

THE BURNING BUSH

Miniseries

PRESS CLIPPING

Agnieszka Holland, *Burning Bush*

29 January, 2013 | By [Geoffrey Macnab](#)

The Polish director talks to Geoffrey Macnab about her three part drama series for HBO Europe.

Polish director Agnieszka Holland has had a wildly varied career encompassing everything from European arthouse films (*Europa Europa*, *A Lonely Woman*, *Angry Harvest*) to episodes of *The Wire*, *Cold Case*, *The Killing* and *Treme*. Her collaborators have ranged from Krzysztof Kieslowski and Andrzej Wajda to David Simon and Fred Roos. Last year, her 2011 feature *In Darkness* received an Oscar nomination. Now, Holland has directed *Burning Bush*, a three part drama series for HBO Europe. This is inspired by the actions of Jan Palach, a 21-year-old student who set himself on fire in Wenceslas Square in Prague in 1969 as a protest against the communist regime and the occupation of Prague by Soviet bloc armies. He died of his injuries four days later.

Burning Bush will be shown at International Film Festival Rotterdam later this month. There are plans afoot for the series to be screened in selected cinemas in Prague and possibly in Poland.

Speaking from New Orleans, Holland points out that the actions of Palach have a very strong personal resonance for her. Holland, now 64, was a student in Prague in the late 1960s and was heavily involved in the student protest movement at the time of the "Prague Spring" (the period in the late 60s when the Czechs tried to cast off the Soviet shackles). "I was like 20. It was my first important life, political and historical experience," she declares. "It was something which formed me in some way for the future. My view of society and people was very much shaped by this experience. It was, in some way, an incredible gift that I was able to come back to this."

Burning Bush was scripted by Štěpán Hulík, a young Czech writer who finished a first draft on spec. The script ended up being sent separately to both Holland and HBO. She responded very positively. ("I was surprised that young people were able to write something so accurate and so true about this event.") HBO was likewise enthusiastic and wanted to commission a mini-series.

Holland agreed with the decision, reckoning that a three part series would enable her to give "this quiet chamber story an epic dimension."

Holland jokes that when she makes movies, her backers always tell her they are too long. For example, the first cut of *In Darkness* was over four hours long. With *Burning Bush*, though, she had "the luxury of the format" and could take time to tell the story.

The series, she argues, will give young Czechs the chance to "look back and figure out their identity" and think about the part that the Palach incident had in shaping their national identity. She believes the drama is the first to address these issues in depth and that it offers a truthful portrait of "Post-Stalin society behind the Iron Curtain."

"They (HBO) are on both sides of the ocean," she reflects on working with HBO's new arm in Prague having made so much drama for the US parent company. "They are in some ways similar. The philosophy of HBO here (in the US) and there (in Europe) is quite similar.

"They want to do ambitious fiction work based quite often on reality or history. They don't want to be conventional in their approach to the subject and they give relatively big creative freedom to the director and writers. At the same time, they give quite a substantial amount of money. Of course, not everything HBO does speaks to me as a director but everything I have done (for them) has been very interesting and enriching." No, when she was a young director in Solidarity-era Poland in the late 1970s, she didn't imagine that, 30 years later, she would be helming episodes of a cop series in Baltimore (*The Wire*).

SCREEN DAILY

"But HBO was the place - and still is - where you are able to make the films and TV series that are much more complex and innovative stylistically and in terms of the subject, in writing and casting than most other productions - including Hollywood and a lot of independent productions," the Polish auteur enthuses. "HBO suddenly opened up the windows for many things that had been untold before." She describes *The Wire* as being like "the great American novel" and points to its ethical dimension and complexity. Not many movies (she adds) have the same ambition.

As ever, Holland has several new projects for small screen and big screen on the boil. Among the feature film projects is an adaptation of *Drive Your Plough Over The Bones Of The Dead*, (*Prowadź swój pług przez kości umarłych*), a novel by leading contemporary Polish writer Olga Tokarczuk. This is being produced through Tor Film and she hopes to start shooting before the end of the year.

Holland claims she never set out to work in the US and that she has always simply followed the best material. "I was very happy making Polish movies. Still now, American movies are not my ambition. I am doing movies where I can find the interesting subjects, the money and the craft."

As for *Burning Bush*, which is executive produced by Antony Root for HBO Europe, she believes it is the kind of TV drama that the region desperately needs. "The radio and television in most (formerly) communist countries is very bad. It's really weak...the level is generally very low. HBO takes it much, much higher and opens up the ambitions and the appetites of the audience as well."



HBO's 'Burning Bush' to play at Rotterdam
Agnieszka Holland helmed miniseries gets fest berth
By WILL TIZARD

PRAGUE -- Polish helmer Agnieszka Holland's miniseries "Burning Bush" is to make its international debut at the Rotterdam Film Festival, the latest TV drama to play at a leading sprocket opera.

The HBO Europe three-parter, which centers on the suicide of Czech dissident Jan Palach in 1969, will screen at the fest Jan. 30, following its world preem in Prague on Jan. 27.

The drama follows the legal and political aftermath of Palach's self-immolation in Wenceslas Square as a protest against the Soviet-backed regime. Slovak thesp Tatiana Pauhofova toplines as the attorney who fought to protect Palach's reputation after the regime tried to discredit him.

Holland made her international breakthrough with "Europa Europa" in 1990. She has also helmed episodes of HBO skeins "The Wire" and "Treme."

HBO Netherlands will air the first episode of "Burning Bush" on Feb. 5, and the remaining 13 countries reached by HBO Europe will begin airing it in March.

The Rotterdam fest will also screen HBO's "Girls," and HBO Latin America's "Profugos."

High-budget TV dramas are increasingly finding berths at the top film festivals. Jane Campion's "Top of the Lake," for example, plays at the Berlinale next month.

HBO Europe on the hunt for UK indies' drama formats

17 January, 2013 | By [Peter White](#)

HBO Europe has called for UK indies to bring it scripted drama formats as it looks to expand its original programming strategy.

The company, which operates premium channels across Central and Eastern Europe, is searching for scripted formats to replicate the success of its local versions of psychological drama *In Treatment*.

Anthony Root, executive vice president, original programming and production, HBO Europe, said the broadcaster was looking for returnable drama and event mini-series to produce across Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland and Romania.

He said he was in talks with indie producers in the UK and hopes to find between five and 10 scripted formats to produce locally.

"We hope there are some shows that have been produced in the UK that have not achieved huge international distribution, which could be right for us," said Root. "We are scouring the market for formats that fit our criteria. I think it is likely that we will find something out of the UK."

As well as local versions of *In Treatment*, the broadcaster has remade Armoza Formats' Israeli drama *When Shall We Kiss* and is in development with cop drama *The Naked Truth*, which is also being adapted in the US by its parent company HBO. "We have the funds to do what we want," said the former Sony Pictures Television exec.

This hunt for formats comes ahead of the launch of 3 x 80-minute mini-series *Burning Bush*, which has been produced by Czech indie Nutprodukce. The period drama, set in Prague in 1969, is directed by Agnieszka Holland, who has worked on US series *The Killing* and *The Wire*.

Root said HBO Europe was also keen to hear from British documentary producers that could coproduce factual commissions in the region. The company produces around 12 documentaries a year and is keen to partner with international firms.

HBO Europe started making original shows six years ago, but its upcoming miniseries *Burning Bush* marks a new level of budget and ambition. Director Agnieszka Holland tells TBI about her work on the show, HBO's content boss Antony Root talks about how the original programming strategy will evolve and HBO Europe boss Linda Jensen explains how the drive into big-ticket originals works in tandem with the premium network's roll out of HBO Go.

HBO's first event-miniseries in Europe

***The Wire* and *Europa Europa*'s Agnieszka Holland directs**

Other big-ticket scripted projects in development

Launch will boost TV Everywhere service HBO Go

As was the case with HBO in the US, HBO Europe's drive into original content started out with documentaries. "We thought they were a good way to tap into local stories and there was good marketing, PR and viewer value in making docs for a certain amount, rather than bringing out ads for the channels," says HBO Europe CEO Linda Jensen.

The move into scripted duly followed with *In Treatment*, the Israeli-originated series that was remade for HBO in the US. A local version was made in Romania and subsequently in HBO's other key territories, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. Another show with Israeli heritage was also remade locally, with a Hungarian version of *Shall We Kiss*. A second season of the relationship drama will follow this year, as will a Romanian version.

Burning Bush takes the original programming drive to a new level. Whereas *In Treatment* was relatively easy and affordable to produce with the action primarily taking place on one contained set, the new miniseries was shot on location and had 100 speaking parts. Originally conceived as a feature film, the show is produced by Czech production firm Nutprodukce, and focused on events following 20 year-old student Jan Palach's self-immolation in Wenceslas Square in 1969. Over three, 80-minute episodes, it follows the legal efforts of his family and their lawyer to clear his name in the face of the Communist propaganda machine. It is shot in Czech.

"It does something great TV drama, and HBO drama, does: it surprises the audience," says Antony Root, the ex-Sony and Granada executive who, since early-2011, has been executive VP, original programming and production at HBO Europe. "The audience thinks this is a film about Jan Palach, but it's really a longer look at events after his death. It is the first event miniseries produced in the region and the first of what I hope will be a number of them."

The series will premiere on HBO in the Czech Republic on January 27 and play out on subsequent Sundays, before being shown throughout the region. Root hopes it will ultimately also be seen further afield.

"The subject matter is hugely resonant in the Czech Republic and the wider Central Europe region, but this transcends its locality with universal themes of good versus evil and individuals being morally tested. No other broadcaster or premium cable channel would do it." With safe, entertainment format-driven schedules, the region's commercial broadcasters have created a window of opportunity and demand for HBO's edgier, more challenging content.

"For some reason and despite all of the money the terrestrials have made, they haven't gone that way and we are in a perfect position to do the stuff they won't," Jensen notes.

Burning Bush director Agnieszka Holland agrees: "Traditional TV in those countries is pretty weak; it is worse than in Communist times in some ways. It's very commercial in a primitive way and more ambitious projects are relegated to late at night or don't happen at all." HBO Europe's original content strategy, meanwhile, is inextricably linked to the launch of HBO Go, the TV Everywhere service that is now available in all of the territories in which HBO Europe operates. HBO needs to build a catalogue of its own shows in order to provide the depth of programming Go requires.

“Going against the current trend and not coproducing means that HBO has all rights and can exploit *Burning Bush* and other originals on Go or any other platform.

“We’ve invested a lot into both efforts and it’s a two-pronged strategy, it’s a way of ensuring that as we move into our digital future, technically and from a content point of view, we are a great attraction for viewers,” Jensen explains. “We need to build a library of local product because that has meaningfully added value on HBO Go. Strategically we want to build a library to sit alongside the US HBO content [HBO has access to all of the HBO US series under an output agreement].”

Looking ahead there will be more tent-pole programming and the next wave is already in development. “We already have stuff of a similar stature to *Burning Bush* in the works in our other markets,” Jensen confirms.

Agnieszka Holland: a direct connection

Agnieszka Holland is the Oscar-nominated Polish auteur whose big-screen credits include *Europa Europa* and 2011’s *In Darkness*. Her small-screen work is marked by an association with David Simon, creator of *The Wire*, and she has worked on several installments of that show. When TBI caught up with her to talk about *Burning Bush* she was in New Orleans working on the finale to another David Simon show, *Treme*.

Agnieszka Holland’s links to *Burning Bush* run much deeper than being a director-for-hire. As a student in Prague in the 1960s she saw and was involved with many events surrounding the Prague Spring.

“I have a very direct connection with *Burning Bush*, I knew some of the real-life characters and was part of the student movement in Prague at that time,” she says. “The project was written by a Czech writer [Stepan Hulík] and developed by two Czech producers [Tomáš Hrub and Pavla Kubecková]. I was surprised it could be written by someone in their 20s because it reflects the reality of that time so well. I thought the script was accurate and fresh.”

Although the series is in Czech, Holland says the miniseries will resonate beyond the CEE region with its relatable themes about the human condition.

In an era when filmmakers are moving from big to small screen, Holland divides her time between both mediums. TV was the right platform for this story, the director says: “It allowed us to really speak about the reality of the characters in a more epic way, to show their development and complexity. The best TV is like the great Nineteenth Century novel, it allows you to show the totality of the situation and the miniseries is a very attractive form.”

Having worked for HBO in the US, Holland senses the same creative ambitions at its European division.

She says: “I’m very grateful to HBO in the States for opening up a new avenue for new subjects, writers and directors. HBO Europe is trying to do the same: to create important, ambitious projects rooted in the countries in which it is based.” Holland adds that working with HBO in the US and Europe is a similar experience. “In some ways it is better because it is a smaller structure and it is easier to reach people at the top,” she says.



HBO Europe to air first original mini-series, hopeful for wider distribution

January 21, 2013

HBO Europe will air its first move into big-budget original mini-series, the Agnieszka Holland-directed three-part *Burning Bush*, on HBO Czech Republic from next Sunday, following a theatrical showing of the first part to an invited audience in Prague this Wednesday.

Burning Bush, whose storyline deals with the aftermath of the self-immolation of student Jan Palach in Prague in 1969 in protest against the Russian invasion of the country the previous August, will also have a theatrical premiere at the Rotterdam Film Festival on January 30 and will be shown at the Karlovy Vary Film Festival in the Czech Republic later this year.

As well as airing on HBO services in central and eastern Europe, the broadcaster is hopeful that the series will also secure distribution in western Europe and further afield.

At a press event in Prague at which the series was shown in full, Antony Root, vice-president, original programming and production, HBO Europe, said, "We are very hopeful that we will arrange distribution in western Europe, and we were very excited to learn that our confrères in the US were excited about it."

Speaking to *DTVE*, HBO Europe CEO Linda Jensen said the HBO in the US had so far declined to relinquish its right of first refusal on the show.

Burning Bush was fully funded by HBO Europe with some support from the Czech ministry of culture.

Root said that HBO Europe would look to develop further high-profile series in the region. "Our job is to find space in the schedule, the funding and the local talent and create a framework and environment in which they can do work they can't do on public TV or commercial TV."

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ON PARLE DE SÉRIES
ET EN PLUS ON LES REGARDE

HBO Europe va bientôt diffuser sa première série originale

HBO Europe, disponible dans de nombreux pays de l'Europe de l'est, a récemment adapté plusieurs formats israéliens tels que Be Tipul (la version d'origine de In Treatment) ou encore Shall We Kiss. A partir du 27 janvier, la première véritable création originale du groupe va arriver sur les écrans tchèques avec la diffusion de la mini-série Burning Bush, dont le tournage et le budget dépassent toutes les productions précédentes.

La mini-série, à l'origine développée pour être un film, est centrée sur les événements qui ont suivi l'immolation d'un jeune étudiant tchèque au Wenceslas Square de Prague en 1969. Elle racontera les efforts de sa famille et leur avocat pour laver son nom face à la machine propagandiste communiste. Burning Bush a été réalisé par Agnieszka Holland (The Wire) et est composée de 3 épisodes de 80 minutes.

Même si la série est entièrement tournée en tchèque, l'ambition de HBO Europe est de la proposer d'abord dans tous les territoires où le groupe est présent, puis ensuite de la vendre à l'international. D'autres projets sont actuellement en développement pour les autres marchés du centre de l'Europe.



Agnieszka Holland's Czech 'human torch' movie to premiere in Prague

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Director Agnieszka Holland's TV mini-series about Jan Palach, who burnt himself to death 44 years ago in protest against the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, premieres in Prague, Wednesday.

Agnieszka Holland, whose last film *In Darkness* won numerous awards in Poland and abroad, was involved in the student protest movement in Czechoslovakia at the time of the so-called Prague Spring, while a student of the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague.

The three episode film, *Burning Bush*, had its press screening at the Grand Hall of Prague University, where Jan Palach studied history.

He was just 20 years-old when he burnt himself to death in protest against the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968.

Referring to her own time in Czechoslovakia, Agnieszka Holland said that the events following Palach's death deprived her of any lingering illusions about communism.

Burning Bush is not a docu-drama focusing on Palach's suicide but a story of a young lawyer representing Palach's mother.

The movie follows the transformation of society from mass resistance against the communist regime to growing resignation and normalization.

Produced by HBO Europe, the film will be shown at the International Film Festival in Rotterdam on 30 January, followed by television screenings in many countries, including Poland next month.

Burning Bush is dedicated to four people who burnt themselves to death in protest against the invasion of Czechoslovakia, Jan Palach, Jan Zajic, Evzen Plockov and Poland's Ryszard Siwiec.

Meanwhile, Holland's previous film, *In Darkness*, has been premiered in Rome and goes on general release in Italy on Thursday, three days before Holocaust Memorial day, which is marked annually on 27 January.

In Darkness is the gripping true story of Leopold Socha, a Polish sewer worker in Lvov who keeps a group of Jews hidden in the sewers under the noses of the occupying Nazi forces, bringing them food and supplies, and saving them from the Holocaust. In an interview for the Italian Catholic daily 'Avvenire', Agnieszka Holland said that *In Darkness* was the most difficult project in her career, mainly in view of the conditions of work on location, in the sewers. "I also felt a great sense of responsibility, realizing that telling yet another Holocaust story was not an easy task," the Polish director said.

One of the Italian critics referred to Leopold Socha, the courageous worker who first sheltered the Jews for money but whose motives became gradually purer, as the Polish Schindler.

In Darkness won an Oscar nomination in the Best Foreign Language Film category last year. **(mk/pg)**



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HBO drama Burning Bush delivers first film treatment of Palach story

22-01-2013 16:16 | [Ian Willoughby](#)

The new HBO miniseries *Hořící Keř*, or *Burning Bush*, receives a gala premiere at a Prague cinema on Wednesday night and kicks off on TV screens next Sunday. Over 23 years after the fall of communism, it is, remarkably, the first film treatment of one of the most dramatic moments of modern Czech history – the self-immolation of Jan Palach in January 1969.

Palach, a Charles University student, carried out the radical action in protest against the Soviet occupation that had begun five months earlier and society's acceptance of it.

Burning Bush was written by Štěpán Hulík, who is 28. The screenwriter says he first heard about Jan Palach's self-sacrifice as a child – when the student's remains were returned to Prague in 1990 – and has had a great interest in the story ever since.

"His act fascinates me really a lot, and very profoundly. I think his act was an act of unselfish love, which he was able to show to all people.

"And I think it could be something like a challenge for us. I mean, if Jan Palach was able to sacrifice his own life, then we also could be able to do something to change something in society, to change something in the world around us. This I think is something that I think will be with us forever, this legacy."

Are there any particular myths about Jan Palach? Or do people have misunderstandings about what he did and who he was?

"Yes. Very often it's said that he was just a crazy young man and there is no need to tell you that I absolutely disagree with this statement.

"But in our movie we were trying not to convince people that Jan Palach was either a hero or just crazy. We wanted to leave this question to people, and to let them answer for themselves."

[Agnieszka Holland, photo: CTK](#) For HBO Europe's biggest production to date, the company turned to Agnieszka Holland, who has previously helmed episodes of the hit HBO dramas *The Wire* and *Treme*.

The Oscar-nominated Polish director could offer a unique perspective, having been a politically engaged student at Prague's FAMU film school in the period when the three-part drama is set.

Holland – who was herself briefly jailed for distributing illicit materials – recalls the backdrop to Palach's desperate act in the post-invasion period.

"It was a society in which hope was broken, a society of disintegration, resignation, fear and atomisation. What I was seeing...you know it was my first experience of this kind, so it stayed in me very deeply, as a deeper truth about the strength of the society – how long people can fight for something and in which circumstances, and when they give up."

TV news anchor and actress Emma Smetana, 24, has a small role in *Burning Bush*, playing a girl believed to have been Palach's girlfriend. Smetana – who says people today are not in a position to judge his actions – has a more personal connection to his story than most people of her age.

[Jan Palach](#) *"My grandparents knew Jan Palach, because they were in the same high school and they were in the same generation. So the whole heroic act that he did – and I think there's absolutely no doubt that that's what it was – was a bit relativised by them, in the sense that they talked him about as a quiet, discrete, not particularly shining personality. They said that they almost wouldn't notice him actually at school, and that he was an average guy.*

"I think that actually reinforces the impression that I have of this act – that heroes are not born as heroes. It's somehow the general context that pushes some normal, plain, ordinary people into acts that are then shown by history to be incredible and exceptional."

Burning Bush begins with Jan Palach pouring two buckets of petrol over himself and setting himself alight at the top of Wenceslas Square. There are no close-ups of the actor's face, allowing the makers to use actual images of the student and to skilfully incorporate footage of his massive funeral.



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The miniseries maps the aftermath of his death, principally the legal efforts of Palach's mother to fight a lie put about by a Communist MP. He claimed the student had been duped by Western agents and believed he was using a flammable fluid that would not harm him.

['Burning Bush', photo: HBO](#) The real hero of Burning Bush is Dagmar Burešová, the Palach family's lawyer, who paid a price personally for representing them. There is a moving moment at the end when a title informs the audience that the brave Burešová had gone on to become Czechoslovakia's first post-communist minister of justice.

Writer Štěpán Hulík explains why the series focuses on the lawyer's fight.

"Of course, usually when you try to make a biography, you tell the story of your hero from the very beginning and then through his or her whole life to the end. But in this case I was sure that this approach wouldn't help us. It wouldn't allow us to say what's most important about Jan Palach's act.

"So when I realised there was another story – that of lawyer Dagmar Burešová – I realised that from her perspective we would be really able to tell Jan's story in the most interesting and surprising, maybe peculiar, way.

"What is really important to me is that in some way Dagmar Burešová was, I think, someone who took over the torch...the legacy of Jan Palach. She was continuing in the things that he was trying to do."

['Burning Bush', photo: HBO](#) While Burešová took on the Communist authorities, Burning Bush shows how many around her were defeated by them, quietly accepting their fates in the "normalisation" period that saw hard-line Communists reassert their control in the wake of the Soviet invasion. Agnieszka Holland, whose husband is Slovak, describes the atmosphere then.

"It was a very, very sad country. People really didn't have a hope that change could come. So they accepted it. They made all of these pro-Communist gestures, but after work, at home, they cursed the regime, but not very loudly, and drank beer, and so on."

One character, a lawyer colleague of Burešová's, is blackmailed into betraying her by an StB agent who presents him with a stark choice: collaborate, or your daughter will not be allowed to study. I asked the director whether the audience ought to feel sympathy with those forced to compromise.

"It's not a question of sympathy, but a question of understanding, and the question you ask yourself: What would I do in those circumstances? You can ask yourself the question: What I would do? Or what is really important to me. How much am I able to sacrifice?"

"I think that every generation has this test to pass. In times that are not heroic...sometimes of course, you know, in times of heroic struggles and when the whole nation or society is together, that is in some way easier...but the truth about ourselves comes in those quiet times."

['Burning Bush', photo: HBO](#) **Compared to for instance making other HBO shows, like The Wire or Treme, did you feel a great sense of responsibility making this film, because you have to stick to the historical truth to a certain degree, whereas with The Wire, say, it's just a fiction?**

"There's some amount of fiction here. We decided to mix fiction with the real story. But it was fictionalised. Half of the characters are real and half are compilations of real characters.

"You know I felt responsibility as a non-Czech person who, on such a scale, is telling this story. Because the only thing existing before it was TV documentaries. So it was a responsibility in that I could be attacked by the nation for screwing their national subject [laughs].

"On the other hand, they had twenty-something years to tell the story, and if they didn't, why not me? My experience – both my Czechoslovak experience and my life experience after – made me, I think, a person who had the right to tell this story without any kind of complexes."

The four-hour-plus drama will get its international premiere at the Rotterdam Film Festival next week and will be screened by HBO in numerous European states, primarily those which, like the Czech Republic, have a communist past.

['Burning Bush', photo: HBO](#) Some viewers at a preview screening in Prague last week felt that the subject matter had perhaps been ever so slightly simplified to make it more palatable to an international audience.

Be that as it may, Burning Bush is a highly impressive and occasionally moving miniseries with extremely high production values, fantastic acting and excellent camerawork, with many scenes filmed at the actual locations where the events portrayed occurred