



October 22 – November 16, 2025

**Presented by the Skalny Center for Polish and Central European Studies
University of Rochester**

INTRODUCTION TO THE FESTIVAL

The Polish Film Festival 2025 presents an exceptional journey through Polish cinema, spanning classical masterworks and daring contemporary voices. This year's festival weaves a profound literary dialogue throughout its programming, opening with Kafka-esque visions and closing with Kafka himself—a testament to the enduring connections between Polish and Central European artistic traditions.

The festival unfolds in three parts: [Part I](#) showcases classic Polish cinema at the Dryden Theatre, curated by Jared Case; the [Grand Opening](#) celebrates Polish musical heritage with a new film about Chopin; and [Part II](#) presents contemporary Polish filmmaking at The Little Theatre. Together, these films explore themes of memory, identity, displacement, artistic survival, and the search for meaning in a complex world.

PART I: CLASSIC POLISH CINEMA

DRYDEN THEATRE AT GEORGE EASTMAN MUSEUM

Wednesday, October 22 – Saturday, November 8

All screenings at 7:30 PM

Jared Case, Curator of Film Exhibitions at the Dryden Theatre, has crafted an extraordinary selection of classic Polish films that traces a powerful thematic connection. The festival opens with a triple feature that includes the Kafka-esque animated masterpiece *Labyrinth*—a fitting introduction to themes of alienation and the individual crushed by totalitarian forces. These motifs echo throughout Part I, reaching their fullest expression in *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, based on Bruno Schulz's surrealist novel.

Kafka and Schulz—both Jewish writers born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Schulz a Polish Jew, Kafka a Czech Jew)—explored the grotesque and metamorphosis, and both met tragic ends. They shared profound artistic sensibilities. When **Timothy Yim-Stueve**, Dryden Theatre Manager, introduces Sanatorium on November 7, he will illuminate this connection and invite audiences to return for *Franz*, Agnieszka Holland’s biographical portrait of Kafka, which closes the entire festival on November 16. This literary dialogue—from Kafka-esque visions through Schulz to Kafka himself—creates a bridge across the two parts of the festival, revealing the deep interconnections of Central European modernist art.

The films in Part I range from Oscar-winning animation to powerful dramas of conscience and resistance, each a landmark of Polish cinema.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 22, 7:30 PM

TRIPLE FEATURE: *PASSENGER* / *TANGO* / *LABYRINTH*

PASSENGER (*Pasażerka*)



Poland, 1963, 62 minutes

Directed by Witold Lesiewicz and Andrzej Munk

Written by Andrzej Munk and Zofia Posmysz

Principal cast: Aleksandra Ślaska, Anna Ciepielewska, Jan Kreczmar

Passenger is a tragically unfinished masterpiece and the final film of the brilliant Polish director Andrzej Munk, who died in a car accident in 1961. His collaborators, led by Witold Lesiewicz, completed the film in 1963 using existing materials and honoring Munk’s vision.

Based on Zofia Posmysz’s radio play and short story (Posmysz herself was an Auschwitz survivor), the film employs a dual structure: footage of a contemporary ocean liner intercut with flashbacks to Auschwitz. Aboard the ship, a former German concentration camp overseer named Liza recognizes Marta, a woman who was once her prisoner. This chance encounter triggers a flood of memories that Liza has carefully reconstructed to absolve herself of guilt.

The film masterfully explores the mechanisms of memory and the perpetrator’s attempts to reinterpret history. Munk portrays how oppressors deceive their own consciences, presenting Liza’s relationship with Marta as “complicated but not without closeness”—a chilling example of moral evasion. The audience witnesses a growing psychological conflict, with the camp history deliberately shown from Liza’s subjective, self-serving perspective.

Despite being incomplete, *Passenger* retains extraordinary power to provoke reflection on the nature of evil and human conscience. The film won the International Federation of Film Critics (FIPRESCI) Prize at the 1964 Cannes Film Festival and was Poland's submission for Best Foreign Language Film at the Academy Awards.

Watch the trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVYg0GkLMZo>

TANGO



Poland, 1980, 8 minutes

Directed and written by Zbigniew Rybczyński

Produced at Se-ma-for Studios, Łódź

Tango is a groundbreaking animated short film that won the Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film in 1983. Using revolutionary multiple-exposure technique,

director Zbigniew Rybczyński created a mesmerizing meditation on repetition and the human condition.

The film presents a single room observed by a static camera. Gradually, thirty-six characters from different stages of life enter and exit, each performing looping, repetitive daily activities—eating, cleaning, playing, sleeping. Through Rybczyński's innovative technical mastery, the characters occupy the same space without colliding, creating a complex choreography of ordinary human existence.

Rybczyński considers himself a constructivist rather than an impressionist. For *Tango*, he explained that “construction and technology exist first,” with meaning emerging from the meticulous technical structure. The film's themes—the repetitive nature of daily life, the universal patterns of human behavior—are “eternal and common to all people.” While critics have interpreted the work as commentary on life in communist Poland or social alienation, Rybczyński intentionally leaves meaning open to interpretation, allowing the audience to draw their own conclusions.

A charming footnote to film history: at the Oscar ceremony in Hollywood, Rybczyński stepped out for a cigarette and was not recognized by security when he tried to return, leading to a memorable argument before he could accept his award.

Watch the full film:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z27z7oLQb3o&list=RDz27z7oLQb3o&start_radio=1

***LABYRINTH* (Labirynt)**



Poland, 1962, 15 minutes

Directed and written by Jan Lenica

Labyrinth is a surrealist masterwork by the renowned Polish animator Jan Lenica. Using cut-out animation that combines hand-drawn elements with collages of old photographs, Lenica creates a nightmarish, anti-utopian vision.

The film follows a winged man's journey into a treacherous city ruled by totalitarian forces where individuality is suppressed. As he navigates this oppressive labyrinth, the protagonist struggles against a system designed to crush human freedom and spirit. The film is often described as a Kafka-esque allegory about totalitarianism and the human cost of authoritarian control.

Lenica's unique visual style—blending traditional animation with cut-out techniques—creates a visually striking and oppressive atmosphere. His use of collage and surrealism has been compared to the later work of Terry Gilliam and Monty Python, making *Labyrinth* a precursor to the type of cut-out animation that would become popular in subsequent decades.

Labyrinth is considered a landmark work of Polish animation and a significant piece of surrealist art. Its themes of alienation, oppression, and the struggle for freedom strongly resonate, establishing the Kafka-esque motifs that will recur throughout the festival and culminate in the closing film, *Franz*, Agnieszka Holland's portrait of Kafka himself.

Watch the full film: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1nfJnuf7Buw>

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 5, 7:30 PM

***MOONLIGHTING* (Fucha)**



United Kingdom/Poland, 1982, 97 minutes

Directed and written by Jerzy Skolimowski

Principal cast: Jeremy Irons, Eugene Lipiński, Jiri Stanislav

Moonlighting is a political allegory created in direct response to the declaration of martial law in Poland in December 1981.

Director Jerzy Skolimowski, himself a

Polish filmmaker living in exile at the time, drew upon his own experience of being cut off from his homeland to create this tense, minimalist masterpiece.

Nowak (Jeremy Irons in a captivating performance) is a Polish foreman who travels to London with three non-English-speaking construction workers on tourist visas to renovate a townhouse for a corrupt Polish official. The workers are kept isolated inside to avoid detection, with Nowak acting as their only link to the outside world. When martial law is declared in Poland and all communications are cut off, Nowak—the only one who can understand English news reports—decides to conceal the political upheaval from his crew, forcing them to continue working.

As the project's costs spiral out of control, Nowak is left with no money and resorts to shoplifting to feed his men. The film details his increasingly desperate attempts to manage his crew and finish the renovation while silently bearing the weight of his secret. The isolation of the Polish workers in London serves as a metaphor for the suppression of the Solidarity movement back home.

Moonlighting uses minimal dialogue and no traditional incidental music, creating a stark and tense atmosphere. Much of the crew's dialogue is deliberately in Polish and kept from the audience, mirroring Nowak's isolation and the communication barriers that define the story.

The film was highly acclaimed upon its release, winning the Best Screenplay Award at the 1982 Cannes Film Festival. Critics Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert both praised the film, with Ebert giving it four stars and calling it a “wickedly pointed movie.” Critics noted the film's unique ability to build tension from seemingly mundane details and its effective use of political subtext without being overly didactic.

Director Jerzy Skolimowski is a key figure of the Polish New Wave. His father, a member of the Polish Resistance, was executed by the Nazis—an experience that profoundly influenced Skolimowski's work. Before becoming a director, he was a published poet, short story writer, playwright, boxer, and jazz drummer. He co-wrote the screenplay for Roman Polanski's *Knife in the Water* (1962) and gained international recognition for early works like *Identification Marks: None* (1964). His 1967 film *Hands Up!* which contained politically critical commentary, was banned by Polish authorities, forcing him into exile. His recent film *EO* (2022) won the Jury Prize at Cannes.

Watch the trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kjf4f7ONltg>

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 7:30 PM

SANATORIUM UNDER THE SIGN OF THE HOURGLASS

(Sanatorium Pod Klepsydrą według Braci Quay)



USA/Poland, 2024, 75 minutes

Directed by Stephen Quay and Timothy Quay

Written by Stephen Quay, Timothy Quay, and Bruno Schulz

Principal cast: Tadeusz Janiszewski, Allison Bell, Andrzej Klak

Executive Producer: Christopher Nolan

Introduction by **Timothy Yim-Stueve**, Dryden Theatre Manager

The Brothers Quay's *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* had its world premiere at the Venice International Film Festival on August 29, 2024, and represents one of the most anticipated adaptations in recent cinema. This live-action/stop-motion puppetry hybrid brings to life Bruno Schulz's profound 1937 novel.

A ghostly train journey on a forgotten branch line transports Józef to visit his dying father in a remote Galician sanatorium. Upon arrival, Józef finds the facility entirely moribund, run by the dubious Dr. Gotard, who explains that his father's death—which has already occurred in the outside world—has not yet come to pass here. Time has been “put back” within the sanatorium's walls, and “we are always late by a certain interval of time of which the length cannot be defined.”

Józef comes to realize that the sanatorium is a floating world halfway between sleep and wakefulness, where time and events cannot be measured in any tangible form. The hourglass—a traditional symbol in Polish culture used in obituaries and death notices—represents both mortality and the possibility of its reversal. While the hourglass signifies the finite nature of life, the sanatorium's premise suggests that time can be manipulated, offering the “possibility of recovery” by reactivating the past. This duality captures the human desire to defy mortality while acknowledging death's inevitability.

The film's executive producer is acclaimed director Christopher Nolan, a longtime admirer of the Quay Brothers' visionary work.

Bruno Schulz and Franz Kafka—both Jewish writers born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Schulz a Polish Jew, Kafka a Czech Jew)—shared profound artistic sensibilities. Both explored themes of the grotesque and metamorphosis, creating surreal, nightmarish worlds that defied

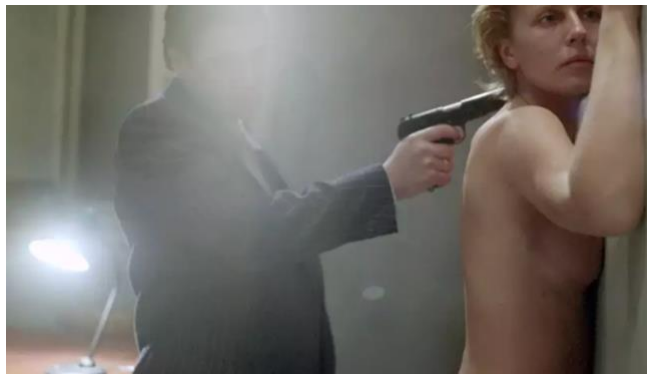
conventional narrative. Both met tragic ends—Schulz was murdered by the Nazis in 1942, while Kafka died young of tuberculosis in 1924. Their work continues to influence writers and filmmakers worldwide.

Timothy Yim-Stueve will discuss this connection during his introduction and invite the audience to return for *Franz*, Agnieszka Holland’s biographical portrait of Kafka, which closes the festival on November 16. This literary dialogue—from Kafka-esque visions through Schulz to Kafka himself—reveals the deep interconnections of Central European modernist art.

Watch the trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkKPqXMFHS8>

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 7:30 PM

INTERROGATION (Przesłuchanie)



Poland, 1982, 118 minutes

Directed by Ryszard Bugajski

Written by Ryszard Bugajski and Janusz Dymek

Principal cast: Krystyna Janda, Adam Ferency, Janusz Gajos

Interrogation has one of the most dramatic backstories in Polish cinema history. Completed in 1982, the film was immediately banned by the Polish government, which deemed it “the most anti-communist film in the history of the Polish People’s Republic.” The film’s production company, Zespół Filmowy “X,” was dissolved as punishment, and director Ryszard Bugajski was forbidden from working. Following the declaration of martial law, Bugajski was eventually forced to flee with his wife to Canada in 1985.

But Bugajski was aware that the authorities would censor his work, he secretly made a 35mm copy before it could be seized. He then created VHS copies that were circulated and viewed illegally in underground screenings held in homes and church basements throughout Poland, turning the film into a legendary cult sensation. For seven years, *Interrogation* remained suppressed, a symbol of artistic resistance against totalitarian control.

The film was finally released officially in 1989 after the fall of the Eastern Bloc. It premiered to great acclaim, receiving a nomination for the Palme d’Or at the 1990 Cannes Film Festival, where Krystyna Janda won the Best Actress award for her extraordinary performance. Bugajski returned to Poland in 1995 after the country became a democracy and resumed his career there. He was a special guest at Rochester’s 2013 Polish Film Festival. He passed away in 2019.

Set in Stalinist Poland in the early 1950s, *Interrogation* follows Tonia (Krystyna Janda), a carefree cabaret singer who is arrested one night by the Security Service on a fabricated charge. In prison, she becomes the subject of brutal psychological and physical interrogation aimed at forcing her to incriminate an innocent man. The film follows her dramatic fight to preserve her dignity and humanity within an inhumane system.

Many critics emphasize that *Interrogation* is a poignant study of human attitudes in the face of totalitarian oppression. Janda's performance is considered one of the most outstanding of her career—an intense portrait of courage, defiance, and the will to survive.

This screening carries special meaning: we are showing a film that was once forbidden, whose director risked everything to preserve it, and who honored Rochester with his presence just over a decade ago.

Watch the trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vcWrYYdejjE>

GRAND OPENING

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 7:00 PM

DRYDEN THEATRE AT GEORGE EASTMAN MUSEUM

The Grand Opening of the Polish Film Festival 2025 celebrates Polish musical heritage with *Chopin, a Sonata in Paris*, a sweeping biographical drama about Frédéric Chopin at the height of his fame in 1830s Paris.

Professor Randall Stone, Director of the Skalny Center for Polish and Central European Studies, will officially open the festival, welcome attendees, and make announcements before introducing our special guest speaker.

Sven Joseph, a PhD student in Musicology at the Eastman School of Music who specializes in Polish state-imposed folklore music in post-war Poland, will provide expert context about Chopin's music and his significance in Polish cultural history before the screening.

Following the film, all attendees are invited to a festive reception in the Dryden Theatre lobby featuring live jazz performed by Trio E Beatrice, along with food and beverages with Polish accents provided by Farmhouse Table. This opening gala offers an opportunity to meet fellow film enthusiasts and members of the Rochester Polish community.

***CHOPIN, A SONATA IN PARIS* (Chopin, Chopin!)**



Poland, 2025, 133 minutes

Directed by Michał Kwieciński

Written by Bartosz Janiszewski

Principal cast: Eryk Kulm, Joséphine de La Baume, Victor Meutelet, Lambert Wilson, Maja Ostaszewska, Karolina Gruszka

Chopin, a Sonata in Paris is a visually stunning biographical drama that opened the prestigious Gdynia Film Festival on September 22, 2025, and was released in Poland on October 10, 2025. The film presents Chopin as a “19th-century rock star”—a bold, emotionally charged portrait of the composer at the peak of his celebrity.

Set in Paris in 1835, the film follows the 25-year-old Chopin as he navigates high society, giving concerts and socializing in aristocratic salons. He enjoys the admiration of King Louis Philippe I (Lambert Wilson) and is treated as a celebrity and romantic icon of Parisian nightlife. The cast also includes Joséphine de La Baume as George Sand and Victor Meutelet as Franz Liszt, placing Chopin among the luminaries of his era.

Beneath his witty exterior, Chopin struggles with a debilitating disease. He balances a life filled with romance and parties with intensive compositional work and piano lessons to support himself. The realization that his days are numbered pushes him to revolutionize music, composing with increasing urgency as time runs out.

Based on Chopin’s private letters and memoirs, the film is an emotional story about a genius who created beauty despite his struggle with pain and mortality. The production features impressive cinematography by Michał Sobociński and production design by Katarzyna Sobańska, immersing viewers in the sweeping, baroque aesthetic of 19th-century Paris.

The film showcases numerous Chopin works, including an improvisation on the Polish Christmas carol “Lulajże Jezuniu,” Ballade No. 1 in G minor (Op. 23), Scherzo No. 2 (Op. 31), and Waltz in C-sharp minor (Op. 64), among others. The score also features lesser-known chamber pieces and songs, providing a comprehensive portrait of Chopin’s artistry.

While reviews have been mixed regarding the narrative structure, critics consistently praise the film’s stunning visual presentation, strong production values, and the lead performance by Eryk Kulm. The film offers an impressive, emotionally charged approach to Chopin’s life that will resonate with audiences drawn to romantic, biographical storytelling.

Watch the trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=noi55KOvrew>

PART II: CONTEMPORARY POLISH CINEMA

THE LITTLE THEATRE

Wednesday, November 12 – Sunday, November 16

All screenings at 7:00 PM

Part II of the Polish Film Festival presents five contemporary Polish films that showcase the vitality and range of current Polish filmmaking. These works explore grief and transcultural understanding, artistic survival and identity, quiet lives transformed by unexpected change, the refugee experience in our current moment, and the enduring mystery of one of literature's greatest figures.

The films span genres from intimate character studies to sweeping documentaries, from cross-cultural dramas to political allegories. They feature some of Poland's most celebrated directors and rising talents, including Jan P. Matuszyński (whose previous films premiered at Venice and Locarno), Damian Kocur (whose film is Poland's submission for the Academy Awards), and the legendary Agnieszka Holland.

The festival concludes on Sunday, November 16, with *Franz*, Agnieszka Holland's biographical portrait of Franz Kafka, introduced by **Professor Stephen Schottenfeld** of the University of Rochester's English Department, a Kafka scholar and enthusiast. Following this closing film, all attendees are invited to a banquet celebration marking the conclusion of the 2025 Polish Film Festival.

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 12, 7:00 PM

MINGHUN



Poland/USA, 2024, 94 minutes

Directed by Jan P. Matuszyński

Written by Grzegorz Łoszewski

Principal cast: Marcin Dorociński, Daxing Zhang, Natalia Bui

Minghun is a sensitive and original exploration of cross-cultural understanding,

grief, and love from director Jan P. Matuszyński, whose previous films *Leave No Traces* and *The*

Last Family premiered at Venice and Locarno film festivals. Matuszyński was also a jury member at the 79th Venice International Film Festival.

Jurek (Marcin Dorociński) is a Polish widower devoted to his teenage daughter Masia. Though they live in Poland, Masia cherishes and observes the traditions of her late Chinese mother. When Masia unexpectedly dies, Jurek's Chinese father-in-law Ben (Daxing Zhang) travels to Poland to help lay her to rest and with the intent to perform a "minghun"—a ghost marriage for Masia, so that she might find balance and not be lonely in the afterlife.

For both men, the decision to conduct minghun sparks an emotional journey deep into themselves. The clash of their very different cultures is intended to help them realize that regardless of origin, we all belong to one human family where basic emotions are shared. The film combines surprise with humor and strong empathy, ironically confronting loss, beliefs, and spirituality.

The film is multilingual, featuring dialogue in English, Polish, and Chinese, reflecting its truly international scope. Star Marcin Dorociński, one of the most beloved Polish actors, has gained international recognition through Netflix's *The Queen's Gambit*, *Vikings: Valhalla*, and the Tom Cruise blockbuster *Mission Impossible: Dead Reckoning*. Daxing Zhang, a Chinese actor and producer based in Los Angeles, is known for roles in *The Matrix* and *Charlie's Angels*.

Cinematographer Kacper Fertacz, recently awarded by the Polish Society of Cinematographers, reunites with Matuszyński to create striking visuals. Director Matuszyński cites influences ranging from *Parasite* (which combines existential weight with lightness and humor) to Kieślowski's films, Michael Mann's explorations of loneliness, and powerful films about loss like *21 Grams* and *The Secret Life of Words*.

Early reviews praise Dorociński's performance and the film's emotional depth. This is a moving and tender film about hope, love, and the search for meaning in life and what comes after it—a story about the meeting of cultures and about love that can come at the least expected moment.

Watch the trailer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_11Z56Q5NDc

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 7:00 PM

THE TRUE STORY OF TAMARA DE LEMPICKA & THE ART OF SURVIVAL



USA/Poland, 2024, 96 minutes

Directed, written, and produced by Julie Rubio

Narrated by Anjelica Huston

Featuring Eden Espinosa, Victoria De Lempicka, Marisa De Lempicka, Paula Birnbaum

The True Story of Tamara de Lempicka &

The Art of Survival is a visually stunning documentary that had its world premiere at the Mill Valley Film Festival on October 11, 2024, and has since screened at prestigious venues including Lincoln Center in New York, the San Diego Jewish Film Festival, and the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

The film explores the life and artistic legacy of Polish Art Deco painter Tamara de Lempicka, utilizing previously unseen 8mm home movies, paintings, and newly discovered birth and baptism certificates that reveal her true name, heritage, and identity for the first time.

Tamara de Lempicka was the preeminent Art Deco painter, known for her high-gloss sensual nudes and portraits of high society during the Jazz Age. She was a Polish-born Jewish artist (her heritage hidden for decades) who fled the Russian Revolution and later escaped the rise of fascism in Europe by moving to the United States in 1940. She was openly bisexual, having romantic liaisons with both male and female models, and lived an indulgent, decadent lifestyle that defied social conventions.

The documentary, narrated by Anjelica Huston, weaves together archival footage, Lempicka's paintings, animated motion graphics, and interviews with art historians, family members (including her granddaughter and great-granddaughters), collectors, and Broadway performer Eden Espinosa, who was nominated for a Tony Award for her starring role in the Broadway musical *Lempicka*.

Lempicka's popularity has soared in recent years. Madonna and Barbra Streisand are among her most notable collectors, and one of her paintings recently sold at auction for over \$21.1 million—the third-highest amount ever paid for a work by a modern female artist. In 2024, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco presented a retrospective exhibition at the de Young Museum.

The film examines why it took so long for the United States to understand what European art collectors, Hollywood elite, and art historians have known all along about Lempicka's genius. It

celebrates the triumph of the human spirit and highlights topics of artistic survival, resilience, identity, and creative expression.

As Tamara herself once said: “I live life in the margins of society and the rules of normal society don't apply to those who live on the fringe,” she broke down barriers and opened doors for female artists, leading them into a world of creative choice. She was a brilliant, brave artist and the hero of her own story.

Watch the trailer:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1u1sZCVofek5NdYZzJ2umJJW3edjwEFJU/view>

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 7:00 PM

SPARROW (Wróbel)



Poland, 2024, 106 minutes

Directed and written by Tomasz Gąssowski

Principal cast: Jacek Borusiński, Krzysztof Stroiński, Julia Chętnicka, Piotr Rogucki

Sparrow is an endlessly charming debut film from director Tomasz Gąssowski—a heartwarming dramedy that blends gentle humor with real emotional depth. The film

was produced in cooperation with Amazon Prime Video.

Remek Wróbel (Jacek Borusiński in a praised performance) is an unassuming bachelor approaching 40 who works as a mailman and plays for a local amateur football team. He leads a quiet, highly regimented life, dedicating his spare time to studying encyclopedias to hone his remarkable memory. Aside from his resourceful friend Pedro, who runs shady deals, Remek has no one close in his world—and he's happy with that.

One day, everything changes. His orderly life is turned upside down by two unexpected arrivals: his long-lost grandfather Roman (Krzysztof Stroiński), whom he's never met before, and his new neighbor Marzenka (Julia Chętnicka), a lively and outspoken woman who forces Remek to engage with a world beyond his comfort zone.

These events push Remek to confront a new reality where his predictable routines no longer apply. He must learn to adapt to the changes life has thrown his way—to make lemonade when life gives him lemons.

The film's observational style, slow pace, and character-driven plot create a gentle, humanistic portrait of ordinary life. The muted color palette effectively captures the provincial Polish setting. Reviews have been divided, with some praising the excellent cast performances and the film's blend of drama and understated comedy, while others found the narrative occasionally disjointed.

However, there is widespread appreciation for the film's wholesome, heartwarming qualities. As one reviewer noted: "It's been a while since I've seen such a good Polish film. A film to unwind in this messed-up world. No rudeness, no forced undressing, and no foul language. A ballad about the ordinary lives of somewhat lost people in a lost world."

Sparrow is a lovely counterpoint to the heavier films in the festival—a warm, human story about solitary lives transformed by unexpected connection and the quiet courage required to change.

Watch the trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZCwMyrFr0I>

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 7:00 PM

***UNDER THE VOLCANO* (Pod Wulkanem)**



Poland/Ukraine, 2024, 105 minutes

Directed by Damian Kocur

Written by Damian Kocur and Marta Konarzewska

Principal cast: Sofia Berezovska, Roman Lutskyi, Anastasiya Karpenko, Fedir Pugachov

Under the Volcano is a powerful and timely drama that was selected as Poland's submission for Best International Feature Film at the 97th Academy Awards (2025). The film has been praised for its sensitive portrayal of displacement and its ability to capture the anxieties of people affected by war without depicting direct combat.

The film follows a Ukrainian family of four—a blended family on vacation in Tenerife, Canary Islands—who become refugees overnight when Russia's ongoing occupation of Ukraine turns into a full-scale invasion in February 2022. Stranded in a tourist paradise, they are forced to deal with feelings of isolation, fear, and uncertainty. The surreal disconnect between their beautiful, peaceful surroundings and the devastating reality back home creates intense emotional strain within the family.

The title's "volcano" is not literal but metaphorical—representing the simmering tension and chaos of war that affects the character's lives. The dormant volcano on the island symbolizes the latent but ever-present danger of the wider world. The family is literally "under the volcano" while metaphorically living in the shadow of potential catastrophe. The metaphor extends to the characters' internal states, with simmering emotions and unresolved conflicts threatening to erupt at any moment.

The immense pressure begins to strain relationships within the blended family, creating new tensions and magnifying existing ones. The parents, Roman and Nastia, struggle with how to manage their children's fear while suppressing their own anxiety. Roman faces a moral dilemma: stay with his family in a safe place or return to Ukraine to fight—an impossible choice that pits his duty to his family against his duty to his homeland.

Director Damian Kocur, known for exploring topical themes in a thoughtful and nuanced way, focuses on the psychological toll rather than battlefield violence. The drama is not driven by explosions or combat but by the quiet trauma and slow psychological breakdown of a family living under the shadow of a distant war. As Kocur has stated, "My film is about how apparent our security is, and how quickly, overnight, we can go from being tourists to refugees."

The film makes the point that anyone's life could shift overnight, forcing them to confront their own vulnerabilities and fears. It is especially relevant given Rochester's role in welcoming Ukrainian refugees in recent years.

Watch the trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DeTdtVATvKc>

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 16, 7:00 PM

CLOSING FILM

FRANZ



Czech Republic/Germany/Poland, 2025, 127 minutes

Directed by Agnieszka Holland

Written by Marek Epstein and Agnieszka Holland

Principal cast: Idan Weiss, Peter Kurth, Jenovéfa Boková, Ivan Trojan, Katharina Stark

Introduction by **Professor Stephen Schottenfeld**, Department of English, University of Rochester

Award-winning director Agnieszka Holland is embarking on her most ambitious project to date: a biopic of the iconic 20th-century Czech writer Franz Kafka. Conceived as a “kaleidoscopic mosaic,” the film follows the imprint Kafka left on the world from his birth in 19th-century Prague to his death in post-WWI Vienna. Franz gives the audience a brand-new perspective on the life of the man behind the literary giant.

The film had its official selection at the Toronto International Film Festival 2025 and San Sebastian International Film Festival, with executive producer Christopher Nolan (also executive producer of *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, screened earlier in this festival).

Agnieszka Holland is one of Poland’s most celebrated filmmakers, with three Academy Award nominations: *Angry Harvest* (1985), *Europa Europa* (1990), and *In Darkness* (2012). Her numerous features include *The Secret Garden* (1993), *Spoor* (2017)—which screened at Rochester’s 2018 Polish Film Festival—*Mr. Jones* (2019), and the Venice Jury Prize winner *Green Border* (2023). She has also directed episodes of many notable TV series, including *Treme* and *House of Cards*.

Holland’s connection to Kafka is deeply personal. She discovered his work in high school, and he became “one of the key writers who inspired me the most—and then something more.” His “triple identity” (Czech, German, Jewish), “self-irony and acute sensitivity” made him “an admired brother, fragile despite all his strength, who must be looked after.” One of Holland’s crucial reasons for studying in Prague was that it was Kafka’s city. Her first steps there traced his footsteps through the old town’s mysterious, photogenic streets.



Under communism, Kafka was banned—the regime felt his books “created a diagnosis that threatened their reality.” The Prague Spring began with a conference that brought Kafka back into Czech literature. “The shy, insecure Kafka became a symbol of freedom,” Holland writes, “and I understood it as the freedom to ask questions with no answers and to share his bold, mercilessly

pessimistic outlook on the world.”

In 1981, Holland produced an adaptation of Kafka’s *The Trial* for Television Theatre, which she describes as “one of my most rewarding creative adventures.” But she knew that to tell Kafka’s life story, she couldn’t use “a conventional, linear, classical way; such a narrative would betray the more profound truth about Franz.” Instead, she searches for him “in shards, riddles, feelings,

in a concoction of facts, assumptions and imagination, in his dreams, his literature and his letters.”

The film explores Kafka’s fierce fight with his father, his longing for love and ordinary bourgeois life alongside his fear of it, and his relationships with the remarkable women in his life—including writer Milena Jesenská (Jenováfa Boková). The cast also features Peter Kurth as Hermann Kafka, Ivan Trojan as Siegfried Löwy, and Katharina Stark as Kafka’s beloved sister Ottla.

Holland includes a contemporary element in the film: after 1989, Prague realized that Kafka could be commercially exploited. “Several Kafka monuments, a museum, cafés, fast food outlets, and tourist routes with Kafka’s name on them sprouted around the city, and thousands of souvenirs are on offer: Kafka’s face is on mugs, T-shirts, postcards, magnets or stamps. We also decided to include this aspect in our film—Kafka would be fond of irony and paradoxes.”

Franz serves as the perfect closing film for the Polish Film Festival 2025, completing the literary dialogue that began with the Kafka-esque animated film *Labyrinth* on opening night and continued through *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, based on Bruno Schulz’s work.

Watch the trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WFPrlEa294Q>

Following the screening, all attendees are invited to a closing banquet celebrating the conclusion of the 2025 Polish Film Festival.

The Polish Film Festival 2025 is presented by the Skalny Center for Polish and Central European Studies at the University of Rochester.

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