



by Vladimír Kabelík

*The Polish poet Czesław Miłosz once wrote that to change countries was among the worst calamities that could befall an artist. Art, no matter what its universal pretensions, is first of all local, rooted in a particular language and culture. Despite the relatively high technical universality of filmmaking, emigration for the filmmaker can be culturally traumatic. While there are plenty of examples of (more or less) successful adaptation by filmmakers from one country to another, from von Sternberg to Louis Malle, the hardship of being culturally uprooted is perhaps less well-known. (Or in the case of Canadian filmmakers who depart for Hollywood, not even recognized.)*

*Vladimír Kabelík is a 34-year-old filmmaker who came to Canada almost two years ago. His grandfather was one of the pioneers of the Czech film industry; and his father is a film director, as is Vladimír himself. Since graduating from Prague's FAMU University College department of Arts, Film and TV, Kabelík wrote and directed 28 short films, five of them award-winning, as well as having worked in Czech television and theatre. In August 1982, Kabelík emigrated, in search of a new life in Canada ... and a second filmmaking career. This is the story.*

photo: Jiri Smid

## Culture shock

# Canadian reflections by a former Czech filmmaker

We landed smoothly at Toronto International Airport and I could only wish that our new life in this country would go as well. It has been over one year since that moment, a time filled with a marathon of phone calls, meetings, hours spent over a typewriter and, finally, the first steps into film production, studios and editing rooms. With increasing acquaintances, new awareness and experiences, I had to, by necessity, compare everything with my 14 years' experience as a Czech filmmaker. That is how this article came about.

"That's great, excellent, your movies are wonderful, nice to work with you, please stay in touch with me, we'll call you again..." Probably like other newcomers I too thought, after several initial contacts, that there were no serious problems in the path on my second film career. I have practical experience as a filmmaker as well as a scriptwriter and

*Since coming to Canada, Vladimír Kabelík has produced commercials, documentaries and videos.*

director, editor, cameraman and photographer. That I know how to make films is evident from prizes and recognition received from many international film and television festivals plus actual films and videotapes that I brought with me. All these first impressions, however, were only naive notions. Eastern Europe, a six-month stay in a refuge camp in Austria with a wife and two small children, work at a factory in Switzerland – none of this, obviously, had cured me of my naivety. From day one, I had breathed deeply of the Canadian air, full of freedom and optimism. That is why I was taken back with the “courteous lie” or, even better, “smilingly encouraging denials.” In Prague, when something was wrong with my films or scenarios, I found out about it in no uncertain terms, without flattery. Unfortunately, the majority of problems were of a political nature. At the same time one knew where one stood, without coquetry, praise or promises.

The Toronto style was different from the start. People would deny their presence at the office, their secretaries would phone me with apologies half an hour before an arranged lunch meeting, topics that had been agreed upon one day were no longer valid a day later. In this manner I gained my first valuable experience: the fact that when someone says to you “Let’s have lunch sometime” does not mean that he really wants to do so, or that he ever shall have lunch with you.

I received valuable advice from one cameraman. “First, you must know that you’ve come at a rotten time. But you must believe that you’ll succeed in what you aim for” ‘Where strength is applied the work gets done’ is not only a Czech proverb but also a tried and true ‘American dream’ where one waits for that chance that comes one day but must not be missed. Further, remember that throughout this continent, people always have a ready answer. Few people can simply afford to admit that they do not know something. The answer, though, it may be far from correct, must only sound convincing. In Canada, therefore, do not tell a lie but never tell the complete truth either. Adjust your truth. An employer does not generally seek your intelligence and experience, but regards one as an object to be used. The worst thing that can happen to one is to be “overqualified”; in many ways worse than if you did not know how to read or write. Now I see that my friend knew what he was talking about. This well-intentioned advice did not prevent moments of scepticism and disappointment. Sometimes it really looked as though our landing at the Toronto airport was pretty bumpy.

“You Czechs are quite clever. You have good hockey players, excellent beer and even that Milos Forman has made himself a reputation in the U.S. So don’t worry and chin up!” That is roughly how talks with Canadian filmmakers sounded, whether at Humber College, York University or on the job while filming and in production studios. I still found it difficult encountering that constant optimism of the Canadian spirit to which we Slavs feel more remote. I tried to explain the difference between the playing-style of the Czech hockey players in Canada and the totally American style of the Czech director Forman who lives in the U.S. This reminds me of an excellent Czech cameraman who came in search of freedom but is still working as a waiter in New York, since he was not able to

adjust to the American reality and consumer philosophy.

“Try a place where they don’t make any money” was the advice of a friend, and he was right. Community TV channels are really an excellent non-profit opportunity for the public to literally get their hands on film, or rather video, production. I too filmed my first Canadian film *Krystyna*, about the fate of a Polish girl in strange and enormous Toronto, under these conditions. The basis of production, though, is semi-professional and I personally prefer a professional approach. The “community channel” did, however, give me an opportunity to meet some really nice people who helped me out quite a bit.

And then I got a job. It came suddenly, as one expects in America. Work in a film lab, a job nearly similar to one I had during the summer while studying at the Film Academy in Prague. So I was starting from the beginning once more. It is a paradox that my starting salary was smaller than the government support paid to new immigrants. At the same time I got to know new people, gaining “Canadian experience”, becoming a member of the life in this country and I was able to provide for my family myself.

“Listen, why do they show children’s films so late at night?” my wife asked me a few days after our arrival. “But those are films for grown-ups” was my uneasy reply. To merge into a different culture does not tend to be simple. Every day hurts and pleases one at the same time. For a film producer it is understandably important to follow TV programs to see the newest films, the best acting, to keep up with new faces and to compare working styles. Pay-TV with its higher demands could be most likely the right way. But it is still important to study the mediocre. It is disconcerting how many simple films with no solution or messages are shown daily on the screen. A psychologist would be better qualified in answering why society needs mass escape from reality

and from responsibility in such large doses. You must understand that I have no objections to good science-fiction. After all, our writer Karel Capek, who first came up with the name “robot”, ranks among my greatest favourites. But at the time of his writing he wished to convey a message – as do Ray Bradbury’s well-presented and still effective forewarnings, for example. The same cannot be said of some children’s programs which present a false romanticism and encourage violence. On the other hand I was very impressed with shows like *Polka Dot Door* and *Sesame Street*, that are really high-standard.

If I return once more to my “Canadian gamble” I must mark down the day that I was told by the Ontario Arts Council that I had been chosen among the successful authors in the category of experimental films and that I had been presented with a film grant. This gave me great satisfaction plus a useful support for the future. If my film *Chimneys* materializes, I would like to include in it my experiences and views of Canada through the eyes of a Czech filmmaker.

At present I am finishing a short slide show titled *Venice* that I would like to produce in film format for the CBC.

Like other filmmakers I have many ideas about what could or should be filmed. One screenplay I would like to mention (the realization of which I am saving for the future) is a 20-minute project called *Romeo and Juliet*. It would be a transformation into the symbolism of film “light-play” (the concept of shadow-play in this case is incorrect, since it mistakenly reminds one of the classic forms of shadow theatre). I realize the difficulties in obtaining each dollar for non-commercial film-production, even though the filming of such a piece needs no more than a small studio, six handy people and a week’s time. I suppose that its production could only be supported by the National Film Board.

What do I wish to say in conclusion? I come from a film family. My grandfather took part in forming the Czech film

industry, my father is an director of science films and I too somehow grew up with this profession. This is why I know well that real filmmaking is a sickness, and once infected, a person never finds a cure. It demands not only sensitivity and creativity, patience, organizational ability and perhaps a bit of talent, but primarily total dedication. The resultant film is reflected in all this. I believe in this film sickness of mine, the same way that I believe in a film future for Canada, which does not originate only in the number of Oscars and such awards, but mainly from the make-up of the population and therefore from further cultural development that awaits this country.

## Afterword

As I read through what I wrote over six months ago, all these images come back again. Much of what I mentioned then is repeating itself and much has changed. I feel though, that I too have changed – probably a lot.

One of the feelings that remains and is becoming stronger is the knowledge that I shall probably never be able to explain to my Canadian friends all that has been over-turned in my life, the changes that have occurred in my work, and I almost certainly will not be able to explain this to my old friends in Czechoslovakia. (I should love to know whether other immigrant-filmmakers in this country – and there must be quite a few – who have similar feelings.)

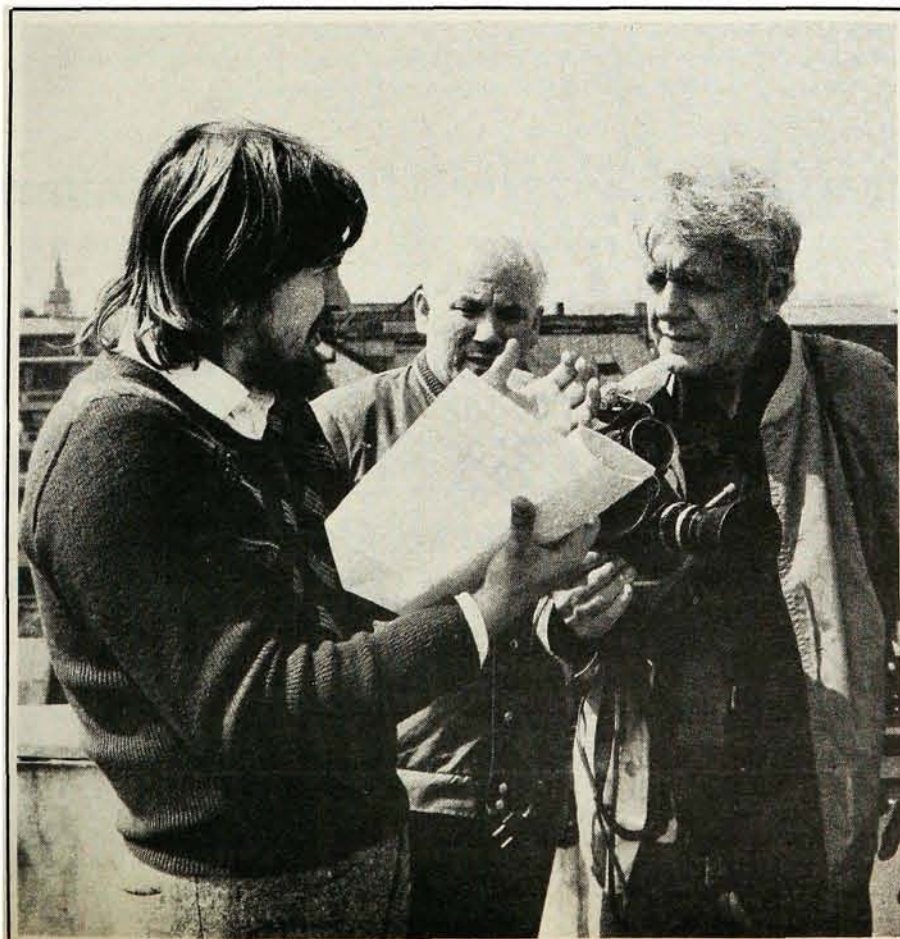
It has been a year and a half now that I have lived a Canadian life, increasingly becoming a part of it. Toronto is no longer a new and unknown city for me, full of strangers. Only the experiences are still new. Canada and my life here is no better and no worse than I expected, just different. The changes in environment, in thinking and in traditions are not just one flight across the Atlantic. The acclimatization will last for a while.

Like many other Canadians, I too lost my job during this economic “stabilization.” It came as suddenly and unexpectedly as when I was hired. The explanation is simple: film labs are losing orders and as I was among the “youngest” employees it was my turn to go among the first.

But I have again worked as a cameraman, photographer and video technician several times – depending on how fate offered its helping hand. There were mostly small and unimportant projects but also a good schooling of experiences and life strategies.

Lately I have begun to work for the CBC as a consultant. I write review and critiques of new scripts not yet included in the programme schedules. It is very interesting work, quite similar to that of a film editor that I did in Czechoslovakia.

When I think about all that I have actually seen in my time, when I “view my own film” (as Chaplin used to say), I come to the conclusion that I should devote more time to closer contact with younger, beginner, filmmakers. After all, there are so many things they should know that they do not pause about, since no one gives them that initiative. In general they are great technicians who often miss the idea, purpose or ethic in a film. They are the ones who are always curious about my experiences and opinions. Therefore, I might even attempt film education – if enough people show interest. I am slowly preparing teaching outlines, though this does not mean that I would like to give up on my “film sickness” – the desire to be *there*, at the scene.



● The way it was: Kabelik directing cameraman Eduard Sigrot in Prague

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