

Reverence and revulsion: The problematic case of Roman Polanski

A new film from Roman Polanski will again shine a spotlight on the sordid backstory of the acclaimed director and his flight from US justice

He's won an Oscar, Baftas, Cannes Palme d'Or, Golden Globe, Venice Golden Lion, Berlin Golden Bear, a string of French César Awards and all the accolades the film industry can bestow on an individual. But, to many people, the movie director Roman Polanski will always be considered, first and foremost, a child molester who escaped the punishment he deserved following his notorious sex trial in California.

Ever since he made the decision to board a plane for Europe rather than face another day in court at the whim of an erratic and fame-obsessed judge, Polanski has divided opinion across the world.

Now, with work [due to start](#) on his latest film '[The Palace](#)' next month, before a scheduled release later this year, the controversy that smoulders around the director will reignite in a blaze of publicity. Maybe great news for a movie launch, but not necessarily so for all those involved in his unsavoury story.

In his birthplace of Europe – he was born in France, and raised in Poland – Polanski was hailed for many years as a true auteur, a possessor of a singular directorial style, a genius. In the US, where he had built a stellar career, he was considered something of a tragic figure after his beautiful wife, the actress Sharon Tate, was murdered in the home they shared along with four friends by the Manson Family on a night of slaughter in August 1969. Polanski, unsurprisingly, had been devastated.

These days, the public perception of Polanski is far more complicated. Already a controversial character given his flight from US justice, once the #MeToo movement [caught up](#) with the controversial director in 2017, his reputation took an even greater hit. A

steady stream of allegations of sexual misconduct emerged. California artist Marianne Barnard [alleged](#) that Polanski sexually assaulted her when she was just 10 years old. German actress Renate Langer [reported](#) to the Swiss police that Polanski raped her twice when she was a child model in 1972. Former American actor [Mallory Millett](#) said Polanski tried to rape her in 1970, and a woman identified only as Robin M. [accused](#) Polanski of raping her when she was 16 years old.

It was all too much, and the cumulative effect was that the director was expelled from the US Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in 2018. He appealed the decision but two years later it was [confirmed](#) and, just three months after that, in November 2020, the French film academy, César, also [expelled](#) him, following protests over the nomination of his film [‘An Officer and a Spy’](#) for a string of awards.

But the case that led to Polanski's 44 years in self-imposed exile from Hollywood was that of [Samantha Jane Gailey](#), now Geimer. In 1977

Polanski was charged by Los Angeles police with six criminal offences against her, including sodomy, sex with a minor and rape by use of drugs.

The victim has since repeatedly declared she has forgiven the director. She lives quietly with her family on the Hawaiian island of Kauai, and nowadays shuns the spotlight that has followed her ever since she became an unwilling participant in a media circus. But the mum-of-three must know that when Polanski's latest film hits the festival circuit en route to the cinema, the phone will start ringing non-stop and journalists will suddenly appear on her doorstep insisting she relive the nightmare of her teenage years.

Not that she appears traumatised at all. In 2013, she wrote a startlingly frank and honest autobiography, ['The Girl'](#), explicitly recounting her experience, which makes it clear that her rape by Polanski did not define her later life and all she wishes is for the media to let her move on from the whole episode.

Once Polanski fled America, Geimer admitted to a sense of relief. But she also reveals how she dabbled in drugs and acted out during her early years. In her telling, it seems that behaviour had more to do with her being shuttled east and west across the country to spend school and holiday time with her divorced parents, and taking advantage of the relaxed style of parenting that flourished in the 1970s.

Drugs, alcohol and casual sex went mainstream after the 1960s, particularly in California, and led to youngsters like Samantha Jane Gailey, whose mum and stepdad made a living on the fringes of the entertainment industry, having access to all three. Now 'Sam' Geimer, she recalls that, as a young teen, she was once offered a glass of wine by the actress Jacqueline Bisset – she had a small role in Polanski's ['Cul-de-Sac'](#) – who was pouring one herself.

In the current environment, many would gasp at an adult encouraging a youngster to drink alcohol, but

for those who were raised at that time – myself included – it would be a familiar experience.

That incident was the same night as the attack by Polanski, who had stopped off to visit Bisset before taking Geimer to the empty home of his friend Jack Nicholson, where he raped her. In the ensuing years, however, the talk of alcohol, combined with the idea of a 13-year-old girl alone in a strange home with a 43-year-old man – who had already been caught snapping topless photos of his latest ingénue – led to the creation of a narrative that Samantha was a wild teen. It was cruelly claimed she had dreams of stardom, and had been pimped out to the director by her mother in an attempt to curry favour with a powerful Hollywood figure.

Geimer dismisses the idea as out of hand. At the time of the rape – March 10, 1977 – her sister was going out with a friend of the famous director. When her mother met Polanski at a party, he suggested her younger daughter might be ideal for a photo shoot in French Vogue he'd been commissioned to

do. The magazine has since denied any such agreement existed.

But it sounded promising. In 2013, Geimer [told](#) the LA Times, *“We thought, ‘Man, I’m gonna be famous now. We’ll get me in Vogue Paris and then maybe I’ll get a good part.’ One step and you’re on your way. That’s what we thought it was, a chance, my big shot.”*

The man she dubbed her ‘ticket to stardom’ subsequently turned up to collect her from home for the shoot. Geimer had enlisted her girl pal, Terri, as chaperone, but when Polanski told her they wouldn’t return until late, her friend cried off and rode home instead on her bicycle, leaving the teenager alone with him.

The photo shoot at Nicholson’s home went as planned for the director, as he plied the youngster with champagne and gave her part of a ‘disco biscuit’ – 70s slang for a Quaalude, a powerful prescription sedative and hypnotic pill popular at the time. Polanski and his prey ended up in Nicholson’s

hot tub, but she feigned an asthma attack and fled to a bedroom where her attacker followed her and engaged in oral, vaginal and anal intercourse.

Gailey later told a grand jury that she repeatedly asked to go home, but Polanski persisted. She said she felt dizzy, unwell and claustrophobic, much like Carol Ledoux, the spaced-out, rape-obsessed character played by Catherine Deneuve who turns murderous in Polanski's critically acclaimed first English-language feature film, ['Repulsion'](#).

In 'The Girl', Geimer writes, *"I made the decision to just let him do it, how bad can it be, it's just sex. He doesn't want to hurt me. He just wants to do it. And that will be that. It's not like I am a real person to him, or for that matter that he is real to me. We are both playing our parts."*

When the ordeal was over, disturbed by the homecoming of Nicholson's then-girlfriend Anjelica Huston, Geimer dressed, bundled her clothes and fled to Polanski's car. She said he drove her home before uttering those dreadful words, *"Don't tell your*

mother. This will just be our secret.” But that’s not how it went. Still high from the champagne and drugs she’d consumed, Geimer told her boyfriend and family everything immediately, and they called the police. That changed her life forever.

Geimer later wrote, in the same self-deprecating style she uses throughout ‘The Girl,’ *“I never would have been so honest if I hadn’t been so high. How I’ve wished, over the years, I’d never told anyone about that poke in the butt.”*

What went on that night is undisputed. No one has ever questioned the young victim’s harrowing grand-jury testimony and Polanski has since [admitted](#) his crime. He’s also made off-colour references to it in the past and has made [no secret of his desire](#) for young – very young – girls. In 1978, for example, he began a relationship with 16-year-old Nastassja Kinski. He was 45. And, in 1979, he [told](#) British author Martin Amis, *“Judges want to f**k young girls. Juries want to f**k young girls – everyone wants to f**k young girls!”*

On that March night in 1977, however, the name Roman Polanski caught the attention of the LAPD and the feeding frenzy began. He was charged with statutory rape, as his victim was underage at the time, along with five other criminal charges and the wheels of justice began to turn... slowly.

Judge Laurence J Rittenband, asked to handle the case and was given free rein in the Santa Monica Courthouse where Polanski was to be tried.

But ultimately it wasn't the string of serious charges, all carrying heavy sentences, for which the director would face trial. In a plea bargain, Polanski's attorney had the alleged rape, drugging and other charges dropped in exchange for his client pleading guilty to the less serious offence of unlawful sexual intercourse. And this is where the search for justice met a sticky end.

"Well this was Hollywood," Geimer wrote. "Judge Rittenband had cast himself as writer-director-producer-actor and was orchestrating

every beat of this production, thinking only about what was best for his own image.”

In a pre-arranged deal made in the judge's chambers, Polanski pleaded guilty and Rittenband agreed his prison time would consist of a 90-day psychiatric evaluation which would start as soon as the director had completed a film he was making in Bora Bora.

Problematically, Polanski stopped off to visit the movie's distributors in Germany before heading to the Pacific island, and he was soon identified by a local paparazzo who snapped him surrounded by a bevy of young women on a night out at Oktoberfest in Munich.

When Rittenband was shown the photograph, he blew his top, ordered Polanski to return and immediately sent him to the state prison in Chino to begin the delayed 90-day psychiatric assessment. Polanski complied, underwent the evaluation and was then released. Instead of the anticipated 90

days, however, the process took just 42 days, before Polanski was free again.

This time, it was the media who blew up and Rittenband was put on the spot. How could a man serve just 42 days' psychiatric evaluation as a sentence for the criminal offence of unlawful sexual intercourse with a minor?

The judge again summoned the respective counsel to his chambers, where he insisted that Polanski needed to serve at least 48 more days behind bars. He told the attorneys, however, that he would be announcing an indeterminate sentence – potentially 50 years, but he made assurances it would be more like 48 days and, at the end of that, Polanski would be expected to agree to voluntary deportation. Rittenband reckoned that would quell the media clamour.

But it was a big ask for Polanski to trust the judge, who seemed more interested in how he himself was portrayed in the press than in any real sort of justice for either the young victim or the director. It would

also mean the end of his Hollywood career. While he might have escaped lightly on the criminal charges, surely he deserved a fair trial and a sentence commensurate with his crime, based on the law and not a judge's whims?

Polanski looked at the odds, didn't like what he saw and, on February 1, 1978, he fled US justice and took the final seat on a British Airways flight from LA to London and from there he travelled to Paris, never to return. Rittenband promptly issued a warrant for his arrest. But both prosecution and defence lawyers had seen enough, and petitioned the court to replace the judge. Consequently Rittenband was finally thrown off the case.

The American public was outraged at the turn of events, but throughout Hollywood the general feeling was that one of their own had been treated unfairly. Nevertheless, Polanski was not about to return at that point.

Exile did not sit well with him, and his career stalled through the 1980s and 90s, although those years

were not exactly uneventful. He shot the critically-panned [‘Pirates’](#) in Tunisia and years later it emerged that all was not well on set during production. In 2010, the British actress Charlotte Lewis [alleged](#) that during filming Polanski had sexually assaulted her “in the worst possible way” when she was only 16 years old. The claim reared its head again as recently as last year, when Lewis filed a suit for [defamation](#) against Polanski, who had dismissed her charge as “an odious lie” in an interview with Paris Match. The case is expected to come to court later this year or in 2023.

As the 80s neared an end, Polanski’s 1988 suspense thriller [‘Frantic’](#), starring Harrison Ford, proved a box office hit and it was on set here that he met Emmanuelle Seigner, who would become his wife the following year. She was 18 at the time, he was 51.

The next decade was tough going for Polanski, and it seemed his star had faded. The situation wasn’t helped by his failed 1997 bid to resume his career in the US. While Judge Larry Fidler agreed Polanski

could return to the States and avoid serving any jail time it was insisted that, to hear the dismissal, he must appear before the bench – and [television cameras](#). The idea of all that publicity – none of it positive – was too much for Polanski and the deal fell through. (While the court has since denied any such plan, the attorneys involved have confirmed it was the case).

Ten years later, Polanski made another attempt to convince a court to allow him to return without facing prison but, again, the judge insisted the director must appear in court while he decided on the matter. Polanski was still not ready to take his chances.

Another decade later, in 2017, Sam Geimer took the surprise step of approaching the court in a bid to have the case against Polanski dismissed. Denying her request, Judge Scott Gordon made his view perfectly clear, [saying](#), “*The defendant in this matter stands as a fugitive and refuses to comply with court orders.*” The message was clear. Polanski can expect no more favours.

Which is how we find ourselves here, 45 years after that night at Jack Nicholson's home with two people whose lives were changed – and linked – forever.

Sam Geimer's [Twitter profile](#) has her as a “bad victim,” and she is unquestionably that. A girl and now a woman who won't be pitied or pilloried for something that happened to her many years ago. She is no one's victim. She's a happy, healthy, married mother minding her own business.

And Polanski? He did finally regroup and in 2003 won an Oscar for [‘The Pianist’](#), and since then has only added to his [filmography](#) . At 88 years old he is still turning out his singular movies. But will he ever return to the big time in Hollywood or will he continue to ply his trade with the help of the smaller European outfits?

While France chooses not to extradite its citizens, there have been two concerted attempts by the US to seek extradition for Polanski, from Poland in 2015 and, in [2009](#), from Switzerland. Both were unsuccessful, although in Zurich the director was

detained briefly in jail and then under house arrest after travelling to collect a gong at a film industry awards night. The extradition request was denied by the Swiss.

Following his arrest a [petition](#) for his release was raised in the States, signed by nearly 150 household names including Natalie Portman, Tilda Swinton, Isabelle Huppert, Penelope Cruz, Diane von Furstenberg, Wes Anderson, Martin Scorsese, Monica Bellucci, Inarritu, Ethan Cohen, David Lynch, and Harrison Ford.

Hollywood might have thrown its weight behind Polanski, but the public mood had hardened against him. An opinion poll held in France at the time found between 65 and 75 percent of respondents wanted Polanski extradited to the US, while 75 percent of those surveyed in a poll in Poland said they did not believe he should escape another trial.

In the years since that petition appeared, however, most of those big name signatories have chosen not to publicly withdraw their support, with Natalie

Portman, Emma Thompson and Asia Argento among the few to admit they regret putting their names to the document.

The question now is what might result from a return to an American court? Polanski has admitted unlawful sexual intercourse with a minor and accepted Judge Rittenband's 90-day sentence, even if that was somewhat curtailed. So it is unlikely he would be re-tried. But failure to appear for sentencing is also a criminal offence. And with the legacy of #MeToo meaning the courts, the media and the public are far less forgiving of powerful men abusing their power – and the certainty that his return would spark a media frenzy like no other – then a prison sentence cannot be ruled out.

Polanski has proven incapable of making a clear choice for 45 years. Stay where he is in the country of his birth as his reputational currency continues to devalue and his talent slowly withers on the vine. Or stand up and finally face the music in a Los Angeles courtroom – and risk prison.

It's a choice mirrored in his first ever feature film, the 1962 ['Knife in the Water'](#), a brilliantly sparse, Polish-language flick that was nominated for an Academy Award in 1963 as Best Foreign Film. The film ends with a feuding, ill-tempered married couple in an idling car at a crossroads, not going anywhere. For the husband in the driver's seat, the choice is impossible. One way lies home for a tumultuous future with his adulterous young wife; in the opposite direction lies the long arm of the law and awkward questions about his role in what he believes is a young man's drowning. He chooses to do nothing. A state of just being. The end.

Sixty years later, this is where Roman Polanski still finds himself. Caught at a crossroads. Maybe this year, his new work, 'The Palace,' will herald a return to the limelight. It might win back his critics. He'll go back to Hollywood and wipe the slate clean, showing remorse and humility. Or maybe – and more likely – he'll remain corralled in France, shunned by polite society, remembered forever as a deeply flawed genius brought down by his unacceptable sexual predilections.

Stuck forever in a state of just being.