



Jerzy Stuhr

It's probably the character of Max from *Sexmission* that most of us would immediately associate Jerzy Stuhr with, although he is a versatile person — a sheer Renaissance man. He is an actor and director — both film and theatre — as well as a professor and activist. He has been continually active in the world of culture. Both his children have followed in his footsteps — daughter Marianna, who has become a painter, and son Maciej, who is also an actor.

Jerzy Stuhr has graduated from the Polish studies at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow and from the Faculty of Acting at the **Ludwik Solski Academy for the Dramatic Arts in Krakow**. During his studies, he collaborated on and acted in the STU Theatre. Having graduated from the studies, he was employed at the National Helena Modrzejewska Old Theatre in Krakow — he cooperated with that theatre until 1991. Stuhr has never followed the beaten track. He has always combined the arts that he was fond of. Conventions have never been to his liking. He has tried many things, transforming from an actor into a director, then from a director to a teacher. Only when it seemed he would complete a certain phase of his career definitively, he returned to it. His artistic way has not been limited to Poland alone, as he was looking for inspiration abroad, for instance in Italy. He won the hearts of audiences with extraordinary sense of humour, but also with intelligence, which emerged from scenes where not a single word was said — a distinctive glance was sometimes enough.

This one-man band has also published a book about his family: "Stuhrowie. Historie rodzinne" (The Stuhrs — Family stories), which serves as yet another confirmation that he is a repository of anecdotes and various stories. It is clearly visible that the extraordinary professional career is not the only focus of Jerzy Stuhr, as he cares much for his hearth. We have had many opportunities to see how well he and his son get on with each other, although their true relationship is not always reflected in fictional film plots — let's take his last film (**Forecast for Tomorrow**, 2003), where both gentlemen do not seem to be fond of each other.

The 1970s were undoubtedly his golden era, as this was the time of his most outstanding characters. It was the time of the cinema of moral concern, which gave artists the opportunity to openly tease the conscience of Poles. It was during that time he had the chance to cooperate with such big names as Kieślowski, Wajda or Holland. In the films by Krzysztof Kieślowski: **The Scar** (1976) and **The Calm** (1976), then in **Camera Buff** (1979) and **Three Colours: White** (1993), he played the characters that were existentially tangled — they sometimes spread their wings, only to plunge into darkness, the other time.

In 1977, he played in **Wodzirej**, by Feliks Falk. He portrayed a typical nouveau riche, who would literally walk over everybody to climb up the ladder of success, which was the ultimate goal of his life. **Chance** (1979) was another acting episode with Falk. In that film, Stuhr played a teacher with a morally ambivalent personality. When looking closer, we can see that Krzysztof Kieślowski gave him the roles of men who were somewhat immersed in elevated thoughts, while with Feliks Falk it was petty street smarts, rascals or immoral men, in general.

Jerzy Stuhr has had an affair with both cinema and theatre. It was Andrzej Wajda and Jerzy Jaroński that convinced him to return to stage. He had many opportunities to face the challenge of Shakespeare dramas (and comedies), as is expected of any proper theatre actor. Stuhr was to make his debut in **Hamlet**, by Konrad Swinarski. Unfortunately, it was never staged, because of a tragic death of the director. It was again Andrzej Wajda that made it possible for him to play in Shakespeare plays. First, it was **Hamlet (Scenes and Monologues)**, then, following shortly, **The Tragic Story of Hamlet** (both in 1981). Stuhr also played in **Taming of the Shrew** (1991), **Macbeth** (1995) and **The Merry Wives of Windsor. Fortinbras Gets Drunk** was Jerzy Stuhr's last episode of cooperation with the Old Theatre in Krakow.

He had two opportunities to portray Dostoyevsky's characters: he played Piotr Wierchowiewski — the leading character in **The Possessed** (1971), replacing Wojciech Pszoniak. Many years later, he portrayed Porfiry Petrovitch from **Crime and Punishment** (1984), a new production of the play by Andrzej Wajda. Then the 1980s came — the time of cult comedies, starting from **Sexmission** (1983) by Juliusz Machulski — resembling SF films, through **Kingsajz** (1987), a story about a fictional land of **Szuflandia** (Drawerland), and **Deja Vu** (1989) — based on gangster films. The following two films turned out to be



interesting titles: **O-BI, O-BA. The End of Civilization** (1984), by brilliant Piotr Szulkin, and **Citizen Piszczyk** (1988), by Andrzej Kotkowski — a story about a victim of the mistakes and misinterpretations in the People's Republic of Poland.

In 1985, Jerzy Stuhr became a director. He started with the prose of Patrick Süskind (the author of **Perfume**) and staged **The Double Bass**. However, that play received diametrically opposite reviews. The People's Theatre in Nowa Huta was the place of new theatrical challenges for Jerzy Stuhr. They included: **Yvonne, Princess of Burgundy** (1990) by Witold Gombrowicz and Molière's **The Bourgeois Gentlemen** (1993). At that time, the work of Jerzy Stuhr was so overwhelming that his nomination for the rector of the Ludwik Solski Academy for the Dramatic Arts in Krakow was hardly a surprise. He occupied that position in the years 1990-1996, only to retake it in 2002. The capstone of his career was the title of a professor of theatre arts, awarded in 1994. He once said: *"Being faithful to one's own principles means perceiving theatre as a service for the society, audience and art. We're probably the last generation of this kind. When it is gone, an entire era will be gone — the era of theatre's ethos. I am deeply convinced this will be the case"*.

Taking a breath from theatre, Jerzy Stuhr again stood behind the camera. He was inspired by Jerzy Pilch's novels, which led to the filming of **List of Lovers** (1994), which won a Special Prize at the Polish Film Festival in Gdynia. Soon after that, a fledgling film director decided to pay tribute to his master — Krzysztof Kieślowski, by making **Love Stories** (1997). The film retained the emotional spirit and pathos that Kieślowski was famous for. There were more films to come: **Week in the Life of Man** (1999), then **Big Animal** (2000), which was based on the screenplay by Maciej Orłoś — this was the last screenplay that Kieślowski was working on, before his death.

Since Jerzy Stuhr treats reality half jokingly, there was no reason why he wouldn't diversify his brilliant career with not-so-serious films. This was the case of **Kiler** (1997) and **Two Kilers** (1999) — he portrayed Commissioner Ryba, in both films. Obviously, the originator of both films was Juliusz Machulski, with whom collaboration is always extremely fruitful. Another step in Jerzy Stuhr's career, this time a very different one, was dubbing Donkey in **Shrek** and its successive parts. In Radio ZET, Jerzy Stuhr commented on that: *"When I read that Donkey was my best role to date... One can get depressed"*. So, let's go back to the more serious paths that fortune had in store for the artist. Further steps in his career led him to a position in the European Film Academy. Apart from his activities in the field of art, Jerzy Stuhr became the President of the Father J. Tischner's Children's Hospice in Krakow. He was also awarded with the Knight's Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta.

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