacek Luskiński, *Body* by Małgorzata Szumowska, *Convoy* by Maciej Żak, *Stars* by Jan Kidawa-Błoński and *Panic Attack* by Paweł Maślona. For his role in *Silent Night* directed by Piotr Domalewski he was awarded Polish Film Awards – Eagle for Best Supporting Actor in 2018. His most recent films are *The Butler* by Filip Bajon, *Zuzel* by Dorota Kędzierzawska, and tv series *World on fire* for BBC.



CAST

JAN KOMASA

Polish director, studied directing at the Łódź Film School. His short film *Nice to See You* world-premiered in Cannes Cinefondation competition, where it got the 3rd prize. His feature film debut, *Suicide Room*, premiered in the Panorama section of the Berlinale and attracted over 800.000 viewers in Polish cinemas. His second film, a war blockbuster *Warsaw '44*, sold over 1.8 mln. tickets. *Corpus Christi* is his third feature film.



DIRECTOR

AURUM FILM

Aurum Film is a Polish company that produced feature films like: *Carte Blanche* by J. Lusinski (Grand Prix at the 18th Shanghai International Film Festival), *The Last Family* by Jan P. Matuszyński (premiered at International Competition at IFF Locarno 2016; many awards at Polish and international film festivals), *Ready To Roll. Exterminator* by Michał Rogalski and *Dark Almost Night* by Borys Lankosz. The newest one *Corpus Christi* by Jan Komasa (Polish-French co-production) will be premiered in Polish cinemas in October 2019.

Aurum Film is an executive producer of two tv series for Canal+ Poland; *The King* directed by Jan P. Matuszyński and *The Snakesville* by Łukasz Palkowski - both now in production. Aurum Film is also in the pre-production stage of several film projects e.g. *Magnesia* by Maciej Bochniak and *Leave No Traces* by Jan P. Matuszyński (Polish-Czech co-production).

LES CONTES MODERNES

Les Contes Modernes, i.e. The Modern Tales, is aimed at taking part in intellectual debates within our contemporary societies by any means necessary (fiction, animation, creative documentary and transmedia). Les Contes Modernes federates authors and artists of various horizons (film directors, visual artists, choreographers, graphic novelists, philosophers, game-designers etc.) who question the world surrounding us in all its complexity and who put the esthetic search at the heart of their creations. Les Contes Modernes supports projects which develop a humanist, empathic and creative approach on the world of today and of tomorrow. Les Contes Modernes is a production company based in Auvergne-RhôneAlpes region, South of France, between Lyon and Marseille, in La Cartoucherie, center of excellence for the animation industry.

PRODUCERS

FESTIVALS

World Premiere: Venice Giornate degli Autori
North American Premiere: Toronto IFF

FILM INFORMATION

Original title: Boże Ciało
English title: Corpus Christi
Genre: Drama
Country: Poland,
France
Language: Polish
Year: 2019
Duration: 116 min.
Picture: color
Aspect ratio: 2.39:1
Sound: 5.1
Available format: DCP

CAST

Bartosz Bielenia
Eliza Rycembel
Aleksandra Konieczna
Tomasz Ziętek
Leszek Lichota
Łukasz Simlat

CREW

Director: Jan Komasa
Screenplay: Mateusz Pacewicz
Cinematography: Piotr Sobociński Jr
Editing: Przemysław
Chruścielowski
Production design: Marek Zawierucha
Costume design: Dorota Roqueplo
Sound design: Kacper Habisiak,
Marcin Kasinski,
Tomasz Wieczorek
Music: Galperin Brothers
Production company: Aurum Film
Co-production
companies: CANAL + POLSKA,
WFS Walter Film Studio,
Podkarpackie Regional
Film Fund,
Les Contes Modernes
With the support of: Polish Film Institute,
CNC
Producers: Aneta Hickinbotham,
Leszek Bodzak
Co-producers: Patrice Nezan,
Piotr Walter,
Manuel Rougeron,
Frederic Berardi,
Marek Jastrzębski

PRODUCER'S CONTACT

Leszek Bodzak
AURUM FILM
ul. Resorowa 20
02-956 Warsaw, Poland
www.aurumfilm.pl
+48 504 275 800
bodzak@aurumfilm.pl

WORLD SALES

New Europe Film Sales
Czeriakowska 73/79
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www.neweuropefilmsales.com

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