

## **THE DYBBUK a prize-winner at the Odessa International Film Festival**

At the 6th International Odessa Film Festival the full-length documentary by Krzysztof Kopczyński: *THE DYBBUK. A TALE OF WANDERING SOULS* – a Polish-Swedish-Ukrainian co-production, which took part in the Ukrainian competition – won the Award of the International Federation of Film Critics (FIPRESCI), given by a jury consisting of: Ingrid Beerbaum (Germany), Cerise Howard (Australia) and Alexander Gusev (Ukraine).

### **Giving the award, Alexander Gusev said:**

“I thank the festival’s selectors that during the screening of films in the Ukrainian competition I didn’t have to be ashamed in front of my foreign colleagues. And yet – though the films’ aesthetic aspects didn’t cause any particular embarrassment, there was one film I watched – I guess like most of my fellow Ukrainians – feeling shame of another kind. This polemical, uncompromisingly truthful work shows how historical tragedies from our past that have not been appropriately re-examined – and are sometimes consciously passed over – find dramatic reflection in our present. From our point of view, the fact that this film was made, its moral message, the chance to see it in its complete, uncut version – in spite of this or that part of the audience – manifests itself as astonishing evidence of positive changes in our society and offers hope for a better tomorrow.”

*THE DYBBUK* deals with Hasidim making pilgrimages to Uman and Breslov, and their conflict with Ukrainians building a monument to the Cossacks, Gonta and Zalizniak, who were responsible for murdering thousands of Jews and Poles during the insurrection of 1768.

### **Alexander Gusev about the film *THE DYBBUK. A TALE OF WANDERING SOULS***

In one of the best parts of Jafar Panahi’s film *TAXI*, the director’s cousin reads an official list of film subjects which are forbidden in Muslim countries.

Probably the most convincing proof that present-day Ukraine is totally unlike Iran, was the screening in the national competition at the Odessa International Film

Festival of Krzysztof Kopczyński's THE DYBBUK. A film about which you feel compelled to say: "uncomfortable", "unpleasant", "overdue".

The film really can be called "overdue"; films like it ought to have been made and distributed long ago. Perhaps that would have allowed us to avoid many problems in our tragic present.

The film is about the relationship between Hasidic pilgrims and the residents of Uman; not even about the interpenetration of those two worlds, which really don't interpenetrate at all – like oil and water, they don't mix – and it's not even about them colliding with each other, but about them coming into contact.

One of its main merits is that it can be called both anti-Semitic and anti-Ukrainian, because it deals not with the specific flaws of specific nations, but about our shared, universal attachments to stereotypes. And also about our aversion to strangers, which we precipitately define as enemies, about the impossibility of ridding ourselves of our historical prejudices, and about the sources of xenophobia.

It's a film about our inability to understand and forgive, about the lack of willingness to show remorse. It's a film about dybbuks, souls that cannot know peace, the souls of unlamented victims of our dramatic history, for the suffering of which we lament to this day, because we're incapable of admitting that our ancestors committed crimes.

The Ukrainian episodes made a much greater impression on me, of course – as a Christian and a Ukraine citizen – than the Hasidic episodes [...]. There's no doubt that the comments of typical Uman residents about Jews being murdered by Khmelnytsky's army being an important stage of Ukraine's regaining its independence can be construed as marginal rubbish, not to be treated seriously. But how can one cope with a history lesson; a mixture of tearful sentimentalism and delight in descriptions of torture, a lesson during which children are told to regard Gonta and Zalizniak as heroes? I must admit that in comparison with that my schoolboy recollections of lessons glorifying Dzerzhinsky and Pavlik Morozov fade into insignificance.

What can the value system in the army be when the soldiers defending their fellow Ukrainians are ordered to follow the example of Gonta and Zalizniak? What can

we expect from the cultural politics of a country where local authorities erect a monument to the town's executioner?

Of course, Gonta didn't kill his Catholicised children, and, as far as I recall not only tried to prevent the massacre, but also saved many people. The whole of his guilt depends on the fact that for lofty reasons he turned over to a dreadful enemy a town he ought to have defended. But typical residents, the teacher and the officers venerate him precisely as the hero of Shevchenko's epic poem, the leader of the Uman massacre and an infanticide.

But what can we expect from the vision of Gonta – God rest his soul – if even a crucifix here is a badge of ethnic affiliation and a means to insult people? Who suffers more – a Jew, cursing Christ, in whom he has never seen the Saviour and whose likeness has appeared in a place which is holy to him, or a “Christian” trying to exploit the symbol of his faith – a symbol of atonement and abasement, a symbol of love and forgiveness – to accentuate the superiority of his nation, humiliate strangers, and trigger hatred and conflict?

In this context, the demolition of Lenin's monument in the film's finale doesn't look too optimistic – the audience already know that a monument to another murderer may be erected on the vacant plinth.

There is obviously cause for optimism; above all, that in our country – in spite of everything – films like this are made and screened.

The author was a member of the jury of the International Federation of Film Critics (FIPRESCI) that awarded the film a prize at the 6th Odessa International Film Festival in July 2015.