



Maria Blicharska has a company in Paris and another in Warsaw. She works with American, Iranian, Egyptian and Belgium crews. Her latest international co-production, *Frost*, is being premiered at the Directors' Fortnight in Cannes

FROM PARIS WITH LOVE

➔ Sebastian Smoliński

We meet to talk about her career, as she's finishing the post-production of *Frost*, an ambitious French-Polish-Ukrainian-Lithuanian movie directed by one of Europe's most accomplished auteurs. "I have this professional calling to be a filmmaker who crosses national borders, and *Frost* reflects this idea in a wonderful way. It's a delicate, intimate look at the Ukrainian conflict. It's a great project, which was worth doing not for financial gain, but for the sake of priceless and timeless art," says Blicharska. She jokes that in Poland she is considered a French producer with Polish roots, and a Polish producer in France. She is convinced that her international approach is exactly what European cinema needs right now. "There are more and more movies that need to be shot in various countries, and multilingual crews are essential. It's not about competition between different national industries, but about quality and cooperation."

Polish-French connection

Blicharska's road to Paris and to prestigious projects was fast, but even 15 years ago, no one would have suspected that she would one day be a key Polish producer operating internationally. "I studied French philology and cultural management. I had nothing to do with the cinema until I happened to be on the set of Marcin Krzyształowicz's *The End of Holidays* in 2002," she says. "I soon became fascinated by the possibilities that filmmaking had to offer. It's a fusion of art, finance, law, mathematics, and technical and practical knowledge, as well as creative contact with talented people," she adds. Blicharska finished post graduation film production studies in Katowice and soon decided to go abroad. "I was interested in international co-productions from the outset. I went to Paris to gain experience and knowledge about them, and then Poland joined the EU. I started working with Rafał Lewandowski, a Polish filmmaker raised in France. A few years later, when he made

his debut feature *The Mole* (2011), which was filmed in Poland and France, I worked on the French side."

Blicharska was primarily a line producer in the early years of her career. She worked with foreign film companies, viz. a Brazilian company shooting in Poland and Germany, and a Belgian company going to Ukraine with a Polish crew. She also organized the filming of many Polish movies in France and elsewhere. Blicharska is especially proud of the big-budget American historical documentaries shot in Poland, viz. *One Day in Auschwitz* (2015), produced by Steve Purcell, Stephen D. Smith and Leslie Wilson with music composed by James Horner. The movie was broadcast on 250 TV stations in 45 languages.

In 2006, Maria Blicharska and Monika Sajko-Gradowska founded the Polish film production company Dönten & Lacroix Films. "We were working on Polish films and we managed to organize few shooting days in New Orleans right after Katrina hurricane struck. We thought that everything had been going so well that we should set up a company to help Polish filmmakers shoot outside Poland. I think we've worked on all the major Polish films shot in France over the past 10 years."

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Blicharska was soon given an opportunity to further develop her skills. "I met Margaret Ménégoz from Les Films du Losange, who had produced many *nouvelle vague* films since 1962, when she founded the company with Éric Rohmer and Barbet Schroeder," says Polish producer. "She had always fascinated me, I admired her work, and working with her was a dream come true. I became a unit production manager for Margaret in 2006, even though I had a company in Poland. I spent two years there and it was the best school I've ever had."

Blicharska later went back to Dönten & Lacroix Films own projects, viz. short animations. *Esterhazy* (2009) was shown at the Annecy Film Festival and won the

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Golden Hobby-Horse at the Krakow Film Festival. "The first full-length feature we made as producers, Julia Kowalski's *Crache Coeur*, premiered

in the ACID section at Cannes in 2015, and was given positive reception. It was such a great experience."

In the same year, Blicharska founded Blick Productions, a French production company based in Paris. She is currently working on Polish projects, like the upcoming feature *Kantor: I Shall Never Return* (a bio-pic about the legendary Polish theatre director), some of which was shot in Paris. "We hired 150 people and closed off half of Paris. The French Film Commission must have been impressed, because they later had us included in a delegation of French filmmakers going to Hollywood," she says.

Blicharska's next project, however, is not going to be a big-budget studio film. She is developing a "hybrid of animated and live-action film about the deportation of Polish Jews to Siberia. The people who survived this are still alive and can share their stories," she says.