

# Cold War

Pawel Pawlikowski POL/UK 2018



While ageless and universal, **“Cold War”** comes from a deeply personal place for Pawlikowski—Wiktoria and Zula are based on and named after Pawlikowski’s own parents, who (as the filmmaker openly voices in every interview) had their own thundery relationship battle that stretched over four decades. In this cinematically condensed, informally episodic version (jazzy and unruly like some of the film’s music), the attractive duo is played by the striking Tomasz Kot and the immensely talented actor/singer Joanna Kulig; an instant, Marilyn-Monroe-meets-Liv Ullmann-esque vision.

A sophisticated conductor and musicologist traveling through Poland with his producer Irena (Agata Kulesza) and recording folk tunes with the hopes of reintroducing their glorious melodies, Wiktoria auditions talent after talent for the choral ensemble he is tasked to create. It’s during one of those tiring sessions that the fiery Zula enters the picture. She sings well; she says she can easily learn to dance and in what might be a con to leave a lasting impression, claims she once stabbed her abusive father fatally. Falling for her directness and turbulent spirit immediately, Wiktoria recruits her. And the impossible obstacles introduce themselves in no time once their affair takes off in earnest.

Nostalgically shot in sterling black and white and the boxy Academy aspect ratio by cinematographer Lukasz Zal (like Pawlikowski's "Ida," a heart-breaking study of the pull of identity), "Cold War" is really a film about the hardships of living in exile. In that, the starry-eyed Wiktor and the hardened Zula make and break promises, support and betray each other, and both abandon and reassume identities to survive wherever life takes them within or on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Their brief bliss while traveling and making music together gets cut short when Zula doesn't turn up for their haphazardly planned escape from Poland.

When they meet years later in the cobblestone streets of Paris and reinstate their impossible romance in the smoky corners of jazz clubs filled with snobby intellectuals who look down on Zula, their odyssey takes an even more impossible turn: Zula plays up her national pride—a form of self-defense any immigrant will relate to. She can no longer stand the submissive, alienating man Wiktor has become.

**Roger Ebert. *Rogerebert.com***

At the heart of **Cold War** is Joanna Kulig, who previously worked with Pawlikowski on *The Woman in the Fifth* and *Ida*, and who here delivers a star-making performance of astonishing range and depth. Before our eyes we see Zula transform from not-so-innocent young woman (she candidly confesses to spying on Wiktor for state security) to sultry jazz singer and raddled showgirl; from faux "pure Polish" belle to smoky Parisian chanteuse; from victim to victor and back again. Since *Cold War*'s rapturous debut at Cannes, Kulig has been widely compared to Jeanne Moreau, although her intelligence and tough sensuality reminded me more of Léa Seydoux; like her, Kulig could doubtless slip with ease between accomplished artist actor and badass Bond girl. Coincidentally, Kulig's co-star, Tomasz Kot, was reportedly Danny Boyle's choice for the next Bond villain – a possible source of the "creative conflicts" that led to Boyle's recent departure from that forthcoming film.

Plaudits, too, to musician Marcin Masecki, a key collaborator who Pawlikowski originally considered for the role of Wiktor, and who is credited with the "jazz and song arrangements". Just as Miles Davis pointed out that "It's not the notes you play, it's the notes you don't play" that matter, *Cold War* is a dark musical full of silences and ellipses. It's up to the audience to fill in the episodic gaps in the narrative, and to divine the true feelings that so often remain unspoken. Appropriately, it left me speechless.

**Mark Kermode *The Guardian***