

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Before the Spark Dies

Agata Trzebuchowska on *SICK*, the horror of growing up, and the Hail Mary that became her feature debut

Interview by Paul Salfen · AMFM Magazine



Agata Trzebuchowska. Photo: Maciej Edelman / *SICK* press notes.

Fantastic Fest week has a particular temperature in Austin. The rooms get louder. And every so often a film arrives that the programmers know will rattle people — not because it is trying to out-gore the room, but because it sits too close to something the audience already recognizes. That is the week Agata Trzebuchowska chose to world-premiere *SICK*.

Trzebuchowska is not a stranger to the international circuit. She first reached a global audience as the face of Paweł Pawlikowski's *Ida*, the film that won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film and earned her a European Film Award nomination. Her shorts *Heat* and *Vacancy* already announced a director interested in intimacy, identity, and the thin membrane between what is real and what is performed. *SICK* is the feature — a 90-minute Polish drama-horror about two siblings sent to the countryside to care for their ailing grandmother, and about what happens to a body when childhood stops being a safe room.

Paul Salfen caught her days before she boarded for Texas. She had never been. She was still in Warsaw. She was already smiling at the idea of good movies, good parties, and a little nature. She was not smiling at the idea of explaining the movie too cleanly.

I would describe it as a horror of growing up, to say the least — not to spoil anything.

— Agata Trzebuchowska

A SUMMER THAT WILL NOT STAY INNOCENT

The official logline is almost polite: things spiral out of control in more ways than one when two siblings are tasked with caring for their ailing grandmother. The short synopsis is warmer and stranger. During the summer holidays, 16-year-old Maks and his 19-year-old sister Emma are dispatched to the Polish countryside. The heat is heavy. The house is dark inside and blinding outside. Their bond starts to shift into something the film refuses to name in a single word. The grandmother's frailty becomes less a medical fact than a presence. A once-idyllic season turns into a passage into adulthood that does not feel like a gift.

In her director's note, Trzebuchowska calls adolescence a slow-blooming horror — visceral, tender, deeply unsettling. *SICK* is a story of bodies: aging, aching, desiring, shedding. Horror, she writes, does not come from a monster. It comes from the quiet violence of change, the fear of losing control, the uncertainty of inhabiting a changing body, and the end of innocence. Ian McEwan's *The Cement Garden* left a mark on her before the idea arrived — that suffocating, strangely seductive atmosphere where sexuality and disgust share a room.

She told Salfen the film was, against that darkness, a joy to make. "It was actually a joy to make this film, and also fun. We had a very small crew of very dedicated people — very close collaborators and friends. We had fun making this film, despite some dark themes it's touching on." The memories, she said, are only good ones. The schedule was tight enough that there was no extra room to second-guess the thing to death.



Konrad Kąkol as Maks and Katarzyna Łubik as Emma. Photo: Maciej Edelman.

THE HAIL MARY

Salfen has a signature beat he takes into almost every conversation — the Hail Mary. The moment a career stops waiting for perfect conditions and throws the ball. For Trzebuchowska, that moment is *SICK* itself.

She had been developing another film for years. It was supposed to be the debut. It was complicated, expensive, meant to be shot abroad. Drafts stacked up. Financing stalled. Somewhere in the pile, the spark went missing. “I had been struggling with the other project I had been working on for a pretty long time,” she said. “I wrote so many drafts of the screenplay that I lost a spark somewhere in between. So I really wanted to make something simple, something intimate, something I could make pretty quickly before the spark dies. I felt that it has to be now, and I really need to be on set and prove myself as a director.”

That was a year, maybe a year and a half, before this conversation. The strategy change is now a finished film with a Fantastic Fest slot and a Sitges European premiere behind it. In the press notes she is blunter about the themes she gathered once the writing got fast and intuitive: the fear of growing up, and incest as a way of looking at desire, shame, and fear in the same frame. She wanted to ask what a forbidden desire might reveal about her characters’ terror of becoming adults. She did not try to binge a syllabus of horror films while she made it. She watched and read things as far from *SICK* as she could get, so she would trust her own pulse instead of second-guessing it.

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— Agata Trzebuchowska

TWO FACES THAT ALREADY KNEW EACH OTHER

SICK lives or dies on the siblings. Salfen said as much: the wrong two people and the movie would not work. Trzebuchowska got lucky, and she knows it.

Katarzyna Łubik, who plays Emma, was still in acting school. Trzebuchowska found her the way a lot of contemporary casting now begins — scrolling. “The girl I found on Instagram when going through the pictures of another actor I was considering for the main part.” Konrad Kąkol, who plays Maks, came recommended by an agent who is also a friend. Kąkol had already taken a lead in Jan Sazek’s *Dad’s Not Home*, which won the Gold Medal at the 2025 Student Academy Awards; Łubik had appeared in Or Sinai’s *Mama* in Cannes’ Official Selection. On paper they were young. On screen they had what Trzebuchowska kept calling an aura.

“I was really rooting for both of them when I just saw their pictures — that they would be as good during the audition as they looked. They both had this aura and this charisma that I instantly felt. And they were. There is a certain resemblance between the two of them, so I was also very lucky that they actually look alike.” She locked them early. Finding the grandmother was harder. The role asked for a kind of courage a lot of older actresses did not want to give. Monika Niemczyk — who has worked with Krzysztof Warlikowski onstage and appeared in Andrzej Żuławski’s *The Devil* — had no shortage of it. After Żuławski, Trzebuchowska notes in the press notes, she had certainly been through stranger things.



A once-idyllic summer in the Polish countryside. Photo: Maciej Edelman.

WHAT AN ACTOR KNOWS FROM THE OTHER SIDE

Salfen asked the obvious question of a performer-turned-director: did standing on that set make her want to step back in front of the camera, or was one job already enough? Trzebuchowska did not romanticize a dual role. What the acting years gave her was translation.

“Having this acting experience definitely helped me when working with actors, because I can imagine what they need — and what you need when you’re on the other side.” That is as close as she came to a method. The rest of the production language in the press notes is physical: long, uninterrupted takes so the camera and the actors could stay responsive; a run-down Masurian house cleaned and furnished by the cinematographer Maciej Edelman and a few friends, kept raw on purpose; interiors that stay cool and shadowy against a summer that is all glare and nature. The house, she said, could be walked almost in a loop. It made her think of a snake curled in on itself. It became another character.

Sound was built around a guitar — adolescent, physical, a little predatory when the bass distorts, a little too intimate when a ukulele gets under the skin. Practical effects were chosen because puberty is not a digital idea. You watch a body change in front of you. You do not get to look away into a clean composite.

DO IT YOUR WAY

Fantastic Fest is full of people who look at a screen and decide that is the job they want. Salfen asked for advice. Trzebuchowska almost refused the podium. “I don’t feel that I’m in a position to give advice, because I’m a very fresh filmmaker myself. But if I had to say something, I would say: just follow your instincts, and just do it, and see where it will take you.”

What keeps her on the path is not a vision-board sentence. It is a narrower discipline. “I strongly believe that when you are true to yourself, you will find your way. You have to just stay true to yourself. That’s what I’m trying to do. I try to do something that feels true.”



Maks, played by Konrad Kąkol, in SICK. Photo: Maciej Edelman.

LEAVE THE ROOM WITH WHATEVER YOU FEEL

She will be in the building for the Q&As. She knows those rooms get lively when a film is this loaded. She still will not assign the takeaway. “I don’t want to tell people what they should think of the movie. I would like them to immerse themselves in the story, in this world and in these characters, and just spend some time there and sit with whatever comes to their mind and whatever they feel — and to react in an honest way to what they experience.”

That is the same answer she gives in the press notes, almost word for word: *SICK* is full of ambiguities. It is difficult and uncomfortable and also playful and sensual. She wants a feeling that stays, not a thesis the audience can recite in the lobby.

After Austin she is not going quiet. The stalled intended debut found money while she was making this one. She is also developing *URKE*, a surreal mockumentary, co-written with Mateusz Kłodecki, about a couple in a sexual crisis. She described that next film the way a Fantastic Fest audience likes to hear a next film described. “It’s going to be even sicker than this one.”

First, though, Texas. Barbecue and parties can wait behind the screenings. She wants the movies, and a little air. *SICK* opens the conversation the way she opened this one — without a clean moral, and without a promise that growing up is going to feel like arriving anywhere safe.



SICK. Photo: Maciej Edelman.

FIND AGATA TRZEBUCHOWSKA · SICK

SICK world premiere — Fantastic Fest 2026, Friday, September 18, 5:30 PM CDT, Theater 6. Additional screenings September 24, Theaters 6 and 7. European premiere: Sitges Film Festival.

Poland, 2026. 90 minutes. Drama / Horror. Polish with English subtitles. Directed and written by Agata Trzebuchowska. Produced by Patryk Sielecki and Adrianna Rędzia for Lumisenta Film Foundation. World sales: Pluto Film. Starring Konrad Kąkol, Katarzyna Łubik, Monika Niemczyk, Julian Świeżewski, Eliza Rycembel.

Press: Emma Griffiths PR — emma@eg-pr.com · Production: lumisenta.com · Sales: plutofilm.de

Interview conducted by Paul Salfen for AMFM Magazine, September 2026.

Paul Salfen is Managing Editor of AMFM Magazine and a veteran interviewer of film, television, music, and sports figures. He is the author of Going For It!, a collection of Hail Mary moments from the artists and athletes he has spent two decades putting on the record.