

The Andrzej Wajda-Philip Morris Freedom Prize

By Ron Holloway

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Cinema is not just art and entertainment," said Polish director Andrzej Wajda in dialogue with German colleague Volker Schlöndorff during a program scheduled at the American Academy in Berlin. "Cinema also has a social, moral, philosophical function. This is often forgotten today." Asked for further clarification, Wajda answered, without hesitation but on a note of nostalgia: "Compare today's cinema with Italian Neorealism, with postwar Swedish and French cinema, and the gap is evident!"

Poland's most acclaimed film director had his reasons for speaking out so directly and without compromise on the banality of contemporary cinema.

On the day before, in the Polish Cultural Institute on Alexanderplatz, he had been honored with the American Cinema Foundation Freedom Award -- indeed, the ceremony was most impressive. Guests from the United States and Poland, among them Agnieszka Holland, Wajda's favourite collaborator on screenplays, were present. Moreover, the occasion marked the founding of the new "Andrzej Wajda -- Philip Morris Freedom Prize," to be awarded annually to a promising filmmaker from Central or Eastern Europe, in whose works are reflected the themes of freedom and democracy. The prize will be awarded together with a purse of \$10,000 donated by the Philip Morris Kunstförderung.

Each July, during the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival, an international jury will select the winner of the Andrzej Wajda Prize. In February, on the occasion of the Freedom Film Festival in Berlin, the prize will be officially awarded to the winner. "This is not a lifetime achievement award," says Gary McVey, director of the American Cinema Foundation, "but a prize in recognition of an exemplary moral and ethical message in the art of the cinema.

The measure for excellence can be found in Andrzej Wajda's masterpiece 'Ashes and Diamonds' -- a film that stands out for its courage, strength, vision, humanity, integrity and authenticity."

The winner of the Andrzej Wajda prize will then be invited to show his film in Berlin and Los Angeles during respective, back-to-back Freedom Film Festivals. On both occasions, a program of films selected from the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival will be shown as well.

When an honorary prize is named for a living film director -- indeed, when honor is being paid at the same time to a living legend like Andrzej Wajda - expectations for the excellence of the prize are naturally high. Wajda's credo was underscored in the dialogue exchange with Volker Schlöndorff at the American Academy, namely: "The weakness of contemporary cinema is the lack of ideas. Few directors today dare to speak to the future. Most directors of American entertainment films don't believe in the moral credo of the cinema. This is not a question of art versus entertainment. It's a question of what cinema is all about."

Questioned about the weakness in European cinema, Wajda answered: "Films about one's identity, about one's personality, are boring. Films that are intended to 'shock' the audience, even when they go to the extreme to deal with burning social problems, are at best questionable. European cinema should be a cinema of ideas. But where do we find these ideas? Only a few European filmmakers -- screenwriters as well as directors -- want to spend the time and effort to look for ideas."

Over his long career, Andrzej Wajda has held the position that cinema can be effective when viewed as a "game," or "dialogue," between the audience and the film director. Key examples from his artistic oeuvre were programmed at the Polish Cultural Institute: *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958), *Everything for Sale* (1968), *Birch Wood* (1970), *The Wedding* (1972), *The Promised Land* (1974), *Man of Marble* (1976), and *Korczak* (1990). To these should be added *Man of Iron* (1981), Wajda's *Solidarinosc* film, which spoke to the status quo of the nation and to a great extent exhausted its creator. Honoured with the Golden Palm at Cannes, Wajda found himself driven into exile and far from the inspirational chord of his homeland when martial law was declared in Poland in December of 1981. Nearly a decade lies between *Man of Iron* and *Korczak*, the latter a distinctly Polish theme made possible with the support of Berlin producer Regina Ziegler Film.

At this writing, Andrzej Wajda's screen adaptation of Adam Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* is nearing completion. It's a film that speaks to the soul of each and every Pole. Every school child can recite from memory some lines from Adam Mickiewicz's epic poem, penned in 1834, when the poet was living in exile in Paris. Knowing Wajda's commitment to himself, to his film art, to his country, *Pan Tadeusz*, a Polish-French co-production, will also speak to the soul of a New Poland



Figure 1: Director Andrzej Wajda

Author Information

Ron HOLLOWAY (1933-2009) was an American critic, film historian, filmmaker and correspondent who adopted Europe as his home in the early fifties and spent much of his life in Berlin. He was an expert on the study of German cinema and against all odds produced, with his wife Dorothea, the journal *German Film*, keeping us up-to-date with the work of directors, producers and writers and the showing of German films around the world.

In 2007, Ron Holloway and his wife were awarded the Berlinale Camera Award. Ron also received the Bundesverdienstkreuz (German Cross of Merit), Polish Rings, Cannes Gold Medaille, the American Cinema Foundation Award, the Diploma for Support of Russian Cinema and an honorary award from the German Film Critics' Association.

Ron was also a valued contributor to *Kinema* for the past fifteen years.