



BURNING BUSH

DIRECTED BY ACADEMY AWARD NOMINEE AGNIESZKA HOLLAND

Reviews



August 2, 2013 | 06:41PM PT

This taut, nuanced longform work from Agnieszka Holland reps a valuable contribution to our understanding of the past half-century of Czech history.

Alissa Simon

In January 1969, Czech university student Jan Palach set himself aflame in Prague's Wenceslas Square to protest the Soviet occupation of his homeland. His brave deed and painful death sparked massive spin control by the Czech government and its Soviet overlords, rather than the expressions of dissent he hoped to inspire, as chronicled in the excellent "Burning Bush." Expertly helmed by Agnieszka Holland, this three-part HBO Europe miniseries is a compelling slice of history in which fear can trump idealism and the truth doesn't always lead to justice. It's a taut, nuanced work that should easily connect at a human level with upscale offshore auds.

Already broadcast in Eastern Europe, and Toronto-bound after earlier fest play including Rotterdam and Karlovy Vary, —Burning Bush reps a valuable contribution to our understanding of the past half-century of Czech history. Rather than telling Palach's story in straightforward biopic form, Stepan Hulik's intelligent screenplay concentrates on the impact his self-immolation had within the social and political climate of the time. He centers the action on charismatic attorney Dagmar Buresova (Tatiana Pauhofova) and the remaining members of the Palach family — Jan's mother Libuse (Jaroslava Pokorna) and brother Jiri (Petr Stach) — who hire Dagmar to sue parliament member Vilem Novy (Martin Huba) for libel. After Jan's death, Novy made a much-reported speech that scandalously belittled him and suggested the existence of a false conspiracy.

Surrounding these principal characters is a large, well-etched ensemble, encompassing the student protesters who attempt to preserve the remaining ideals of the Prague Spring and publicly defend it against systematic repression, as well as the STB, the Czech secret police, Pressespiegel für Montag, 5. August 2013

who deal mercilessly with any activity that could be considered anti-communist. There are also supporting players, such as Dagmar's physician husband, Radim (Jan Budar), who, much like Libuse and Jiri, becomes a casualty of a family member's heroism and sacrifice. Although preparations for the court case and its ultimate hearing take up much of the latter two episodes, the longer first chapter shows the lengths to which the organs of the state go to defuse Jan's action. Fearing that more human torches will appear, police major Jires (Ivan Trojan) blackmails Jan's student friend (Emma Smetana) into appearing on live television and saying that the dying man has asked her to request that no one follow his example.

While the compassionate doctor (Tatjana Medvecka) treating Jan has the wherewithal to stand up to the police and the STB, not everyone is so lucky. Dagmar's mentor and law-office partner, Vladimir Charouz (Adrian Jastraban), seems to be a highly principled man. But his political-activist daughter (Jenovefa Bokova) reps a weak point that a sinister secret-police officer (Igor Bares) ferrets out almost immediately. Even the judge (Ivana Uhlirova) presiding over the Novy case is explicitly told by her superiors what the verdict should be.

Neophyte screenwriter Hulik won a literary award for his book — Kinematografie zapomneni, in which he mapped out the state of Czech film during the period of so-called normalization, and he clearly understands how much of Czech society at the time was paralyzed by fear and the feeling that things could not be changed. Given the complexity of the story he tells, some characters and events are necessarily fictionalized.



But the doomed court case at the center was real, and Dagmar Buresova went on to become the first Czech justice minister of the post-communist era.

Holland, who studied at the famed Czech film school FAMU and actively participated in the events portrayed, displays a singular feeling for the material, not only for having lived through the period, but also because it aligns with a key focus in her work: the question of human morality and how it withstands a fraught situation. Her experience directing longform cable TV series such as —The Killing and HBO's —Treme and —The Wire lends a fluidity to her style, and she confidently visualizes complicated details in a compressed but gripping fashion.

Ace lensing by Martin Strba and Rafal Paradowski, blending perfectly with archival footage, leads the good-looking tech package. Costumes, production design and locations, with the help of extensive VFX work, supply an authentic period feel, while the haunting score conveys a continual sense of anxiety and danger.

Film Review: 'Burning Bush'

Reviewed at Karlovy Vary Film Festival (Special Events), July 5, 2013. (Also in Rotterdam Film Festival — Signals; Toronto Film Festival — Special Presentations.) Running time: 231 MIN. Original title: "Horici ker"

Production

(Czech Republic) An HBO Europe production in co-production with Nutprodukce. (International sales: Beta Film, Munich.) Executive producers, Antony Root, Tereza Polachova, Tomas Hruby, Pavla Kubeckova.

Pressespiegel für Montag, 5. August 2013

Crew

Directed by Agnieszka Holland. Screenplay, Stepan Hulik. Camera (color, HD), Martin Strba, Rafal Paradowski; editor, Pavel Hrdlicka; music, Antoni Komasa-Lazarkiewicz; production designer, Milan Bycek; costume designer, Katarina Holla; VFX, Boris Masnik; sound, Petr Cechak.

Film

Breaking and Broken News

Will McAvoy, meet Jan Palach.

By David Thomson

Tatiana Pauhofová as Dagmar Burešová in “Burning Bush”

Hbo is happy to have “the newsroom” back for a second season, and anyone who admires Aaron Sorkin half as much as he does will be pleased, too. It’s an entertainment, like a film by Capra or Hawks, lit up with Sorkin’s cockeyed faith in the antique news business. Amid the sharp talk, the handsome people, and the ingeniously interwoven storylines, Sorkin’s delight in his own skill embraces a fanciful newsroom where so many engaging characters—the best, the brightest, and the most eccentric—are stars. So Will McAvoy is an Edward R. Murrow for today who has difficulty putting his pants on, and MacKenzie McHale (Emily Mortimer) can save an on-air crisis in seconds, and isn’t she wearing a new bra as she hurries back and forth—isn’t it emotion in motion? I wouldn’t miss “The Newsroom.” But I resist the suggestion that it has much to do with our world and our need to know. Just as “The West Wing” was Sorkin imagining himself president, “The Newsroom” is his chance to think it might be fun to run a news show.

But HBO seems less certain about what to do with a mini-series called “Burning Bush,” made for HBO by Agnieszka Holland, in Czech, about the case of Jan Palach. You may not know that name, but I’ll bet Will McAvoy could give you chapter and verse. On January 16, 1969, the twenty-year-old Palach, a student of history and political economy, used gasoline to set light to himself in Wenceslas Square in Prague. He had burns on 80 percent of his body before bystanders smothered the flames, and he died three days later. He left a note protesting the Soviet invasion of August 1968, intended to extinguish the “Prague Spring.”

Palach called for the end of censorship, the closure of the Soviet newspaper *Zpráva*, and a general strike. His action implied that he was just first in a group that would all set fire to themselves. There were some other burnings, but it seems likely that the group plan was a myth. Still, “Burning Bush” makes “The Newsroom” look like indulged kids playing at *All the President’s Men*. If HBO wants their hit show, so be it. But they could take a chance on the real demoralization of Eastern Europe in 1969. After all, it has several resemblances to our America now.

But you may never see “Burning Bush”— not if you weren’t at the recent festival of Karlovy Vary, or in Prague for the television premiere—so I should spell it out for you. Notice first that Palach does not really appear. We see the young man, and then a whirl of flames in a reflective window. In the hospital, we observe the white muslin trying to protect him. Instead, we see the distraught mother and some student friends, and then we meet the lawyer, Dagmar Burešová, who reluctantly takes the case that is the action of the film. In the attempt to evade or to distort Palach’s gesture, the authorities spread the report that he was crazy—isn’t it insane to oppose the modern state? One blackguard (a Czech who was previously a KGB informer) voiced this slur and the Palach family sued him for libel. Dr. Burešová is the lawyer who decides to take their case, though she knows the remote chance of success and the guaranteed reprisals.

Agnieszka Holland is Polish by birth, the child of journalists. She lost grandparents in the Warsaw Ghetto. Her father died in mysterious circumstances when she was thirteen, after police interrogation. She went to Prague to study film, and was there for the famous spring. Later she spent six weeks in prison, and acquired fluent Czech.

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So she knew the city re-created in “Burning Bush”: the squat cars, the cramped flats, the cobbled alleys, the desolate rural railway stations, the grim simplicity of life, the grace in a cup of coffee, and the attention drawn to anything other than drab, gray costume. With that anonymous clothing goes the pinched guarded faces of many Czechs, accustomed to instability, dread, and the lack of hope. What prompted Palach was less a need for particular reform than the overall despair of the country. He sacrificed himself. The lawyer in the film is the only movie-like person on view in that she is played by an attractive actress, Tatiana Pauhofová. That casting may be excessive, or HBO’s longing for something good to look at. As it happens, the actress is outstanding, but we do have to buy into the equation between her looks and her virtue. It is worth knowing that Dr. Dagmar Burešová was a real person who became minister for justice under Václav Havel.

“Burning Bush” comes in three episodes, over three hours in all, in drained color, newsreel intercut with the drama, and with a gallery of haunted faces. It re-creates an occupied country, and a recent past of great hardship and worse fears. That’s the great contrast it makes with “The Newsroom,” in which the journalists are cute and aglow with the self-delight of actors who are employed. (If you ever want to have a lost soul in a film, find an unemployed actor. But the moment you hire him, he’ll brighten up.)

I suspect Aaron Sorkin believes that “The Newsroom” is on the cutting edge of our conscience, as well as being a captivating fifty-two minutes once a week. In this second series, there promises to be an extended arc in which Will and his newsroom (in ardent pursuit of ugly truths) get into legal troubles. But Sorkin is drawn to those face-saving plot devices.

So in “The Newsroom” he frets and fusses over whether Will and MacKenzie should be married (in the way of Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell in *His Girl Friday*) without ever realizing the way marriage (that concluding institution) is now beyond defense or beside the point. Sorkin believes that politics are personal. He has a point, and it is surely the code by which the American movie has existed. Thus, in *The Social Network*, which he wrote, there is a gossipy eagerness for Mark Zuckerberg the indolent scoundrel, but none at all in the complications and demoralizations brought about by the universe of Facebook.

So Will’s program agonizes over whether to acknowledge the Casey Anthony trial, and never notices that America at large prefers to know more about “tot mom” than about Iran, Afghanistan, or the banking crisis. Will and MacKenzie are beautiful stars above the news, with the merry turmoil of their lives. You can trace this ethos back to the noir heroics of Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman (with an assist from Jason Robards Jr.) saving the Constitution. That was a slice from the old pie that started with Jimmy Stewart and Gary Cooper as Mr. Smith and Mr. Deeds. But the Constitution now seems like a board game manipulated by the hallowed few whose task it was to protect and preserve it.

So turning to “Burning Bush” is to go back in time and to come forward in sensibility. It refers to a bush on fire, but never consumed or dying: an expression of Palach’s legacy. Holland, who has worked in many countries with honor, knows enough to realize how far we keep slipping toward the indifference and the ruthlessness and the helplessness that are destroying our political culture. Perhaps that sounds alarmist when, like Will, we can relax in our spacious apartments listening to cool rock, sipping a single malt, and brooding on our love lives. We can seem like enviable figures in advertisements, but we are dogged by ghosts of our former selves.



Whereas Agnieszka Holland has made *Europa Europa*, *In Darkness*, and a version of *Washington Square*, while also doing a fine job with episodes of “The Wire” and the pilot of “Treme,” both HBO creations. The America that goes to the Middle East more with hardware than local languages is supposedly aggravated by having to read subtitles for the Czech language. Is it asking too much for us to know anything about Czech history—a Masaryk is mentioned in “Burning Bush”—or about the significance of a Jan Palach? There are scenes in the new “Newsroom” where Neal (Dev Patel) goes to an Occupy Wall Street meeting and gets to talking with a pretty young woman, except that she declines to be a leader or to be political, because in America “occupy” is a vacant lifestyle, not a sacrifice. “The Newsroom,” more than it knows, but in ways it cannot hide, concerns a country and a communications system at the end of their tether. “Burning Bush” is about a society that was desperate, or numb, and had to decide between the two. At the very least, we deserve to see both. (For anyone concerned, I believe that “Burning Bush” will play on a large screen at an American film festival in the next few months.) o

David Thomson is a film critic for the new republic.

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*).

SCREENDAILY

"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 finds religion 'Burning Bush' mini centers on 1969 martyrdom

By [Will Tizard](#)

HBO Europe has seen success in its four key European territories -- the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Romania -- with formats like those based on Israeli hit "BeTipul," which features smart well-written characters that can define the brand. Now, the cabler is adding a passion project to the mix.

HBO's most ambitious original European miniseries to date, "Burning Bush," tells the tale of history student Jan Palach, who set himself alight in 1969 to protest the Soviet-backed occupation of Prague. The suicide is perhaps the most influential Czech act of conscience since Protestant minister Jan Hus got himself burned at the stake in the Middle Ages.

Directed by Agnieszka Holland, the moody, often chilling three-part drama approaches Palach's near-mythic act of martyrdom from a unique angle, following the scramble by authorities to discredit the 20-year-old, and his family's hopeless legal actions to defend his reputation.

HBO Europe's veep for original programming and production, Antony Root, would not disclose the project's budget, but its tech specs and cast are comparable to splashy HBO U.S. productions, and it's the most enterprising project yet launched in the 15 territories the European division reaches.

Holland, one of the rare European directors who alternates work on the Continent with helming U.S. projects, ranging from HBO's "Treme" to AMC's "The Killing," says that after reading Czech scribe Stepan Hulik's script, she didn't hesitate in committing to the demanding Prague-lensed project. Though she likened the miniseries to shooting three feature films, her memories of Palach's sacrifice from her own student dissident days made the choice easy.

"When you are doing episodic television in the U.S.," she says, "it's just a short commitment, and I am in some way serving somebody's vision. 'Burning Bush' was much more a personal project from the point of view of my involvement and ambitions."

While Holland notes that the project consumed a year of her life, she adds that the 50 shooting days gave her more breathing room than she often gets creating work for U.S. cable shows. "We had more time for each part," she says, comparing the creative and economic logic of the production to that of an independent feature.

Root says "Burning Bush" is the first of HBO Europe's original-language event miniseries. One or two such productions, which include longer drama series as well, are slated yearly for each of the cabler's four key European territories. The first "Bush" installment aired Jan. 27; the mini also unspooled in the Rotterdam fest.

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.

WorldScreen.com

NEW YORK: Antony Root, the executive VP of original programming and production at HBO Europe, talks to TV Drama about the ambitious three-parter *Burning Bush*.

Based on real characters and real events, the haunting drama *Burning Bush* has been billed as HBO Europe's highest profile project to date. The three-part mini-series focuses on a Prague history student, Jan Palach, who set himself on fire in protest against the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1969. A young female lawyer, Dagmar Burešová, stepped up to defend Jan's family—and his legacy—in a trial against the communist government. The story that plays out is one of basic human values, truth, honor, justice and courage.

"*Burning Bush* was brought to HBO by two young Czech producers, Tomas Hruby and Pavla Kubeckova," explains Antony Root, the executive VP of original programming and production at HBO Europe. "The original script was a graduation project by the screenwriter, Stepan Hulik, a contemporary of Tomas and Pavla at Prague's renowned film school FAMU. These young people worked with HBO executive Tereza Polachova and the director, Agnieszka Holland, to develop the script into a mini-series."

Root said that what immediately appealed to him about the project was that its story is profoundly resonant for the people of Czechoslovakia. "Its starting point—the personal sacrifice of Jan Palach in January 1969—is a historical event embedded in the consciousness of the nation. The story that unfolds is also relevant to all the people of Central Europe who, following the end of WW II, lived under communism for almost 50 years. Beyond that, *Burning Bush* has universal story values: heroic self-sacrifice, family tragedy, the struggle of good versus evil and the moral testing of individuals under pressure. For these reasons we believe it will also find an audience outside the Central European region."

Burning Bush premiered on HBO Europe in the Czech Republic on January 27 and the following episodes played out over the next two Sundays. The mini-series had its international premiere at the International Film Festival Rotterdam on January 30 and HBO in the Netherlands started airing the piece on February 3. It's rolling out on HBO Europe in other territories in March. "We are currently working on a strategy for international distribution outside the HBO territories," says Root. "We strongly believe that work of this quality will find an audience in both Western Europe and North America."

HBO Europe has engaged in other original scripted drama productions—last year it produced second seasons of *In Treatment* in Poland, Romania and the Czech Republic as well as a first season of the show in Hungary—but *Burning Bush* helped to raise the bar.

"*Burning Bush* is our first event mini-series," Root says. "In its scale and complexity—both physical and creative—it is our most ambitious project yet. From a physical point of view, it required a large cast, close attention to period detail in design, costume and props and the recreation of locations that have changed significantly since 1969, such as Wenceslas Square, which was recreated with extensive CGI at a tram museum. From a creative point of view, thanks to the vision of the writer Stepan Hulik and the director Agnieszka Holland, the series captures what it must have felt like to live in Czechoslovakia during the so-called normalization that followed the Prague Spring, and achieves an emotional profundity rare in television drama."



Burning Bush: the meaning of sacrifice

by Dorota Hartwich

07/03/2013 - When **Agnieszka Holland** ([interview](#)) brings to the screen the trajectory of a martyr, hero, individual or genius, from Solomon Perel in *Europa, Europa* to *Copying Beethoven*, not forgetting *Total Eclipse* and the *True Story of Janosik and Uhorcik*, or even Leopold Socha in *In Darkness*, she always does it in an intimate way, without erecting any monuments to them. This is also the case in her new opus, *Burning Bush*, a television series in three episodes dedicated to Jan Palach, a student who set himself on fire in 1969 in Prague to protest against the communist dictatorship and the invasion of his country by the Soviet Union.

(The article continues below - Commercial information)

Jan Palach is, however, hardly present in the movie. His action opens the movie, but we only see him for a few minutes and his face is never shown completely. Instead, the focus is placed on the witnesses: we see Palach's desperate act through the eyes of a young mother, her three or four year-old daughter, passengers getting off the tram, a ticket inspector, a student who happens to be walking by... The hero himself is not the centre of attention because it is the context, the social environment and the impact of Jan Palach's act that is of interest to Agnieszka Holland.

Burning Bush is not a historical film representing a heroic action, but rather the reflection of people, their emotions and attitudes, with all their strengths and weaknesses: their fear of the system, compelled lies, courage, sacrifice, disenchantment, solitude, and finally, hope, which only emerges 20 years later. To conclude her account, Agnieszka Holland indeed shows scenes of the commemoration of the 20th anniversary of Palach's sacrifice in January 1989, a commemoration which led to several days of important demonstrations (now called "the Palach Week") announcing the fall of the dictatorship.

Beyond a very strong narrative dynamism, which sometimes makes the film closer to a thriller, the choice of the human perspective gives *Burning Bush* the authenticity of a documentary and brushes away any risk of falling into sentimentalism. One of these human dimensions, remarkable and moving, sees the parents of young rebels worrying about the destructive nature of political opposition: "What if my son were inspired by Palach and followed his example?"... Because Jan Palach's act also had its detractors. Just as the director perfectly outlines, his action led to very strong emotions and admiration in Czech society, but it also brought about a real sense of anxiety and serious doubts. The question of the meaning of sacrifice is clearly central to the film, which is also dedicated to Czech citizens Jan Zajic and Evzen Plocek and Polish national Ryszard Siwiec, who also set themselves on fire during the same struggle.

Produced by HBO Europe, *Burning Bush* will be shown on HBO channels in 15 European countries. Unveiled at the Rotterdam Film Festival, it has a place already reserved on the programme of the 48th edition of the Karlovy Vary Festival.



Agnieszka Holland's Moving New HBO Miniseries 'Burning Bush' Depicts a World Aflame

Agnieszka Holland's 'Burning Bush' HBO Europe

Before HBO Europe came along and turned "Burning Bush" into its highest profile production, the idea for the miniseries, which received its international premiere at the 42nd Rotterdam Film Festival, was turned down by Czech television. Written by neophyte screenwriter Štěpán Hulík and directed by the Czech-educated Polish filmmaker Agnieszka Holland ("Europa, Europa"), "Burning Bush" restages a landmark event in modern Czech history. On January 16th, 1969, 21-year-old student Jan Palach set himself on fire in Prague's Wenceslas Square.

Part of a suicidal pact that a group of young students had made in opposition to the Soviet invasion, Palach's extreme gesture became a monument of resistance. Given the opportunistically abused nature of the subject and its potential for melodrama, the risk of inflicting audiences with a gold brick of mellifluous proportions was high. But "Burning Bush" instead veers away from the pseudo-historical fairy tales Hollywood specializes in to deliver a master class in modern historical drama.

Holland's miniseries contravenes the "hero biopic" convention -- that tendency to romanticize the protagonist's life -- by not recounting the young idealist's exploits but focusing instead on the void generated by his death. The intimate tragedy of a familial loss is violated by the callous lies of a ruthless bureaucracy that tries to deprive Palach's death of its political significance by attributing it to an imaginary right-wing conspiracy.

The film begins with the self-immolation of Palach only to go on to recount the dauntless struggle of the student movement and a young lawyer to rescue his martyrdom from political manipulation and the oblivion of history.

As the newly imposed regime sifts through Prague's university -- Holland was a student herself at the time of the events -- in its impassive quest to quell any form of resistance, history is already being rewritten in the corridors of power. Palach's mother and her other son decide to sue a functionary of the Communist party who has fabricated an elaborate if implausible lie (involving "cold fire") regarding the death of the young student.

"Burning Bush" manages to be genuinely moving without resorting to emotional blackmail.

Without indulging in simplistic duels between "good" and "evil," the film captures the petty corruptions of a society descending into the grey abyss of mistrust and paranoia. Combing historical drama with the understated strain of a procedural thriller, "Burning Bushes" convincingly depicts the political and daily life of a country in the throes of fear. Inexorably, like a spreading disease, the virus of compliance reaps its victims as people start informing on each other, desperate for a sad slice of personal security. The intrepid determination of the young lawyer, Palach's family and the student movement is all the more inspiring, for it's fuelled by an uncompromising thirst for justice rather than the vain hope to "legally" triumph (the verdict will of course be in favour of the regime).

"Burning Bush" is significant in its choice to depict the party functionary not as your typical studio villain but as a subservient bureaucrat whose sole allegiance is to his own miserable interests. "Truth is whatever is more convenient for the nation to hear," points out the indicted party member when confronted outside of the courtroom. Far from being some sort of Soviet line, the abovementioned is the kind of rhetoric one wouldn't be surprised hear uttered from someone like Tony Blair in regard to inexistent weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.



For this reason alone the film possesses a universal and lifelike dimension insofar as to how it shows how the struggle for freedom is often bookended by unhappy endings rather than uplifting triumphs. Adhering to an aesthetic and ethical composure that feels both just and brave, "Burning Bush" manages to be genuinely moving without resorting to emotional blackmail.

Stylistically the film delivers the kind of solid and slick visual storytelling to which the HBO brand has accustomed its viewers. The historical details are impeccable, from the accurate wardrobe choices to the chromatic rendition of a very bleak season, up to the remarkable use of "choreographically aged" locations. Verging more on the cinematic than on the more typical episodic structure of a TV series, "Burning Bush" is filled with sumptuous realizations that fitted the big screen elegantly. The miniseries format, on the other hand, perfectly accommodates a complex narrative that makes the most of its duration to distil an embroiled and realistic story.

It's worth noticing that the period the film explores was a crucial watershed in the history of Czech cinema, whose unruly new wave met in the Soviet tanks a most definite breakwater. One of the most creative and insubordinate generations of '60s filmmakers was dispersed by the Soviet invasion, with some emigrating abroad (Milos Forman and Holland herself) and others, like Věra Chytilová, being severely restricted in their domestic activities. "Burning Bush" started broadcasting last week in the Czech Republic and is already a major hit in the country, where social media is apparently teeming with debates about and around the work. After a cinematic year that saw the overwhelming success of present ("Zero Dark Thirty"), recent ("Argo") and distant ("Lincoln") hagiographical "re-enactments," "Burning Bush" offers a precious insight into how history can, and perhaps should, be narrated on screen, whether that screen be small or big.



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, a 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

22.01.2013 12:18

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