

# Row House Cinema hosts Polish Film Festival for the first time

By Aoqin Yan, Staff Writer

For Northeastern University graduate student Alexander Kong, the Polish Film Festival is worth flying all the way from Boston to Pittsburgh during a weekday in order to watch movies that remind him of the Polish half of his upbringing.

"It's just so exciting for me because my mother is Polish. Even though I didn't speak a word of the language, I always thought I should at least have some exposure to my own culture, maybe through watching movies," Kong said. "It might sound crazy to you, but there weren't any events like this in Boston, so I just flew to Pittsburgh and I still have classes tomorrow afternoon. I thought it's a great chance for me to learn about the Polish culture that also belongs to part of who I am."



Image via Wikimedia Commons

Row House Cinema in Lawrenceville.

This year, the Polish Film Festival is taking place at Row House Cinema in Lawrenceville Tuesday to Friday. The festival presents five Polish films, "Never Gonna Snow Again," "EO," "Sonata," "The Double Life of Véronique" and "Europa Europa." Three of these movies are debuting in Pittsburgh for the first time.

"Sonata," the first movie shown during the festival on Tuesday evening, is about a musician who was mistakenly diagnosed as autistic when he was a child. Later in life, he discovers that he has an impeccable musical talent.

Kong said he watched "Sonata" before coming to the festival, but he would recommend the film because of its moving story and the fact that it makes the audience think, rather than merely entertaining them.

"This movie came in last year, and the story was fantastic. It is more than just a movie for fun, but it also makes you think and encourages you," Kong said. "I can't imagine a person having his childhood without any hearing and being mistaken for autism, but is still able to develop his talent in music. The efforts and the challenges he overcame is impressive."

Pittsburgh's Polish Cultural Council hosted the festival. The organization originated nearly 80 years ago in Western Pennsylvania at the time when there was a huge Polish immigrant community. Though the Polish community shrunk over time, the Council is still dedicated to promoting Polish culture through cinematographic works by collaborating with local theaters.

Maria Staszkiwicz, the executive director of Polish Cultural Council, said the Council has wanted to organize the festival for decades — this is the first time they are collaborating with Row House Cinema.

"We started a few presentations more than 15 years ago, mostly as a sidebar for Three Rivers Film Festival, which was run by Pittsburgh filmmakers," Staszkiwicz said. "This is our first return after the pandemic since 2019. And we used to work with filmmakers, the manager of Harris Theater, which is one of the former filmmakers we have a relationship with, and the other theater we started for the first time, which is the Row House Cinema on Butler Street."

Staszkiwicz also mentioned that Polish culture is still not yet well known by locals, and it is the organization's mission to introduce and promote their culture to the public. She added the main content for this year's festival is the Krzysztof Kieślowski retrospective.

"We just feel that there is a lot about our culture that is not known in this part of the United States," Staszkiwicz said. "A big chunk of our presentation is the Krzysztof Kieślowski retrospective. In June, there was a 4K restoration of his famous trilogy 'Three Colors.' He made the three movies black, white and red. And they are made in France, but they have many Polish actors also."

Staszkiwicz added that she especially recommends watching "EO" because it distinctly tells the story from an animal's perspective.

"Krzysztof Kieślowski's movies are almost all gone now because they were in last week, but there's still 'The Double Life of Véronique.'" Staszkiewicz said. "I would say 'EO' is a special one, not a typical film. It's a donkey's name, and [the movie] almost had no dialogue at all. This movie is made from the perspective of an animal — this is why it has very little dialogue and the idea was the protection of animals."

Kelsey Zehmisch, the marketing manager of Row House Cinema, said she is excited that the theater is hosting the film festival.

"This is actually the first time we're presenting [the Polish Film Festival] at Row House. Our goal is to present really unique programs that you're not going to see in local chain movie theaters," Zehmisch said. "Hopefully, you'll discover a new favorite movie or watch something you maybe wouldn't have watched on your own."

Staszkiewicz and Zehmisch agreed that watching movies at home and from the cinema is completely different due to the atmosphere and environment. As an ex-film shooter, Zehmisch said watching movies in a theater can make it a collective experience.

"We really believe that watching a movie at home versus watching a movie in a small theater are two vastly different experiences," Zehmisch said. "It's really great that people can come together and enjoy movies in the theater setting with other people. It makes it more fun, it makes it a collective experience. We think there's a lot of value in that, from an ex-shooter's standpoint."