

## Tomas Polensky about THE PACK

### What goes on in the locker room, stays in the locker room

If there ever was a film that needed to have its *moment de gloire* in the Zlin Film Festival, it is definitely THE PACK, by Czech director Tomas Polensky. The story is set in Zlin and even the very first image of the opening scene looks very “Zlin-ish”. Coming from a country with a particular children’s film tradition, making a tough film for a young teenage audience was an achievement in itself for the 8heads production company and debut director Tomas Polensky.

When his family moves to Zlin, David joins the local hockey team, The Wolves, with only one dream on his mind: becoming the team’s number one goalie. Even if that forces him to compete with Miky, one of the team’s ringleaders, and that is only one of David’s many problems. Recently diagnosed with diabetes, he sees his hockey future in jeopardy. Pressure is put upon him by two parents with opposite opinions. And then there’s

girls... Some of them are after the team’s most popular player, but there are others who can see right through the macho hockey façade.

**For a foreign audience this might be hard to measure... How big is ice hockey in the Czech Republic?**

Tomas Polensky: Very big! It is the most popular sport around here, with world famous players like Jaromir Jagr or Dominik “Dominator” Hašek, who was my role model as a kid. All my schoolmates fanatically watched the Nagano Olympic Games in 1998 when the Czech national team won the gold medal.

**You had difficulties securing “time on the ice” for your crew, with all hockey fields permanently in use.**

Polensky: The only moment we could film on the ice was during one week in August. Scheduling all the ice scenes in one week was extremely difficult.



**With all these fast movements around a small puck, ice hockey seems not the easiest game to capture on camera.**

Polensky: Capturing the hockey scenes was tricky, considering the little time we had. My reference was MIRACLE (2004), a film by Gavin O’Connor, that I watched several times with my fantastic DoP Andrejs Rudzats. We realised we couldn’t make it within the given time. Therefore we decided to use three cameras. Believe me, I hate multiple camera settings – when all cameras are rolling I feel like I’m watching a tennis game on three different monitors. We prepared different camera setups for each scene, for example one for the fans in the stadium, one for the

players on the bench, one for the ice etc... But none of them seemed to work well. Until Andrejs suggested using a TV camera with long lenses, to capture the action. On the ice we did handheld shooting to get the audience closer. The other problem was that our main actors weren’t exactly the best skaters. First we filmed the body doubles, and then the actors for close ups. I’m so grateful for Andrejs, he was the best DoP I could ever wish for.

**At the same time you were perfectly able to capture the authentic locker room atmosphere. We can almost smell the sweat!**

Polensky: I know this environment through and through. I grew up on ice





hockey ever since I was two years old, only quitting at the age of 18. Only in the main roles we casted actors, all other roles were played by members of the local hockey team. Rehearsals were crucial to bring actors and athletes closer together. We organised a camp where the actors taught the athletes how to perform in front of a camera. And the hockey players instructed the actors about the locker room, how to put on gear, etc. Also with the extras – all of them real hockey players – we created extra authenticity and a realistic background to which we added some narrative details.

**The whole ice hockey scene looks very alpha-male to an outsider like me.**

Polensky: In the world that we depict, being different (like having diabetes) is a stigma. It makes you a loser, an outsider, which I experienced my-

self throughout my ice hockey years. I worked with co-writer Irena Koci, script supervisor Steven Goldsmith and young screenwriter Adam Hobzik. Thanks to him we found an ending to the story that carries out the right message: stand up for yourself! Nobody can help you, not even your parents (who will often make things even worse). In our story it is a girl, Lenny, showing David the right way, helping him to find out who he really is.

**Being a coach isn't easy either, as THE PACK demonstrates.**

Polensky: I realised that when I coached a team of six year old players. There are several approaches. You can be tough and aggressive, like the coach in THE PACK, provoking players to try harder and push their limits. Hockey is an aggressive sport but within the boundaries of fair play. When crossing that line, things get out of hand. For the coach it is diffi-

cult to recognise the difference between standard hockey behaviour and bullying. You can't blame him for not knowing what goes on in the locker room. His biggest mistake is answering to the mother's complaint with a public tribunal.

**There is a certain lethargy about David, as if he is waiting for problems to solve themselves.**

Polensky: Teenagers are nearly adults. They should be able to solve problems on their own. Only this way can they grow up as conscious human beings. When a problem seems too big to cope with, you might hope somebody else will solve it for you. But when you stand up for yourself, you might realise the problem isn't that big after all. Only your fear made it seem so big.

**These dancing classes are as weird to me as the ice hockey scenes. Is this a Czech tradition?**

Polensky: When becoming 16, most teenagers attend dancing courses. Because their parents insist, or because they secretly hope to find a girl or boyfriend there. It is not only about dancing but about etiquette in general. I remember myself quite enjoying it.

**The city of Zlin is very recognisable, from the very first opening shot to the nightly panorama's.**

Polensky: Zlin has an old arena with a unique atmosphere. I love that brick façade. I started my film studies at the Zlin Film School and I like this irresistible red colour in the local architecture. The film was shot here, the story is located here... This is where the film belongs!

–  
Gert Hermans