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vicarious

THE LAST WITNESS
PRODUCTION NOTES

INTRODUCTION

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Directed and Co-Written by Piotr Szkopiak (*Small Time Obsession*), THE LAST WITNESS is a political thriller based on true events.

Alex Pettyfer (*Magic Mike, I Am Number Four, Stormbreaker*) plays the lead role of Stephen Underwood, an ambitious journalist keen to prove his worth. Working for a local newspaper he spends his days covering inconsequential local events whilst on the lookout for a story that will catapult him into the big league. When he comes across a spate of suicides of Polish soldiers from a nearby Displaced Persons Camp, his journalistic instincts kick in.

Sensing a story, his first port of call is Colonel Janusz Pietrowski (Will Thorp – *Unspeakable, A.D. The Bible Continues*), a Liaison Officer for the re-settlement of Polish troops under British command. Their meeting leaves Stephen unsettled – something just doesn't quite ring true.

Stephen's lover is Jeanette Mitchell (Talulah Riley – *Pride & Prejudice, Westworld, St Trinians*), a Junior Commander in the Auxiliary Territorial Service working under Captain John Underwood Stephen's brother. Trapped in a marriage of convenience with a military intelligence officer, she shares Stephen's dream of escape. It is during one of their clandestine meetings that Stephen witnesses a confrontation between a local farmer and a new arrival at the camp, Michael Loboda (Robert Więckiewicz – *In Darkness, Walesa: Man Of Hope*). During the altercation Loboda lets slip his true identity.

From here Stephen's investigation escalates until he finds himself deeply embroiled in a dangerous, multi-layered conspiracy concerning the execution of 22,000 Polish military and civilians by Stalin's secret police.

This is a fictional re-telling of a bloody and heart-breaking story.

Rounding out the cast are Michael Gambon (*Harry Potter*) as newspaper editor Frank Hamilton, Piotr Stramowski (*Pitbull: New Orders*) as Loboda's confidante Andrzej Nowak and Henry Lloyd-Hughes (*Madame Bovary*) as intelligence officer Mason Mitchell.

THE TRUTH BEHIND THE STORY

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Director Piotr Szkopiak's mother, Emilia Szkopiak, was deported to Siberia by the Soviets in 1940. In 1942 she left the Soviet Union and eventually settled in England in 1947 where she continues to live to this day. Her father and the director's grandfather, Wojciech Stanislaw Wójcik, was executed in the Katyn Massacre.

Here we explore the truth behind the story:

- On 1 September 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland from the West.
- Sixteen days later on 17 September 1939, the Soviet Union invaded Poland from the East.
- 1-2 million Polish nationals were deported into the depths of Russia. They faced forced labour, squalid living conditions, starvation and disease. More than half died.
- Between September 1939 and the winter of 1940, Polish POWs were held in camps in Western Russia, the largest being Kozelsk, Ostashkov and Starobelsk. Here they were subjected to lengthy interrogations and relentless political agitation by NKVD officers. The prisoners assumed they would soon be released but the interviews were in effect a selection process to determine who would live and who would die.
- In April 1943 the retreating German Army discovered mass graves in the Katyn Forest in Western Russia. Over 4,000 Polish prisoners of war had been systematically executed, shot through the back of the head.
- At the Yalta Conference in February 1945 (the WWII meeting of the heads of the USA, UK & Soviet Union), Poland received the ultimate betrayal from the Allies when it allowed the Soviet Union to stay in control of the country after the war. At the time, the Soviet Union denied it had carried out the killings, blaming the Nazis. The evidence clearly pointed to the Soviets being responsible but the Western powers colluded to keep the truth from the public. Later, as Europe celebrated VE Day, the Poles who had fought alongside their Western allies to free their country from tyranny had nothing to celebrate as their country remained occupied and, in a further act of humiliation, Polish forces were excluded from the Allied Victory Parade in London in 1946.

- On 13 April 1990, the 47th anniversary of the discovery of the mass graves, the USSR formally expressed 'profound regret' and admitted the responsibility of the Soviet Secret Police. The day was declared a worldwide Katyn Memorial Day.

- In 1992, President Yeltsin released documentary evidence that Stalin himself had signed the order to execute the Poles.

- In 2003, to coincide with the 60th Anniversary of the first graves to be uncovered, the British Foreign Office published a detailed report about the British response to the Katyn Massacre. It continued to claim that it was never in possession of any conclusive proof that the Soviet Union had been responsible for the killings; a claim that has always been challenged by the Poles.

- In 2010 the Russian parliament formally declared Stalin to be responsible.

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT
Q&A WITH DIRECTOR PIOTR SZKOPIAK

Could you tell us a little about the events on which the film is based?

On 1 September 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland from the West. Sixteen days later, the Soviet Union invaded Poland from the East. The Polish Army fought on both fronts as best they could but were eventually overrun. In the East, the Polish military and intelligentsia were imprisoned in Soviet POW camps. That following winter, over a million Poles were deported deep into the Soviet Union – less than half survived. In April 1943, mass graves were uncovered in the Katyn Forest in Western Russia by the retreating German Army. Over 4,000 Polish prisoners of war had been systematically executed, each one with a bullet through the back of the head. To date 22,000 Poles died in what has become known as the Katyn Massacre.

How much of the events portrayed in the film are fact?

The film's story, structure and characters are fictional but the main character Michael Loboda is based on the real Michael Loboda who was found hanged in an orchard outside Bristol in 1947. All the details about the Katyn Massacre itself and the subsequent cover up, which Stephen uncovers, are fact.

The film is a personal one for you. Can you tell us more?

My mother, Emilia Szkopiak, was deported to Siberia by the Soviets in 1940. She left the Soviet Union in 1942 and settled in London in 1947 where she continues to live to this day. Her father, my grandfather, Wojciech Stanislaw Wójcik, was executed in the Katyn Massacre.

Can you tell us about the look & feel of the film?

The film is a political thriller in the tradition of films such as *The 39 Steps*, *Defence of the Realm*, *Hidden Agenda* and *All The President's Men* but with a contemporary sensibility. All the main characters have something to hide; no one is ultimately who they seem to be. Even though the story is not strictly a film noir, I have definitely used that visual style to tell the story as well as other techniques, dependent on what I was trying to represent or the atmosphere I was trying to create.

Why did you choose Alex Pettyfer for the role of Stephen Underwood?

Alex has exactly the right combination of strength and vulnerability required to portray the troubled but ambitious journalist. From our very first discussions, Alex understood the film and the character and I very much enjoyed developing the script with him to bring out the best in him and his ideas.

What do you hope audiences will take away having seen the film?

My hope is that the film is a testament to those who died in the Katyn Massacre and the forgotten victims such as Ivan Krivosertsev and that audiences will leave the cinema entertained but also informed about the fate of the Poles during and after the Second World War; feelings that resonate and are still relevant in the political climate of today.

CAST & DIRECTOR BIOGRAPHIES

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ALEX PETTYFER

British born actor Alex Pettyfer's career includes starring roles in the science fiction action adventure *I Am Number Four* and *Beastly*, a reimagining of the Beauty & the Beast tale. 2012 saw Pettyfer star in the hugely successful movie *Magic Mike*, before appearing in *The Butler* (2014), *Endless Love* (2014) and *Elvis & Nixon* (2016).

Pettyfer recently completed his first film in the director's chair. *Back Roads* centres on a young man stuck in the Pennsylvania backwoods looking after his 3 sisters after the death of his abusive father & arrest of his mother.

TALULAH RILEY

English actress Talulah Riley has appeared in films such as Joe Wright's *Pride & Prejudice* opposite Keira Knightly & Matthew Macfadyen, *St Trinian's*, *The Boat That Rocked*, *St Trinian's 2* and *Inception*.

Talulah made her stage debut in *The Philadelphia Story* at the Old Vic in 2005. Her television credits include episodes of *Poirot*, *Marple* and *Doctor Who*.

She can currently be seen in HBO's hugely popular television series *Westworld*.

ROBERT WIĘCKIEWICZ

Polish theatre and film actor, graduate of Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Teatralna (Academy of Dramatic Arts) in Wrocław, Poland (1993). Więckiewicz made his film debut in Jerzy Skolimowski's *Ferdydurke* in 1993.

He starred among others in Feliks Falk's *Samowolka*, Filip Bajon's *Poznań '56*, Juliusz Machulski's *Pieniądze to nie wszystko*, *Vinci*, *Ile waży koń trojański* and *Kołysanka*, Vlado Balko's *Pokoj v duši* (Slovakia, 2009), Jan Kidawa-Błoński *Różyczka*, Wojciech Smarzowski's *Dom zły*. He also appeared in several TV series.

The part of Cuma in Machulski's *Vinci* (2004) brought him the recognition of Polish film critics and audiences, as well as the Jury's Special Mention for Outstanding Ensemble Acting at Courmayeur Noir In Festival (Italy) in 2004.

The part of Andrzej, an alcoholic P.E. teacher in Tomasz Wiszniewski's *Wszystko będzie dobrze* (2007) turned out to be an even greater success – he received several prestigious awards for it, including the Best Actor Award at Festiwal Polskich Filmów Fabularnych (Polish Feature Film Festival) in Gdynia in 2007, and “Orzeł” (The Eagle), Polish Film Academy Award for the year 2007 as well as the Best Actor Award “Silver Dolphin” at Festroia International Film Festival 2008 in Setubal, Portugal.

In 2009 the Academy awarded him with yet another “Orzeł” for the Best Actor in a Supporting Role in 2008 (in the movie *Ile waży koń trojański*), and in 2010 he was the nominee for the Best Actor in a Supporting Role (for his performance in *Dom zły*).

In 2011 Więckiewicz won his third “Orzeł” for the Actor in a Leading Role (in the movie *Różyczka*). 2011 also saw the release of two movies with Więckiewicz's in the leading roles – *Wymyk* by Greg Zgliński and *Baby są jakieś inne* by Marek Kotowski – which won him critical acclaim.

In 2012 he starred in Agnieszka Holland's *In Darkness* (an Oscar nominee for the best foreign language picture), where he portrayed Leopold Socha, a Polish sewage worker who saved Jews during World War II in the city of Lwow. Więckiewicz received raving reviews in Poland and internationally for this performance and was awarded at the Polish Film Festival in Gdynia and the Polish Film Academy.

His further roles include Hitler in Juliusz Machulski's comedy *Ambassada*, and above all the leading role in Andrzej Wajda's *Wałęsa, Człowiek z nadziei* (*Wałęsa, Man of Hope*) in which he portrayed Lech Wałęsa, the charismatic leader of the Solidarity movement and after 1989 the president of Poland ("Silver Hugo" award for Best Actor at the Chicago International Film Festival 2013, next nomination for the "Orzeł" Award).

In 2014 he starred in the adaptation of Jerzy Pilch's novel *Pod mocnym aniołem* (*Mighty Angel*). That role (in Wojciech Smarzowski's film) got him the Best Actor Award during the Tokyo International Film Festival 2014.

The latest movies with Więckiewicz's participation are: the blockbuster *Ziarno prawdy* directed by Borys Lankosz which had its premiere in January 2015, Jerzy Zieliński's comedy *Król życia* (September 2015) and thriller *Konwój* written and directed by Maciej Żak (January 2017).

SIR MICHAEL GAMBON

Sir Michael Gambon joined the National Theatre under the Artistic Directorship of Sir Laurence Olivier. Following a number of successful leading roles in plays written by Alan Ayckbourn, he made his mark with audiences & critics when he took the lead role in John Dexter's production of 'Galileo'. Since then Sir Michael has made regular appearances at the Royal National Theatre and the RSC in London, with roles including King Lear, Othello, Mark Anthony and Volpone. He has been awarded the prestigious Laurence Olivier Theatre Award for his roles in 'A Chorus Of Disapproval' (1986) and 'A View From The Bridge' (1988) and nominated for his roles in 'The Caretaker' (2001), 'The Unexpected Man' (1999), 'Tom & Clem' (1997) and 'A Number' (2002).

Sir Michael has delighted audiences on the small screen and big screen for the past 6 decades, with roles in *The Singing Detective*, *Maigret*, *Dancing At Lughnasa*, *Sleepy Hollow*, *Gosford Park*, *The King's Speech* and from 2004 the role of Albus Dumbledore in the *Harry Potter* franchise.

Sir Michael was awarded the CBE (Commander of the Order of the British Empire) in the 1990 Queen's New Year Honours List and made a Knight Bachelor in the 1998 Queen's New Year Honours List for his services to drama.

PIOTR SZKOPIAK - DIRECTOR & CO-WRITER

BAFTA Award Nominee PIOTR SZKOPIAK'S second feature film *The Last Witness*, starring Alex Pettyfer, Talulah Riley, Robert Więckiewicz and Sir Michael Gambon, is a thrilling and thought-provoking film with the Katyn Massacre at its centre.

His first feature film *Small Time Obsession* received a UK theatrical release and was selected to play in competition at the British and Irish Film Festival in

Cherbourg, France, and as part of the UK Film Series in New Zealand. Both Variety and The Guardian described him as “a director to watch”.

Piotr’s next feature is contemporary thriller *Winter in July* in which a brother and sister fight for justice on opposite sides of the law in a Europe dealing with new threats to its security and stability including terrorism, corruption and political extremism.

FINAL MAIN TITLE CREDITS

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A
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Piotr Szkopiak
Film

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Robert Więckiewicz

Talulah Riley

and
Michael Gambon

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Piotr Szkopiak

based on a stage play by
Paul Szambowski

Producer
Carol Harding

Director
Piotr Szkopiak

THE LAST WITNESS

based on true events