

## Tribeca Talks: 'Floating Skyscrapers' Actor Mateusz Banasiuk Discusses Artistic Fragility and the Kaleidoscope of Human Actions and Consequences Present throughout the Film

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Rarely are there films that stay with the viewer long after they've left the movie theater. *Floating Skyscrapers* (*Płynące Wieżowce*), the thought-provoking and emotionally intensive film from Polish filmmaker Tomasz Wasilewski, is one that continues to frequent one's thoughts weeks after having seen it. The scenes echo in one's mind like a voice in a large hollow cave, prompting a reassessment of the film and its rawness but also of oneself and common social beliefs.

However, though half the credit for the film's success is certainly due to the impeccable filmmaking style, direction and writing of Wasilewski, the film wouldn't be nearly as powerful and evocative without its actors, and especially without the leading role of actor Mateusz Banasiuk, who plays the indecisive and emotionally conflicted Kuba with pure genuineness and understanding for his character (a rarity in Polish cinema when focused in on the feelings of homosexual characters, the ever-present theme in this film).

Banasiuk is no stranger to the camera. He has starred in countless popular television shows and theatre productions in Poland; however, *Floating Skyscrapers* is one of his first major roles in a film, and one that is surely not only going to provoke bountiful conversation among its viewers but also showcase his ability to take on tough character roles, both emotionally and physically. As Kuba, Banasiuk shows us through his natural agility that one's actions, whether intentionally or not, can easily hurt those around us, and therefore, decisions and emotions should be handled with care. Furthermore, wearing his role like a second skin, he delivers a resonating and flawless performance that trickles into the core of the viewer's subconscious, leaving one curious as to what we can expect from him next.

Though busy with his role in the theatre production of *The Force of Habit: A Comedy* by Thomas Bernhard at the Ateneum Theatre in Warsaw, Poland, and without any real rest between flying to and from the Tribeca Film Festival, on a Saturday morning, the talented young actor took the time to speak to GALO about the difficulties of his role as Kuba, his swim training for the film, why he preferred that the role of Michał was given to Bartosz Gelner, and his understanding for the actions of his character.

**GALO: You're a young actor at the beginning of your career. You chose a very controversial role. Are you not afraid that a large amount of audiences in Poland will view the character in a negative way due in large part to his sexual orientation?**

**Mateusz Banasiuk:** It's not really that I chose the role, but rather the role chose me. I could have either accepted it, or I could have not agreed to take the role.

A few of my friends, when they found out what the film is about, they didn't come to the casting. I went to the casting and I liked what [the filmmaker], Tomasz Wasilewski, was saying; I read the screenplay, which really captured my interest... Even now, when a few articles have shown up in Poland in relation to our film, harsh comments concerning the homosexual society have shown up on the forums that accompany them. And I know that I will have to confront it. Truthfully, nothing is really yet known. On one hand, this film might provoke a lot of discussion, it might elicit a lot of aggression, rebellion from different people, and it might also produce some changes in this country [Poland]. But on the other hand, it might be quite possible that nothing will change; that this film is one out of many — someone's voice that's not recognized by anyone. Therefore, it is hard to foretell what will happen in this country after a few months. Nevertheless, there really is little tolerance for some type of otherness here in [Poland], something that isn't known to the people, and unfortunately, there is a grand amount of aggression. I hope that I will not have to come to know this.

**GALO: Personally, I really liked the film, much like a lot of the festival audience; therefore, I hope that in Poland it will be viewed in a positive light. But I do have my concerns in regard to this because, unfortunately, Poland isn't as tolerant a place as New York is.**

**MB:** Fortunately, I live in Warsaw — Warsaw is the most laid back [city]. In Warsaw, people usually don't come up to individuals who they recognize from television, but when you go to smaller cities, then there is indeed quite a lot of interest concerning the people involved in the media/entertainment world. If people like you then they perceive you in a positive way — for instance, I star in a popular show in Poland, and people do end up coming up to me and associating me with the character I play, and most likely if I played a negative type of character, then I would probably receive all sorts of negative comments and some type of negative behavior from those people. But currently I receive all positive feedback. When it comes to a film though, its reach is less significant than that of a television show.

**GALO: You knew Bartosz Gelner, the actor who plays the role of Michał, before the film. How long have you two known each other for?**

**MB:** About three years, maybe four.

**GALO: And did the fact that you two are friends help you in playing this difficult role, or on the contrary, it dissuaded you? After all, a friendship between two men is essentially something different than the feeling that binds the two main characters of the film.**

**MB:** I have a lot of friends, a lot of good friends, with whom I wouldn't have wanted to play this character. Indeed, Bartek is the type of person that I felt was right for the role of Michał, and the type of person that I felt I could find the courage to perform those kinds of scenes with. I think that Bartek also felt comfortable with me. We trust each other; we know each other well... I think that when it comes to that type of intimacy between two men who aren't homosexual, that it required us to overcome something within ourselves, but I think that when it comes to us actors, it would seem we are a bit more tolerant, a bit more sensitive — of course, not everyone — and we have the barrier of touching already overstepped in relation to other people, the same can be said for the barrier of nudity. I am happy that it was Bartek and not someone else. I really don't know what it would have been like to act with someone else. With Bartek we had been able to create a certain type of connection; he is a good actor and I am happy that it was him I was able to act alongside with. And not only because we had previously known each other, but because those acting energies are somehow close to one another.

**GALO: You swim quite well, as seen in various scenes throughout the film. Did you ever train as an athlete or is swimming just your hobby?**

**MB:** When it comes to swimming, I've trained since I was a child, although never athletically, more so recreationally. Later, I started training to become a lifeguard, and for a little while I was a young lifeguard; however, when it comes to the swimming technique, it is quite different than athletic or professional swimming.

[In the film] I was a typical athletic swimmer, where efficiency plays an important role. Undeniably, I had to train a lot for this film with a personal trainer, who had to improve or rather perfect my swimming technique, because just like with everything else, film is evolving, theater is evolving and the sport industry is moving forward too. I wanted to be in the now, and I wanted to perform all the swimming scenes. Generally speaking, I really like sports. And so I immediately told Tomasz [Wasilewski] that I want to perform all those scenes; that I will be able to do so and that I will be able to tweak and develop my skills to the level of standard expected by him...because before I started training for this film, I sort of neglected swimming and the swimming pool. I went swimming sporadically, and unfortunately, one falls out of the expected form. And so I remember when I was at the first training, the trainer gave me such a hard workout that I felt nauseous at one point, but as time went on, my form began to improve, my body began

to change, and my technique began to change, my performance. But I admit that having swum from an early age certainly helped things along.

*(Interview continued on next page)*