

Mr Jones [15] 2019 | Poland / UK / Ukraine | 141 mins

UK release date	7 February 2020
Director	Agnieszka Holland
Screenplay	Andrea Chalupa
Cinematography	Tomas Naumiuk
Music	Antoni Lazarkiewicz
Cast	James Norton (Gareth Jones); Vanessa Kirby (Ada Brooks); Peter Sarsgaard (Walter Duranty); Joseph Mawle (George Orwell)

There's a devastating historical chapter at the heart of Mr. Jones, in which the title character, an idealistic young Welsh journalist played with calm authority by James Norton, trudges through miles of knee-deep snow in Ukraine, delirious with hunger, witnessing first-hand the horrors of the genocidal famine of 1932-33, known as the Holodomor. The entirety of the region's grain production was sold abroad to finance the rapid modernization of Soviet industry, with the Stalin regime regarding the millions of ethnic Ukrainians who perished as a price worth paying for the new utopia.

The ambitious Jones had already achieved precocious fame in his 20s by becoming the first foreign journalist, while working as an advisor to British statesman David Lloyd George (Kenneth Cranham), to fly with then-newly appointed German Chancellor Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels. When his warnings of the Reich's intention to wage war fall on deaf ears and his job is eliminated due to budget cuts he parlays a letter of recommendation from Lloyd George into a Russian press visa.

He gets little help from smoothly shady New York Times bureau chief Walter Duranty (Peter Sarsgaard), though Ada Brooks (Vanessa Kirby), a principled British journalist on Duranty's staff, is slightly more cooperative, revealing that the regime is suppressing information while she's too fearful of reprisals to say more.

With a mix of courage and recklessness, Jones manages to slip past the barriers designed to keep foreign journalists in Moscow and under close scrutiny, boarding a train to Ukraine. From the moment he steps off the train he sees

corpses lying in the snow, and starving farmers looking on in misery as their grain is loaded onto trucks. He wanders into empty houses, their occupants dead in their beds, and watches as impassive workers load lifeless bodies onto a cart, including that of an orphaned baby still screaming. When a family of hollow-eyed children allow him to share their meal, he learns the source of the mystery meat only after he's eaten.

Holland draws from Russian avant-garde techniques here and there, notably slapping on the Eisenstein montage in Jones' traveling scenes. But her most effective device is the tonality of light in the Ukraine sequences, blanketing each widescreen frame with a misty, almost painterly glaze that makes the brutal reality all the more shocking.

Once Jones is captured by Stalin's forces, the terms of his freedom are negotiated using the lives of six incarcerated British engineers as bargaining chips to buy his silence. It's here that he becomes fully aware of the extent to which Duranty is in bed with the regime. Still, while Duranty gets busy debunking his story in The New York Times, Jones persists in his quest to get the truth out, finding an unexpected ally.

Nothing on either side comes close to the trenchancy or grim poetry of Jones' harrowing odyssey, which is as it should be. Well before Jones gets back to his childhood coastal village in Wales this admirably intentioned but wildly uneven movie has already run its course.

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