

'Contract': Creating a freedom out of restriction

By David Thompson

In the opening scene of "Contract," a film by Polish director Krzysztof Zanussi, an old woman walks through the woods on a winter day. The crisp, clear photography enunciates the snow and the silence. Chaos ensues when a runaway horse nearly tramples the woman, followed by several men chasing the animal. "It's gone berserk!" one of them yells at the woman, who mumbles to herself while she picks up her scattered parcels.

That is the point of action on which Zanussi focuses his film. In Poland, a culture steeped in tradition and political restraint is attempting to maintain stability in the midst of opposing forces that threaten to break loose. "Contract" is about the point at which the old meets the new, tradition meets logic and the law meets the desire for freedom.

Zanussi himself was present at the screening of "Contract" Friday night at Sheldon. The screening, along with his visit, was part of a study of Polish film entitled "The Cinema of Moral Dissent: Films of Poland."

The films in the series are definitely worth our attention. Here is a group of film-makers attempting to create plausible art in a society with a strict standard of what can and cannot be shown. Living and creating within limitations unknown to us in the United States, Polish artists must reconcile their attempts at portraying reality with the regulated reality that actually exists.

On one side is a society regimented by the government. On the other is a population that has created its own method for carrying on human functions in the face of constraint. As the recent imposition of martial law makes appallingly clear, the balance between these

dual realities is a delicate one, one that is sometimes tipped too far in one direction.

In his discussion with the audience after the film, Zanussi described the balance that he too must maintain. There are characters in the film representing the conservative side of society, the old guard who makes sure the rules are being followed.

But the occupations of these characters are never made clear. Zanussi explains, "If I were doing this film my way he would be a minister or a secretary of the central party committee, but it is impossible to say this in my country."

The point at which an artist has stepped on one too many toes with his commentary is made clear by the exile of Andrzej Wajda, from Poland. He is a director regarded by many to be one of the finest working in the world today. Two of his films, "Man of Marble" and "Man of Iron," will be shown this week as part of the series.

In Film Comment magazine, critic Peter Cowie has called Zanussi "a director to match Andrzej Wajda." Both are working at articulating the feelings of a society in flux, a society whose cinema has been called "the cinema of moral anxiety."

"Contract," like the other films in the series, is a product of that anxiety. Its structure is basic, its conflicts traditional, its statement made with wit and dignity. It doesn't propose a definite answer, because there isn't one. History will come. As Zanussi said in his discussion, "Toward eternity there is no progress."

The dilemma that Poland is experiencing is made clear in the closing scene of the film. Two women walk in the woods discussing the difficulties of the situation

created in the film. "Perhaps silence is the best policy," one of them says.

As she says this they see a deer through the trees. The stag looks at them, its gaze firm and direct, emanating strength and determination. Zanussi called the deer a being from "a world less corrupt, a world that, unlike ours, has kept its balance"

Then the deer looks directly at us, and the screen goes blank. The gaze of the deer, like the films in the series, leaves us with something to consider, something to help us understand a world apart from our own, something to help us see the balance of freedom in which we all must live.

The Polish film series continues through Sunday.

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