

POLANSKI AND I

The more Marina Zenovich's subjects ignore her, the closer she gets

BY GRAHAM KOLBEINS + PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARINA ZENOVICH

Marina Zenovich, an American documentarian (and former actress), has a yen for Europe's most misunderstood charismatic criminals. She first tackled the subject of charming millionaire manipulators with a bewitching French-actor/singer-turned-corrupt-politician in her acclaimed 2001 stalker-doc, *Who Is Bernard Tapie?*, and now she's taking on the legendary *Chinatown* director and statutory rapist in *Roman Polanski: Wanted and Desired*. Zenovich filters through layers of obfuscation and contradiction to get as close to her subjects' unmediated human natures as cinematically possible. Focusing on men who place themselves in the public sphere yet hold their cards close to their chests, Zenovich takes their seeming imperviousness to scrutiny as a challenge. "I'm interested in people who go off the tracks," says Zenovich. "People with interesting stories."

"Interesting" is an understatement. In *Who Is Bernard Tapie?*, we follow along with Zenovich as she learns the facts behind the titular Tapie's intricate life story, which involves soccer bribery, rap duets and performances in esoteric French cinema. At the climax of the film, Zenovich finds herself standing in the shadows outside a Parisian theater where Tapie has been performing. Inches away from the man she's been trying to reach for two years, it's a lyrical moment for both Zenovich and the audience—we've become almost as consumed with his unknowability as the director herself. But Tapie refuses to give us an inch, casually dismissing Zenovich for the umpteenth time with his indefatigable smile. Returning to America without her interview, Zenovich settles for a distanced fascination—and despite Tapie's elusiveness, we're left with a dizzying portrait of one man's highly complicated relationship with the rest of the world.

While *Wanted and Desired* is a much more serious film than *Who Is Bernard Tapie?*, many of the same forces are at work beneath its surface. It's a gripping examination of the oft-misunderstood events surrounding Polanski's 1977 rape indictment and subsequent flight from the United States, but it's also a fascinating character study of the man himself. "I remember when Charlie Rose asked him, 'What makes you tick?' and Roman Polanski said, 'I'm not interested. You are, I'm not.' It's kind of like... he just *does* things, and does he need to explain it?" wonders Zenovich. "I suppose it's somewhat freeing. Being analytical, it's interesting to see someone like that."

It's hard not to notice that, much like Bernard Tapie in Zenovich's earlier film, Polanski is conspicuously absent in *Wanted and Desired*, represented only through archival interviews and excerpts from his filmic performances. "I'd made a film about someone who wasn't in it, so it wasn't that odd for me," says Zenovich. "You can always be sort of hunting some-

one down." The two filmmakers did eventually meet up in Paris, but Polanski declined to appear on camera. "I think it would look like self-promotion," he told Zenovich. But that very reserve is Polanski's nature—and what makes him such an alluring subject.

Zenovich got hooked on the story in 2003, when Polanski was nominated for an Oscar after directing *The Pianist*. Samantha Geimer, who had been 13 when Roman Polanski had sex with her, wrote an editorial in the *L.A. Times* that year, urging people not to judge the film based on what had happened in the past. "What really got me into it was what her lawyer said on *Larry King Live*," remembers Zenovich. "'The day Roman Polanski fled was a sad day for the American judicial system.' I didn't understand why he would say something like that—it just didn't make sense. So I said to myself, 'Oh, God—this sounds like something interesting.'"

Wanted and Desired exposes the systemic power abuses that corrupted the case, from the manipulative, publicity-hungry judge in charge of Polanski's trial, to the international news media that sensationalized the story, irresponsibly slandering both Geimer and Polanski. "They both kind of live in this world of being locked in the story of what happened," says Zenovich, "because people are so obsessed with the charges and the fact that he fled." The media had always seen Polanski as an easy target, unfairly vilifying the director in 1969 after the murder of his wife Sharon Tate by the Manson Family. Because of Polanski's enigma, they drew their own conclusions from his films, using the subject matter of *Rosemary's Baby* as an excuse to implicate the filmmaker as responsible in Tate's murder, as if to persecute him for his own unwillingness to cooperate with their circus.

The same delicate relationship between private life, public appearance and art is the subject underscoring Zenovich's films. In *Wanted and Desired*, Roger Gunson, Geimer's attorney, discloses that he sought to find a clue to Polanski's personality in his work: Just before the trial, Gunson studied Polanski's entire *oeuvre* at a retrospective held by the Nuart Theater in Los Angeles. Noticing a prevailing dramatic theme throughout the movies, Gunson came to the conclusion that Polanski had been "directing" a scene when he came on to Samantha Geimer in Jack Nicholson's *Jacuzzi*: "Corruption meets innocence over water." Is there any validity to these connections between Polanski's actions and his creative output, or are they nothing more than the overexcited deductions of a culture obsessed with celebrity and their personae?

"I mean, of course they're related. But in interviews, Roman Polanski always denied that in kind of a playful way," says Zenovich. "On [90s BBC series] *Scene by Scene*, Marc Cousins kind of calls him on it,



and Polanski goes into this whole speech, saying, 'You and I are both wearing black. We both have watches on our left hands, and our legs are crossed the same way. What does that mean?'"

Perhaps it was Polanski's refusal to submit to self-analysis that led to his downfall in a culture that heralds the virtues of rehab, where a little therapy can wash away any bad deed. "We come from a culture of apology. Hugh Grant gets a blowjob from a hooker, and he goes on the Jay Leno show and apologizes," says Zenovich. But Zenovich doesn't make any apologies for Polanski, either. "One journalist brought up that they thought the film was sympathetic to him, but I don't think it is, and that wasn't my goal. I was trying to explore what happened in the case, set within the context of a life." The film assumes a sense of neutrality that does the story justice, allowing the audience to feel through the case's complexities and arrive at their own conclusions. Like the best art, *Wanted and Desired* creates a gray area for the viewer to question themselves within.

"It's all overwhelming," says Zenovich. "I wanna make a comedy next." While Zenovich is considering stories for a foray into fictional narrative film, she can't escape her innate tendency to examine the cloudy hearts of mysterious Francophones. Perhaps it's Zenovich's own background as an actress that causes her fascination with these real-life performative masterminds, but she's found herself driven toward yet another charismatic bigwig lately: French President Nicolas Sarkozy. "Somebody asked me, 'Well, do you have his approval?' and I was just like, '...Not yet!'" ■■■