

Early Jerzy Skolimowski

Risk, Restlessness, Censorship, Surrealism

by David Sterritt

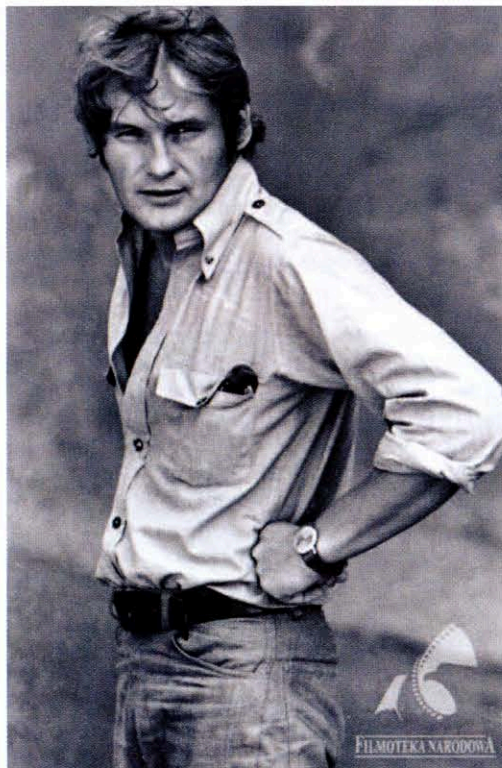
Jerzy Skolimowski has been a restless filmmaker from the beginning. His appetite for brisk activity became evident early when he bypassed the apprenticeship required for aspiring Polish directors, making his first feature, *Identification Marks: None* (1965), out of episodes he shot for his film school classes, planning them in advance and splicing them into an offbeat but coherent whole; he also played the main character, not because of self-regard for his acting expertise but because he required an actor who'd be available whenever needed over several years of stop-and-start shooting. His relationship with genres is similarly unconventional, favoring stories and structures that evade ready-made labels. And he has moved with ease among countries and cultures, from his native Poland to Belgium (*Le départ*, 1967), the United Kingdom (*The Shout*, 1978; *Moonlighting*, 1982), the United States (*The Lightship*, 1985), and elsewhere. Some of his internationalism has been prompted by external pressures, including the oppressive censorship imposed by Polish authorities in his early career, and some has resulted from his personal predilections. Whatever the reasons for this or that change of cinematic venue, the result has been a gratifyingly cosmopolitan body of work, and a varied career that goes far beyond cinema. He became a prizefighter in his teens; he was a jazz drummer and a published author, poet, and playwright in his twenties; and he has been an active painter for decades.

Showing no signs of slowing down, Skolimowski celebrated his mid-eighties by making what may be his most beloved film to date, *EO*, which takes its onomatopoeic title from the braying of its protagonist, a donkey whom cinephiles recognize as an indirect incarnation of the saintly hero of Robert Bresson's sublime *Au hasard Balzac* (1966). (See "Far from the Noisy Crowd: An Interview with Jerzy Skolimowski," *Cineaste*, Spring 2023) *EO* has reinvigorated Skolimowski's celebrity, and two home-video companies are riding the wave with new editions of several early works. A three-disc Blu-ray set from Second Run DVD contains *Walkover* (1965), *Barrier* (1966), and the anthology film *Dialogue 20 40 60*, comprising segments by

Skolimowski and the Czechoslovak filmmakers Peter Solan and Zbyněk Brynych; and a two-disc Blu-ray set from the British Film Institute (BFI) contains *Identification Marks: None* and *Hands Up!* (1967/1981) plus four Skolimowski shorts made in 1960 and 1961. Both releases are replete with audio commentaries, essays, and other extras, offering splendid resources for a deeper understanding of the filmmaker's early efforts. As critic Michael Brooke says in a BFI video essay called *The Boxing Ichthyologist*,

Long before he had matured into *Deep End*, *Moonlighting*, and *EO*, the Polish filmmaker had made a series of challenging works, now released on Blu-ray, which offer insight into his life, artistic influences, and social criticism.

at twenty Skolimowski had no discernable interest in film, but at thirty he had made almost half a dozen features and was on the way to being seen as a New Wave unto himself. In her thorough and aptly titled book *Jerzy Skolimowski: The Cinema of a Nonconformist*



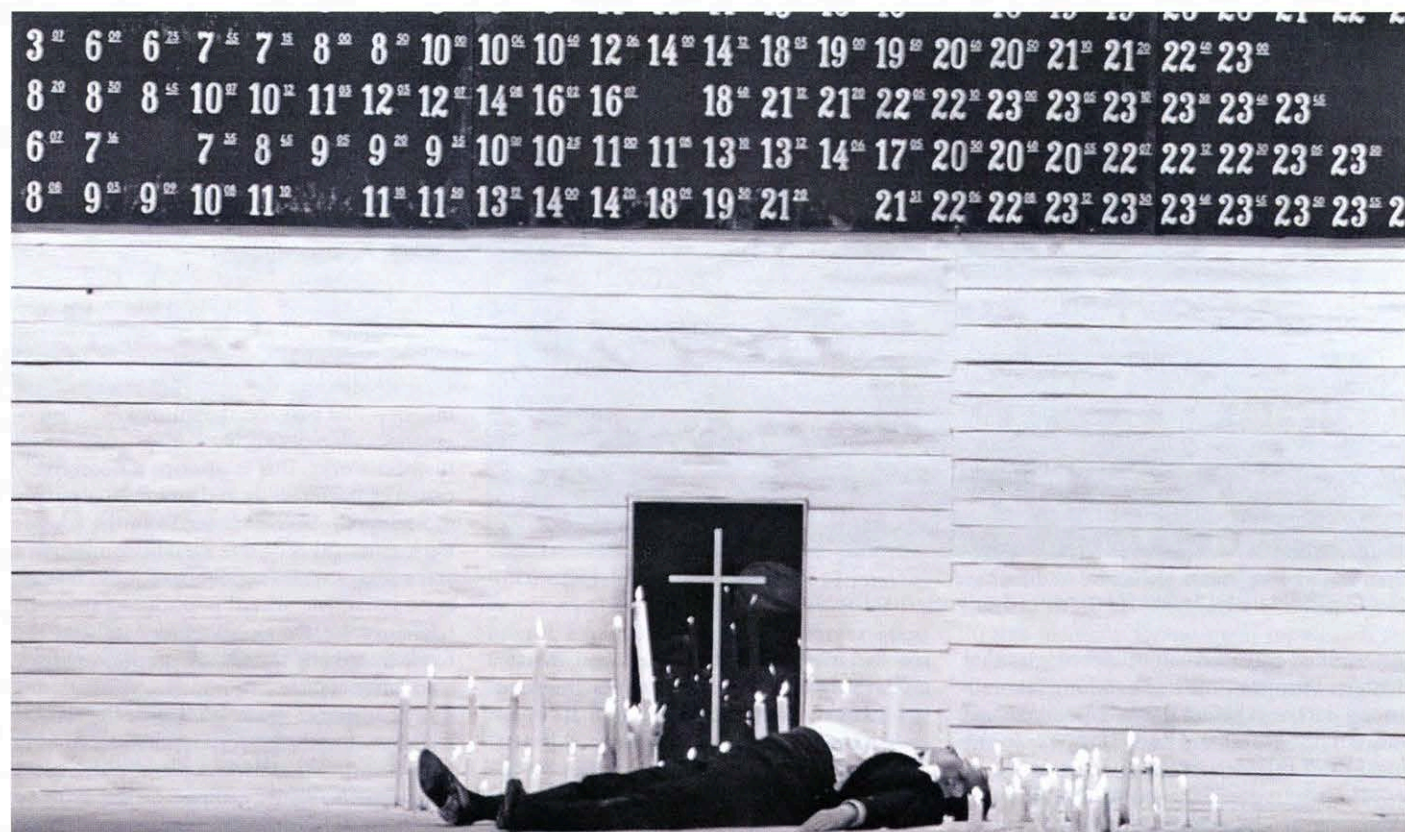
By the age of thirty, Jerzy Skolimowski was being hailed as a New Wave unto himself.

(Berghahn Books, 2010), film scholar Ewa Mazierska writes that he was hailed in the mid-Sixties as "the voice of his generation" for moviegoers in Poland and beyond.

Although only a few of Skolimowski's movies have clearly autobiographical elements, their themes and subtexts echo some of the drama that coursed through his life, starting with his childhood in the Polish cities of Łódź and Warsaw, where he was once buried in wreckage when a German bomb destroyed his family's house. His father served in the anti-Nazi resistance and died in a concentration camp; after World War II his politically active mother worked as a cultural attaché in Czechoslovakia, where Skolimowski

attended prep school. There the future filmmakers Miloš Forman and Ivan Passer were among his friends, and, according to *The Boxing Ichthyologist*, he and the future playwright and Czech president Václav Havel shared a desk. When he was expelled for unruliness, he returned to Poland, failed his art-school entrance exam, took up ethnography instead, and spent his spare time boxing, drumming, and composing verses.

The pivotal year of 1959 brought an opportune meeting between Skolimowski and Andrzej Wajda, whose war-film trilogy—*A Generation* (1955), *Kanal* (1957), and *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958)—had appeared during the (short-lived) political thaw under Władysław Gomułka's new regime, shifting Polish cinema away from Soviet-style socialist realism. Wajda showed Skolimowski a screenplay he and Jerzy Andrzejewski were preparing on the topic of young people. Speaking as a young person, Skolimowski informed him that the screenplay's notion of youth culture was ridiculous. Wajda asked if he could do better, and Skolimowski met the challenge, dashing off the screenplay that became the basis for Wajda's *Innocent Sorcerers* (1960), a breezy ensemble picture involving a physician, a drummer, and a boxer played by Skolimowski in his first screen appearance. Another small role was played by Roman Polanski, who soon invited Skolimowski to collaborate with him and Jakub Goldberg on the screenplay for *Knife in the Water* (1962), the debut feature that launched Polanski's career and gave Skolimowski an impressive credit.



As a student at the Polish Film School in Łódź, Jerzy Skolimowski used film allotted to him for what were supposed to be class exercises to shoot scenes he eventually combined to create his debut feature, *Identification Marks: None*.

By then Skolimowski had enrolled in the National Film School in Łódź, having decided that filmmaking was "easier" than playing drums and writing poems, which he wasn't very good at anyway, as he confesses in a 1983 audio interview on one of the BFI discs. He stayed there until the mid-Sixties, shooting the exercises that fed into *Identification Marks: None* and completing several shorts. Although none of the shorts in the Second Run set match Polanski's remarkably accomplished *Two Men and a Wardrobe* (1958) and *The Fat and the Lean* (1961), they're worth watching for their slender intimations of a talent that's real but still mostly latent. *The Menacing Eye* (1960) is a trifling skit about a circus knife-thrower and the woman on the receiving end. *Little Hamlet* (1960) has a bit more to it, using broad performances and a comic song to poke fun at a few targets that William Shakespeare might recognize (a skull, a soldier) and satirizing Ophelia's fate by putting her in a bathtub. The circus atmosphere resurfaces in *Your Money or Your Life* (1961), a playful take on the serious subjects of postwar militarism and European anti-semitism, and a surrealistic attitude prevails in *Erotyk* (1961), a "film joke" about a menacing lecher, a pretty woman, a shaggy dog, and a balloon. These are clearly novice efforts, although David Thompson's essay for the Second Run collection quotes film-school professor Andrzej Munk lauding *The Menacing Eye*, saying it was "very difficult to invent a one-minute film in a better way."

That's not how I see it, but Skolimowski was already working on the vastly more substantial *Identification Marks: None*, his first feature. It's also the first where he stars as Andrzej Leszczyc, an alter ego who returns in *Walkover* and *Hands Up!* and probably in *Barrier*, where the protagonist is never named and played by another actor (Jan Nowicki) because the producers demanded a real professional in the lead. Although convenience and cost were Skolimowski's main reasons for casting himself in *Identification Marks: None*, the film can also be seen as slightly veiled self-portrait; its Polish title is *Rysopis*, and according to Mazierska's program essay for the BFI box set, that literally translates as "full description of a person," exactly the opposite of the title stuck on the film in English-language territories. It's also the opposite of Skolimowski's aim, which is to evoke the protagonist's entire personality over the course of an ordinary day. Like the filmmaker at that time, Leszczyc has identification marks that are invisible but nonetheless detectable—he's mildly rootless and rebellious, as Mazierska notes, yet grounded enough to have a good shot at a productive future. Still and all, the English-language title isn't altogether inappropriate. Leszczyc is somewhat sketchy and hard to fathom, and while this makes the film itself somewhat sketchy and hard to fathom, it allows the character to evolve in movies to come, as when he morphs from "a disoriented and polite young man" here to "a more assertive, even arrogant man" in *Barrier*.

Mazierska insightfully connects Leszczyc's hazily defined nature with the time when these films were made, the period of "small stabilization" between the harshness of Stalinism and the misery of war, both mercifully over, and the political and economic crises of the later Sixties, sneakily lurking in the wings. The strictures of socialist realism and the neorealist leanings of Polish auteurs like Wajda, Munk, Wojciech Has, and Jerzy Kawalerowicz could now move aside for the freewheeling, improvisatory individualism that Skolimowski pioneered in his early features and would retain in his best films of later years. This approach was firmly rooted in his creative personality—he usually works "without solid preparation, relying on intuition and risk," he said in a 2010 interview—and also in his cleverness at eluding censorship, which remained burdensome under Gomułka's reign. With its disjointed narrative, hazy ideology, and murky sense of place, *Identification Marks: None* was a daring achievement for him and a paradigm-changing moment in Polish cinema. Yet those very qualities raise the question of whether Skolimowski's meandering style was completely a matter of choice, or a sign that crafting persuasive linear narratives wasn't quite within his skill set, a suspicion that some of his Seventies and Eighties work would reinforce.

Identification Marks: None takes place on the very significant date of September 1, the anniversary of the German invasion that pulled Poland into World War II—a milestone that Skolimowski references and then largely ignores, sloughing off the historically



Sporting a conspicuous black eye, Andrzej Leszczyc (Jerzy Skolimowski) chats with old friend Teresa (Aleksandra Zawieruszczyńska) in *Walkover*.

determined situations and psychologies that Eastern European movies had long favored. In the darkness before dawn, Leszczyc hauls himself out of bed and makes his way to the local draft board, where he and a gaggle of rambunctious guys have been called for processing. After he answers a few questions—age: twenty-four; marital status: single; identification marks: none—the officials reprimand him for having skipped a required training session, an offense that counts as desertion. Since he's in good health and has terminated his studies (he was an ichthyology major, of all things), he can now be conscripted for a full two years. Which is fine with him, he tells the surprised administrators, explaining that he doesn't really like ichthyology, can't get into art school, and might as well get started on the grownup part of life. He's ordered to report for duty at the end of the day.

Like most of the other scenes, the draft board episode unfolds in a single take, and the camera stays on the draft panel with no reaction shots of Leszczyc, conveying the passive-aggressive detachment of the outwardly cooperative young man. By contrast, his walk back home, on a road bordering an enormous urban scrapyard, is shot from high above, juxtaposing his swiftly strolling figure with a bleakly monotonous industrial environment. In the next few hours, he goes through a series of mundane activities, filmed in long takes with varying camera positions and movements. Sometimes he's accompanied by Teresa, who's his wife or maybe his girlfriend; she and two other women in the film are played by Elżbieta Czyżewska, then Skolimowski's wife. On his own he goes shopping, eavesdrops on neighbors, has a veterinarian euthanize his ailing dog, almost witnesses a traffic accident, tries to get hold of his school records—here the camera angle mocks obtuse bureaucracy, hiding almost everything we or Leszczyc might want to see—chats with a fortune teller, phones his mother, fights with a

crooked friend named Mundek, declaims to a sidewalk radio interviewer, meets an attractive woman named Barbara on a streetcar, and so on. He seems quite interested in Barbara, but it's time for him to jump on the train for military service, so that's the end of the possible romance and of the movie.

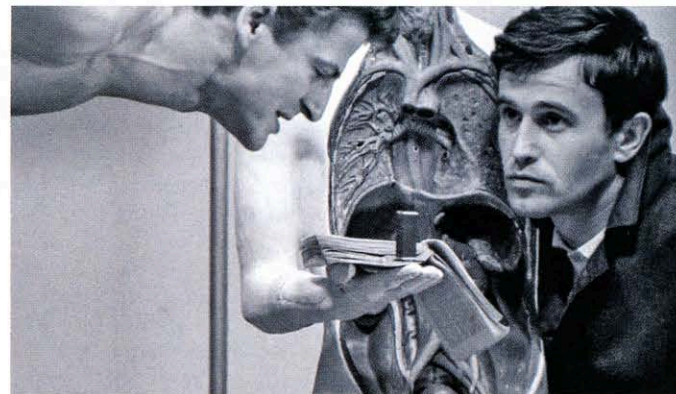
Every one of these events and encounters would be perfectly at home in a picture from the French New Wave, which was having its first great flowering when Skolimowski made his early films; he claimed he didn't see any New Wave pictures until his first few features were completed, but he too had a gift for finding humanistic meaning in prosaic activities. There's also a close kinship with the documentary-like realism cultivated by Forman and Passer in the Sixties, as critic and historian Michał Oleszczyk observes in his excellent audio commentary for *Identification Marks: None*, although Skolimowski brings more assertive camerawork to bear on his ostensibly commonplace material.

Oleszczyk cites an assortment of later intertexts as well, comparing the opening sequences to David Lynch's *Wild at Heart* (1990), which also begins with the striking of a match, and Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958), with its outsized shadows in the street. Like every work of art, *Identification Marks: None* accrues new connotations with the passage of time, and today its indications of economic inequality have relevance far beyond the period-specific symptoms of scarcity and anxiety—the undersupply of telephones, the coexistence of fancy apartments and run-down tenements, the recurring chatter about money—that pervade Skolimowski's vision of Poland's allegedly egalitarian society. Like all his best works, this is at once a deceptively casual character study and an informal survey of sociopolitical fault lines. Even the soundtrack reflects this double agenda, combining a jazzy idiom with fragments of radio broadcasts and a twice-heard pop song of the period, "Eurydice, Do Not Wait for Me." Like the film's images, its sounds are specific and free-associative at once.

Skolimowski made *Walkover*, the second installment in the Leszczyc cycle, immediately after *Identification Marks: None*, although it was released slightly earlier. The last time we saw Leszczyc in the 1965 film he was leaving for military service with Barbara gazing wistfully at his departing train; the first time we see him in *Walkover* he's arriving on a train at the same station, but there's no sign he's been in the military. Just as his train pulls in, a young woman dives onto the tracks, abruptly and mysteriously committing suicide. She looks like Barbara, but since Czyżewska played three different characters in *Identification Marks: None*, this woman could be any one of them, or perhaps someone else altogether. In any case, the death goes virtually unnoticed by Leszczyc, who's already chatting with another woman—an old acquaintance, again named Teresa—about a possible job at a factory where she's an up-and-coming manager.



A prizefighter as well as a filmmaker, Skolimowski cast himself as the boxer protagonist of *Walkover*. (all photos from the film courtesy of Second Run DVD)



Can a medical student lean off a table far enough to seize a matchbox with his teeth? That's the game that begins Skolimowski's *Barrier*.



The restaurant scene in *Barrier* has been deemed the most extensive set piece in any Skolimowski film. (both photos courtesy of the BFI)

Walkover was Skolimowski's first regular commercial production, but hallmarks of *Identification Marks: None* are still in evidence, if for different reasons. Now the long, mobile takes are matters of choice, not results of film-school economy. (Skolimowski wanted to avoid editing, Thompson writes, since he'd skipped most of those classes at film school.) And now the director plays the main role, a boxer, not because of availability but because he has the prizefighter physique and specialized skills required by the part. As a sort-of-sequel to the earlier film, *Walkover* also has the poetic imprecision that was becoming a Skolimowski trademark: the suicidal woman is never identified; it's not clear whether Leszczyc ever did military service; and ichthyology doesn't get a mention. Leszczyc, on the other hand, seems somewhat more goal-oriented than before, perhaps because he's approaching his thirtieth birthday. He interviews for the factory job suggested by Teresa, and romance with her looks likely even though their past relationship was extremely fraught: as an erstwhile convent girl and strict Stalinist, she killed off his engineering studies by denouncing him as a political nonconformist. Since then, he's been picking up cash as an itinerant boxer and peddling the watches and radios he's won as prizes. Boxing interests him far more than the factory, and the story culminates when he fraudulently accepts an amateur bout despite his experienced status. The opponent doesn't show up, so he wins in a "walkover" then gets decked by the errant slugger who finally arrives after everyone's gone home.

In a video introduction, Oleszczyk calls *Walkover* a great boxing movie, on a par with Robert Rossen's *Body and Soul* (1947) and Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull* (1980). The filmmaker wouldn't agree; the long-take prizefighting scenes certainly pack a wallop, but according to Brooke's audio commentary, Skolimowski didn't like them because he had to pull his punches (literally) to accommodate the relatively unskilled actor in the ring with him. Pugilism aside, the film etches a convincingly detailed portrait of the urban scene, presenting a microcosm of

postwar rebuilding and vividly contrasting Teresa, a skillful operator on her way to establishment success, with Leszczyc, who's uncomfortable with the compromises she handles so easily; as Oleszczyk observes, his boxing exploits symbolize the larger question of whether it's wiser to confront sociopolitical enemies—authoritarianism, bourgeois corruption, equivocal ethics—or decide you can't win and walk away from the fight. The film takes this metaphor to an emotionally complex and admirably unsentimental conclusion.

By the time of *Barrier* in 1966, Skolimowski had seen and admired films from the French New Wave, received Jean-Luc Godard's high praise for his first two features, and returned the favor by extolling *Pierrot le fou* (1965). He also acknowledged Federico Fellini's *8½* (1963) as an influence on his stylized decors and quirky narrative strategies; in *Barrier* the unnamed protagonist woos an attractive streetcar driver (Joanna Szczepkiewicz), then disappears from the action for a spell, leaving the streetcar driver to search for him. *Barrier* also displays a rising fondness for surrealism, and Thompson reports that scenes were often devised the day before they were shot. The starting point for the speedily improvised scenario was the randomly dreamed-up image of a man zooming down a ski jump on a suitcase, which happens for no particular reason in the narrative; at other times, the protagonist scales a wall festooned with animal corpses, joins a mob running to nowhere down a foggy street, and places a candle at the feet of a violin-playing priest.

Yet, while the film has novel elements, it continues along the lines of Skolimowski's previous features. The protagonist is either Leszczyc or a Leszczyc doppelgänger, and the action takes place over a limited time span, in this case an Easter weekend. And jazz is again a key component of the soundtrack, here composed by Krzysztof Komeda, who scored two more Skolimowski pictures (as well as films by Wajda, Polanski, and others) before suffering the 1968 accident that killed him at age thirty-seven.

The surrealism of *Barrier* gets going in the first moments, which are as odd as anything from this stage of Skolimowski's career. A kneeling man, hands bound behind his back with an electrical cord, strains his body forward and topples off an unseen surface. The same happens with several additional men until the camera pulls back to reveal what's going on: it's a game; the goal is to lean off a table and grab a box of matches with your teeth; the prize is a piggy bank full of small change. Some of the men say they'll share the loot if they win, while others say they're playing for themselves alone, reflecting the movie's vision of a society that's unified in some respects, divided against itself in others. The men are medical students, but the protagonist doesn't intend to continue his studies because he wants to enjoy life right away, not wait his turn for society's limited trough of goodies, the way the country's old fogies have done. Generation gaps loom large in the film, which refers sardonically to bygone times, as when a new acquaintance presents the protagonist with a saber, a highly charged symbol of traditional Polish aristocracy. The story also evokes religion via its Easter-season setting, Christian iconography, and recurring "Hallelujah" hymn. One of its most striking images is a huge poster asking citizens to donate blood, a substance central to both medicine and Christianity, and the face on the poster belongs to the filmmaker himself. Inserting religious angles was an edgy move by Skolimowski, since Poland was officially atheistic in the Soviet era, as Oleszczyk notes in a video.

Skolimowski the social critic is more prominent than ever in *Barrier*, most pointedly in a twenty-one-minute restaurant scene—identified by Brooke as the most extensive set piece in any Skolimowski film—that foregrounds the influence of another artistic field, experimental theater, on his mise en scène. The dining room is sterile; the headwaiter is weird; a patron is peddling magazines; the protagonist breaks the piggy bank open with his saber; the place fills up; everyone puts on funny newspaper hats. And the music grows ever more mercurial. Komeda's tunes take on a Nino Rota flavor as the goings-on get more



Surrealism and experimental theater inspire the bizarre freight-car scene in *Hands Up!* (both photos from the film courtesy of Second Run DVD)

and more chaotic, then a contrasting mood descends when a chorus of war veterans sings an anthem, prompting the protagonist's girlfriend (also unnamed) to lament the aimlessness of her youthful peers by remarking, "They have their songs. What are ours?" The most bravura musical passage comes when a cleaning woman croons a song with lyrics adapted from a Skolimowski poem: "After bad days, or after something like youth or love...with a hand on his throat he wants to make up for lost opportunities...He wants to be again God knows whom...God knows where...." The woman is played by Maria Malicka, but her voice is dubbed by Ewa Demarczyk, an illustrious singer of the day, and the character's dignity and strength visibly swell as the song proceeds. Obliquely lamenting a "broken society," in Oleszczyk's words, the song's lyrics suggest that the "barrier" of the film's title is the gamut of obstacles, some sociopolitical, some personal, that block off the full, valuable lives its characters can't manage to grasp. Their own behaviors bear much of the blame; they themselves devised the crazy matchbox game that set the tone for their story.

Hands Up! has the strangest content and the strangest history of all the films on the BFI's new Skolimowski discs. Leszczyc is back, played by Skolimowski for the last time, and the narrative looks at him and his friends in two time periods: the present, when they've gotten together for the tenth anniversary of their graduation from professional school, and the Stalinist era, when their student days were disrupted by a bizarre event that brought the ire of the authorities down on them. We see the snafu in flashbacks: they've been ordered to paste together an enormous poster of Stalin, but when they raise the mighty image on its poles, it's clear that somebody goofed—the face has two sets of eyes, one above the other. Does this make Stalin look godlike and omniscient? Or just ridiculous and grotesque? And was the error an innocent blunder or a crafty act

of subversion? For the official investigators, the foul-up was deliberate and unacceptable, and most of the onus falls on Leszczyc, who ends up a veterinarian instead of a physician like the others. The friends reminisce about this and other things at their reunion, during which a few of them leave the gala celebration and enter a nearby freight train car for more intimate conversation. They prove to be a materialistic bunch, nicknaming themselves by the cars they drive (poor Leszczyc has the cheapest) and taking more interest in the comfort of consumer goods than the altruism of medical care. They are highly effective vehicles for Skolimowski's ongoing analysis of contemporary Polish society.

The extended freight-car scene goes even further than the restaurant episode in *Barrier* with an aesthetic steeped in absurdist theater; in another first-rate audio commentary, Oleszczyk links it with such radical stage-to-film adaptations as *The Brig* (Jonas Mekas, 1964), *Dionysus in '69* (Brian De Palma, Robert Fiore, and Bruce Rubin, 1970), and *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as*

Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade (aka *Marat/Sade*, Peter Brook, 1967), all products of a politically engaged Sixties avant-garde to which Skolimowski felt increasingly akin. The railroad car's floor is covered with plaster, which coats the characters' bodies as they dance, cavort, argue, hold a mock funeral, swallow capsules containing either speed or a placebo, and recall the disaster of the Stalin poster and the hostile interrogation that followed. Eventually it occurs to them that their freight car might have transported victims to a concentration camp not so long ago; their response to this is a squabble over how many bodies the car would have held, which is a trivial and vain debate, since the space has magically expanded and contracted during the dreamlike episode. In the end, they break out through the floor, wash off the plaster under a railway waterspout, and wander away through a field full of freshly manufactured cars. Industrialism wins again. Its heavy surrealism notwithstanding, *Hands Up!* is a timely meditation on the unhappy past and discontented present of a society largely blind to its chronic imperfections.

Perhaps predictably, Polish censors did not take kindly to this theme, decreeing that the film would not be released unless the four-eyed Stalin bits were deleted. Skolimowski refused, declaring that he would not work in Poland again until *Hands Up!* was shown on Polish screens. He kept that promise, working in other countries until 1981, when reforms instigated by the Solidarity movement freed the 1967 picture, to which Skolimowski added a new prologue running about twenty-five minutes. The prologue does little to clarify the wildly eccentric action of the original film, and in an audio interview on the BFI disc Skolimowski concedes that "nobody liked it" because it was so dark and negative. But it contains some of the most kinetic editing he ever created, building a fragmented, collage-like assemblage (recalling the Seventies films of Dušan Makavejev, a like-minded provoca-



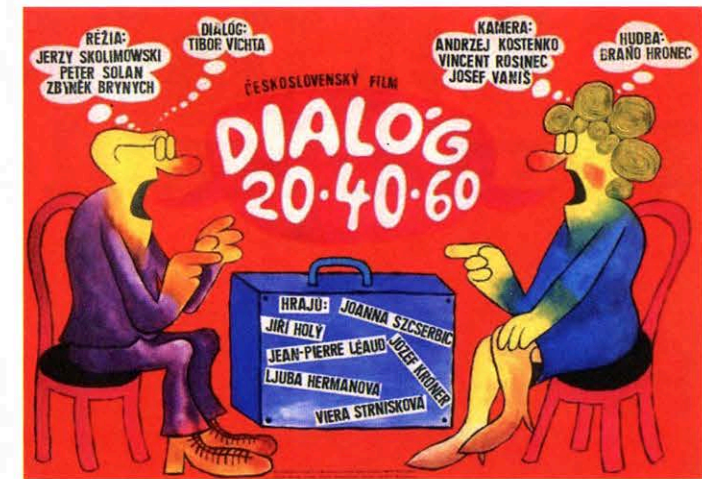
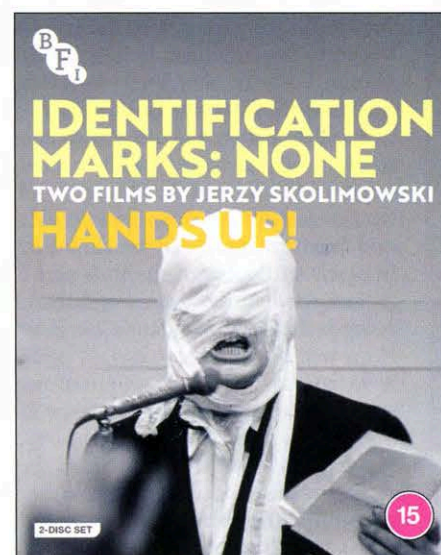
By chance or design, the students in *Hands Up!* bungle the construction of a Stalin poster. Skolimowski's refusal to cut the scene resulted in the film being banned in Poland until 1981.



Jean-Pierre Léaud, dubbed in Czech, plays a pop singer with problems in Skolimowski's episode of the anthology film *Dialogue 20 40 60*.

teur) that leaps between fictional and documentary modes. There are also brief cameos by Jane Asher and Alan Bates, who had acted in Skolimowski films by this time, and self-reflexive sequences where Skolimowski discusses his paintings with Fred Zinnemann and plays a character in Volker Schlöndorff's *Circle of Deceit* (1981), a politically urgent drama viewing the Lebanese Civil War through the eyes of a journalist. Taken as a whole, the final version of *Hands Up!* stands with the most audacious and perplexing movies ever to emerge in Eastern European cinema.

Skolimowski's international phase commenced with *Le départ*, a Belgian comedy made in French, a language Skolimowski barely understood. Jean-Pierre Léaud plays an assistant hairdresser with a passion for cars; strongly influenced by Buster Keaton and the French New Wave, it won the Berlin Film Festival's top prize. Next came the final movie in the Second Run DVD box set, the Czechoslovak portmanteau film *Dialogue 20 40 60*, which uses identical dialogue in three different stories with protagonists from three different generations. Still something of a youth special-



Still considered a "young person" specialist in 1968, Skolimowski directed the "20" segment of *Dialogue 20 40 60*.

ist, Skolimowski tackled the "20" chapter, a frenetic comedy with Léaud (dubbed in Czech) as a popstar and Szczerbic as his scrappy wife. None of the segments is particularly memorable. Nor is Skolimowski's next feature, *The Adventures of Gerard* (1970), a British-Swiss dramedy of which the director has spoken disparagingly to me and many others; or *King, Queen, Knave* (1972), a Vladimir Nabokov adaptation shot in West Germany and England; or *Success Is the Best Revenge* (1984), about a Polish theater director (Michael York) exiled to England; or the Europudding production *Torrents of Spring* (1989), a romantic tale with lovely camerawork; or *30 Door Key*, the discombobulated opus he filmed back in Poland in 1991.

These disappointments aside, however, the Seventies and Eighties brought several pictures that rank with Skolimowski's most brilliant. The first to arrive was *Deep End* (1970), a British-West German production about a teenage boy working in a London bathhouse where sexual vibes and high emotions run rampant; the film's color scheme is optically stunning and symbolically rich, and Skolimowski does dazzling things with the motif of a location being reworked and modified before our eyes. Oleszczyk repeatedly names this as Skolimowski's finest masterpiece, but for me that honor goes to *The Shout*, adapted from a Robert Graves short story. It centers on a traveler (Bates) who has spent years in the Australian Outback, where he learned the "terror shout," an outcry that kills any living creature within earshot. Armed with this interesting weapon, he returns to England and barges into the life of an avant-garde musician (John Hurt) and his wife (Susannah York), with consequences shown in flashbacks during a cricket match at a mental institution. Among its other virtues, the film has montages of unsurpassed energy and complexity. More recent Skolimowski films include dramas about foreigners abroad (*Moonlighting*, *The Lightship*), the eerie and inventive *Four Nights with Anna* (2008), the action-oriented *Essential Killing* (2010), and *11 Minutes* (2015), and the endearing *EO*.

Above I raised the question of whether the prevalence of hazy, improvisatory, and digressive elements in Skolimowski's early films can always be taken as signs of an ornery and audacious talent or might rather be marks of uncertainty and hesitancy in an artistic sensibility not yet fully formed. My own diagnosis is mixed. *Identification Marks: None*, *Walkover*, *Barrier*, and *Hands Up!* are often fascinating, especially when virtuoso sequence shots are deployed to "sculpt with time," in Andrei Tarkovsky's phrase; but I find their narratives more amorphous and their characters less clearly drawn than in the superb later films—*The Shout*, *Deep End*, *Four Nights with Anna*, *EO*—made when Skolimowski's artistry had matured. It's thrilling that his formative films are now available for intensive viewing, and they're mandatory for anyone wanting a deep understanding of his work. My advice is to see them, study them, feast on the extras and essays, and then move on to the later gems that are the true foundations of his deserved position in the pantheon. ■

"Two Films by Jerzy Skolimowski" is a two-disc British Film Institute Region B Blu-ray box set, www.bfi.org.uk. "Jerzy Skolimowski" is a three-disc Second Run DVD All-Region Blu-ray box set, www.secondrundvd.com.

Jerzy Skolimowski:
Walkover (Walkover)
Barrier (Bariera)
Dialogue 20 40 60 (Dialog 20-40-60)
+ short films

