

Polanski's life reflected in film

ROMAN POLANSKI

By FX Feeney
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REVIEWED BY FIONA NESS

In 1997, film-maker Roman Polanski uncovered the memoirs of pianist Wladyslaw Szpilman, a Polish Jew who had lost his family in the purging of the Warsaw ghetto by the Nazis in 1943.

Szpilman survived by moving from hiding place to hiding place as Warsaw was destroyed. The immediacy of his experience and his serendipitous survival caught Polanski's attention and led to the creation of the Oscar-winning film,

The Pianist, in 2002.

Although a story of survival against overwhelming odds, the film is curiously anti-heroic, as Szpilman subsists through accidental encounters and the happenstance of talent. The first-person eyewitness narrative reflects the director's life: Polanski, a Polish Jew, was orphaned by the Nazis when he was nine years old and survived by wandering Poland alone for four years.

FX Feeney details the life and work of the prolific actor/director in this absorbing publication that is biography, filmography and glossy coffee table book in equal measure.

The diversity of Polanski's work is explored, from the Beckett-driven bare horizons and rhyming enigmas of *Cul-de-Sac* (1966) to the creepy psyche of *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and the misty triplets of



Françoise Dorléac and Donald Pleasance in Roman Polanski's *Cul-de-Sac* (1966)

hills beyond hills (both literal and metaphorical) in *Macbeth* (1971).

Moreover, the author's succinct style means the book will

appeal to those with even a passing interest in film.

"The art of film-making," said Polanski, "is not to answer every question." He pioneered

this principle in *Cul-de-Sac* (1966), a dark mixture of comedy and tragedy.

By cataloguing the progression of Polanski's film-making, the author has also cast a historical record of a rapidly changing world and the effect of this change on human interactions.

Feeney writes that the influence of Polanski's work can be seen across the cinematic spectrum, from *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) to *Pulp Fiction* (1994).

"They do not know they're in a tragedy," said co-adaptor and critic Kenneth Tynan of Polanski's *Macbeth* and *Lady Macbeth*. In this instance, art was not reflective of life.

Macbeth was the director's first project after the brutal murder of his actress wife, Sharon Tate, and their unborn child by Charles Manson in 1969. Here, Polanski's tragedy

was all too apparent.

The murder was sensationalised by the press, as Tate and a number of her friends had been tied up, tortured, shot and butchered with knives. Symbols of devil worship were scrawled in blood around their bodies. Polanski later demystified the killings, saying Manson was merely "an artist spurned, and it can be a very dangerous thing to spurn a certain kind of artist. Think of Hitler."

Despite the extraordinary drama of Polanski's life, the director has not relied on film-making for catharsis. However, reading this examination of his work, it is difficult to view his experiences separately from his films. Polanski, however, renders the division with characteristic clarity: "I like shadows in movies. I don't like them in life."