

Meska Sprawa

("A Man's Thing")

Poland : 2001 : dir. Slawomir Fabicki :

: c25 min

prod: : scr: Slawomir Fabicki : dir.ph.:

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Cast unknown

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Radio Times note:

"Directed by Slawomir Fabicki, this Oscar-nominated film depicts three days in the life of a 13-year old boy as he tries hard to hide the fact that his father beats him."

[no listing in "Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001"]

Broadcast Channel 4 Sept 5 2002, as part of a "**Shooting Gallery**" compendium of shorts "by new talent on the theme of 'It's a Man's Thing' ". Poland, evidently, has been recruited to the new fundamentalist church of Child Abuse, which sends its missionaries far and wide to convert the heathen to "correct attitudes". So it would seem anyway, if the title of this film is meant to have any bearing on its theme. Other signs of creeping Americanisation are on view if one is alert to them, from the "high fives" the footballing boys give one another at school (a greeting which is native to the black inner-city ghetto, and nowhere else) or the Adidas and Reebok logos plastered across the wall of the school gym.

Laying that consideration aside, the central boy gives a very moving performance, and the story is well told against a general background of squalor and deprivation, filmed in sepia tones. Bartek Idczak and his little brother have an elderly dog kept in a local kennel. Bartek is a talented school footballer and his father a paunchy layabout with tales of his own prowess on the soccer field before he was felled by an Achilles tendon. Father discovers Bartek's school report hidden under his mattress, with a long string of complaints from the school about the boy's misbehaviour in class and insolence to the staff, mostly petty matters it's fair to say. Father beats his son with a belt.

Bartek is so ashamed to let his bruises be seen that he feigns indifference to playing for the school football team anymore (of which he's captain and star player). He's caught smoking in the toilets by the headmaster and is on the verge of expulsion when the P.E. teacher intercedes for him. He offers Bartek an ultimatum that he either buck up his ideas and rejoin the soccer team, or else he – the teacher – will speak to his father. That same day Bartek is told by the kennel owner that his dog, Bouquet, will have to be destroyed since he's too old and unwilling to eat. The boy begs him for the dog's life, and in panic tries feeding it his own lunch, remonstrating and pleading with the animal. Arriving home, he finds the P.E. teacher paying a social call on his father, to underscore the ultimatum, though being at pains to say that Bartek shows great promise in certain areas.

Duly warned, Bartek rejoins the team next day, but the P.E. teacher catches him lecturing the team in a mockery of his own technique, and loses his temper. He orders the boy to strip off his tracksuit and when he refuses, manhandles him to tear the tracksuit off by force, in so doing exposing the weals on Bartek's shoulders. Mortified, the boy sobs at him "You're not allowed to do that sir!" and runs off. The enraged teacher storms around to the boy's house and lays into his father, then tries to find Bartek, who has locked himself into the kennel with his beloved dog. The teacher finally apologises for humiliating him, and tries to persuade him to come out but Bartek, endorsed by his little brother, elects to stay where he is, in the doghouse.

The end credits identify the boy playing the central character as "Bartosz Idczak", but that is virtually identical to the name of the role he plays, so it may or may not be the actor's name. In any case he is a quivering heap of grief when he's told his dog has to die, and one can't help but be affected by the rawness of his performance. Channel 4's resident pundit Mark Kermode likened the tone of the film to "**KES**", and the comparison for once is not over-generous. The school scenes in particular have that same fly-on-the-wall quality to them, and the football teacher here does recall Brian Glover's swaggering turn in the earlier film. On both of these counts then, **RECOMMENDED**.

However, we've been so battered and bludgeoned with "child abuse" tracts over the past twenty years that one can't help feeling propagandised. The film equates corporal punishment with child battery, but the mere fact that English-speaking films have been drawing that equation for some twenty years does not make it a valid one. The boy's punishment in this film is clearly excessive, but that is hardly to say that punishment was not in order, and even expected. The boy's father is portrayed as a slovenly brute (of course), his mother weakly pleading in his defense (of course) and his younger brother terrorised by the sound of the beating (of course). And of course, the camera shies away from witnessing the very thing it is protesting about.

This has long been a cliché of corporal punishment scenes in the cinema, but since here it is the focal point of the drama, to duck away from showing it is implicitly deceitful. And although Bartek was beaten on the buttocks (he's told to take his trousers down and bend over the bed), by the time the gym master forcibly strips him the bruises have migrated up to his shoulder blades, thereby avoiding the necessity to film the boy's naked backside (as was done for the comparable scene in "**KADISBELLAN**" / "The Slingshot") At one and the same time, the film is pandering to received wisdoms about "male violence" (we don't show *women* beating children any more, and it was always less frequent in the cinema than in actual life) and pandering to over-sensitivity about children's erogenous zones.

Is corporal punishment so uncommon in Poland then, and so universally condemned, that a teacher would beat up a parent on the strength of it? And what is this "man's thing" of the title? Is it football? the boy's attempts to conceal his bruises? or the brutality of the male sex? It just smacks a little too much (to coin a phrase) of whistling along to a familiar tune (in this case, an American one). When caning was still a commonplace in British schools, boys on the contrary used to show off their bruises as a testament to their courage and endurance, not conceal them in shame. This too is a cliché which has been seeded into the popular consciousness, making physical punishment a social disgrace to be hidden, like incest. The film ended with a message inviting viewers who **suspected** any child might be getting beaten at home to ring a special NSPCC informer line, so that the social services might swing into action. Propaganda which invites the public to inform on one another – ah, but all in the name of "protecting children" of course – should be anathema to any thinking audience.

See subject index under **CRUELTY / NEGLECT / MALTREATMENT** and/or **CORPORAL PUNISHMENT** (recognising a valid distinction between the two), **DOGS**, **EASTERN EUROPE / SOVIET BLOC**, **FOOTBALL**, **RECOMMENDED TITLES**, **SCHOOL** and **SHORT FILMS**..