

PRESS BREAKS

PETR KOTLÁR
UDO KIER
LECH DYBLIK
JITKA ČVANČAROVÁ
STELLAN SKARSGÅRD
HARVEY KEITEL
JULIAN SANDS
JÚLIA VALENTOVÁ
ALEKSEY KRAVCHENKO
BARRY PEPPER
PETR VANĚK

ADAPTED FROM THE ACCLAIMED
NOVEL BY JERZY KOSIŃSKI

THE PAINTED BIRD

A VÁCLAV MARHOUL PICTURE

CAST: PETR KOŠAR (A BOY) UDO KIER LECH DYBLIK
JITKA CVANCAROVÁ STELLAN SKARSGÅRD
HARVEY KEITEL JULIAN SANDS JÚLIA VALENTOVÁ
ALEXEY KRAVCHENKO BARRY PEPPER PETR VANĚK
MAKE UP BY IVO STRANČMÜLLER
COSTUMES BY HELENA ROVNÁ
SOUND DESIGN BY PAVEL REJHOLEC
EDITED BY LUDĚK HUDEC
PRODUCTION DESIGNER BY JAN VLAŠÁK
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY VLADIMÍR SMUTNÝ
BASED ON THE BOOK THE PAINTED BIRD BY JERZY KOSIŃSKI
WRITTEN, PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY VÁCLAV MARHOUL

Official Selection

tiff

Toronto International
Film Festival 2019



The Guardian ★★★★★

"Film festivals need masterpieces to marvel at and turkeys to laugh about. But they also need a film like *The Painted Bird*, a film that makes a mockery of star ratings. I can state without hesitation that this is a monumental piece of work and one I'm deeply glad to have seen. I can also say that I hope to never cross its path again. "

VARIETY

"Shooting in ravishing 35mm monochrome, apt enough for illustrating a world drawn into stark black-and-white polarities of good and (mostly, it seems) evil, (...) "*The Painted Bird*" is inarguably effective and immersive, its hard, unyielding gaze backed up by the muscularity of its craft. "

THE INTERNATIONAL FILM MAGAZINE
Sight & Sound

"beautifully composed, Václav Marhoul's third feature is an unforgettable experience that boldly confronts the very worst horrors of war. "

THE Hollywood REPORTER

"Heart-wrenching (...) an emotional three-hour punch in the stomach."

SCREEN
INTERNATIONAL

"Ravishingly shot in black and white Cinemascope, *The Painted Bird* is full of quiet passages in which The Boy wanders through forests, snowscapes and water meadows, the peace and silence of nature contrasting with the horrors that we soon learn to brace for around every bucolic corner."

Little White Lies
TRUTH & MOVIES

"Gruelling but brilliant (...) a mesmerising travelogue."

mymovies.it
IL CINEMA DALLA PARTE DEL PUBBLICO

"A fascinating quality of the gaze leads the viewer into a reflection on superstition and religion."

CINEMATOGAPHE 
POURQUOI FILMSHOW

"A masterpiece."

FT FINANCIAL
TIMES

★★★★

CINEVUE ★★★★★

El País

"*The Painted Bird*" is filmed in powerful and expressive black and white ...to the credit of cinematographer Vladimir Smutny, one of those who stay true to filming in 35mm film."

Trade Reviews

<https://variety.com/2019/film/reviews/the-painted-bird-review-1203320878/>



Film Review: 'The Painted Bird'

Václav Marhoul's muscular, savagely realized Jerzy Kosiński adaptation puts an unnamed Jewish boy through a challenging litany of Holocaust horrors.

By **GUY LODGE**



Anyone depending on the kindness of strangers is on an especially harsh hiding to nothing in “The Painted Bird,” a child’s-eye Holocaust drama of such unrelenting brutality as to make even the vaguest gestures of humanity — a held hand, a shared crust of bread — feel in context like miracles of grace. Only the third directorial effort in 17 years from Czech multi-hyphenate Václav Marhoul, this stonily imposing adaptation of Jerzy Kosiński’s contentious 1965 novel is by some measure his most ambitious and accomplished: a 169-minute panorama of violent societal breakdown, following a nameless boy through a cruel obstacle course of survival and abuse in an unidentified Eastern European country at the frenzied close of the Second World War.

The extreme lashings of suffering and sadism shown here are scarcely ameliorated by the exacting beauty of their presentation. **Shooting in ravishing 35mm monochrome**, apt enough for illustrating a world drawn into stark black-and-white polarities of good and (mostly, it seems) evil, “The Painted Bird” teases its audience into gazing with wonder upon its silvery, shadow-streaked rural tableaux before repeatedly confronting them with images far harder to face with open eyes: a child nearly pecked to death by scavenging crows, a pilloried woman

being stabbed and kicked in the genitals, a man losing his own eyeballs to a jealous rival's rage. (In this earthly hellscape, perhaps losing your sight is a kind of sick blessing.) The film's sheer unblinking stamina is as impressive as its pristine formal composure, though it has to be said that at nearly three hours — somewhat surprising, considering the novel's brevity — its blunt-instrument force doesn't yield much fresh perspective on oft-dramatized atrocities.

Unspooling in competition at Venice, "The Painted Bird" will require a tailwind of festival acclaim and awards to encourage distributors to invest in its **implacable, stomach-testing bleakness, though a star-speckled international ensemble boosts its global arthouse prospects.** Harvey Keitel, Stellan Skarsgård, Udo Kier and Barry Pepper are among the names putting in cameo time, though none wrests the spotlight away from young non-professional lead Petr Kotlár, who holds the camera with grave resolve.

The high international profile of Kosinski's source novel may be a selling point too, even if its reputation has taken a hit since initial acclaim over half a century ago. First positioned as autobiography before being discredited as such, the book has even had its authorship disputed. (There's speculation, meanwhile, that Kosinski was in fact inspired by the childhood experiences of his friend and compatriot Roman Polanski.) Unlike with, say, James Frey's similarly tarnished (and recently, ineffectively filmed) "A Million Little Pieces," none of these literary sticking points are obstacles to the novel's plainly gripping narrative working as cinematic fiction: Marhoul has stripped the text to its barest, tersest bones, wisely eschewing any voiceover and trusting in d.p. Vladimír Smutný's expert camera to steer our point of view.

The only novelistic device here, in fact, is a series of nine chapter headings dividing the film's episodic, gruelingly linear structure. They are titled after the various adults into whose alleged care our pre-teen protagonist, identified only as the Boy, falls over the course of his arduous cross-country trek. Yet no names or other such niceties are uttered on screen in the course of the narrative: "The Painted Bird" offers a vision of war-ragged society in which all survivors have been reduced to anonymous, animalistic beings, drained of feeling or empathy. Separated from his Jewish parents in the turmoil, the Boy is left under the austere guardianship of an elderly peasant woman (Nina Shuneych); enduring hard daily labor in return for food and shelter, he's forced to move on when she dies and he, in shock, accidentally burns the house to the ground. Hold onto this vignette: It's among the film's more cheerful.

The rest of the film proceeds as a catalog of hardship, doled out by one weathered, dead-inside grotesque after another, all with their own methods of exploiting the Boy's vulnerability as he trudges across the landscape with no particular place to go. (We lose track, as does he, of just how far he travels, though Jan Vlasák's superb production design creates a procession of subtly shifting rural cultures.) An itinerant shaman (Alla Sokolova) declares him a vampire and takes him on as a slave; a psychotic miller (Udo Kier, who else) does likewise, only with more hysterical bouts of violence; a Catholic priest (Harvey Keitel) briefly shows the Boy some charity before entrusting him to a shifty parishioner (Julian Sands) who rapes him repeatedly alongside the regular beatings to which he has become accustomed.

And so on and so forth, which is not to sound blasé about the severity of abuse depicted here: Marhoul's aim, perhaps, is to leave viewers numbed rather than shocked by these obscene violations, rather as everyone on screen — including, eventually, the Boy himself — has been desensitized by years of such agony. In this regard, "The Painted Bird" is inarguably effective and immersive, its hard, unyielding gaze backed up by the muscularity of its craft. The clean-lined elegance of Smutný's compositions — which often render human scuffles small against

expansive natural backdrops — evoke a disinterested world that will endure whatever our burdened protagonist's fate.

That vivid physical arduousness does, however, come at the expense of a more poetic payoff in Marhoul's adaptation, bar the titular allegory of an errant bird, flecked with human paint, being attacked for its difference on its return to the flock. There's no spiritual catharsis here, just the endgame of being barely alive, and all gestures along the way should be taken more or less at face value. When a Russian soldier (played with taciturn solemnity by Barry Pepper) gifts the Boy with one of his guns, it may be the most tender thing one human does for another in this waking nightmare. Still, it's a gun. What kind of kindness is that?

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/painted-bird-review-1236151>

**THE
Hollywood
REPORTER**

'The Painted Bird': Film Review

7:45 AM PDT 9/3/2019 by Deborah Young



Courtesy of TIFF

An emotional three-hour punch in the stomach

Jerzy Kosinski's horrific novel about an unnamed boy wandering around Eastern Europe at the close of WW2 is sensitively adapted for the screen in Czech director Vaclav Marhoul's grim and violent reflection on the cruelty of human nature.

Adapted from Jerzy Kosinski's 1965 novel of the same title, **The Painted Bird receives its ideal film treatment in Vaclav Marhoul's heart-wrenching Czech Republic/Ukraine/Slovakia co-production.** Making explicit the young protagonist's Jewish background, Marhoul's screenplay witnesses the horrors of the Holocaust through the dark, somber eyes of newcomer Petr Kotlar, playing a boy who wanders from village to village and from one brutality to another.

As in the book, the shock effect of coldly detailed incest, bestiality and sexual abuse, beatings, killings and mutilation, is furiously non-stop in a film of nearly three hours. Rather than numbing the viewer, however, the parade of evil is presented in a dismaying crescendo of horror that offers no escape, least of all into Vladimir Smutny's rawly beautiful black and white 35mm cinematography, shot in a Cinemascope ratio that recalls so many of the classic films on the Second World War.

- THE PAINTED BIRD - Press Breaks -

Marhouli, a film producer who graduated from FAMU, is best known as a film director for Tobruk, his 2008 adaptation of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* which he relocated to North Africa during World War II. *The Painted Bird* lifts him into a different realm altogether. Its subject, length and seriousness should give it a good shot at prizes, both in Venice, where it bowed in competition, and internationally. Although name actors including Harvey Keitel, Udo Kier, Julian Sands, Stellan Skarsgård and Barry Pepper make memorable appearances in the film's episodic structure, it's a question how such an uncompromising film will fare at the box office unless crowned by major awards.

In the very first scene, the extraordinary young Petr Kotlar, playing The Boy, is attacked in the woods by older peasant boys and watches in horror and disbelief as they burn his dog alive. He buries the remnants near the farmhouse where he is living with a kindly old lady named Marta, who is hiding him at the request of his parents. When he finds her dead one day, he is so frightened he accidentally sets the house on fire, literally burning his bridges behind him.

Setting off through the woods, he comes to a village of ignorant Catholic peasants who superstitiously see the devil in him or, at the very least, a vampire. The witchy Olga, who acts as a local doctor, takes the little boy on as her assistant-slave and even saves him from the plague by burying him in the ground up to his neck. Then a man who doesn't like his looks pushes him in the river and he floats downstream to his next encounter with the Miller (Udo Kier).

To say that Kier has never been more frightening than in this role is saying a lot. His insane jealousy of the looks exchanged by his wife and his hired hand is bound to end badly and it does – with two eyeballs rolling across the floor, licked by the cats. The Boy escapes.

The theme of sexual perversion so prominent in Kosinski's book is introduced in the Boy's meeting with a good-hearted old bird-catcher (Lech Dyblik) who meets regularly with a voluptuous, half-mad girl (Jitka CvancEROVA) for a tumble in the fields. These professional actors bring depth to their simple roles that make the horror of their violent deaths all the more dismaying.

And so it goes. Wherever the Boy asks for shelter, he witnesses immense cruelty born of ignorance, superstition and plain hatred of the Other. His innocence is put to death along with the animals who are wantonly killed by the peasants. It is the good bird-catcher, in fact, who teaches him a terrible lesson when he paints a small songbird white and releases it back into its flock. It is ripped to pieces because it is different from the others.

The courageous young hero is abused by both men and women. He is saved from the Gestapo by a sick old priest played by Harvey Keitel, but soon farmed out to the creepy pedophile Julian Sands, who tortures him relentlessly until the Boy finally liberates himself in a stomach-churner. Fortunately Marhouli keeps the worst violence either off-screen or out-of-focus in the background, letting the viewer's imagination supply the details.

This is also true of the Boy's seduction by a lovely nymphomaniac who offers him shelter. When her aged husband (or father?) dies, she casts her lustful eyes on the pre-pubescent Boy. Her outrage at his inability to satisfy her needs leads to a horrible revenge scene with a goat. Even worse, perhaps, is her cruel disregard for his child's feelings of tenderness and love, which we watch being progressively blunted and destroyed as the saga goes on, along with his

humanity and the taboo against killing. The result is obvious in the final scenes, when the war is over but the heart is cold.

War sweeps over the film with the arrival of the Red Cavalry riding into a village, where they brutally exterminate the inhabitants for sport. The Cossacks knock the Boy out with alcohol and hog-tie him for the Germans as a present. He arrives in the German camp with a note that he's Jewish, and the commandant asks for a volunteer to shoot him. Fortunately, the lot falls to good soldier Hans, played by a war-weary Stellan Skarsgaard.

Though the Boy escapes, he witnesses one of the most heart-wrenching scenes in the film, the passage of a freight train through the fields loaded with Jews on their way to a concentration camp. Some of them knock a hole in the side of a carriage and jump off the train, only to be mowed down by the German guards. Later, the local peasants plunder the corpses of their goods and clothes. Including the Boy, who takes the boots of a dying boy with pity in his eyes.

There are moments in the black and white wasteland of devastated Eastern Europe that recall Soviet masterpieces of horror like Tarkovsky's Andrei Rublev or Elem Klimov's Come and See. The teenage boy from Klimov's film, Alexey Kravchenko, reappears here as an officer who befriends the Boy in a sequence set in a Soviet army camp. He then becomes the protégé of an eye-for-an-eye sniper played by Barry Pepper.

The choice to shoot in black and white and in 35mm brings depth to the essential, often cheerless imagery, occasionally lit by purifying fires and snow-white blizzards. Production designer Jan Vlasek (who like D.P. Smutny worked on Kolya) brings the villages with their thatched huts, prominent outhouses and stone churches to life with the vividness of a fable. Music is avoided in favor of the sounds of nature, many of them threatening. Most of the dialogue was shot in an invented Slavic Esperanto, with smattering of Czech, Russian and German.

Venice / TIFF Reviews

Guardian/Xan Brooks – 5 stars

https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/sep/03/the-painted-bird-review-vaclav-mahoul?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter

The Painted Bird review – savage, searing three-hour tour of hell

Stellan Skarsgård, Harvey Keitel and Udo Kier star in this phantasmagorical horror about eastern Europe that saw half the Venice audience walk out. **I couldn't look away**



One day they'll make a film about the first public screening of *The Painted Bird*, inside the Sala Darsena at the 2019 [Venice film festival](#). It will feature the man who fell full-length on the steps in his effort to escape and the well-dressed woman who became so frantic to get out that she hit the stranger in the next seat. The centrepiece will be the moment 12 viewers broke for the doors only to discover that the exit had been locked. I'm seeing this film as a disaster movie along the lines of *The Towering Inferno*, or perhaps a slapstick comic version of *The Painted Bird* itself.

Film festivals need masterpieces to marvel at and turkeys to laugh about. But they also need a film like *The Painted Bird*, a film that makes a mockery of star ratings. **I can state without hesitation that this is a monumental piece of work and one I'm deeply glad to have seen.** I can also say that I hope to never cross its path again.

Czech director Vaclav Mahoul spins war-torn history into phantasmagorical horror, rattling around ravaged eastern Europe for just shy of three hours. *The Painted Bird* is adapted from a 1965 novel by Jerzy Kosíński, which was cobbled together from survivors' accounts, and takes its title from a scene in which a starling daubed with white paint is mistaken for an enemy and pecked to death by its flock. The movie shows this incident in complete grisly detail. It's one of its lighter, gentler moments.

Petr Kotlar plays the unnamed Jewish stray, identified in the credits only as Boy. He's part Odysseus, part Job in that the tale has him caught in the eddies of the second world war, washed

from one nightmarish episode to the next. Mahoul shot the film over several years, so that we watch Kotlar ageing as the movie progresses. He fills out on screen as the audience thins out.

The first mass walk-out is prompted by Udo Kier's jealous miller, who gouges out a man's eyes and then feeds them to his cats. The second, most violent exodus occurs when the local nymphomaniac (Jitka Čvančarová) is set upon by the townsfolk, while the third is so perfectly synchronised to a Cossack attack that the desperate dash of the spectators mirrors that of the villagers on screen. After it's over, the auditorium is hardly half full. Those who remain have decided to ride the rollercoaster right through.

Judged purely on visual terms, *The Painted Bird* is gorgeous: a lush black-and-white tour of birch forests and bulrushes and remote rustic hamlets. Judged as drama, it is brazenly brutal, a pitiless chronicle of a land red in tooth and claw, so steeped in primitive suspicions that it's startling to suddenly see a 20th-century plane or a truck, or spot actors from less threatening pictures. Look, there's *Stellan Skarsgård* playing a foursquare German; Harvey Keitel as a misguided Catholic priest; Julian Sands as the paedophile parishioner who is eager to take the boy in. Sands is in a death scene that may haunt me for weeks.

Mahoul's film is unrelentingly savage and searing. It knows exactly what it's doing and, by that logic, never puts a foot wrong. What this sets out to depict is an eastern Europe in crisis, rocked by war with its core melting down and psychosexual radiation bleeding into the surrounding countryside. The boy is so tormented and traumatised that it's small wonder he eventually becomes a tormentor, too.

The Painted Bird plumbs the depths, but rest assured that those hardy souls who stay the course are rewarded with the smallest glimmer of hope. This takes the form of a few lines drawn in the condensation of a bus window. After three hours in hell a lone crumb of comfort can fill us up like a banquet.

Sight & Sound/David Opie:

<https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/reviews-recommendations/painted-bird-vaclav-marhoul-black-white-violent-war-story-jerzy-kosiński-adaptation>

The Painted Bird review: Václav Marhoul makes exquisite torture of an abject war story

Venice first look: The Painted Bird makes exquisite torture of an abject war story
Horribly violent yet beautifully composed, Václav Marhoul's third feature is **an unforgettable experience** that boldly confronts the very worst horrors of war.



A young boy runs through the woods, clutching his pet ferret. It's not clear why he's running at first, until another boy knocks him to the ground. Before he has time to recover, the small creature he's holding is snatched away, doused in liquid and set on fire. The high-pitched squeals that follow are drawn out to agonising lengths as the boy watches his only friend burn before his very eyes.

Most films would gradually build towards something so bleak, but *The Painted Bird* actually uses this to ease audiences into a series of even more gruelling scenes. In just under three hours, the unnamed boy travels from one violent encounter to the next in desperate need of care. Nine title cards introduce nine potential carers, almost all of whom are despicable in one way or another. From Udo Kier's eye-gouger to Julian Sands' sadistic paedophile, these Eastern Europeans have had their humanity been scraped away by war, until all that's left is a near-bestial desire to inflict pain on others.

Czech director Václav Marhoul created a new language for the actors to use in his script, unwilling to associate real-life nations with the abominations on display here. Such feats of compassion are almost entirely absent from the film itself. When the boy isn't being raped, beaten or buried from the neck down and left for crows to devour, other characters suffer even worse fates, many of which are too gruesome to share here. It's no wonder then that multiple critics walked out of early press screenings, even if the numbers involved were exaggerated somewhat. This is torture porn on a grandiose scale, brutally hammering away at viewers: an ordeal that makes Dante's *Inferno* seem almost light in comparison.

The only respite in the film's 169 bleak minutes can be found in its truly gorgeous visuals. Tear your eyes away long enough from the grotesque acts of violence on screen, and you'll notice the award-worthy black-and-white cinematography. In a tamer film, this masterful camerawork would take centre stage, but here the film's ethereal beauty instead further emphasises the surreal, dreamlike quality of the violence.

In many ways, *The Painted Bird* feels untethered from reality, yet the events that unfold within actually happened in real life – at least, to some degree. Marhoul's third feature is adapted from a 1965 novel by Jerzy Kosíński, which in turn was based on a number of survivor accounts from World War II. If audiences have become desensitised to the horrors of the Holocaust and similar acts of cruelty, this film actively tries to bludgeon that numbness out of your system by repeatedly forcing us to confront the very worst of what humanity is capable of.

The meaning behind the film's title becomes clear early on when a painted starling is pecked to death by its flock simply because it looks different to them. I have no doubt that *The Painted Bird* itself will be received in a similar way once it's released into the world at large, but thanks to a stunning performance by Petr Kotlar as the boy, this relentlessly punishing movie deserves to soar regardless of – and perhaps even because of – its harrowing controversies.

LITTLE WHITE LIES/UK

<https://lwlies.com/festivals/the-painted-bird-first-look-review/>

The Painted Bird – first look review

Mass walk-outs greeted this gruelling but brilliant literary epic about a young lad's journey through hell.



This punishing but **undoubtedly brilliant monochrome epic** opens on a travelling shot of a small boy, running as fast as his legs will carry him, while clutching his fluffy, white pet ferret. Initially, we don't know where he's running to, or who he's running from. He is barged from his flanks by another kid and the ferret is snatched off of him.

While pinned to the floor, he is able to witness his furry friend being covered in some kind of flammable liquid and then burned alive, its white fur quickly blackened by the lapping flames. It squeals in agony before flopping over to accept its tragic fate. For the unnamed boy, played with a battle-hardened poker face throughout by Petr Kotlár, this is only the beginning of a world of intense, diverse and occasionally surreal suffering. But for him, death is not an option.

It is **a mesmerising travelogue film** by Czech director Václav Marhoul, based on the famous 1965 novel by Jerzy Kosiński, which tells of a young Jewish boy and his horrific life in the wilds of eastern Europe during World War Two. It's broken up into a number of episodes, each named after the person that briefly takes the child under his or her wing.

It's a portrait of a broken continent, housing a populous untethered from basic morality and social order. Some appear to be trapped in another era altogether. The notion of extending empathy towards a pure, virtuous child is completely lost on these characters, a rogues gallery of depressives and eccentrics, paedophiles and nymphomaniacs, all of whom quickly chose to blame all their worldly torments on this doe-eyed visitor.

Marhoul paints this grotesque fresco with barely a hint of wider context and refuses to channel his anger towards systems, governments or the tides of history. He remains fully detached from the boy's cruel destiny, just following the trail and watching on with a coldly objective gaze. Here, evil is always a personal choice – a simple human decision dictated by circumstance, but also by the double-edged sword of isolation. A lot of these monsters are simply stir crazy, trapped in their tumbledown huts and waiting for some kind of sweet release. Their seething malevolence is never driven by some higher edict, but can sometimes be understood as the result of geopolitical chaos and a world too busy with the matter of tearing itself apart.

It's tough to amply describe the film's relentlessly brutal pleasures, but those who have seen films like Andrei Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood*, Robert Bresson's *Mouchette* or Elem Klimov's *Come and See* (whose star, Aleksei Kravchenko, crops up here) might have an idea of the grim terrain we're on here. Like those great works, it's an episodic tale of a holy innocent who drifts through life and becomes the focus of all the world's ills.

Here, our unsmiling hero takes beating after beating, humiliation after humiliation, never laughing, never crying, never complaining, just picking himself up and seeing what the next road brings. Yet he's not against using his natural wiles to foil some of the people who are particularly nasty towards him. By the end of the film, he has become battle-hardened and fearless – though the dark reality is, he'll likely grow up to become one of the monsters who served to shape his dismal formative years.

UK / CINE-VUE / review 4 stars

<https://cine-vue.com/2019/09/venice-2019-the-painted-bird-review.html>

Venice 2019: The Painted Bird review

Premiering in competition at this year's Venice Film Festival, Václav Marhoul's adaptation of Jerzy Kosiński's 1965 novel *The Painted Bird* is a gruelling odyssey through the bloody fields of Europe in the middle of the 20th century.



Sometimes there are films that you feel people must-see – and mustn't see at exactly the same time. Watching *The Painted Bird* in the Darsena, there was a soundtrack of seats slamming up like gunshots as people decided they had had enough. And it was totally understandable. A film about suffering can feel gratuitous. We long for relief. We long for humour. We long for humanity. Sometimes, it just doesn't come.

A young boy (Petr Kotlar) is being chased through a forest. He is caught by the older boys, beaten and his pet weasel is burned alive, writhing in agony as it dies. And so it goes. For the next three hours, we proceed through a passion play of suffering and cruelty. The boy is supposed to be protected by his aunt, hidden away to avoid the worst of the war, but when his aunt dies the villagers identify him as a Jew only a little relieved when the local hag insists he's a vampire and buys him.

Through nine chapters the boy will be looked after, beaten, exploited, repeatedly raped and abused by a series of guardians. Some of them are horrific. like Udo Kier's jealous miller, who gouges out a man's eyes with a spoon, or Julian Sands' horribly convincing paedophile. Others offer some kind of relief like Harvey Kietel's priest. But even an attempt to care for the boy can be mixed do so from mixed motives, like a young woman who saves him from the winter, but also has her own sexual appetites that are in modern parlance 'inappropriate'.

As well as suffering the torments of Job and covered (quite literally) in the shit of history, the boy is also a Tin Drum-style witness to the horrors being perpetrated all around him. A woman (Jitka Čvančarová) with a large sexual appetite is punished by the mothers of the village in a way that sparked the largest number of walkouts. The villagers are sometimes victims but are also frequently a stone's throw away from a pogrom. The Nazis, the Cossacks and the Soviets all make devastating appearances, but the locals are no better. In fact, the first act of kindness visited on the boy is from a German soldier (Stellan Skarsgård) who has been ordered to execute him. Likewise, a Soviet sniper (Barry Pepper) – in a scene reminiscent of Andrei Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood* – will befriend the boy and tutor him in revenge.

The poetry of suffering is both abhorrent and beautiful, disgusting and fascinating, excessive and vitally necessary. Like Ted Hughes' poem *Crow's Account of the Battle*, Vladimír Smutný's camera gazes with a bland indifference and it is this which is perhaps the most disconcerting aspect of the film. We have to supply the empathy; we have to supply the horror. Nothing is given to us. It is also a corrective to the view that the Holocaust only happened in the confines of Auschwitz and similar death camps.

The majority of the victims of the Holocaust were murdered before Auschwitz ever became operational. It took place in the woods and villages, in the fields and by the rivers. It grew from the hatred in people's hearts, a hatred that no longer feels like it resides safely in history. Is *The Painted Bird* exaggerated? Does it go too far? Does it break the limits of taste? "Yes" on all counts. Walking out is an understandable and valid reaction but watching, getting angry, suffering and approaching understanding is also important too.

ITALY/cinematographe.it

<https://www.cinematographe.it/recensioni/the-painted-bird-recensione/>

Venezia 76 – The Painted Bird: recensione

Recensione di The Painted Bird di Václav Marhoul presentato a Venezia 76, un film crudo e violentissimo che parla di crudeltà e razzismo.

Di Giulio Zoppello -3 Settembre 2019



L'Europa dell'est durante il secondo conflitto mondiale, in special modo i territori di Ucraina, Repubblica Cecoslovacca, Unione Sovietica, Bulgaria e Polonia, era un vero e proprio inferno in terra, dove morte, orrore e disperazione dominavano su ogni cosa del creato. E in quella terribile centrifuga di nefandezze, lo scrittore Jerzy Kosinski (che da bambino ebbe l'esistenza stravolta dall'Olocausto) ambientò il suo *The Painted Bird*, che a suo tempo riscosse enorme eco nel mondo, divenuto un film grazie al regista ceco Václav Marhoul, in concorso a Venezia, e al momento il film più forte, crudo, disturbante e spiazzante visto alla rassegna quest'anno.

Protagonista, come nel romanzo di Kosinski, è il Ragazzo (Petr Kotlár), piccolo bambino ebreo che i genitori, impossibilitati a tenere con loro per le persecuzioni naziste, hanno affidato a un'anziana e benevola contadina. Purtroppo però alla morte di quest'ultima, il Ragazzo si troverà completamente da solo, costretto a scappare e muoversi senza meta, a sopravvivere e subire di tutto a causa del suo essere ebreo, del suo essere indifeso, bambino in un mondo di adulti popolato da esseri orribili, barbari, ripugnanti, ignoranti. E loro, tutti loro, buoni o malvagi o semplicemente persi, rivivono grazie alle interpretazioni di un cast assolutamente stellare, che comprende interpreti del calibro di Stellan Skarsgård, Harvey Keitel, Julian Sands, Barry Pepper e Aleksey Kravchenko.

- THE PAINTED BIRD - Press Breaks -

The Painted Bird: un'Odissea oscena e ributtante che racconta il terrore del razzismo
Girato tutto in 35 mm, con un elegantissimo e incredibilmente espressivo bianco e nero esaltato dalla fotografia di Vladimir Smutny, The Painted Bird guida lo spettatore in un'Odissea oscena, ributtante, terrificante per la sua quasi totalità. Il piccolo protagonista vivrà sulla sua pelle le peggiori derive del razzismo, quel razzismo e soprattutto antisemitismo che Hitler non inventò o portò in quelle terre, ma che era secolare "patrimonio" di un'Europa orientale raccontata per quello che era (e purtroppo è in parte ancora oggi): il tempio di ignoranza, arretratezza, il paradiso del razzismo e di un'intolleranza che affondava le radici nella religiosità più oscurantista, nelle faide tribali pseudo-medioevali, in una visione della vita a dir poco terrificante.

Per The Painted Bird, per Marhuol, la religione è il male, la politica è il male, l'uomo è lupus homini, è moltitudine vociante e barbara, è ipocrisia e fanatismo, è prendersela coi più deboli, sfogare su di loro il fango di una vita grama, abitata da fantasmi di credenze e superstizioni antiche e grottesche. Non più grottesche delle strane creature che il protagonista, a cui il bravissimo Petr Kotlár dona una vitalità e umanità bellissime, si troverà davanti, che lo cambieranno (sia in meglio che in peggio) per sempre.

Preti premurosi, contadini violenti, soldati spietati o generosi, SS sanguinarie, ladri, pedofili, pazzi, ebrei in fuga, ninfomani, eremiti... c'è di tutto in questo viaggio nel tempo e nello spazio, molto meno "storicizzato" e definito di quanto si pensi, quanto piuttosto reso chiaramente monito e accusa universale, senza tempo, all'uomo e al suo ripetere all'infinito gli stessi orrori ed errori.

The Painted Bird: i miti non erediteranno la Terra

Sicuramente un film in parte difficile, sicuramente un film duro, crudo, che non risparmia nulla allo spettatore, lo costringe a fronteggiare veri e propri attacchi al comune concetto di empatia, di umanità.

Eccessivo? Difficile sposare questa parola al cinema, ma di certo non si può accusare The Painted Bird di incoerenza, di non avere il coraggio di fare ciò che molti altri film non hanno fatto per prudenza, opportunismo o senso del pudore. Un pudore che non può sopravvivere di fronte alla Storia, quella vera, quella scritta col sangue, lontana dalla rassicurante narrazione che ben pochi registi hanno evitato. Persino l'orrore a ben pensarci, è diventato di comodo, è diventato standardizzato, il suo svelarlo agli occhi dello spettatore, l'autopsia sul lato oscuro dell'animo umano, negli anni ha perso di capacità espressiva, di verità.

Questo film sposta totalmente il limite di ciò che è stato fatto fino ad oggi, sfiorando (ma mai toccando) l'essere film di genere, la sperimentazione slegata dalla fruizione cinematografica standard, ma rivendica invece in modo netto e adamantino la sua essenza politica, filosofica e la menzogna con cui ci consoliamo da sempre: i miti erediteranno la terra.

No, non succederà. Non è mai successo. I miti vengono schiacciati, sopraffatti, l'uccello diverso dallo stormo verrà ucciso in quanto diverso, in quanto tale, il debole verrà mangiato dal più forte, l'agnello massacrato dai lupi e l'unica terra che essi vedranno è quella della loro fossa.

The Painted Bird: il diritto alla vendetta

E il piccolo protagonista, in una landa insanguinata da cosacchi, tedeschi, partigiani ladri, soldati sovietici, alla fine diventerà giocoforza spietato, vindice di sé stesso e dei suoi simili e

pari, gelido difensore della sua sopravvivenza anche a costo di perdere parte della propria. In questo, in tutto questo, *The Painted Bird* rivendica più che il diritto alla difesa, quello alla vendetta, alla punizione, alla malvagità contro la malvagità, a quella parte di umanità che per difendersi sovente si rinnega.

“Ricorda” dice un ispiratissimo Barry Pepper “occhio per occhio, dente per dente”, o meglio, come disse Andreotti: “Va bene porgere l’altra guancia, ma nostro Signore nella sua saggezza ce ne dette due sole”.

The Painted Bird non è un film per tutti; si è una terminologia abusata, ma talvolta calzante e in questo caso nasconde un complimento, un essere in perfetta controtendenza ai tanti film “d’autore” preparati a tavolino per un pubblico generalista che si crede elitario, poco coraggioso e incapace di andare oltre la superficie di ciò che ha di fronte. Un pubblico che ormai ha deturpato per il troppo utilizzo la parola “capolavoro” per film da una stagione, senza riconoscerne uno vero (per quanto grezzo) quando lo ha di fronte.

E questo è uno di quei casi.

OCTOBER 2019

Oscars 2020 Review: THE PAINTED BIRD, A Child's Adventures in Abominationland

Martin Kudlac

The novel **The Painted Bird** (1965) made Jerzy Kosiński's writing career and ultimately broke it. The wanderings of a 6-year old protagonist against the worst display of man-manufactured atrocities during WWII were considered authentic Kosiński's experiences, **The Painted Bird** took as an actual autobiography.

The author did not initially set the record straight, the truth eventually reached the light of the day as curious investigation on Kosiński's (born Józef Lewinkopf) origins emerged along his rather cozy growing out and despite the war-time circumstances. Therefore, the book received the mark of a controversial oeuvre for more than just one reason.

The Czech producer and director Václav Marhoul optioned the rights and spent 11 years and 17 version of the script translating the grim coming-of-age into a big screen spectacle of horrors. **The Painted Bird** became the first Czech film (the film is co-produced by two more countries - Slovakia and Ukraine) to compete in the main competition in Venice after 25 years. Furthermore, the Czech Film and Television Academy picked it as the country's bid for Best International Feature Film at the 92nd Academy Awards.

Kosiński explained in the afterword that one of the reasons for such an unnerving and drastic depiction of worst imaginable terror was the fact that some people kept downplaying the inhuman acts that actually took place during WWII. They considered the heinous deeds against human lives documented in newspapers merely a journalistic hunt for sensations and overall exaggeration to boost the sales. That would be a legitimate reason to write such a book regardless of the high degree of fabulation.

Marhoul's adaptation emerges in rough times that mankind is facing, the film's logline being "the light is visible only in dark", which makes the whole cinematic ordeal the more relevant and timeless. Walk-outs accompanied the Venice premiere, alleging **The Painted Bird** is not for the faint of heart or stomach.

The producer-writer-director himself revealed in the pre-premiere talks that to adapt such distressing material, he had only two options: to expose the horrors in all their brutality or just imply the atrocities leaving the rest to the limitless imagination of the audience. Rationally, he chose the latter one. The reports on walk-outs due to extreme imagery fanned greased the gears of the film's PR than its actual reputation.

The Painted Bird is a massive survival and coming-of-age story against the backdrop of events of WWII in a supposedly Polish (the book was banned in the country for some time, though Marhoul had a tough luck finding Polish co-producers) or basically any other Central European country's countryside (the director opted to use a made-up language of interslavic) clocking almost 3 hours.

The film is divided into chapters copying the book's protagonist episodic encounters from the beginning of the war until the end. The nameless Jewish boy, played by Czech Roma boy Petr Kotlár in his first acting role, tries to make it alive from one emotionally or physically scarring experience to another in the hope to see his family once again. The Painted Bird can be regarded as a perverse Alice in Wonderland.

In the book, the little Jewish boy is taken for a gypsy child as superstition villagers fear his supernatural powers. The straightforward xenophobia certainly makes it easier to call for unabashed pedicide. Throughout the journey, his opinions on life, mankind and God crystallize and congeal. However, he is not solely the one who absorbs the pain in its wild and rich variety, the boy strikes back at least at two occasions when he feels he is being treated unfairly, to put it mildly (one crucial scene is omitted from the book when the boy causes a tragedy).

The film adaptation lacks the numerous protagonist's soliloquies depicting how his worldview is being shaped by drastic situations. Marhoul leaves the guessing on the audience to interpret the boy's acts although the knowledge of the book makes the whole film much easier to process which means the film detached from its source material offers a fairly different experience.

The display of intense brutality creates an aura of exploitation regarding the actual narrative arc or overall dramaturgy (sights of shock, amazement or statements on the ridiculousness accompany public screenings). Trying to compress the story into a tighter plot-driven structure (ergo being faithful as much to the book's narrative arc) results into an augmented theater of cruelty and surreal atrocities painfully illustrating the lack of inhibitions of any kind.

The Painted Bird in writing and subsequent audiovisual incarnation is described as a Holocaust story despite that there is no implication of the actual Holocaust in the abject behavior and the smorgasbord of deviations and taboos (one brief scene features train deportation to a death camp).

The simple comparison to for example László Nemes' **Son of Saul** exposes a wide rift between a Holocaust film and a film set loosely against the backdrop of the Holocaust. In this sense, **The Painted Bird** is more of a WWII drama than Holocaust film as connotations about the war top those of the Holocaust in the film. The book ponders anti-Semitism with higher frequency and explicitness.

The period setting tweaks the whole perception of the story since stripped of the historical references, the film would be classified along the lines of so-called extreme cinema. In this sense, **The Painted Bird** is more of a soft-core arsploitation film however not fetishizing the rich variety of aberrations for sensational purposes but oversaturating the cinema of realism with extremes out of symbolic and mythological reasons. Although the war in

progress serves basically as a license and trigger for brazen nihilism of those living on the fringes of the conflict.

The cinematography of Vladimír Smutný evokes Fred Kelemen's crisp lensing in Béla Tarr's dramas and their aesthetics mostly in the beginning. A black and white shot of a shed in countryside reinvigorates the memory of **The Turin's Horse**. After the initial scenes, the camera becomes livelier as shorter takes become more prominent which is also accented by the editing.

Unlikely Tarr's melancholic ruminations, **The Painted Bird** is defined by the acts and thus is more action-driven regarding characters and space. The cinematographer and editor carefully conceal all the transgressions (except murder or killing) leaving viewers' imagination to finish the scenes with very little space for fantasy.

Kosiński's novel and its adaptation are relevant for the current tumultuous times of crisis, polarized society and raging dehumanization. The volume and intensity of abominations in the three-hour running time basically normalize terror as it remains the sole constant of the film and its basic discourse of vocal xenophobia, disorder, moral and physical decay.

IFC acquired the U.S. rights to the film for the 2020 theatrical release.

BY **NORMAN GIDNEY** | OCTOBER 24, 2019

Episodically, *The Boy* encounters various characters along his way. There is Miller (Udo Kier), who takes the boy into his home despite domestic troubles and fits of rage. There is the benevolent but ailing Priest (Harvey Keitel) who brings *The Boy* into the church. We even watch as *The Boy*, a Jew, chances upon stoic Nazi, Hans (Stellan Skarsgård), and learns the rules of war from Russian soldier Mitka (Barry Pepper). *The Boy's* sojourn is quite literally aimless as one person, after learning the boy is headed home, asks him where home is. *The Boy* simply states, "I Don't Know."

Through pristine black and white photography by Vladimír Smutný, we are witness to the myriad shades of grey that war brings out in mankind. Not to belabor the point, but Smutný's work in this film is quite simply perfect. There isn't a single bad shot that exists in *The Painted Bird* from the first frame to the last. It is through this exquisite beauty that the realities of conflict are heightened. We see the good, the profane, the savage, and the sacred on an intimate scale.

"...Smutný's work in this film is quite simply perfect."

The production values, too are crisp, and believable—from the various tonal shifts in sound, intimate and expansive, to the variety of costumes by Helena Rovna that different regions and classes.

Final praise, however, must be given to Václav Marhoul for adapting this important work and to newcomer Kotlar, who is tasked with carrying the nearly three-hour film.

What could have easily become an exhausting endeavour is guided deftly away from the precipice to become a celebration of determination. Hardly any of *The Painted Bird* is what you would call pleasant. It is often a difficult watch at times but is a consistently engaging one. As the Czech Republic's submission for Best Foreign Language film, I easily expect a nomination to materialize for this solid piece of work. As stated in the beginning, the images will stay with the audience long after leaving the cinema. Perhaps now, in these times, when the threat of war is bandied about like a trite threat, this is a good thing.

INDIEWIRE

October 20, 2019

Film analysis/mention

By Eric Kohn

<https://www.indiewire.com/2019/10/jojo-rabbit-nazi-satire-1202183151/>

‘Jojo Rabbit’ and Nazi Satire: Why It’s So Hard to Mock the Bad Guys, and How to Get It Right

"Jojo Rabbit" isn't the only attempt to mine humor from Nazi characters, and there's a reason why it's so hard to pull off.

Eric Kohn

It's impossible to address the challenge of Nazi [satire](#) without considering "The Day the Clown Cried." Jerry Lewis' misbegotten 1972 production found the comedian directing himself as a Jewish entertainer at a concentration camp. To date, the completed work (if it exists at all) has never been seen. Lewis was reportedly ashamed of the project and managed to hide the footage from the world for the remainder of his life. "[Jojo Rabbit](#)" is some indication of why Lewis wanted to bury it: It's no easy task to turn the Holocaust into a punchline.

There's a difference between confronting evil and actually dismantling its assumptions. For all the good intentions of "Jojo Rabbit," Taika Waititi's "anti-hate satire" never contends with the Nazism at its core. It would be a different story if the movie, in the grand subversive tradition of "The Producers," appropriated Nazi iconography by positioning it in a ludicrous context divorced from ideology. Mel Brooks' 1967 smash wasn't actually *about* [Nazis](#) so much as the shock value they symbolize; it wasn't designed to assail any specific belief system. In "Jojo Rabbit," its child protagonist exists at the center of a Nazi-occupied universe, albeit one loaded with ludicrous caricatures. And therein lies the rub.

In a movie that reduces the Nazi mentality to a zany barrage of gags, the prospect of dismantling Aryan notions of racial purity, or even instinctive hatred for the Jewish people, has no real staying power. "Jojo Rabbit" is long on vision but short on insight at a time when a searing repudiation of Nazism could really come in handy.

"Jojo Rabbit" hits theaters just a few weeks after "Joker," and despite the murkiness of that movie's message, there's no question that it manages a more successful confrontation with the nature of an evil mind — the internal mechanics that drive mindless hate, the accumulation of anger and frustration that lead people to lash out at the world in irredeemable ways. It's a

tragicomedy about the thin line between tragedy and comedy, as well as the forces that can lead society to confuse the two. And it drops viewers into that ambiguous space, leaving them to sort through a murky ethical quandaries within. By contrast, “Jojo Rabbit” simply pokes its subjects with a sly grin, until the titular young character wakes up from his spell.

“Jojo” pretends to enter the lion’s den, but lacks the courage to explore what it really looks like. And these days, the concept of Nazism has morphed into a more subtle threat that percolates in our society, sometimes in more latent ways than much of the country cares to admit. Satirizing Nazism from decades past is basically a copout.

That’s probably why some people love it. If Waititi wallowed in the bleak realities of Jewish persecution or the continuation of anti-Semitism to this day, it wouldn’t be “Jojo Rabbit.” Like much of Waititi’s work, this colorful coming-of-age comedy merges whimsy with the emotional poignance of a child coming to grips with the adult world, and on some occasions it musters real sympathy for that plight. But the adult world surrounding him plays like a half-hearted cartoon. Sam Rockwell’s giddy stormtrooper is a sketch of a character who ultimately becomes Jojo’s lovable father figure, even sacrificing himself to save the kid in the movie’s big finish. The movie also portrays him as murderous anti-Semite. “Jojo Rabbit” never reconciles these competing variables, nor does it attempt to interrogate the very real paradox of a kind-hearted person with a monstrous relationship to the world.

Such was the brilliance of Charlie Chaplin dancing with the globe in “The Great Dictator,” as his Adolf Hitler stand-in Adenoid Hynkel tussled with inane aspirations. The elegance of the slapstick in this 1940 classic formed a statement unto itself, implying that even the worst human tendencies stem from a complex network of desires and misguided convictions — the inanity of the Nazi character stems from a realistic core. When Waititi himself surfaces as Jojo’s imaginary Hitler pal, he’s just a child’s notion of heroism, devoid of substance. It’s believable that Jojo may be too young to grok the sheer mania of Nazism, but the movie dangles his naïveté as a joke unto itself: Kids those days believed the damndest things!

The Holocaust invites a lot of bold takes, and usually not the funny kind. “Jojo Rabbit” premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival, where it won the coveted Audience Prize, but fewer people made time to see a very different Holocaust movie in the festival lineup that also dealt with a child’s perspective on the war. “The Painted Bird,” the Czech’s submission for the Best International Film Oscar, adapts Jerzy Kosinski’s controversial novel about a young boy wandering the vacant wastelands of a war-torn Europe, eventually finding himself at the mercy of crude Nazis and Stalinist troops.

The nearly three-hour black-and-white saga is a taut study in miserablism as the beleaguered kid careens from one persecution to the next: Abandoned by

his parents, his last refuge burns to the ground, and his subsequent caretakers lead to a smorgasbord of abuse — he's forced into slavery in one village, where the local mystic buries him up to his neck in mud; another man rapes him; later, a woman takes his virginity and lures him into an erotic tryst before cheating on him with a goat. At times, "The Painted Bird" is a cycle of nihilism that stifles the genuine pathos at its core, but ultimately it musters a profound disgust for the way an innocent character contends with the unrelenting darkness of Nazi-occupied Europe.

"The Painted Bird" never aspires to make a mockery of its subject, but it takes some audacious (if not always successful) risks in how it approaches its goal. The poor kid's struggles are so ludicrous that they *nearly* pitch into an absurdist comedy, with the kind of brash provocations that suggest the specter of Lars von Trier. It has the ambition missing from "Jojo," a willingness to look directly into the void rather than sparing viewers the ugly realities of relentless struggle.

And maybe that's why it will only appeal to the small fraction of people willing to take the plunge. Kudos to IFC Films, the U.S. distributor for "The Painted Bird," for taking the gamble on this gorgeous and devastating cinematic achievement — but it's obviously not a mass-market template for parsing evil, as "Jojo" aims to do. Waititi has delivered a quick fix for audiences who want their movies to lighten up the world, but all that sun outshines the awful truth.

So what *is* the happy medium for parsing hatred and doodling all over it at the same time? In the 2016 documentary "The Last Laugh," an engaging deep dive on the subject of Holocaust humor, an octogenarian Mel Brooks holds a comb horizontally beneath his nose and issues the Hitler salute. "This is the guy that made me money, so I stay with him!" he says. Brooks has no shame: He started cracking jokes about the Holocaust before the liberation of the camps. But at no point has that humor actually attempted to comprehend the Nazi mindset. He's all too eager to exploit Nazism for personal gain, and does so with a masterful comic brush, but stops short of giving it the satisfaction of genuine representation.

Perhaps the sheer lunacy of anti-Semitism is a joke that requires no fictitious layer. Fifteen years ago, Sacha Baron Cohen dressed up as his fictional "Borat" persona from "Da Ali G Show," took some hidden cameras to an Arizona country bar, and sang a catchy tune with a chorus imploring his audience to "throw the Jew down the well." Little by little, the ebullient crowd sang along. It was a chilling, brilliant stunt designed to illustrate the infectious nature of mob mentality, years after Nazi rallies lost their currency on the world stage, and anticipated much of the horrific bigotry on display whenever Donald Trump addresses his most fervent supporters. Cohen's humor is funny because it's true, eliciting the kind of laugh that catches in your throat. When it comes to this brand of satire, there may be no other way.

HOLLYWOOD ELSE-WHERE

October 13, 2019

Film analysis

By Jeffrey Wells

<http://hollywood-elsewhere.com/2019/10/persistence-of-vision/>

Persistence of Vision

Vaclav Marhoul's *The Painted Bird* (IFC Films, sometime in early 2020) probably won't win the Best Foreign Language Feature Oscar, but, as the official Czech Republic submission, **it totally deserves to be nominated**. Because within its own ravishing and diseased realm, it's a great film. It just happens to be **tough to sit through**.

I saw it last night and holy moley holy fucktard. It's about a little Jewish kid (**Petr Kotlár**) trying to survive all on his own in eastern Europe during World War II, and man, does he suffer the drawn-out pains of hell. So did I in a manner of speaking. But not altogether.

I'm calling *The Painted Bird* a "beautiful" highbrow art film for elite critics and cineastes who have the fence-straddling ability to enjoy magnificent b&w cinematography (all hail dp **Vladimir Smutny**) and austere visual compositions while savoring **the utmost in human cruelty and heartless perversion**.

The vile, animal-like behavior is unrelenting; ditto the **highly sophisticated monochrome arthouse chops**. Marhoul is quite gifted, quite determined and uncompromised, and quite the bold cinematic artist. He is also, as Kosinski was, **one sick fuck**.

I mean that in a good way as Marhoul is a Bergman-like in an unrelenting clinical way; he never panders or tries to soften things up for the mom-and-pop schmuckos — he's totally playing to **Guy Lodge** and his ilk. This is a movie about some awful, horrific, beastly people (**Harvey Keitel's** priest and the kid's father excepted), and what agony it can be to suffer under them on a prolonged basis.

I read Kosinski's "**The Painted Bird**" when I was 22 or 23, and I somehow absorbed all the horrific sadism and cruelty and lonely agony without incident because of **the dry, matter-of-fact Kosinski prose**. It's quite another thing to hang with that feral, dark-eyed little kid who doesn't talk for the entire film.

What is the perverse obsession with people and animals being hung upside down by ropes? What was so terrible about servicing that hot-to-trot farmer's daughter (**Jitka Cadek Cvancarova**)?

The instant you see white-haired, beard-stubbed **Udo Kier**, you go "oh God, here comes another cold, maniacal, salivating monster performance." **Harvey Keitel** is totally subservient to the *mise en scene* — just playing an old, white-haired priest who coughs a lot and then dies. **Julian Sands** plays a total salivating beast. **Barry Pepper** (who was young 20 years ago but no longer) is interesting as a Russian soldier with no love for Communism or Josef Stalin.

Exquisitely made, and **utterly hellish to the core in terms of its depiction of the human condition**. I happen to be on friendly terms with one of the producers, **Tatiana Detlofson**, who used to be married to *Variety's* **Steven Gaydos**. Does it deserve to be nominated for Best Foreign Language Film? Yes — it's too well made not to be so honored. Every frame screams "**soul-cancer arthouse perversion**".

If you despise human nature and are filled with loathing for people in general, this is a movie for you. But it's also an exquisitely well-made film in terms of the aesthetic precision and visual balance and generally magnificent cinematography. Unsparing, ice-cold, 98% heartless. Make that 99%.

VARIETY / Shailini Dore

“Wow what an incredible film! Everyone has been telling me how intense and good it is. I am not disappointed. After the screening, I had to sit there for a few minutes to take it all in.”

Notes: Shailini Dore is the editor for Variety’s International Feature special issue running early November. She already assigned Guy Lodge to write a trend feature analyzing how many of the Eastern European films are very strong this season. She confirmed this film will be featured. We are figuring out if Guy Lodge needs additional quotes.

INDIEWIRE / Ryan Lattanzio

“I don’t want to say I like this film. However, I thought it was highly impressive. Every scene and every shot drew my attention. I thought it was going to be a slow three hour journey but it is completely the opposite! I am still in shock.”

Notes: Ryan did say he has a lot of questions and want to do an interview with Vaclav when he is in Los Angeles early next week. However, he is waiting for his Indiewire editors’ approval. More to follow.

NOVEMBER 2019

2019
AWARDS SEASON
Q & A

Stellan Skarsgård on Courting Controversy

The Painted Bird actor explains why the Czech Republic Oscar entry, which triggered walkouts on the festival circuit, tells a timely tale

By Scott Roxborough



If there is one film in the international feature race guaranteed to cause controversy, it's *The Painted Bird*. The official Czech Republic entry, from director Václav Marhoul, triggered mass walkouts at its festival screenings in Venice and Toronto — with even hardened film critics unable to stomach the unflinching depictions of wartime horror in Marhoul's three-hour, black-and-white epic, adapted from Jerzy Kosinski's controversial novel from 1956.

The World War II-set film follows a young Jewish boy who wanders from village to village across Eastern Europe, facing one brutal violation after another. The book's title comes from a rural tradition of catching birds, painting them in bright colors and then releasing them into the wild, where these “painted birds” are rejected by their own families as foreign and pecked to death.

The book caused controversy at the time because the people terrorizing the boy were ordinary Polish peasants, not German Nazis. In his film adaptation, Marhoul sets the tale in an unnamed Slavic nation and has his cast speak an invented language, a pan-Slavic Esperanto, which avoids condemning a single nation but makes the child's story of horrors even more chillingly universal.

Stellan Skarsgård, 68, who plays a war-weary soldier in the film, believes, for all its violence and controversy, that

The Painted Bird is exactly the kind of movie needed right now. “This film takes place during the Second World War, but the same things, the same horrors happen today,” he says. “We need to remember what war is and to learn from it.”

This is a difficult film to watch, and there have been walkouts. How is this graphic depiction of violence justified?

I think you should be entitled to walk out, as you should be entitled to turn your head away if you see a street fight. But to say that you shouldn't show violence as something unpleasant is dangerous. We are used to seeing so much violence and it is always sanitized, it is always for our entertainment. It is made to tickle us and excite us. But violence, real violence, is horrible. And if you don't get upset by seeing real violence, then I think we are losing something. You should be upset by the violence in the film.



What does *The Painted Bird* bring to our depiction and understanding of World War II?

The period of the Second World War is interesting. We keep on using it because, in terms of moral discussions, it's the ultimate material. There are very few moral questions you can't plant in that soil. Sometimes it is used in a cliché way and you get some sort of Holocaust porn, or you use Nazis as just a shortcut to show someone is evil — which I think is dangerous. It's important that we understand that those people, who committed those crimes, were just like you and me. And if we don't recognize that, then we are really in jeopardy of becoming like them. I want to see films that show human beings, not clichéd monsters, committing all those horrible things.

What's the relevance of the story for audiences today?

The same things, the same horrors, happen today, all over the world. It is important that we remember and that we learn from it. If you talk about Western Europe after the Second World War, there is no time in history that has been better for humanity. Because after the Second World War, everybody agreed on one thing: This must not happen again. And they agreed on the way for it not to happen again: that you build a society where nobody is starving, where there is a minimum of inequality and where people have a decent life. That worked for some decades. And now we have seen the income gap widen, the inequalities widen and what happens? The extreme right is popping up its head again. And communism is popping up its head. Because it is the perfect soil for that kind of thing. And it's much easier to find followers for this sort of thing if the memories aren't fresh anymore. This sowing of hatred and fear and nationalism and xenophobia, which is very profitable for certain world leaders at the moment, is leading straight ahead to what this film depicts.

Interview edited for length and clarity.

TIMES OF INDIA – November 10, 2019 – “My film is too real for the Oscars, says Vaclav Marhoul” by Priyanka Dasgupta

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/my-film-is-too-real-for-the-oscars-says-vaclav-marhoul/articleshow/71993147.cms>

My film is too real for the Oscars, says Vaclav Marhoul

Priyanka Dasgupta | TNN | Updated: Nov 10, 2019, 12:30 IST

On a rain-swept Saturday evening, Vaclav Marhoul stood on the balcony of Nandan, smoking a cigarette. The KIFF screening of his The Painted Bird (TPB), a frontrunner at Venice Film Festival’s Golden Lion where it ultimately lost to Joker, had just got over. The full-house turnout at Nandan for The Painted Bird clearly showed that passion for good cinema had clearly cut short cyclone Bulbul’s flight to wreck havoc at KIFF. Though perturbed by the screening glitch over subtitles, Vaclav was moved by overwhelmed viewers congratulating him for what they described as a profoundly violent film depicting the black-and-white wasteland of Eastern Europe during the end of World War II. Directors Raj Chakrabarty and Arindam Sil stood on the aisle — awe-struck by Vaclav’s portrayal of the journey of a little boy through Holocaust horrors. Later, when Vaclav settled down for chat at the VIP lounge of Nandan, he spoke about how he makes movies only if he falls in love. Excerpts:

The Czech Republic has nominated your film for the Oscars...

Yes. Three weeks ago, I was in Los Angeles and Chicago and opened a campaign for the Golden Globe and Oscars there. There are some very good movies competing in the Oscars, including Pedro Almodovar’s Pain & Glory and the Bong Joon-ho’s Korean film, Parasite, which won at the Cannes Film Festival. I think my film is too real for the Oscars.

Your film has also been described as the most “controversial” Oscar entry among the 93 movies this year. Does that give you a kick?

No. Jerzy Kosinski’s novel from which this film was adapted was also described as controversial. For a long time, people in my country have not seen a movie like that. Now that I am travelling to various festivals, I hear that it is rare in world cinema. My movie is a call for three most important things: Humanity, love and hope.

After competing in Venice, your film is now competing at KIFF. What went on your mind when you were given this offer to compete at KIFF?

It was the festival’s decision to put my film in the main competition. When the festival expressed interest to show it here in Kolkata, I agreed immediately. This is the first time among screenings at 32 festivals that my film was being screened for an absolutely different culture and people. Even though the subtitles didn’t appear due to some technical glitch, Indian people still understood it.

That’s the language of cinema. Initially, there were hiccups. Later on,

many said that the visuals are so strong, film just started to grow...

That's wonderful. We are filmmakers. Our mother tongue is a picture and not the dialogues. That means we have to show and use sound to tell a story. But today, many movies are verbose. When I started writing the first version of the film, I told myself that there would be no dialogues. However, not having subtitles was disappointing. People didn't understand the dialogues in the final catharsis of the film when the father explaining to the boy why they had sent him away.

What is this Interslavic language that your characters speak in?

It is an invented language. It doesn't exist. I didn't want any nation in eastern Europe to be associated with the characters. Had that happened, it would have been a problem. Besides, this story is timeless and universal.

Can anyone really understand what is being said?

The Slavic people will understand 80% of the language. The Russian soldiers in the film are speaking in Russian while the Germans are speaking in German. The little boy and his father speak Czeck.

How did you cast this little boy (Petr Kotlár)?

He was eight when I met him on the street. I felt in my heart that he was one. He is not a professional actor.

Isn't Majid Majidi also doing the same thing?

Yes...

The film has such elaborate scenes on violence and sexuality. How did you shoot those with him?

There was a way I shot it. There is a scene in the meadow where women are shown murdering a boy. I shot the scene from two angles. I first shot the scenes with Petr. Then, I sent him away and turned the camera on to film the women. In the editing room, we merged the two scenes.

How did you shoot the violent scene where birds come and poke his head?

That was VFX.

Didn't this shooting impact the boy psychologically?

Nothing happened to him. Before shooting, he was tested psychologically. Petr comes from a good background. He is a lucky boy and has no troubles in his life.

So, he wouldn't be remotely close to the character he plays in the film...

Yes. During the principal photography, he was all lost. Suppose, we designed a complicated shot. The next moment, he would just forget it and be interested in kicking a football. If you asked him what is going on, he would be lost. He had the background information of the film being about an abandoned boy who is trying to find a way back home. I didn't tell him everything but I did tell him something. We

had a psychologist with us when we were initially shooting in Ukraine. But after a few months, it was evident that Petr didn't need it.

Apparently, you devised a way of directing him...

Petr loves animals and has a dog called Dodik. When I needed to have a right expression on his face or eyes, I used Dodik. I would say something like: "Petr, just try to imagine that you are walking with Dodik and you are going to meet a friend. You are talking to your friend and discussing video games. You forget that Dodik is with you. When you stop your discussion with your friend, you notice that Dodik isn't there. So what happened with Dodik? May be, some bad guy has stolen Dodik. May be, Dodik is arrested. May be, Dodik doesn't have any food..." When I said these lines, his expressions changed. I knew I had got the look. One could say this is a bit of a manipulation but that's how I directed him. For some scenes, I used doubles. We had a very short-heighted 37-year-old. We used him for the sex scenes.

Hasn't he watched the movie?

His family decided that he must watch it. But I know, he hasn't seen it when he watched it. At the Prague premiere, he was there, sitting behind his grandmother. He was only talking about what he had done during the shooting. Effectively, he only saw himself on screen. Nothing happened to him during the shooting and nothing happened when he watched it.

Were you disappointed when your film lost out to Joker at Venice?

No. It was such a big honour to be in competition at Venice. After 25 years, a Czech film was selected to Cannes, Berlin or Venice. So many famous directors were present. People knew about my film in Venice. I don't think about losing to Joker at Venice. What could have been a disaster for a director is when no one knows about his film and it is simply forgotten. My film is too real. It is not like a fairytale like Joker. It isn't a period film.

Many have found it difficult to watch this film too...

That's because many are watching themselves in the film. That is very painful. Even the violence in my movie is very decent. But the people are projecting those scenes in their mind.

You mentioned that after 25 years, a Czech film was selected to Cannes, Berlin or Venice. What's the situation of the movie industry in your country?

I feel, TPB is an exceptional movie. This kind of a movie hasn't been shot in my

country for more than 35 years. In my country, the general interest is in sex comedies.

How did you have the courage to make something so different from sex comedies?

That's me. I fell in love with this. I wrote, directed and produced this film not because someone expected me to do this but because I simply needed to do this and tell this story. Filmmaker has two directions to take. One is sex. The other is love. If you are directing a film with sex, you can make five movies a year. None of them is important but you earn a lot of money. The other is love. If you fall in love, you can sustain.

When you say making cinema after falling in love, one is assuming that it is to do with cinema made with a certain conviction. You took 11 years to make this movie. By then, your peers would have made some 100 films.

How difficult was it to stick to your conviction?

People have asked me what next and I said I don't know. To make a movie, I must fall in love. If I don't fall in love, I will not make another movie.

That's how strong your conviction towards art is...

I am 59 years old and know what I need in my life. If you want a good life, you need to balance it with yourself and people around you.

When you are not making cinema for 11 years, were you doing anything else?

Nothing.

One knows of directors who can't have this conviction and have to do so many other things just to keep their kitchen fire burning. How did you survive?

I have sponsors who love my movies, know that I am crazy and support me. During the development process, I ask for grants from the National Film Firm. I also received a grant from the European Union. Yet, there were two occasions when I was on the verge of bankruptcy. I didn't know how to continue.

The Kolkata International Film Festival is organised by the state government.

How important is a government support for nourishing movies?

Czech filmmakers still have to struggle. It isn't that politicians don't like culture. But, for most, it isn't as important as coal mining or heavy industries. I feel culture is much more important than anything else. Society can improve if governments can give as much importance to culture as to mining or heavy industries.

What's your idea of Indian cinema?

Unfortunately, no Indian cinema is distributed in Czechoslovakia. Sometimes, someone buys Bollywood. I haven't watched any Indian movie. I would be really interested in an Indian film about ordinary people. Nobody is buying them for

distribution in Czechoslovakia.

How do you view Hollywood with his studio and star system?

I call it the time of Avengers. I love American films from the '60s and '70s like the Easy Rider and the Midnight Cowboy. The last great American movie I saw was The Greenbook or Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri. That means Americans can still produce and write very good movies. But generally, they come up with Avengers kind of movies.

Do they shroud smaller independent European movies?

Yeah. But that was always the case. In America, film is and was always a business. In Europe, film is a part of the culture. The roots of this difference is hundreds and hundreds of years back. The culture in Europe is developed from people on the top. In America, the culture is developed by people who immigrated there. It is not that the European culture is better than the American one. It is just a fact.

Despite not being from a family of filmmakers, why did you decide to do movies?

I am a black sheep in my family. I was 14 when I simply decided to make movies. I studied in film secondary school, the film university and was working in the film studios.

How important is it to study films to be a director?

Nobody can teach you to acquire talent. That is a gift from the god. If you are sensitive, logically and consequently, you have empathy. If you have empathy, you will understand people and find stories to tell. If you are ignorant and don't have any empathy for anyone, you can't make a good movie. A film school is very important to understand the technical bits like editing and camerawork.

One school makes a difference between arthouse and commercial cinema. Another makes a difference between good and bad cinema.

Which school do you follow?

There is just good and bad cinema. A commercial movie must not be necessarily bad and a good art movie can also be very commercial.

THE FILM STAGE – November 14, 2019 “The Painted Bird” by Rory O’Conner
<https://thefilmstage.com/reviews/the-painted-bird-review-vaclav-marhoul/>

The Painted Bird

Václav Marhoul

IFC Films; 169 minutes

Director: Václav Marhoul

Written by **Rory O’Connor** on November 14, 2019

Disregard the glowing reviews and eight-minute standing ovations. What really adds fuel to film festival publicity fires are the boos, the walkouts, the affected twitter rants, the ensuing backlashes, and counter-backlashes, and so on. One of the most recent to generate such heat is an adaptation of Jerzy Kosiński’s divisive 1965 novel *The Painted Bird*, a not-enormous work of historical fiction that has been turned into a nearly three-hour epic of the same name. Presented in black and white, it tells the story of one boy’s horrific odyssey through Eastern Europe during World War II where he is faced with events grisly enough to provoke what The Hollywood Reporter, amongst others, reported as “mass walkouts” when it played in Venice and Toronto earlier this season.

But what in the world ruffled all those feathers? *Bird* was adapted and directed by Václav Marhoul, a Prague-born actor and filmmaker whose previous work behind the camera has consisted of a Raymond Chandler homage titled *Mazaný Filip* (2003) and, more notably perhaps, the 2008 film *Tobruk*, which followed a Czech soldier’s growing sense of disillusionment during that WWII siege. *The Painted Bird*, another film very much about disillusionment and war, stars young Petr Kotlar as the novel’s unnamed, ethnically and religiously vague, and almost mute boy who acts as our witness to all the oncoming depravity.

The director fires a portentous early warning shot with his opening sequence, in which Kotlar’s boy is shown running through a forest cradling his pet ferret. Giving chase is a pack of delinquent youths who eventually catch him and give him a kicking before setting his furry friend on fire. The camera lingers as the poor thing writhes and squeals. This kind of abject cruelty is rampant in *The Painted Bird* and liberally exchanged: between man (and in this film it is mostly—if not always—men) and man; man and beast; beast and beast. War is hell, Marhoul wants to remind us, and when the chips are down we humans are not always as evolved as we would like to think.

From here the director moves his film into chapters, each named for a character in the relative sequence. The story continues on the boy’s family farm: a brutal looking place where the well bucket sways with all the promise of a hangman’s noose (Vladimír Smutný’s bleak cinematography,

while often marvelous, hits a high watermark here). Upon finding his mother dead in her rocking chair, the boy accidentally sets the place alight, thus beginning a series of misfortunes that will take him from an early gig as a witchdoctor's assistant to grafting at the mill of a violently abusive man (Udo Kier) to, much later, catching fish for a lonely nymphomaniac—amongst other things. Other acquaintances come in the form of S.S. officers, a pedophile, and cornea-threatening ravens.

Every time our beleaguered guide feels he is out, they *dragggg* him back in and it is through this relentlessness that *Painted Bird* forgoes much of its authority. The opening exchanges promise much, like a grueling if obvious update on Elem Klimov's *Come and See*—a film that shredded more nerves, it should be said, with an image of two children wading through neck-high mud than *Bird* musters in all its countless depravities. (The most abhorrent involve gouged eyeballs, bestiality, and a bottle that is used to rape a woman before being smashed inside her.) But the film becomes crass in this faux-macho oneupmanship as if taunting the viewer's endurance. *Can you take it? Don't you want to see what happens next?*

Yes, it is a gratuitous film about a gratuitous time but one with little interest in humanity, which is surely the reason why those early festival viewers deemed their time could be better spent on other things. The film's reliance on shock and its disinterest in basic empathy ultimately combine to trivialize the fictional events Kosiński depicted in his book—which, coming as they did from a Jewish-born Polish man who, as a boy, had survived the war, are believed to have been based in some way on experience (although Kosiński's credibility has not gone unquestioned over the years). Famous actors appear in the few sympathetic roles (Stellan Skarsgård as the token good Nazi, Harvey Keitel as a naive but decent priest) while the villainous ones are played with only exaggerated menace. Like a horror movie, many of the shocks are signposted with basic Chekhovian clarity.

Given the obvious solemnity of the subject (a mood which the film appears to take as a given and not something that must be earned), it is hard to fully appreciate *The Painted Bird* in either way; it is just too serious a film to be taken lightly and too silly a film to be taken seriously. It makes one wonder: what exactly does that leave?

The Painted Bird screened at Thessaloniki International Film Festival.

DECEMBER 2019

DEADLINE – December 31, 2019 “Vaclav Marhoul On His Oscar-Shortlisted ‘The Painted Bird’: A Message Of Hope And Humanity” by Nancy Tartaglione.
<https://deadline.com/2019/12/vaclav-marhoul-interview-the-painted-bird-international-feature-oscar-1202818858/>

Vaclav Marhoul On His Oscar-Shortlisted ‘The Painted Bird’: A Message Of Hope And Humanity

By **Nancy Tartaglione**

International Box Office Editor/Senior Contributor

Czech director Vaclav Marhoul’s adaptation of Jerzy Kosinsky’s controversial novel *The Painted Bird* is one of 10 films that was recently shortlisted for the International Feature Oscar. The film took more than a decade to bring to the screen and debuted in competition in Venice where it won the Cinema for UNICEF Award. IFC picked up U.S. rights for *The Painted Bird* out of its TIFF premiere and will open the movie next year.

An evocation of wild, primitive Eastern Europe at the bloody close of World War II, the story follows the journey of ‘The Boy,’ who is entrusted by his persecuted parents to an elderly foster mother. The old woman soon dies and The Boy is on his own, wandering through the countryside, from village to farmhouse. As he struggles for survival, he suffers extraordinary brutality meted out by ignorant, superstitious peasants and witnesses the terrifying violence of the ruthless soldiers.

While Marhoul never puts the violence front and center, calling it “decent” violence, he tells me that after spending time in Los Angeles, screening the movie on the campaign trail, he heard from many people, “Your film is a masterpiece, but it’s too real.” That led him to believe “it is absolutely impossible, we are never going to be shortlisted.” To his surprise on the evening of December 16, he took his phone out after attending a theater performance and found about 50 text messages relating the news.

The Painted Bird was a passion project for the filmmaker whose other works have included *Tobruk* and *Smart Philip*. “I remember when I read it, I was so touched and it just kept coming at me like a boomerang all the time.” From the page, says Marhoul, “The pictures appeared to me. Every sentence was like a picture shot and that doesn’t happen every time.”

Still, “people are thinking that I am crazy to read this book as a message of humanity, good and hope. People think it’s about violence and brutality, but for me that’s not the story. It’s not the picture but the frame. The story is

telling us a message about humankind.” He likens it to today’s world saying, “From the beginning for me this book was timeless and universal. It’s not important that it is set during World War II. It’s not important that the main character is a Jewish boy. This was never a war time drama or a Holocaust drama.”

The boy in question is Petr Kotlar, a non-professional actor whom Marhoul found by chance. Visiting a medieval town in his home country, Marhoul says he “met him on the street by accident and felt it was him. He was my first choice and from that moment on I didn’t try to find another actor. My ace was my heart and my instinct.” Kotlar was nevertheless “so professional and so prepared. He is so open and is absolutely not interested in the fact he will be a big star in Czech Republic. He would like to play football,” laughs Marhoul.

The film employs what the director calls Slavic Esperanto which Marhoul fell upon also by accident. “Jerzy never said where the story was going on, just somewhere in Eastern Europe. So it was a technical problem for me. But Jerzy didn’t tell the truth. He said this was an autobiography and that wasn’t true... I just really didn’t wish that any nation should be associated with the story. I had to find a solution and just typed Slavic Esperanto into Google. What came up was Interslavic, an invented language that maybe about 40 people speak. I found the guy who created the language and he wrote the dialogue.”

JANUARY 2020

ROME.A.CZ – January 8, 2020 "Czech director of 'The Painted Bird': All it takes here is to be different and you've got trouble" by staff.

<http://www.romea.cz/en/news/czech/czech-director-of-the-painted-bird-all-it-takes-here-is-to-be-different-and-you-apos-ve-got-a-problem>

Czech director of "The Painted Bird": All it takes here is to be different and you've got a problem

8.1.2020 13:01



Václav Marhoul (left) and Petr Kotlár (right). (PHOTO: Jan Dobrovský)

Here in the Czech Republic, viewers are not leaving screenings of the most-discussed film of Czech cinematography early as the first sensationalist headlines about its screening elsewhere proclaimed was happening. On the contrary - almost 100 000 people have gone to see it in cinemas alone.

The director/screenwriter of "[The Painted Bird](#)" did not at all anticipate that would be the domestic reaction. "I am glad to be able say to you all straight up - don't be angry, forgive me, I estimated that poorly somehow," is the message Václav Marhoul has for Czech film-goers.

Born in 1960, Marhoul is a director, producer and screenwriter as well as a member of the [Divadlo Sklep](#) ("Cellar Theater") company and the [Pražská pětka](#) ("The Prague Five") ensemble. A graduate of the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague ([FAMU](#)), after the Velvet Revolution he worked for seven years as the General Director of the [Barrandov Studio](#) and later as manager of the arts association and gallery called [Tvrdohlaví](#) ("The Stubborn Ones").

Marhoul has directed the films "[Mazaný Filip](#)", "[Tobruk](#)" and "The Painted Bird", based on the global best-seller by [Jerzy Kosiński](#), which made it into the main competition of the [Venice Film Festival](#) last year. He also signed a contract last year with the prestigious American artists' representation agency, [Creative Artists Agency](#).

Q: You have dedicated a chunk of your life to filming "The Painted Bird". How did it occur to you to film that "unfilmable" book?

A: It occurred to me after I read the first three pages, believe it or not. It was such strong reading matter that it awakened my imagination, I comprehended that I was holding an absolutely exceptional work in my hands. Once I finished reading the book I was fully decided that I must film it one day. I read it ahead of making "Tobruk", and once I had completed that, "The Painted Bird" began to come back into my head like a boomerang, and I decided to take the first step of acquiring the rights to the book. Nobody else in the world had managed that yet.

Q: How long did that take?

A: Exactly 22 months. The contract with the publisher in Chicago and negotiating the details took 14 months of combat that was rather merciless, but I must acknowledge that it was also quite fair. For example, one of my conditions was that they would not have the right to approve my screenplay. Yes, they could express their opinion of it, but not give the final approval. Eventually they agreed to that.

Q: Would you begin making "The Painted Bird" again if you knew it would take you 11 years, that you would be writing 17 different scripts, and mainly that it would be so difficult to raise money for it? You could have made three films during that time, for example...

A: Maybe... but that's just speculation. If you get your hands essential material of this kind, you never know exactly how long it will take to produce. I didn't suspect it would take 11 years, either. Sometimes I tell myself that our ignorance protects us. You don't know what will happen tomorrow, you go day by day, month by month, year by year, and eventually you arrive at your destination.

Q: "The Painted Bird" is not in color. The 35-millimeter format is also not traditional. Was your aim to make the film appear to be from the old days? Does the black-and-white format evoke something for a viewer that color film cannot?

A: Color would have literally ruined this film. From the beginning I wanted the story to look like a real one, and I realized it was exactly color that would literally rob the film of its truthfulness. Black-and-white is also more abstract, and thanks to that, it aids the viewer's own imagination. Have you seen "[Schindlers' List](#)"?

Q: I've seen it.

A: So, imagine if "Schindler's List" had been in color. I think that would have been an absolute catastrophe. However, there are many fabulous dramas about the war that are filmed in color and it doesn't hurt them at all. The English film "[The Long Day's Dying](#)", for example, or the Soviet film which in my view is also the best such film, from 1985, "[Come and See](#)", by Elem Klimov. Nevertheless, "The Painted Bird" is not a war drama, it's about a universal message, it's rather a psychological testimony about the creatures we call human beings.

Q: You've turned an unknown boy into a globally famous actor. Are you still following the career of Petr Kotlár as an adolescent?

A: Certainly, I know what's going on around him. We must realize he's still a child, a 12-year-old who goes to school.

Q: Do you advise him when he chooses roles?

A: To tell you the truth I addressed that just once, because Pét'a's dream was to perform in the TV series "[Ordinace v růžové zahradě](#)" ("The Surgery in the Rose Garden") and Radim Fiala, who plays the character of the doctor, aided him with that at the time. That was a catastrophe, because he was offered a role, even if I'm exaggerating a bit, of a "stinking *cikán*" who bullies poor little white boys. I immediately dissuaded him from taking the role.

Q: Did he comprehend why you argued against it?

A: I explained to him how television works and that television is not film. A film does not have as much of an impact on people. Unfortunately, there are some people here - and this is a sad piece of news to deliver - who are unbelievably stupid. A friend of mine who plays a negative character in a TV series was recently beaten up by people who believed he is exactly the kind of person whom he portrays in the series. We can draw on past examples as well - when "Nemocnice na kraji města" ("[Hospital at the End of the City](#)") was being broadcast, the actor Vinklář was refused service in a butcher shop with the words: "Dr Cvach, we won't sell you anything." When, in that same series, the character of Ema, the housekeeper to the head physician, Sova, passed away, people sent cake or slippers to the television station for him. So in other words, if Pét'a were to accept such a role, as an aggressor, then some people would believe he's one in reality as well. This wasn't about me forbidding him to do it, I have never forbid him to do anything that way, but I explained to him that he actually should not render such a role.

Q: What do you think, as a director, of the depiction of Romani people in Czech films and serials? Is it stereotypical, or not?

A: In the area of Czech film there is just one Czech director dedicated to this, [Petr Václav](#). He has made two feature-length films and I believe they were made honestly and not stereotypically. I will not name another colleague of mine, a director who made a feature-length film where one of the roles was meant to be Romani, but he was so frightened of working with a Rom that he cast a white actor in brown face. That was a terrible event. Television series, however, probably have to succumb to stereotypes, they want to accommodate the majority taste. According to sociological surveys, Romani people are not the favorites with the majority here. Most people unfortunately even apply the principle of collective blame to them.

Q: What would have to happen for Romani people to perform roles here that are not based on their ethnicity? Like in the American productions where African-Americans play lawyers, doctors, police officers ...

A: When I cast Pét'a in "The Painted Bird" I wasn't thinking along those lines. I have my own approach. A big Romani community lives here in Český Krumlov. I have many brilliant friends among those people and I think this is above all about personal experience, about comprehending that there are differences among us that do exist, just as they do among all other people. However, for that to change in this society is going to take a very long time. [Public broadcaster] Czech Television took an unbelievably big step forward with the "[MOSTI](#)" series, I believe that represents enormous progress. I dare say a series like that did manage to change people's opinions or thinking. For example [the Romani actor] [Mr Godla](#) played a positive role, so [commercial broadcaster] TV Nova will follow suit. Television stations want to be inconspicuous that way, so if an actor falls into a category, and Mr Godla has fallen into the category of positive roles, then he will stay there, because viewers are accustomed to seeing him like that. However, if it were a negative category, then nothing could aid him, because audiences don't comprehend that the people on their screens are just actors.

Q: How do you personally perceive the current position of Romani people in the Czech Republic?

A: People frequently tar all Roma with the same brush, period. It's classic xenophobia, in some cases it goes as far as discrimination. However, we must also be straight with each other and say that some Romani people are themselves to blame for many things. It's a terribly complex matter. This is not just about Romani people here, though, the same goes for Germans, or for Americans, because Czechs are bothered (although the Roma are also Czechs) if somebody is shouting loudly somewhere, for example, or arguing - it bothers me, too. If I'm on the tram and 20 jolly foreigners get on and bellow as if the world belonged to them, it's just not pleasant. The same thing sometimes happens with some Romani people. They then create a bad reputation for those who do not behave that way. I have also experienced this, of course, with white people several times, but it's more difficult with the Roma, because anybody can then think "You see, we always did believe that this is their behavior." Romani people are not aware that if some of them behave like that, they *a priori* confirm all of the prejudices the majority holds against them.

Q: In the film "Tobruk" your heroes have doubts, they are buffeted by emotions, it goes so far as to make them anti-heroes. Why?

A: During war there are no heroes, in war you want to survive. That's what "Tobruk" is actually about, unlike "The Painted Bird", it is a wartime drama. "The Painted Bird" is not even a film about the Holocaust, its environment and form may be anchored in a certain year, but the film is timeless. However, what's in "Tobruk" is the reality of how that all actually functions. Things are not really as they are depicted in other films, where the protagonist is a big hero each and every minute and never wavers. That is genuinely not how things work, and I really feel sorry for all those people who believe that war is both hell and great entertainment. It would be enough for them to take a single step into a war zone just once and they would immediately change their opinion.

Q: What is it like for a Czech director to film with stars like Harvey Keitel and Stellan Skarsgård? Did you have to make a confident impression on them, that

you knew exactly what to anticipate from them, or was it that your humility with respect to the subject matter and your modesty with respect to the actors themselves convinced them to join you?

A: That's an unbelievably sensitive question and I'm slightly embarrassed by it. Both are the case, of course. They know whether a director already knows what he wants and how he will manage to achieve it. From me they felt that this was an auteur film, that I was literally living through this film. I worked with them before we began filming them, they saw samples of what we'd already done. From that footage they comprehended what I was about. We always spent the evening before a shoot together, we discussed the roles, the film, so then I had no problem on set.

Q: The film has already been screened at many prestigious festivals and [Vladimír Smutný](#) won the prize for best cinematography at the [Chicago International Film Festival](#). It has also been screened with big success in the Czech Republic. What is the life of this film like currently? What kind of plans do you still have for it?

A: This is all just the beginning. In the Czech Republic we are approaching the magical number of 100 000 viewers - if you'd asked me my prediction several months ago and told me so many people would come to see "The Painted Bird" here, I would have believed you'd gone crazy.

Q: Does that mean you've broken down a prejudice you held about Czech audiences?

A: I've broken it down. I am glad to be able say to you all straight up - don't be angry, forgive me, I estimated that poorly somehow. In the case of a demanding film of this kind - black-and-white, lasting almost three hours, without dialogue or music - I think my considerations were absolutely rational. Otherwise, we're currently taking the film around the globe to 36 festivals. We also were nominated for the [Satellite Awards](#) in the USA for best foreign-language film. That's an enormous honor and success. "The Painted Bird" will arrive in cinemas abroad in 2020. For example, in America it will screen in April 2020. *[Editor's Note: After this interview was completed it was announced that "The Painted Bird" is [shortlisted for an Oscar](#) in the category of International Feature Film.]*

Q: Recently you said: "People believe I'm totally crazy when I say that ["The Painted Bird"] is about love and goodness, even if its format is unbelievably cruel, violent and brutal." What clue to comprehending your film can you give to those who don't see your humanist message in it?

A: "The Painted Bird" is built on contrasts. It works, for example, according to the principle that we do not realize the value of somebody or something until the moment we lose that person or that thing. If I were to simplify this, most of the time we don't realize how important it is to be healthy until the moment we fall ill. We don't much appreciate it before that. What does suffering mean to somebody who has never experienced it? It's not until the moment of suffering that one wishes not to suffer. So this story is built on contrasts - you accept the necessity of goodness, of hope, of

love exactly because they are absent from this film in an unbelievable way, and you look for them even more as a consequence.

Q: The main hero of the film undergoes a test of character - does the evil others commit against him break the child's innocent soul? Can violence be excused? For example, the struggle for one's own life, for self-preservation...

A: The problem lies elsewhere, though - that struggle can actually become a negative position, one of retaliation and revenge. That's already an absolutely different category. My hero, exactly as you say, is a child with an innocent soul, and he falls further and further into darkness. However, the worst thing about it is, of course, that the child is not aware of this. A child just accepts the behavioral models of the people around him. He is not able to analyze them, as an adult person would. That, again, is an error made by many viewers of "The Painted Bird", they attribute their own adult experience to him, and that's absurd.

Q: You most probably saw hundreds of child hopefuls for the main role in "The Painted Bird"...

A: I never held a casting call, I met Pét'a Kotlár at the athletic stadium in Český Krumlov and after five minutes I saw that he was the one, and that held true.

Q: How did you come to know Kotlár family?

A: In Český Krumlov. I've been visiting there for about 12 years and I always stay in the same room at the [Hotel U Malého Vítka](#) - where, by the way, all of my screenplays have also been written. Right around the corner from that hotel, the Kotlárs have their restaurant, [Cikánská jizba](#) ("The Gypsy Room"), the locals call it U Cikánky ("At the Gypsy Woman's"). Sometimes I'd go there for a glass of wine. I think the situation in Český Krumlov is absolutely different than it is elsewhere here. The people in Český Krumlov are not in a trap like the Romani people living at the [Chanov housing estate](#) are, for example, or anywhere else in an excluded locality where they may fall into the clutches of loan sharks or other problems such as unemployment and the youth may be into drugs. The vast majority of Romani people in Český Krumlov have jobs, everybody here appreciates that, for example Pét'a's grandfather is a municipal assembly member. His grandmother, Věrka, told me that Pét'a was probably not even aware that he is Romani until the age of seven. One day he came home and confided to them that somebody had abused him as a *cikán* and he didn't even know what that was.

Q: What surprised you about Pét'a's reaction to filming, or the response of his family?

A: For example, there was a scene where Pét'a is floating on a log, and it gets carried away by the river somewhere into the distance, and despite the fact that he's an excellent swimmer, he was terribly afraid because he was alone on the log. The crew was about 20 meters away from him, his grandmother was running along the riverbank... Nothing could have happened to him, he was wearing a neoprene scuba-diving suit, there were emergency medical technicians prepared to respond everywhere, so even if he had wanted to drown he wouldn't have succeeded. He

clung to the log, he didn't like it very much. Then we were filming a scene, though, where Pét'a was meant to lay down beneath a moving train, originally it was meant to be done by a stuntman, but he said he would do it himself - and then it was my turn to collapse. His grandmother saw no problem with it and said Pét'a would do it. So he lay down beneath the train and we filmed the scene behind him, from the left side. First we rehearsed it - the train drove over him more slowly, then they accelerated, there were stunt people there with Pét'a beneath the train, and it took us about three hours to rehearse before we were able to film. We saved quite a lot of money, on top of it all, because otherwise it would have been a demanding trick shot.

Q: We can also perceive this film as a parable for today. We can see the fate of refugees in it, the exploitation of them for slave labor, the easy money the smugglers make on them. Is there also something in this film, in your view, that captures the position of Romani people today?

A: I think it captures the position of anybody who is different, it's not just about Romani people or Jewish people, but about each and every person who gets stuck in the gears of prejudice, xenophobia, or racism. When people have problems, they principally are based in the fact that they are just different. The symbolic scene in "The Painted Bird" is ultimately about that. It's an allegorical scene that demonstrates the basic message in an essential way. This is a timeless matter, also from that perspective. It doesn't matter what your skin color is, it's enough to be different in any respect.

Q: This recent film of yours shows human cruelty and insensitivity in full force. Why do you believe some people reveal this about themselves in such a way? Is it just out of a feeling of power over the lives of others?

A: It's not just something that shows up, it's human nature, and each of us has this inside us. [Professor Zimbardo](#) at Stanford University demonstrated this with his famous experiment. He turned 24 intelligent, normal, young people from good families into 12 guards and 12 prisoners. He built a fictional prison, with cells, even, and the experiment was meant to last about three weeks. Eventually it had to be closed down after five days because the people in the role of the guards became sadists who began to even mentally and physically abuse their "prisoners". The experiment created the two basic conditions for such behavior - impunity and opportunity.

Q: Can this happen because of ideology as well? People who were, for example, members of the SS also had families whom they loved, but despite that they murdered and tortured others without compassion...

A: People frequently ask how it was possible that a cultured nation like the Germans managed to commit such atrocities during the Second World War. For example, in Belarus alone there were more than 600 of our "[Lidices](#)" burned down and their inhabitants murdered, including the children. That was not just done by SS soldiers, but also by Wehrmacht troops, the so-called ordinary people. Among them were also, for example, the kind of people who two years before had been giving piano lessons in Hamburg and despite that managed to use a flame-thrower to burn a four-year-old child alive. How is that possible? In addition to the two conditions that I mentioned

being met - i.e., impunity and opportunity - the psychosis of war was also added to the mix. This isn't just about killing, because if a victim is a civilian, then we exclusively refer to such killing as murder. Many were traumatized for the rest of their lives by such events - not just the survivors of such attacks, but sometimes even those who committed them, and for many years afterward. Nobody can ever say "I would never do that", because the human soul is actually a fragile vessel. In order for it not to crack, the individual must have a very high level of morality and very strong principles.

Q: Many people consider the Second World War to be ancient history. What about the victims of present-day wars? Are you able to comprehend the fear of the possible consequences of receiving children or young people from those regions here in Europe? How can we face that fear and the populists who feed it? Is receiving such people here a good idea?

A: I don't know how to face it in the least. The best way would probably be for people to go see those areas for themselves, to see the dead people with their own eyes, the people afflicted by war, but that is the last thing in their lives they will ever do. So here they will sit, drinking beer, eating dumplings, and somehow they will again become abusive, angry, and hateful. The only way to break that down is through actual personal experience. You don't have to go to a war zone, it's enough to go look at a refugee camp in Greece, for example. I was there in June because I have long supported UNICEF in the refugee camps in Rwanda where we have had programs for some time. You can't buy that kind of experience, it's reality. It's just like when I was in Afghanistan or Iraq, these are matters that can't be communicated - but my experience is that nothing will move people of that kind. They're building a concrete bunker for themselves and they will close themselves up inside it and fearfully peek out now and again, just to berate everybody. Recently on Veteran's Day a person came up to me in Prague, he looked rather decent, and he said to me: "Mr Marhoul, you're in the Army, so you'll have an opinion about this." Then he asked how we could shoot dead "all the niggers that want to come to our country". It was terrible. I responded that he should get away from me, that I decidedly would not be discussing any such thing with him.

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Petr Kotlár: Filming with Václav Marhoul was a colossal experience

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Petr Kotlár in "The Painted Bird". (PHOTO: Jan Dobrovský)

The film "wrapped" in the summer of 2018. It had been preceded by several years of preparations, 17 drafts of the screenplay, and tireless efforts to finance the drama that is "The Painted Bird", in which the main role of a Jewish boy has now been portrayed by a Romani boy, Petr Kotlár of the Czech Republic.

The black-and-white film, based on the 1965 dramatic novel of the same name by Jerzy Kosiński, a Jewish author of Polish origin, held its world premiere at the Venice Film Festival and its Czech premiere in September 2019. Pét'a, who is 12 years old today, spent a year and a half on set with the film, not just in the Czech Republic, but also in Ukraine, for example, after [director and screenwriter Václav Marhoul spotted him](#) and cast him several years ago.

"We filmed in Ukraine for about a month. My grandmother was the main person who accompanied me the entire time," Pét'a tells us, and Věrka, his grandmother, immediately adds her perspective.

"The filming was demanding, altogether it lasted a year and a half. Once it was all over, I marveled during the premiere in Venice at what an admirable film has been made about a child's lonely encounter with cruelty and violence," she says in praise

of what is one of the most widely seen films in recent years, adding that young Pét'a's brilliantly-launched acting career will not end with "The Painted Bird".

According to the other offers for film roles that quickly were made to Pét'a, it's clear he may one day join the ranks of famous actors. "We were contacted by a Czech-Danish production company with an offer of a lead role. The main plot will be that the protagonist sees something he wasn't meant to see, so the mafia will attempt to silence him once and for all," his grandmother reveals, and Pét'a then humbly adds this interesting information: "There should even be passages there where Romanes will be spoken. We'll see how it turns out, though, for the time being I've completed the screen test, I had to learn the lines the producer sent to me, and maybe tomorrow or the day after I will find out whether I've been cast."

The filming itself would just be 20 full days, eight in Denmark and the rest in the Czech Republic, which is a significant difference compared to the filming of "The Painted Bird". According to his grandmother, the adolescent actor has received many offers, but when she read the different screenplays with him, the Czech-Danish co-production was the one that captured his attention because of the action.

The production should begin filming in February. Because one of Věrka's sons is wheelchair-bound and needs 24-hour care, and because she is also running the [Cikánská Jizba](#) restaurant ("The Gypsy Room") in Český Krumlov with her husband, she is glad that this time around, if Pét'a is cast, she would share the job of accompanying him to the set not just with her husband, but also with her other son, Pét'a's father, who works Monday through Friday at an automobile factory in Austria, where he has lived for several years, and who usually returns to the Czech Republic just on the weekends.

I don't want to be typecast as an aggressor

An offer also came to Pét'a to perform in the television series "Ordinace v růžové zahradě" ("The Surgery in the Rose Garden"), which would have been an opportunity to work with the actor Radim Fiala, who became a favorite of his when filming "The Painted Bird". "I always say Radim is the best, we got along awfully well, it's a lot of fun with him and we're friends," Pét'a says of his fellow actor.

"The role they wanted to give my grandson wasn't for him, though," his grandmother says readily, explaining that he would have played a boy bullying his schoolmates, which Pét'a didn't like. Despite the fact that one of his big dreams is to once again act with Fiala, he eventually had to refuse the role.

"We rejected that role for Pét'a, but nobody got angry about it, that all happened absolutely without any friction. We are open to further collaboration with them, so who knows, maybe a role will be offered in the serial that my grandson would love to play," his grandmother told us hopefully, revealing that fame has decidedly not gone to Pét'a's head.

She says they have lived their entire lives in Český Krumlov, that people know each other well there, and that people have come to the restaurant for a meal just to be

able to take a photo with the young actor. Despite that, she says he pays no attention to the increased interest in him or the curious looks he gets.

"I do not believe I am different from my peers, I am still the same guy who I was before making the movie," Pét'a says with humility in his voice, adding that sometimes he can tell his schoolmates are slightly envious of him and would love it if he could get them into a film too. "I always tell them that's not how it works, I don't have the power to promote anybody anywhere. However, if a friend of mine appeared in a film or a series I would certainly be a fan."

Pét'a's grandmother nods approvingly at her grandson's words. "Everybody believes working behind the camera is just like strumming a guitar, but I always answer that it's not like sitting at home on the couch, turning on the TV and vegging. The work done behind the camera is really hard," she explains before describing some experiences behind the scenes.

"Before it's all filmed they set the lighting, check the camera angles, in short whether all is as it should be, and you're waiting to take the shot for as long as five hours, easily," she says from experience, recalling one of the scenes in which Petr had to lie down beneath a moving train. According to him, he didn't like the idea of a stunt double doing it and preferred to do the demanding scene himself.

"The director explained that I could have a stunt double, but in the end people would be able to tell that it wasn't me under that train, and understandably that wasn't what I wanted. I decided to risk it. The scene took several hours to film, in the beginning I was also afraid, but it was an experience to see a train from that perspective. Mr Marhoul might have been praying the whole time, but eventually we accomplished it together," the young actor says.

Acting is drudgery

Petr also recalled the iconic scene from "The Painted Bird" in which the crows were standing around his head. "I wasn't afraid of them because I knew they were domesticated and trained, but it's true that in between shots one of them hit my head and then I was a bit more on alert," he reveals.

"We filmed all day, I was hidden in a hole, covered up with boards that they then scattered clay over," he says of the film-making trick that has a big impact onscreen. The most difficult scene, though, was unequivocally the one on a log that gets carried away by the river.

"Before I knew it, I found myself very far away from the crew," Petr recalls. "The fear I had at that moment wasn't really acting. I was wearing a wetsuit and there were divers everywhere, but I was already half-dead from fear. I really don't like recalling that scene," he admits.

Petr, who today is one of the most famous teenage actors, sometimes still likes playing musical instruments. "Dad is a musician, my brother Míša is too, he can actually play all the instruments. I play something here and there, but I don't stick with it long," he admits.

"This time, though, I've decided I will attempt learning the saxophone, I have a borrowed one at home, so I'm honestly practicing," he reveals, and his grandmother warms to the topic. "Pěťa sings wonderfully, he has perfect pitch," she says, but her grandson immediately interrupts her.

"Well I don't know about that, Grandma," he says with his typical humility. He is just that modest about the reaction of Czech audiences to the film, which has been seen by almost 100 000 cinema-goers here.

According to the young actor, nobody anticipated the film would have that kind of audience success at home. His grandmother closes the conversation by adding that it's not clear whether her grandson will want to continue to act in the future.

"He's still at an age when he isn't certain about his future profession yet. We'll see once he's grown up a bit. However, one thing is sure, I would like him to go to high school and then to college. I want him to study and achieve something and then if he decides to continue with acting I will support him, just as I would support him in anything he eventually decides to do," Věra Kotlárová concludes, and Pěťa agrees.

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