

Gaslit Nation Transcript

15 July 2020

“Silence Is Poison: Agnieszka Holland, James Norton and Peter Sarsgaard on Mr. Jones”

[begin film trailer for Mr. Jones]

Paul:

Hello.

Mr. Jones:

Paul, I need your help arranging an interview with Stalin.

Paul:

Go to Walter Duranty at the New York Times.

Speaker 4:

Listen, I really need to talk to you, I’ve found something big. You can crack the story wide open.

Walter Duranty:

Mr. Jones.

Mr. Jones:

Mr. Duranty.

Walter Duranty:

Why are you really here?

Mr. Jones:

I need your help.

Walter Duranty:

This is Ada Brooks, she’s my star.

Ada Brooks:

What do you want?

Mr. Jones:

The story no one is talking about.

Ada Brooks:
Ukraine.

Paul:
Stalin's called.

Speaker 7:
You will retract your statements to the press immediately.

Paul:
Or they will shoot our engineers?

Walter Duranty:
You actually thought you could interview Stalin and make some kind of difference, didn't you?

Ada Brooks:
I guess the agenda now—

Mr. Jones:
I don't have an agenda, unless you call truth an agenda.

[end film trailer for Mr Jones]

Sarah Kendzior:
I'm Sarah Kendzior, the author of the bestselling books *The View From Flyover Country* and *Hiding In Plain Site*.

Andrea Chalupa:
I'm Andrea Chalupa, a filmmaker and journalist and the writer and producer of the journalistic thriller, *Mr. Jones*, which is available now wherever you stream your films like Amazon, iTunes. Check your local listing.

Andrea Chalupa:
In today's episode, we are going to be playing interviews with Agnieszka Holland, the director of *Mr. Jones*, James Norton, the star of *Mr. Jones* who plays Gareth Jones, who was inspired by the real life Welsh journalist who risked his life and career to expose Stalin's genocide famine which killed millions of people—the vast majority Ukrainian—and this genocide was covered up actively with the help of Walter Duranty, the Moscow bureau chief for *The New York Times*, a social ring leader for the literati of that

age who would flock to Moscow looking at Stalin's great worker's utopia. Walter Duranty is played by Peter Sarsgaard, who we will also be hearing from in this episode.

Andrea Chalupa:

Now, I want to share that these interviews were recorded when we were all together at the Berlin Film Festival in 2019 launching the film for the first time. Agnieszka Holland, the director, as soon as she finished her cut—her director's cut—as soon as it was done, she said, "Get this out there right now."

Andrea Chalupa:

It was like she was hitting send on a tweet. She had a lot to say. She had a lot to say with this film and she wasn't going to wait to say it. So the first film festival that accepted it was right around the corner and that was the Berlinale, the Berlin film festival. So we all went there. But ironically, the film wasn't actually scheduled to hit theaters until the very end of the year, so it enjoyed a very long film festival time, going to film festivals in Turkey, Israel, across Europe, South Korea, and other places.

Andrea Chalupa:

I'm so grateful for that now, looking back, because of the pandemic. So, thank you to Agnieszka Holland for your passion and having so much to say with this film and fighting so hard all these years and making it to get out into the world and for having that foresight to get it out as soon as possible because of that urgency you had to say what needed to be said.

Andrea Chalupa:

These interviews were recorded right after the big, sweeping blue wave elections in the US, so you may hear a bit of reference to that. I'm just excited to finally share this with you, and I want to say a special shout out to my co host Sarah Kendzior. I called Sarah from the set of Mr. Jones basically saying, "I don't want to come back to the US. Everything's on fire. Let's finally start that damn podcast we've been talking about for forever."

Andrea Chalupa:

So, as a coping mechanism for returning to the US after filming for many months in Europe, in Ukraine, Poland, and Scotland, I flew back to the New York City from Poland and a week later, I flew to St. Louis and recorded the very first episodes of Gaslit Nation in Sarah's dining room. We have Mr. Jones in some ways to thank for Gaslit Nation.

Sarah Kendzior:

Yep, and that was two years ago, basically, today, so happy anniversary, Gaslit Nation. Things have only gone uphill for the world since that fateful time and we hope that you enjoy these interviews.

Andrea Chalupa:

Great. We're going to start by launching a clip from the film. Here we have an act three clip where Gareth Jones has just returned from his illegal tour of Ukraine. He has slipped inside. He eluded his Soviet sensor and he witnesses ghost village after ghost village in Ukraine as though all the people have been abducted. He's just been brought back by the Soviet Secret Police and he's now in the heart, the belly of the beast, in Moscow where he runs into Walter Duranty, who is there for an emergency press conference for reasons you'll see in the film. This is a face off between Gareth Jones versus Walter Duranty, which is a larger conversation about the role of the journalist today.

Walter Duranty:

Mr. Jones. I'll have you know I convinced them to let you go. You don't deserve to be in a prison for your bravery.

Gareth Jones:

You knew, Mr. Duranty.

Walter Duranty:

Knew what?

Gareth Jones:

How much is Stalin paying you? What's keeping you here lying for them?

Walter Duranty:

You wouldn't know the first thing about how difficult it is to report from Moscow today, would you? Of course not. You're just a child.

Gareth Jones:

It is not the job of a journalist to say, "How dare you, sir?"

Walter Duranty:

You actually thought you could interview Stalin and make some kind of difference, didn't you?

Gareth Jones:

A souvenir from my trip. Tree bark. It's all the people have left to it.

Walter Duranty:

All right. [Russian 00:06:32, struggle] My dear Mr. Jones, there comes a time in every man's life when he must choose a cause greater than himself, than all his miserable little ambitions put together. Perhaps someday you will. It's a shame. You would've made a fine journalist.

Andrea Chalupa:

Agnieszka Holland is one of Poland's most eminent filmmakers and a leading political voice in Poland for human rights. Often facing off with the country's Trump-like government that openly attacks LGBTQ people and other marginalized groups. Her mother participated in the 1944 Warsaw uprising against the Nazis and aided several Jewish people during the Holocaust, receiving the Righteous Among The Nations medal from the Yad Vashem Institute in Israel.

Andrea Chalupa:

Holland grew up in Soviet-occupied Poland. Her parents were journalists that faced pressure from the regime. Her father's official cause of death was suicide, while under police interrogation. As a film student in Prague in 1968, Holland protested the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in a pro-democracy movement known as the Prague Spring. She was arrested and imprisoned for her activism. She would

later make an award winning HBO miniseries inspired by this time called Burning Bush, about Jan Palach, the young Czech student who set himself on fire to protest the normalization of Soviet brutality.

Andrea Chalupa:

Holland has made dozens of films, including the Oscar nominated Europa Europa, the true story of a Jewish boy who hid in Hitler's Youth to survive. The Oscar nominated In Darkness, the true story of a sewage inspector who hid Jewish people in the sewers of a Polish city during the Holocaust and the childhood classic The Secret Garden. She has directed hit TV series like The Wire and House of Cards.

Andrea Chalupa:

Agnieszka.

Agnieszka Holland:

Yes, it's me.

Andrea Chalupa:

You have a heart of gold.

Agnieszka Holland:

I have what?

Andrea Chalupa:

A heart of gold.

Agnieszka Holland:

Heart of gold?

Andrea Chalupa:

Your heart is made of gold.

Agnieszka Holland:

No, I don't believe you. I don't think so. My heart is made from flesh and blood and muscles and it's pumping blood and it doesn't have no feelings.

Andrea Chalupa:

After all these years. No, but you are a purely spirited person or else you would've never taken a chance on me. Just me, an email, and a script. Seeing how you work with everyone, you're so generous. How do you survive so long in an industry, in a world filled with idiots? How do you survive and keep that goodness?

Agnieszka Holland:

Probably I have some good genes, some generous genes because it's true that the world is not very merciful, but sometimes it's nice also. We are meeting some people who are giving you back some kind of kindness or some kind of emotions or some kind of knowledge, some make you wiser or show you the

world in a different perspective than you are seeing it yourself. So, it's not negative. I cannot say that my journey in this profession is negative.

Agnieszka Holland:

I met a lot of great people and mostly the people I was working with, most of them, they've been really very generous and very grateful. The actors also. The actors are wonderful people. So, if I am counting positives and negatives, I think I can find more positives than negatives which probably is not the case in the professions like politics.

Andrea Chalupa:

Definitely not. One thing I want everyone to know is that on two different occasions, people with a lot of money and millions of Euros at stake wanted you to hire a new writer and both times, you said no. The conversation was over. We didn't get that money, but we ended up of course making the film and it was fine. Could you talk about—not to flatter me, of course—but just the pressures, I guess. You have to go through so many gatekeepers to make a film and how do you navigate the pressures of people trying to change it and force you into doing things or else you're not going to get to the next level?

Agnieszka Holland:

I'm probably not interested in doing any film. If I decided to make the film like that, it was because of your script and because of your approach and because the ideas were inside and they inspired me. They made me interested in telling the story. If I was interested in the story only, I could read the books which I'm doing anyway but if I want to tell the story in a way which is personal and inspiring, I hope, for others, I need to believe that I'm doing it honestly and that I'm doing it in a not too conventional way. It means that I'm not following the path which I already cleared, which I already [inaudible 00:12:03].

Agnieszka Holland:

With every next film I'm doing, I know that I don't have so much time to spend the year of my life with something I don't deeply believe in. I have some principles, you know? For example, if you came with the project, I will not have left you on the side of the road. I think that I would never feel well about it. For my well being, well feeling about myself...I'm not a traitor. I don't like to betray people, especially the people who trusted me.

Andrea Chalupa:

In terms of being a woman in this industry—because Gareth Jones got made through women. It was a woman director, woman delegate producer with Klaudia Smieja, and woman sales agents and a woman main investor. That was sort of how we were hacking the system, was going through women. Of course, Dziedzic, our male producer who loves strong women. That's his weakness. What is sort of your advice for being a woman in this industry and generally and navigating a really tough industry?

Agnieszka Holland:

You'll have to be strong, because you have to be perseverant. A woman has double the obstacles the man has and even for men, this industry's not easy. You have to be assertive; it means you have to defend yourself and your beliefs and your ethics. My method is to be myself. Maybe it's not the most efficient method in terms of making big money or big something.

Agnieszka Holland:

I believe that being authentic to myself and following my instincts and following my principles, I'm eliminating some opportunities but I'm not regretting it. I think that it's the creation of the work, the career even, if you want, but life and being yourself is the most important. It's maybe idealistic, but it sounds pragmatic in my case.

Andrea Chalupa:

You are fiercely yourself. You have such a strong voice as a filmmaker, which you use for human rights and one thing I love about everything I've picked up from you over the years is you're intellectually brilliant and you have a philosophical mind and that shows in all of your work. If you weren't a filmmaker, you could've been a journalist. If you weren't a journalist, you could've been in academia, God help you, in philosophy or something like that.

Andrea Chalupa:

But a question about women specifically in the world today: if you look at the US Congress now, the side that is fighting for progressive values seems to be a very strong group of women now, as we saw with the recent midterm election in the US, this historic number of women coming into Congress. But then the far-right in Congress, all men. It's very gender divided. We have this far-right rise across Europe and the US driven by men. How do you see that in the world today? Is it women versus a certain type of man? What is the battle line here?

Agnieszka Holland:

It becomes somehow the war between two values and some very conservative values or authoritarian values are represented by men, mostly white men of older age but not only. Those values of openness and progress and generosity are symbolized or represented by women and the new generation of women as well.

Agnieszka Holland:

The women see the priorities... [inaudible 00:15:51] generalization, [inaudible 00:15:52] of course because you have plenty of women who voted for Trump. But in general, the men are defending their world. Their paternalistic world of power and leadership is endangered. It's endangered also by emancipation of women because emancipated women are not dependent anymore on the men's money and men's desires. They can make their free choice if they have the economic possibility to do it and they have their own ambitions and their own projects, which means that the man is not the master anymore in his household.

Agnieszka Holland:

For the long time already, he's not a master in the working place because with the wild capitalist, brutal capitalism corporational world, the people in the working place are somehow enslaved and they can lose their job anytime, any moment also. The last castle of men was his house and for the long time, even if he was not providing with the food, the women have been playing the traditional roles. Now, more and more women refuse to do it. When they emancipate, the procreation doesn't become their main ambition.

Agnieszka Holland:

If they have children, most of them have children, but they have one child, sometimes two children, they don't have five, six and so on. It's a big demographical change and the population is changing. In Europe,

it will be very visible very soon because in most of countries, even in Catholic countries, you're speaking all the time about the church and anti-abortion laws. Like Poland, procreation is shrinking and the demographic is changing. It's negative for quite a long time. Same in Germany, same in Scandinavia.

Agnieszka Holland:

If you have the countries where it's still pretty high, it's mostly because of immigrants, Muslim immigrants mostly. It makes men very nervous, you know? Their instinct, their natural instinct to preserve the genes is endangered and they can be very violent when fighting to keep their superiority. Women feel that the rights we acquired are fragile. It's why Handmaid's Tale was so popular because it shows that it can happen. It can happen, and Trump's politics show also it can happen and Kaczynski's party in Poland also. It can happen that your rights, which you fought for for hundreds years, can be taken from you. The law can change and suddenly you are not anymore the master of your body or the master of your destiny.

Agnieszka Holland:

It is a big conflict which is a real conflict. It's not only that the bad man imagined something. It is a real conflict of two values and two powers; the power of freedom for women and the power of possession for men. I think personally, I'm sure that if women only was voting in the United States, Trump would have been never elected. If women only will be voting in Poland, Kaczynski's party will be not elected. Don't have majority.

Agnieszka Holland:

I have the idea for Poland—I'm not sure if it will be possible to establish worldwide—to take away the voting rights for men for 10 years. Not forever, you know? Women didn't have the voting rights for thousands of years, so they can have this trial, time of thinking and understanding change for 10 years, maybe 15. We'll see. I'm not sure yet but 10 years is the minimum.

Andrea Chalupa:

Of course. Let them give us a bit of a pause so we can fix things. So, how do you see the similarities right now with what's going on in Poland and what's going on now in the US under Trump?

Agnieszka Holland:

It is pretty similar. Poland is like a small lab and a lot of [inaudible 00:20:16] different countries, small country, never was a power. It means it was maybe in the Middle Ages but not for a long time. It's not an empire. It's not a very influential country. It's a country which had very weak economy, but the economy's growing for the last 30 years and is going very well somehow, but has identity problems and has a lot of complexes and terrible religious influence of the church. Very patriarchal society and the fear of freedom somehow.

Agnieszka Holland:

They claim that they want freedom, but in reality, they're afraid of freedom. So, they are escaping to some ideologies of illusion and independence and they are seeing danger when the danger is not. And they had this megalomaniac feeling that they have to prove they are great. Their greatness is being the biggest victims, so the biggest problems they have with Jews because the Jews have been persecuted more than Poles and that is difficult to accept.

Agnieszka Holland:

But in the same time, being the victims in the same time, they want to be more noble and better and then more important and always right. There is this infantile kind of relation with the weaker and with the past. The past needs to be embellished, the past needs to be changed, to serve their agenda or propaganda needs or well feelings.

Agnieszka Holland:

The similarity also is the big part of the population, they are heirs of slaves. It was serfs, it was peasant slaves but they've been slaves. It is also this guilt and this feeling of inferiority which is included in the society which pretends they've been noblemen but in reality, 90% comes from slaves.

Andrea Chalupa:

Stalin got rid of all the elite.

Agnieszka Holland:

He eliminated a lot of, yes. But not all. He didn't have time to kill all but Stalin and Hitler, they've been pretty solidary in eliminating Polish intellectuals. But most of the population before the war or now is very poorly educated and pretty ignorant and it is like in the US. The people are very easy to manipulate because their knowledge of the world or their knowledge of themselves is very limited.

Agnieszka Holland:

So, when the populist leader comes and offers a nationalistic pride and the illusion of greatness and they find the right enemy, it's very easy to manipulate Americans and very easy to manipulate Poles.

Andrea Chalupa:

Final question. You were born in Soviet occupied Poland. Both of your parents were journalists. Your father's official cause of death was suicide while under police interrogation. You, as a young film student, were arrested in Prague protesting the Soviet occupation—the normalization—and you spent time in prison with horrendous stories from that time in prison. Then just generally growing up in the Soviet Union trying to make your way as somebody who's also Jewish and the anti-Semitism you faced and your family faced, and now you're back in the world today with a president of the United States that studied Hitler to learn how to create propaganda and give those types of speeches and then you have this—as we said, the rise of the far-right—this resurgent Kremlin that is very much bringing back Soviet values, bringing back Stalin.

Andrea Chalupa:

Where do you find the hope? And I know you do have hope because it takes hope to do any sort of anything in the world. So, where do you find your hope just to see the nightmare that you grew up in come back?

Agnieszka Holland:

Women. Women. Women's movements. Women's strength, women who really care about the projects and not about their ego and not about their power. At least I hope so. Forbid the vote for men and give us a time to change the world for better.

Andrea Chalupa:

You had your time, get out of the way and let us fix it.

Agnieszka Holland:

I don't believe in my utopia, but I think that only utopia can save us in those times.

Andrea Chalupa:

Thank you so much, Agnieszka, for everything. Your film is beautiful and you have a gorgeous soul and you're the soul of the film. It's going to be watched 100 years from now. I know that for a fact. I know that. I've been to the future. They love it there.

Agnieszka Holland:

It's our film. Thank you.

Sarah Kendzior:

Next we'll hear from Gareth Jones himself, James Norton. Norton is best known for his starring roles on the hit British television series Happy Valley, Grantchester, and McMafia. He recently played John Brooke in Greta Gerwig's Little Women. Then we'll close it off with a discussion with Peter Sarsgaard, who stars in the next Batman film, The Batman, as district attorney Gil Colson.

Sarah Kendzior:

Sarsgaard played Bobby Kennedy in the film Jackie and editor Chuck Lane in Shattered Glass. In Mr. Jones, he stars as Walter Duranty, the New York Times Moscow Bureau chief who actively helped Stalin's regime cover up the mass murder of millions in the manmade genocide famine known as the Holodomor—"death by hunger". Duranty won the Pulitzer Prize in 1932 for glowing articles about Stalin as the conditions that would bring about the famine were already in motion.

Sarah Kendzior:

We will start the interviews with a short clip of highlights from the Mr. Jones press conference at the 2019 Berlin Film Festival, where the film premiered and these interviews took place.

Agnieszka Holland:

First, I think that Holodomor, the great famine, big famine, Stalin's famine, it is one of the worst crimes of humanity in the 20th century, made by man or by the regime, and very little known. I felt like the ghosts of this crime are just calling for a place, for some kind of spotlight, for some kind of justice. So that it was like moral duty, I felt, when I read it.

Agnieszka Holland:

Gareth Jones, the young man, the young journalist, Welsh journalist, very well read, very well educated, very bright and with great political instincts even if he was only 26, 27 years old. His courage, his individual courage and the price one is paying until now for this kind of courage... what is the freedom of media? What is the honesty of the media? What is the agenda of the media? What is the fake news? What is alternative realities?

Agnieszka Holland:

More we've been advancing with this film, and fortunately more and more, these questions became relevant and urgent somehow because I believe that we cannot have democracy without free media.

James Norton:

Gareth was a good soul. From the beginning of his life, he knew what he wanted to achieve and he paid the biggest sacrifice to achieve it. I guess... and as Agnieszka says, in the current climate of confusion and fear, to take something from him, to learn something, is to be as courageous and clear in the pursuit for truth, empirical truth, and in sharing that truth, if it costs you, you've got to pay that cost. You've got to get out there.

James Norton:

I mean, Gareth was the most... As far as journalists are concerned, as you say, right now there's so much conversation about fake news and the media and the role of the journalist. More than ever, we need to protect journalists. As Agnieszka says, there is no democracy without a free press. If this film can be a catalyst for that conversation and hopefully garner the respect required for journalists and maybe even inspire some young future Gareth Jones to go out there and find the truth, then that'd be a wonderful thing.

Agnieszka Holland:

I think that it's important to speak about the past. When we were shooting in the small Ukrainian village which is practically abandoned, very few people are living there, mostly old women, and when we've been talking to those old women, they all have been the survivors of Holodomor. They all remember this very vividly and they told me that for this and for their entire life, they never talk about it. It was the silence not only between two nations but the silence also inside of the families. This silence is like poison.

Peter Sarsgaard:

I want to celebrate the brave journalists and I think if we make them truly the heroes in our everyday lives, we know their names, we know who they are, we follow them, even those of us who feel lazy about doing so, it's difficult, it's painful, but to really, really put those people's names in our minds everyday. They're the spearhead. So, I don't think the Durantys deserve to be called out. I don't want to hear their names.

Andrea Chalupa:

So, my friend Sarah was supposed to join us but it's 5:00 AM. Do you remember when we were shooting in and I came downstairs and I said, "I'm starting a podcast," and you were the only one at the table that understood what I was talking about?

James Norton:

Yes. I do, I do. And how is the podcast going?

Andrea Chalupa:

It's still going. I'm so excited. I really like it. We're a GarageBand podcast, so that's why I only have one microphone.

James Norton:

Nice. I love it. You can't see this, but Andrea's basically getting tennis elbow right now.

Andrea Chalupa:

I know we have a lot of great footage from various conversations about the political meaning of this, but I wanted to focus more on the work we did and draw attention to your stunning performance in this film. Stunning. People watch this and they're just like, "He's incredible." But one thing I want everyone to realize is that you were thrown into such a... We threw you into a blizzard in Ukraine and that's how this started. That was your first day on set.

Andrea Chalupa:

Then your second day on set, you had to act with a wolf and so on and so forth. I want everyone to know that not only are you insanely gifted, but you're also incredibly strong because these conditions were very harsh when we started off in this production and you were buoyant throughout and you really carried everybody.

James Norton:

That's very sweet of you to say. I definitely didn't, but I contributed to a sense of warmth. There was a sense of collaboration on that set, which I think filters down from our, as you say, fearless leader, and yourself. It was infectious and all I did was tap into Agnieszka's energy, which as you know is something unique and inspirational.

James Norton:

My favorite moments of the whole film, I think, were sitting huddled around the monitors in deep, dark northern Ukraine somewhere near [inaudible 00:32:12] and it's freezing, it's minus 15, beast from the east is kind of hitting us from all sides and Agnieszka, every hour or so, we'd all be sitting in silence preserving energy and suddenly she'd start singing this quiet Polish song, like, "Let's not give up hope."

James Norton:

Someone told me once that the words usually translated as, "Keep on hoping, keep the hope," and then usually the Polish crew would all start to sing with her and sort of rouse the troops in such an extraordinary way. Those moments for me really epitomized I guess the movie but particularly her leadership and her energy. She did really lead from the front.

James Norton:

The actors were always very well looked after. It's the crew members who on every single morning, who don't get the electronic thermals underneath their clothes which I was equipped with. It took a group effort and immense amount of strength from everyone involved but yeah, we pulled it off and we managed to get out of Ukraine relatively unscathed, with a little bit of a hangover and no frostbite.

Andrea Chalupa:

The other thing I was really blown away by... so working on this script for a million years with Agnieszka, we barely escaped development hell. We were getting horrible notes left and right on this script where it was like the Amadeus notes where the emperor says, "I like it, but there's too many musical notes," and you're like, "What does that mean?"

Andrea Chalupa:

You came in and I was so irritated and nervous to meet you because I thought you were going to come in with all these horrible notes that I'd have to try to decipher and apply to the script and instead, you came in with a surgical precision and had a very short list for me that was very impactful. Basically, you were a gift from God when it came to giving script notes. You were.

Andrea Chalupa:

It's to the point where I have you on record, and this is on recording and I almost want to say for the rest of my life and your life, you need to read my work and fine tune it. I will bring it to you when it's fully baked and you just need to do the final pass on it, because that's what you're so good at. You are a surgeon.

Andrea Chalupa:

You would go in and find the little bit that I knew was wrong, that didn't feel right but I saved it for later and you'd always zero in on that.

James Norton:

I'm definitely not particularly adept at script editing, although I'd love to get better and I'm actually trying to put some projects together on my own, so it's a skill I need to learn. From the point of view of the actor, a good writer and a good director will acknowledge that the person who knows the inner workings of that particular mind is the person playing it.

James Norton:

You guys spent so much time on so many different characters in the story and the structure and the world and the context and yet, my role is simply just to get into Gareth's head and work out what's making him tick. It's amazing how many times you turn up on set and the director thinks that they know that person better than you do. It's like, I fully respect you and your work but you have to understand that I've been doing my work.

James Norton:

You were fantastic in allowing Vanessa and I and Peter to have a voice and come in with ideas and little small edits and cuts or additions. This process is defined by collaboration. That's what makes good filmmakers—listening to other people and giving them a voice. Credit has to be given to you as well for allowing me that. Yeah, I think we landed on a great script. You gave us a great script and we gave it a tiny little polish.

Andrea Chalupa:

I love the polish so much and it was very efficient. I mean, all the actors were great and they all had their own language when it came to the script, but I think given how impatient I am, the cleanness of your notes and how effective, I was like, "He can clean my house, you can organize my closet."

James Norton:

My life couldn't be further from that. I'm a total hoarder. I live in my life and my room, my house, and my mind are just deeply cluttered and disorganized. I might be wrong in saying this and I probably shouldn't put it on record but I'm pretty sure I heard one day that Steven Spielberg sends Tom Stoppard—once the script is finished, the day before they start filming—he sends it to Stoppard and he pays him an absurd amount of money to read it and give one set of notes. I'll tell you what, we can have the Stoppard-Spielberg relationship.

Andrea Chalupa:

Absolutely, but you're going to be doing it on a volunteer basis. I will pay you in good karma. Then I want to also say, intellectually, you're also very fierce because we've had a lot of interesting discussions on set and especially in rehearsals. We were locked in a conference room in Kyiv with Vanessa and Agnieszka for hours. Literally four hours, debating French philosophers and really turning the ideology battle between Ada and Gareth, where they're quietly whispering but it's an intense battle.

Andrea Chalupa:

It was just incredible what you were coming up with, the ideas. I would just grab stuff coming out of your mouth and put it in the script.

James Norton:

I mean, again, that mostly came from Vanessa because there is a version of Ada which played a sort of foil for Gareth and didn't develop the story, and particularly her own characterization, I think we all at the beginning struggled to find her voice and her motivation and her inner workings. Vanessa, Agnieszka, and you decided that work needed to be done.

James Norton:

Actually, we found something fascinating. The fact that she was living in Russia, in Moscow, fully involved in the Communist experiment and the five year plan and yet, ideologically, it was completely counter to her value system. That's majorly a fascinating character to excavate and to pitch against Gareth who is an incredibly committed journalist but equally non-committal as far as his own politics are concerned and would always prioritize the search for the empirical truth.

James Norton:

Again, allowing Vanessa that voice and allowing us that conversation, that four-hour chat, I agree, that was one of my favorite scenes in the end, the discussion, the hushed conversation over the map of Ukraine. But you have to let the actor have that voice in order for that conversation to happen so again, credit to you guys.

Andrea Chalupa:

What I also want to draw people's attention to just so that they're aware of your character, not Gareth but you, I was very much a freshman on campus among seniors. I was instrumental in getting the film made. I was like a tank. I was the optimistic American that was like, "We're going to make this, of course!" among all of these cynical Eastern Europeans. But then as soon as we got on set, I was completely needless and completely lost and just shellshocked throughout all of it.

Andrea Chalupa:

Suddenly, all these people and all this equipment showed up and I didn't know what any of it meant. I was worthless in production and in fact, I found out this trip, the crew had a nickname for me called The Tourist.

James Norton:

I genuinely had no idea of that nickname and I actually have to say it is an intimidating place. I have friends and family members who arrive on set and if you're not used to the rhythm and the routine, the language, then it's a complicated and confusing environment. Again, you've got to give yourself a break. You were the reason we were there. You were there as our collaborative fearless leader alongside Agnieszka.

James Norton:

I didn't even know that you had a nickname. All I think I heard you being called was Your Majesty. I'm just saying. You were very much like our producer and our leader, so don't worry about it. There's nothing to... I can't even remember one moment of imparting some sage advice. If I did, you should tell me what it was because I need it [inaudible 00:39:25] myself.

Andrea Chalupa:

How much do you love that I turned this interview around on me?

James Norton:

Exactly. I love it.

Andrea Chalupa:

Peter, it is an honor to sit here with you.

Peter Sarsgaard:

Thank you so much.

Andrea Chalupa:

Great. Sorry, we're super low budget. I am here in Berlin on the day of the world premiere of our film, Mr. Jones, which you star in, which everyone's freaking out over your performance who has seen the film. You steal the show. Our acting across the board is incredible, but you, you're magic.

Peter Sarsgaard:

Um, is it just because of my nude scene that you say that?

Andrea Chalupa:

And yes, that was a lot of the magic that went into it.

Peter Sarsgaard:

Just naked, I would say. But you wrote this scene, obviously.

Andrea Chalupa:
Hoping to cast you.

Peter Sarsgaard:
Sure, sure. Somehow it felt more naked because I was in those leather stirrups.

Andrea Chalupa:
Yes, because Walter Duranty had a wooden leg from a train accident, so you were not only naked but you had the leather stirrups on.

Peter Sarsgaard:
It's more naked than naked.

Andrea Chalupa:
You were working in a dense forest of naked extras. How did that work out?

Peter Sarsgaard:
They were all young and incredibly beautiful men and women and yeah, it's difficult to stay focused under such circumstances because you're very conscious of being an old, past his prime guy.

Andrea Chalupa:
But you were the Mick Jagger of the set. The more takes we did, the more your arms were flailing, the more you were Jaggering it up.

Peter Sarsgaard:
The thing that you get when you work with a director like Agnieszka is freedom. I mean, that's really what someone who's a master knows to do, right? You think, they're like a horse whisperer with actors. It's really not like that. They just look at you. I mean, Agnieszka, she just looks at you and smiles and you do a take and then she comes up and she talks to someone and she might be kind of stern with them. Then she turns to the actor and she smiles at you and she says, "One more, please." Then she goes back. It's just very supportive and lovely. I mean, it's really on you.

Andrea Chalupa:
Absolutely. She gave me, over the three years we worked together, so much freedom on the script. I was amazed. There was one point where I just went off and did a big deep rewrite and I put all this hidden feminist goddess, ancient Mesopotamian symbolism in it and I was like, "I have a new draft for you," and she's like, "Great." So if I had freedom on the script, that means the actors had... All of us were tinkering away working on the script together. You were helping me write some of your scenes and lines.

Peter Sarsgaard:
One of the things that really helped with this was that I was fascinated with the guy, Walter Duranty. I wanted to know how someone had that life, right? From Aleister Crowley to hosting the world's literati

in Moscow and being sort of the docent for the western world to Moscow. I was fascinated with his life, so I felt like I wanted to get to know him. I wanted to learn about him.

Peter Sarsgaard:

When I showed up, I would say more than a lot of other projects I've worked on, even with real people, I was armed with a lot of information. And so we were able to communicate, and I think from an intelligent point of view with facts. He wasn't strictly an asshole. He also did this. I got to defend him a little bit with information.

Andrea Chalupa:

That first meeting with you, you and I met in a vegan pizza parlor in Warsaw and talked for hours, having a grad school discussion about Walter Duranty and his life. It was clear that you came fully armed with all this research and that was one of the most gratifying experiences. I felt like I was alone for so long with this little world and here comes a fellow nerd to nerd out with me and we're speaking the same language for so long and it was just so gratifying.

Peter Sarsgaard:

I mean, how messed up would it be if we went to go do this film, which is about the truth and letting the truth out, and we told a bunch of lies about the guy who was the liar? That would be common. In truth, that would be sort of commonplace, but we don't.

Andrea Chalupa:

Your character Walter Duranty was actually my gateway drug into the project because I was a college kid with this big dream of making this movie and I was researching why would a guy like Walter Duranty—who I grew up knowing about because he covered up this genocide famine that my family had suffered through—why would he do something that's so against the ethics of journalism by covering up this famine?

Andrea Chalupa:

He writes in the New York Times "There is no famine." So, the more I researched him, I was like, "Wait, he was lovers with the great Satanist Aleister Crowley? He did all this opium? He wrote hymns for Satanic orgies in 1920s Paris?" As a college kid, you're like, "This is incredible."

Peter Sarsgaard:

Isadora Duncan, all these people are coming and hanging out with him. When you really start to think about the life and lifestyle that he was protecting and also, I think for him, access, right? That's probably what he would've said in response to any of the criticism was, "Well, if I write that, then I lose access and then we have no information."

Peter Sarsgaard:

So, for him, it wasn't covering something up; it was maybe ignoring the details of something and then as it got to grow larger, of course it gets to be more difficult to ignore and hopefully it gnawed away at him somewhat. But in the meantime, he had this incredible world going on. If you just think about...for a guy who'd gone through World War I and seen the level of destruction that he had seen and personal devastation, I can see how he stuck his head in the sand. Not even to excuse him at all, but just, it kind of started to make sense to me.

Andrea Chalupa:

At the same time, when he was going to school in Liverpool, he signed up, he volunteered to be on the side of the people...he served his school somehow by busting truants who would then be caned. Even at a young age, he aligned himself with abusive authority almost to reap the benefits of being part of that authority and he did that as an adult in Moscow.

Peter Sarsgaard:

Align yourself with power. It's like everyone who stands around Trump right now. You're like, "How are they doing that?" Well, they're probably... The story they're telling their wives and children, husbands, as they go home is, "we have to be in the room in order to turn the ship around at all or avoid the obstacle that's coming. You got to be in it and if I am too critical of it, then I won't be in it and someone else will be who's less of a decent person than I am."

Peter Sarsgaard:

I think you make those kinds of excuses to yourself. One thing I'm really glad I didn't do was a Liverpoolian accent, which it actually occurred to me at one point and I remember mentioning it to this dialogue coach I was working with and she went, "Oh no, no, no. Don't do that. Don't do that."

Andrea Chalupa:

No, it was incredible how you moved mountains to be part of this project. People have to know. You showed up on set completely jetlagged and you just dove into the role, you dove into the lines and you didn't miss a beat. You were such a calming presence on set. You were like the Fonz. I kept calling you Mr. Xanax. People have to know how absolutely easy you are to work with, how inspiring you are to work with, because you were always so gentle with me as a super green and shellshocked screenwriter running up to you and going, "Does this line work? Does that sound right? Is this the proper..."

Peter Sarsgaard:

I told you, I'm more drawn to people at the beginning and people at the end, so we'll see how you are with me in the middle. I was working on this other project with a first time filmmaker that required all of me in a different way. When I came here, I felt very comfortable because we had an incredible crew and we had Agnieszka as our leader and frankly, coming from the other film where it was more like I would say, "We have limited time, ditch that shot, let's just shoot the whole thing here", thinking a little bit more than being an actor, it was a calming place for me. It was an easy place for me.

Peter Sarsgaard:

Some actors work better thinking the whole crew hates them. I work better thinking the whole crew is rooting for me.

Andrea Chalupa:

Everybody was madly in love with you and you're just hanging out in your smoking jacket and your wooden peg leg basking in the sun between takes. It was just a magical experience and I have to say, the set that you were living on for days, Walter Duranty's apartment, it was this gorgeous art deco apartment from the era with all these rooms sprouting off of the main hallway and it was all richly, richly built. You felt like you were back in time and there's cigarettes burning and incense burning and naked extras just lounging around.

Peter Sarsgaard:

Everyone was very comfortable with their nudity. If we shot this in the States, I would've been covering up a lot more.

Andrea Chalupa:

It felt very authentic, too. It felt like it was a party on set that day.

Peter Sarsgaard:

Absolutely. The production design really... I can't tell you how many times as an actor I'll walk into a room and be like, "This is my bedroom? Seriously? With the Duran Duran poster over my bed? Who do you think I am?" Because that defines you so much. It's not just your acting that defines you. They go, "That's his bedroom." And so I felt supported, always, by the production design.

Peter Sarsgaard:

So many of the decisions that were going into the filmmaking, that's probably why I was Mr. Xanax.

Andrea Chalupa:

Final question. In terms of what Duranty stood for, what an important reminder he is for us today, where even prestigious institutions like the New York Times can get things wrong and that we shouldn't just have blind faith just because there's some fancy title associated with something. What in general, given that you've lived this role, what sort of reminder do you want Duranty to carry for audiences today in this world of fake news?

Peter Sarsgaard:

Well, I think in the world of fake news, you can't rely on the information that you get minute to minute, second to second. You have to see how things shake out over time. I really think that's the only way to understand things and not to make decisions based off of things that happened five minutes ago or even a day ago or even a week ago, is to take a step back and as the Eameses would say, do a power of ten and get a little bit of perspective on the general movement of things and protect journalists.

Peter Sarsgaard:

Journalists are being murdered all over the world. And it is a sacred job. It is as sacred as being a priest.

Andrea Chalupa:

That's beautiful. Final question because I'm going to abuse my power. That's what this interview is about. What do you think Walter Duranty, Pulitzer Prize winner for the New York Times Moscow bureau chief, he finally won his O. Henry Award after struggling for so long to be recognized as a great fiction writer, he was surrounded by great artists, he essentially brokered a deal between the Soviets and FDR's government for official recognition of the Soviet Union. He spent hours with FDR advising him on policy. What do you think he would think of this film?

Peter Sarsgaard:

Well, you know, he was interested in screenwriting also. Didn't he go and live in Southern California? I guess they were working on a short story but I could imagine that he would wish that he had written it.

Andrea Chalupa:

That makes me feel so much better and I got to write it and avenge all these people.

Peter Sarsgaard:

I think he would've changed a few things.

Andrea Chalupa:

Thank you so much.

Andrea Chalupa:

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