

## The Enchanting Beauty of Poland

### A conversation with Ryszard Kaja – painter, set designer, poster artist



*Ryszard Kaja photographed by Łukasz Cynalewski*

#### **Joanna Sokołowska-Gwizdka:**

**The exhibition of your posters “Exploring Poland” will open in Austin, Texas in November 2018 as part of the annual Polish Film Festival and the celebrations marking 100 years of Poland’s independence. It might seem that your posters can only be understood by the Poles. A perfect example is the poster depicting a village called America that shows pears growing on a willow tree. Since the exhibition is intended for an American audience, will it require a special set of guidelines?**

#### **Ryszard Kaja:**

Well, I hope it doesn't, but it's hard to say, hmm... let me reflect on this for a moment. The meaning of some of the posters will certainly only be clear to Poles, or people fluent in Polish. I love Polish language, with all its richness of nuance, and I enjoy playing with words, incorporating linguistic references in my posters – like in the poster titles BABIMOST [*\*Women’s Bridge*], BABIA GÓRA [*\*Witches’ Mountain*] or PODHALE - where highlander women are hiding traditional embroidery patters under their slips [*\*play on words: “pod” - under; and “hale” (halki) - “slips”*], but most of my posters refer to specific places and their enchanting beauty. Those posters will be understood by everyone. Sometimes, however, I do make specific references to culture, tradition, art, or history, and then it pays off to know

the context to fully understand my poster. For someone who has never heard of Kantor, the WIELOPOLE poster will be incomprehensible; for those unfamiliar with SZYMBORSKA, finding the outline of her profile in the meanders of the Vistula River will be an abstract notion; but then should one even bother about viewers who do not know who Kantor or Szymborska is?

**You played a role in reviving the travel poster.**

Travel posters were at the height of their popularity in the 1930s, and their heyday continued after the war. Excellent LOT posters immediately come to mind. But then the travel poster slowly faded into oblivion. Nowadays, it's replaced by commercials, TV spots – I guess a new era calls for new mediums. And yet it turns out that the traditional form of a poster that you can hang at home, that you can touch, is having a moment, perhaps for sentimental reasons. The Poland in Posters series has enjoyed tremendous popularity; it has even spawned imitators! Those are mostly young graphic designers developing entire series of prints with our country as the subject matter. The number of BAŁTYK [*\*Baltic Sea*] posters has probably reached thirty - most of them are terrible, with a few gems hidden here and there, like for example the spectacular works of Wojtek Domagalski! Unfortunately, more often than not new travel posters either border on cliché or intellectual mediocrity.

**Your father, Zbigniew Kaja, also dabbled in travel posters. Is your POLAND series a continuation of your father's work?**

My father created several posters as part of the “Discover the Beauty of Greater Poland” series commissioned by KAW [*\*National Publishing Agency*]. He was enamored with Wielkopolska [*\*Greater Poland*], which was prominently featured in his posters, lithographs, linocuts, drawings, and paintings. The posters in that series cannot be considered his best work - at the time, he experimented with photography, looking for new forms of expression. Still, those posters hold a special place in my heart, just like the places they depict.

I caught the travel bug from my parents. At the time, passports were unattainable, but we traversed the length and breadth of Poland in our rickety, hideously beige Syrena [*\*car make*]. We discovered places of unexpected beauty, unspoiled, away from touristy trails. It's because of those trips, and my later travels, that I can tell stories about Poland today.

**The POLAND poster series features big Polish cities as well as little known towns. What made you turn your eye to such places as Solina, Lubiewo, Wolsztyn, Brda or Warnowo, which are not your typical tourist destinations in Poland?**

I always search for places that are not merely significant but also simply beautiful, and not necessarily glorified. For me, Poland is more stunning if you peer over the wattle fences, into the places that are peaceful, quiet, and not swarming with tourists. Fortunately, my publishers – Joanna and Krzysztof Marcinkiewicz, from Polish Poster Gallery in Wrocław, are ambitious in their approach to poster art, and won't bat an eye if my posters depict modest places; actually, they are the inspiration behind some of my posters, such as ŻAREK, their special place that no longer exists. I just want my posters to evoke memories, and memories, as we all know, just like unruly thoughts bury themselves in the most

unexpected, oftentimes humble places. I have a real life story for every single poster. When my poster book gets published, each poster will come with a description. It's the memories, like roots, that imbue places with meaning. And I have a very special bond with some of those places.

Wolsztyn – my beloved town, where my mom was born, where I spent every vacation as a child, where I visited the spectacular local depot, where dear Aunt Marcia made mouth-watering compotes of unassuming peaches picked from the imposing, heavily-laden tree at the entrance to the garden. Who would have thought that posters depicting such inconspicuous places would become so popular? Who could have predicted that my WARNOWO poster, purposefully unappealing, featuring a village on the island of Wolin, where I spend my summers, would become a favorite of British gardeners?

*“Co oswaja Ryszard Kaja” [The Taming Pursuits of Ryszard Kaja] - A retrospective solo exhibition of Ryszard Kaja's works at Arsenal Municipal Gallery in Poznań, 2016*

**Your posters are brimming with symbolism and cultural references. No one would have heard of Szczepieszyn if it weren't for the beetle that buzzes in the reeds there [\*a reference to a Polish tongue twister]. Pacanów is synonymous with Koziółek Matołek [\*Silly Billy-Goat, a cartoon character], Koniaków is its famous lace, and the town of Chałupy is the nudist beach in Zbigniew Wodecki's song, just like Bolesławiec is synonymous with the famous pottery with its distinct pattern. Are your posters born from ideas that are already there or is it a creative process that unfolds around a certain concept?**

Every now and then it does feel like a poster is ready in a snap, but sometimes it's a slow and painful process... And unfortunately, that may at times be apparent in the work, which is not good at all - because even if the memories we talked about are there, you don't always know how to avoid the cliché, and even if the idea is there, you still have to come up with the right form for the content. The creative process behind a poster of the Gdańsk shipyard is different from that of the Young Poland's BRONOWICE. A poster, like good bigos, should burst with intense flavors so I season it with culture and arts, drawing from my own Pantheon of great influences. There is Kantor and Nowosielski, the contemporary music of Penderecki, and Nikifor whom I have great respect for.

**The posters in the POLAND series are neither monumental nor stereotypical. You show us Polish forest, the All Souls Day with its flickering lights of memories, but also ghosts of the PRL [\*Polish People's Republic] past. Could you comment on this?**

That's the way it goes – instead of being proud of what we have, we tend to glorify the ersatz, the counterfeits, we still want to be someone else, and still try to hide what's ours. We pretentiously aspire, for whatever reason, to be German-like, then American-like, or very – too much - European, or even cosmopolitan. As if we were ashamed of what's ours, because ours is often trivial, banal, ordinary to us, and thus it seems not sophisticated enough. We want to be worldly at all cost, forgetting that to become worldly we need to appreciate what we have first. Think about the Norwegians - who continue to encourage the traditional wooden architecture in the countryside, whereas in our villages wooden houses have rotted and fallen apart, replaced by concrete boxes to imitate the wealthy Europe. Folk art, traditions, costumes – it has all died before my eyes. And yet it wasn't so long ago that

the movie *Chłopi* [*\*The Peasants*] was filmed using nothing but original folk costumes (by the way, it's a fantastic movie, perhaps I should make a poster for Reymont's *Lipce*?). We want to be better than we are, and we fail to appreciate what we have. Cognac and bourbon are delicious, but is our vodka worse? The Himalayas are mighty but our Tatra mountains are superb. The Amazon forest is the lushest but you can't deny the charm of a birch grove, and it's so exotic to outsiders! Italian renaissance is undeniably grander than Polish, so I am not going to flaunt imitations in my posters - but we have our own Biały Bór with what can be considered the most beautiful modern orthodox church in the world completed by Jerzy Nowosielski, the artist who I am absolutely sure is about to be discovered in Europe and around the world as one of the greatest and most significant artists of the twentieth century. I can't help my love of the Polish unrefined nature. *Not a lowland, not a valley, such is this municipality* [*\*a quote from a song by Cabaret Dudek*]; the more I travel around the world, and I travel a lot, the more I fall in love with our beloved Polish "backwoods", and this is the Poland I try to portray, make people fall in love with, and see the beauty where it's invisible to most people.

*"Co oswaja Ryszard Kaja" [The Taming Pursuits of Ryszard Kaja] - A retrospective solo exhibition of Ryszard Kaja's works at Arsenal Municipal Gallery in Poznań, 2016*

**I have a strong personal bond with Łódź; that's where I grew up, and then worked at the University of Łódź, focusing on traditional Polish theater. Your ŁÓDŹ poster draws on the art of Władysław Strzemiński, who lent his name to the Łódź Academy of Fine Arts. You used to design sets for the Grand Theater in Łódź. How do you remember that city?**

I have a soft spot for Łódź, and I often wonder whether I shouldn't design another poster featuring that city. I made my debut in Łódź, and that's where I fell in love with theater. Łódź has a unique personality, which makes it stand out among other Polish cities that are losing their individual character in pursuit of globalization. I lived in Bałuty, near the magical Jewish cemetery; I worked at the Grand Theater as a set designer, with occasional gigs at the Musical Theater, Stefan Jaracz Theater, the New Theater, the Logos Theater, or the Studio Theater. I had a number of exhibitions there, both large and small... Ah... Łódź... With its delicious townhouses, so tousled, so multifarious, with its impressive postindustrial architecture, and so many dear friends I still keep in touch with.... I think I will come up with another Łódź poster but since I try not to repeat the names, perhaps I should call it ŁÓDŹ FABRYCZNA - as a reference to the station where I got off the train hundreds of times, but also as an homage to the distinctive style of that city?

**The Austin exhibition includes your theater posters as well. How do you feel about theater and theater poster?**

I fell for the world of theater head over heels, and got completely sucked into it. I worked as a set designer for over 20 years, mostly on musical theater stages. It was such a precious time for me. All the emotions around the opening night, I still love it so much! I am very theatrical -it was reflected in my stage designs, it shows up in my drawings, and probably also in the way I talk about them. And my stage sets always looked like paintings. But I have to admit that despite all my accomplishments and awards, there was quite a large group of set designers who disliked me, did not appreciate me. Majewski (a prominent figure in the Polish set design world) or Sadowski couldn't even stand the sound of my name, they would

go to Dejmek asking him not to hire me, arguing I wasn't modern enough. Well, I'm not, that's a fact, I have no idea how to be trendy. And it's the same when it comes to my posters. There is a certain (fortunately not so large) group of poster artists who do not hold my work in high regard. They turn their noses up at my posters, especially the Poland series, calling them too conventional, too personal, too popular - which in itself is suspicious - they come up with all kinds of labels. And perhaps they are right... I constantly have to fight for a place for myself, for what I do, because I am in fact neither fashionable nor trendy, neither modern nor en vogue, because in defiance of everybody and everything I remain myself, both on stage, and in posters. And theater poster perfectly merges two loves of mine: theater and poster art.

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**You personally selected posters for the Texas exhibition. What criteria did you apply? What Poland and which aspects of Polish culture do you want to show the American audience?**

It's hard to say, I just followed my instincts; I already had several shows in the States, mainly in St. Louis, which I visit regularly, so I more or less know how my works are received, but this time the exhibition is addressed in particular to the Polish community and to people interested in Poland, at least interested enough to come to your festival. So I picked out works that are infused with the Polish spirit. There is nothing more important than the roots that we've grown from, that shaped us, no matter how twisted they are. Italians are very proud of being Italian, which - let's be honest - can at times get annoying, especially when they start talking with their hands, so I would like to encourage the Polish community to rise above their embarrassment and brag about our Polish vodka and herring on oilcloth, boast about our All Saints Day filled with windswept nostalgia, so much smarter and more dignified than the funny spectacle of Halloween... And what if not Polish poster, respected - or even adored around the world?

Unfortunately, despite the invitation, I won't be able to make it to this year's exhibition in Austin due to my illness, but I am most likely going to make an appearance next year. And if the organizers are not tired of me yet, I am planning to show the complete POLAND series, which includes 170 posters. And I am determined to come next year because I was invited to stay at a lovely cottage that gets daily visits from a very courteous deer. I saw the deer on video, and I am very much looking forward to meeting Mr. Deer in person.

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**The online exhibition of Ryszard Kaja's POLAND posters will be published in the Culture Avenue magazine on Wednesday, November 7, 2018.**

**The exhibition in Austin opens on Thursday, November 8, 2018.**

**For more information visit:**

[www.austinpolsishfilm.com](http://www.austinpolsishfilm.com)