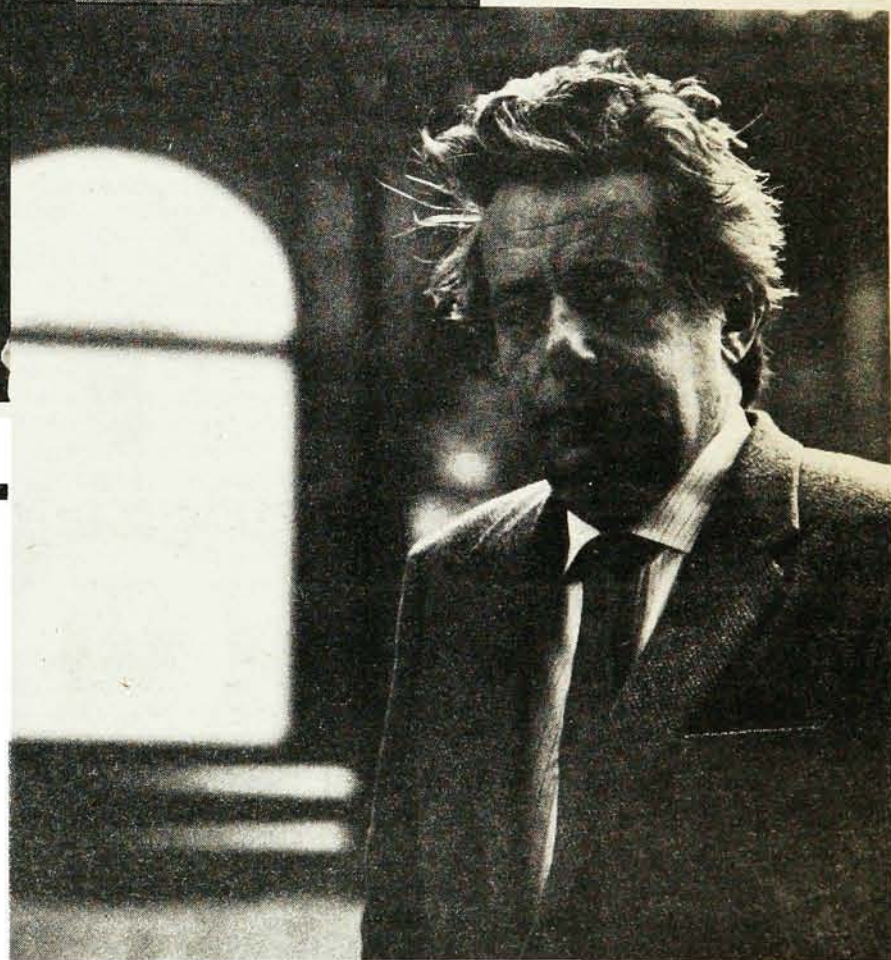




● Then: Mordecai Richler with Jack Warden (in cap) and Richard Dreyfuss during a break in the shooting of *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1974). Now: Richler outside Montreal's Ritz Carlton



## Mordecai Richler

# Now and Then

*Joshua Then And Now*, an RSL production directed by Ted Kotcheff from Mordecai Richler's script of his 1980 novel, is headed for the Croisette. It's been five years since English-language cinema in Canada had a film in competition at Cannes. (The last was *Out of the Blue*, a certified 'Canadian' production directed by the American Dennis Hopper.)

The most expensive Canadian film ever made, *Joshua Then And Now* has a lot riding on its success, though, says Richler, that will not be won or lost at Cannes. To Richler, *Joshua* represents the last hope for what he terms "respectable films" in this country. As he sees it, English-language filmmaking in Canada has, with the exception of *The Grey Fox*, produced nothing but "trash" in the past 11 years. Back then, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, the 1974 film version of Richler's 1959 novel,

also directed by Kotcheff, showed what kind of film this country was capable of making, but, as Richler notes, there was no follow-through — a failing Richler squarely attributes to Canadian producers.

In the following interview with Cinema Canada, Richler shares some of his thoughts on writing *Joshua*, both the novel and the screenplay, as well as his experiences with filmmaking in three countries: Britain, Canada, and the U.S.

After Stephen Leacock, Mordecai Richler is Canada's most internationally known writer. His other novels are *The Acrobats* (1954), *Son of a Smaller Hero* (1955), *A Choice of Enemies* (1957), *The Incomparable Atuk* (1963), *Cocksure* (1968), and *St. Urbain's Horseman* (1971). He is currently working on a new novel.

**Cinema Canada:** *Do you see yourself as a film person?*

**Mordecai Richler:** No, I do less and less of that. I only really do it now when it's my own work, otherwise I stay away from it. So I do very little film writing.

**Cinema Canada:** *How did that come about?*

**Mordecai Richler:** Well, I never particularly cared for film. It's something I learned how to do in England. I wrote film scripts there as a means of maintaining myself between novels. When that no longer became necessary, I did film far less frequently. I only do it (or I only did it if it wasn't my own work) for all the monies involved. For no other reason. It's very well paid. It's a craft I taught myself but I don't particularly care for people in film or for writing film.

**Cinema Canada:** *Except for your own writing, is it a question of control over what's going to end up on the screen?*

**Mordecai Richler:** Oh, sure. You know filmmaking is a group activity and I don't like group activities; and there are huge sums of money involved, a lot of compromises have to be made, and I'd much rather write novels or even do journalism, which I enjoy. However, if I were suddenly very broke, I would go out and do a film. But it's a street corner deal; so, I do what's necessary and leave.

**Cinema Canada:** *With Joshua, were you happy or indifferent that it was picked up by two Canadian producers? Was this something that you wanted?*

**Mordecai Richler:** No. Of course, I wanted it to be done and I wanted to do it with Ted (Kotcheff). I was pleased when (producers Robert) Lantos and (Stephen) Roth came into it. However, obviously no Hollywood studio would make it, or I would have made it there. Because there would have been less restrictions. I did it here because I couldn't get it made there. And here, Ted got final cut which is very important to us and in a sense we both had it because we worked together very closely. And Lantos and Roth have been very cooperative, to their credit, and have not imposed anything indecent on us at any time, so I'm very pleased.

**Cinema Canada:** *Why would no one have done it in Hollywood?*

**Mordecai Richler:** Well, because it's not... finally 20th Century-Fox came in, yes, but they're in for the end money. They have a percentage of the budget. But this is not a commercial film. In Hollywood they don't make adult films or they make very few of them. They want to make films that appeal to 14 year-olds and which they will go to and see two or three or four times. It's not the sort of thing I write. And even if this film does very well – we're hoping for the best – it will only appeal to audiences in very large cities. It's not the sort of thing that will play in small Southern towns or in small western towns in Canada. It will play in very big cities. So there is a limited sophisticated market for this kind of thing.

**Cinema Canada:** *You wrote in Shovelling Trouble that the idea of a Canadian film industry with tens of millions of dollars was alarming. Now that you've got some \$12 million riding on Joshua, are you alarmed?*

**Mordecai Richler:** More like ten but it's enough, I think.

**Cinema Canada:** *Is that alarming?*

**Mordecai Richler:** Sure, it's alarming. It's an awful lot of money. I guess by American standards it isn't. It's six-and-a-half million or seven which is not a very large budget these days, but it's frightening. There's a lot of government money in there and I just hope it works out. But yes, it's frightening, sure.

**Cinema Canada:** *Can you explain in what sense?*

**Mordecai Richler:** Well, there's a lot at risk. Also, if it does well, it will be easier to make respectable films here. If it doesn't do well, it won't be of any help to anyone. There are so many accidents involved in films. It's not like writing a novel where you're in total control. And then there were compromises that we had to make. Casting compromises from the beginning because we weren't allowed some of the people we wanted because they were American. So, it was very rough for Ted and rough for me too.

**Cinema Canada:** *You wanted Americans in what case?*

**Mordecai Richler:** It would be indiscreet for me to go into it right now but we would have cast a couple of things differently.

**Cinema Canada:** *Does it have to do with the point system, for instance?*

**Mordecai Richler:** Well, as I understand the legislation now, you're only allowed one American actor. We were granted two, we wanted three. And in the end we were granted two – we really needed four but... There are some very good Canadian performers on the other hand. I think that Alan Scarfe is awfully good and Michael Sarazzin is very good. I mean there are some good actors here. But there are others we could have casted. So, there are certain restrictions here. On the other hand, we couldn't have made this in California at all. So, I guess we should be grateful for what we got.

**Cinema Canada:** *You said that if Joshua works it will increase the possibilities of making respectable films in this country.*

**Mordecai Richler:** Yes, I think everything made here is trash.

**Cinema Canada:** *In this country?*

**Mordecai Richler:** Yes, I think they squandered a grand opportunity here and were put to shame by the Australians and it's largely the fault of the producers who were shameless and greedy, people of dismal taste, who were more interested in making deals than films and who made a lot of money for themselves, who made disgraceful films. And now there are no more private investors because the bones have been picked dry by disreputable producers. So, a lot of damage has been done. And on the other hand, you know, we've had, in the last few years that I've seen, *The Grey Fox* which I thought was very good. For the rest, I haven't seen anything that I would want to sit through. What they make here is soft-core-porn, at best. I mean a real epiphany, is making *Porky's* (which) I guess would be the dream of every Canadian producer. Well, you don't cheat somebody for making *Porky's* but you don't exactly respect him and sit down and have dinner with him. So, it's just too bad what happened. On the other hand, the Australians made some very engaging films and continue to do so.

**Cinema Canada:** *Why do you think that they were able to do that?*

**Mordecai Richler:** Well, I guess they weren't as corrupt as people are here. I mean there is talent here.

**Cinema Canada:** *What causes the corruption, in your view?*

**Mordecai Richler:** We are very close to the States so some of the most capable directors and producers and people who really were interested in film were not available because they'd left the country long ago. So, what we were left with were people who were very good at skinning doctors and other networks for income tax shelters and their gifts lay in cooking up shady deals more than making films. And the wrong people got ahold of it, and cheated the private-sector and the taxpayer both. And so Canadian films do not enjoy a very large reputation anywhere and it's a pity.

**Cinema Canada:** *And yet your novel was bought by two producers who, more or less, come out of that honorable Canadian tradition.*

**Mordecai Richler:** Yes, so I'm pleased.

**Cinema Canada:** *But is that not one of the kinds of compromises?*

**Mordecai Richler:** You mean that I made? Well, I took a chance. But, again, to be fair to them, they've never done anything without consulting me. They never imposed a director I didn't want or anybody I didn't want. They really behaved extremely well in this whole project with Ted and with me. And they certainly had their financial problems. I guess everyone had. But they have a lot at stake too. If this film works, well they are reputable producers. They are not just the producers of *Bedroom Eyes*, or *Heavenly Bodies*.

**Cinema Canada:** *Does that change the nature of the producer to achieve a certain kind of respectability at a certain level, once you've made your way up through the drek? In your experience with some three film industries, is that the way it goes?*

**Mordecai Richler:** Well, it needn't go that way. I think about seven or eight years ago, God knows, the money was flowing. There could have been attempts at more honourable projects and there weren't. I mean the highest ambitions of any of those films was schlock... And so you got people from Mulroney down joking about Canadian films and what a disgrace they are and they brought it all on themselves.

**Cinema Canada:** *When you sold Joshua, the rights to Joshua, it was conditional on what? You mentioned Kotcheff having the final cut.*

**Mordecai Richler:** Well, I said I wanted Ted and they were very agreeable to that and I knew Ted wouldn't do it unless he had final cut. But there were times when Ted was engaged elsewhere and might not have been available and I was willing to consider other directors and so were they, but we screened films and they did not impose any director on me that I didn't want, so I'm grateful for that.

**Cinema Canada:** *Your role in this was somewhat more than screenwriter?*

**Mordecai Richler:** No, it was screenwriter, really. But we did consult together.

**Cinema Canada:** *According to Martin Knelman, you did 19 drafts of the script?*

**Mordecai Richler:** No, I did a lot of drafts. It's a very difficult script and I still don't know whether it works but it was very difficult. *Duddy Kravitz* was very easy.

**Cinema Canada:** *You did Duddy fairly fast. The script was written in a matter of months, no?*

**Mordecai Richler:** Yes, *Duddy Kravitz* is an anecdotal novel and filled with incident. *Duddy Kravitz* is not about someone with a rich inner life. It's a linear story taking place over a very short time: it really was a question of making choices, which scenes you were going to use and which you weren't. All the dialogue was there. *Joshua* was a very, very difficult script. I guess it must have gone 7, 8 or even 9 drafts. Oh Robert (Lantos) is given to hyperbole, but no, not 19 drafts.

**Cinema Canada:** *Even so, 7 or 8, is that high for a script?*

**Mordecai Richler:** Not for me. I re-write an awful lot. And then there were other problems here in that (you had) a ridiculous situation where you are being asked to write fat and thin at the same time. You are writing a film script that should be about 130 pages and a TV version at the same time for the CBC which should be about 180 pages and because of real financial considerations in those additional 60 pages, we didn't want to bring in other characters or new settings because it would be too expensive. So, there were problems, problems created by the nature of the financing. I happened to know all along that Ted shoots long and that we probably didn't need a long TV version because we would have had it anyway, more or less... They shot some scenes for TV. But our primary concern always was the film and we were going to let the TV version take care of itself once we got to the shooting.

**Cinema Canada:** *You were shooting the two versions together?*

**Mordecai Richler:** No, we shot the film but there were certain scenes that Ted knew would not get into the film – it would just make it too long – but we could choose as well. So, it worked out. There was enough material there for TV. The TV version, I think, is two two-hours. They will show it a year after the film is released. So really it's three hours and 25 minutes.

**Cinema Canada:** *You had to do a script for each?*

**Mordecai Richler:** Well, to begin with, yes. So that created difficulties, technical difficulties.

**Cinema Canada:** *You were saying that it was a very difficult script to write. I can imagine that from the book. What did you do with it? Did it involve major structural shifts?*

**Mordecai Richler:** Yes, I told the story in a different way – somewhat – or simplified the structure somewhat for the film. And I took all of Spain out immediately. It was gone. There was no way you could use that. And a number of characters went entirely...

**Cinema Canada:** *Doesn't taking Spain out change a lot?*

**Mordecai Richler:** No. His obsession with Spain is still there, with the Spanish Civil War. But it's done through narration...

**Cinema Canada:** *And so he doesn't*

go back?

**Mordecai Richler:** Yes, he does but it's very quick. Christ, I'm suppose to deliver a film of 120 minutes, we're talking about a 450-page novel – there's no way I could have done that. You know, there are obvious things: three or four Bible lessons in the novel, and in the film we have one. Which takes a lot of time at that. We cut an awful lot from the novel. Whether there's enough left or not I don't know until other people see it. I hope so.

**Cinema Canada:** So, it was mainly a question of cutting?

**Mordecai Richler:** Cutting and reshaping and telescoping and making it coherent with all the cuts.

**Cinema Canada:** Is it hard to do a script from your own work?

**Mordecai Richler:** I'm not a bad surgeon so that didn't bother me. It's hard... People have asked me: When you wrote that novel, did you write it to be a screenplay? I mean, they're out of their minds. You know, a lot of the novel's strength was in the structure of the novel. So, it's difficult... and risky.

**Cinema Canada:** How long did it take until you had a finished script?

**Mordecai Richler:** I worked on it on and off for about three years, I guess. But I didn't work on it for three years. I worked on it for two months at a time... and then when finally we realized it was going to be made, then I got very serious and we went through it very carefully. So I'd join Ted in California on occasion and at other times he came to my house on the lake. Ted's a very literate man which is unusual with directors – good or bad. He's very well read and has a certain regard for my work, so there was no question of getting it vulgarized and he had some very good suggestions. And we've worked together on and off for years so we understand each other. So there are no tensions.

**Cinema Canada:** You started working on it after the rights had been sold or were you working on it before?

**Mordecai Richler:** Only after. But rights being sold is one thing, and then something happening is something else. We worked on it and we met but until the financing was in place, we didn't exactly break our backs, because you never really know.

**Cinema Canada:** Have you seen the film?

**Mordecai Richler:** Yes. The arrangement with Ted was that while he was doing his rough cut I wouldn't come in until he had some kind of assembly because it was better to have someone there with a fresh eye and then we talked at great length about it and I'd come back... You know I'm probably as helpful to him when he's editing as he is to me when I'm writing and when I'm writing we don't meet. I mean, he doesn't come in and talk to me every day about writing. We meet once a month. When I've got a considerable amount of work done, then we talk about it and it's valuable to me in that he hasn't seen it every day. So it was the same when he was editing. I was more valuable to him when I came in occasionally so I could look at it with some freshness. By that time it was coming out of his ears... And he works extremely hard and stays with it right through the editing, the post-synching and the mix and he doesn't just walk away from it all. So, he's been



● Mordecai Richler at the 1981 Genies: "I think if we finally made two or three films here, then it would do everybody a lot of good."

working on it for years by now. He came up here last April so, it's a year now that he's been editing.

**Cinema Canada:** How do you feel about what you've seen?

**Mordecai Richler:** Well, I think he's done a very good job indeed. Whether the actual story works or not, whether my part works or not I'm not sure until outsiders...

**Cinema Canada:** Is there a moment when you know? How did you feel about Duddy for instance?

**Mordecai Richler:** I didn't know whether it worked or not. You don't really know because it becomes so familiar. Then you're dealing with scenes that are supposed to be funny, well, when you've seen them 14 times, they sure as hell aren't funny. And when

you are two guys sitting there analyzing it, you no longer know what people will think, whether they'll find it funny or not.

**Cinema Canada:** But does there come a point where, given certain kind of distance, like one's writing, for instance, then...?

**Mordecai Richler:** That point comes about four years after you've finished the film, by which time it's too late... But we'll soon hear the good or bad news. I guess Ted will be finished, I'm seeing him tomorrow night in Toronto. I guess he'll be finished in two or three weeks. Then it has to be delivered to (20th Century) Fox.

**Cinema Canada:** Is that a dicey moment?

**Mordecai Richler:** Yeah, because the regime that bought it and liked it is no longer there. And whenever a new re-

gime comes in they want to piss all over what the previous bunch did. So I don't know. Nothing would surprise me or shock me in the film business. I just don't know what'll happen. I hope they'll like it and distribute it well. If not, somebody else will. I'm not worried about it being distributed or released at all, but I don't know what's going to happen with Fox, I have no idea.

**Cinema Canada:** But does the fact that it's going to Cannes help in terms of dealing with them? Does it matter to them particularly?

**Mordecai Richler:** I don't think so. Cannes really only matters in Europe, I think. I guess it can create a bit of momentum. But the thing about submitting it to Cannes is that everyone knew it was being submitted for competition so, if it had been turned down, it would have been: Oh, they turned down the film. It must be awful. But they turned

down *Duddy Kravitz*. Anyway, it's good that they took *Joshua*. Now, if it doesn't win anything, they'll say: It didn't win anything. So I don't know. I'm not going to Cannes. I've been.

**Cinema Canada:** You worked in England for the British film industry before its demise. Have you worked in Hollywood at all?

**Mordecai Richler:** Yes. Since I've been back in Canada I've gone out two or three times.

**Cinema Canada:** In your novel, *Joshua goes but he only stays a mighty short time*.

**Mordecai Richler:** The most I've ever stayed was three weeks.

**Cinema Canada:** Writing scripts?

**Mordecai Richler:** Ted was doing a film, *Fun with Dick and Jane*, and I went there and worked on the final draft. But I had a clause in the contract that I would not stay longer than three weeks. Another clause was I would not meet with the producers. I would only meet with Ted. Third was if I was going to stay for three weeks I would have to bring my wife out. So, I left after three weeks and they wanted more work done so I worked for a week here on it and just spoke to Ted on the phone. But three weeks is enough there.

**Cinema Canada:** In both the case of *Duddy* and *Joshua* these are still in some sense seminal moments in Canadian film. Do you have any thoughts about the difference between those three national film industries: British, U.S. and Canadian? Or is it all the same to you?

**Mordecai Richler:** The difference here is that, you know, most producers are unspeakably vile and crooked anywhere: England, California or here. But here they are also mostly inept. I don't mind con men but an inept con man is a special breed!

**Cinema Canada:** What do you mean by that: "inept con men"?

**Mordecai Richler:** Well, they are unsuccessful crooks. They don't know how to rob a bank. I used to get a lot of calls from Canadian producers but I've always said no. The things they were involved in! They were insulting, you have no idea.

**Cinema Canada:** For instance?

**Mordecai Richler:** Oh, I don't want to go into it. Then also they wouldn't want me or wanted me because I was "points", but also acceptable in California. It was not something that interested me. I was never offered anything here that tempted me because of its quality, which was very fortunate.

**Cinema Canada:** In the case of American scripts, or something like *Fun with Dick and Jane*, there was a moment, I believe, after *Duddy* when *The Incomparable Atuk* and *St. Urbain's Horseman* were going as films.

**Mordecai Richler:** That was before. *The Incomparable Atuk* was bought by United Artists. That was bought before *Duddy Kravitz*. When Ted started to work on *Duddy Kravitz* I was working with Alan Pakula who wanted to make *St. Urbain's Horseman*. And he's a very bright man but he had just made a film called *The Parallax View*, and it had not been a great commercial success. And he wanted to make something that he felt had a big commercial chance before he

made *St. Urbain's Horseman*. So he made *All The President's Men* and I said: It's gone on too long, and we just split over it. In an amiable fashion, but we decided to part ways.

**Cinema Canada:** It had gone on too long in what sense?

**Mordecai Richler:** He was going to make it, he was going to make it and then he was always doing something else. So I like Alan, but, I mean, it's just like you never go up to the plate. Then it's been picked up on and off by people in California but never been budgetted or gone into production. I guess if this does well, it's a possibility. *Atuk* is something else. Norman Jewison bought that. Norman had, I don't know, three or four scripts done and I understand they were all terrible. And he gave up on it. We might make it. There's been a lot of talk about that. It's possible, because of the nature of the novel, a live possibility.

**Cinema Canada:** In Canada?

**Mordecai Richler:** No, in the States.

**Cinema Canada:** Is that a kind of validation for you that it go that route? For instance, you have a time here now in terms of television production where there are piles of money for Canadian projects. Is it a preference on your part?

**Mordecai Richler:** To make it there? Well, you can cast it the way you want if you make it with an American company. That's the advantage. You don't get tangled in all the nationalist roles. I like to use Canadian actors whenever possible, but I don't want to be told I have to use them because they are Canadian. Neither does Ted. So, we'd prefer to make it or *St. Urbain's Horseman* there. There are enough dangers and risks in making any kind of film. Before you even begin, if you are limited on how you can cast it because of bureaucratic reasons, you are putting yourself in handcuffs and God knows, even the people you cast with delight may not turn out. But if the only way we could make it was here, we might do it here.

**Cinema Canada:** Both those books, you'd like to see them become films?

**Mordecai Richler:** Yes, sure.

**Cinema Canada:** What does it mean for a writer to have his work become a film?

**Mordecai Richler:** Well, I don't think it's any test of the novel's quality at all whether or not it's made into a film. However, if you've worked on a novel, let's say three or four years and it's made into film, you're paid a lot more money. It's seen by a lot of people and the novel is re-issued and more people read the novels and there are a lot of satisfactions. And with *Duddy*, everything came up roses. The film still plays, it has a very good reputation everywhere and it was a lot of fun.

**Cinema Canada:** *Fun to have made?*

**Mordecai Richler:** Yeah.

**Cinema Canada:** Does it ... it's another medium, it's another kind of, I hate to use the word, "product" all together. Do you feel that having your work become film gives it a kind of greater durability, a kind of greater accessibility than writing?

**Mordecai Richler:** No. Any film of a novel is a simplification so ideally once you write an original film, which I have not done, it gives it more currency but

not durability. More people see it and then more people will read the novel because they've seen the film. When *Duddy Kravitz* came out there were new paperback editions in the States and in England and it played in a lot of countries and it was very nice, sure. The only place it didn't do well was in England. Oddly enough.

**Cinema Canada:** The film?

**Mordecai Richler:** Yeah. It didn't do well critically or commercially. It did very well in France and in Scandinavia, and other countries. But the British didn't take to it.

**Cinema Canada:** Any idea why?

**Mordecai Richler:** They didn't like it, just didn't like it. The reviews were not terribly good as I remember and it just came and went. Nobody knew who (Richard) Dreyfuss was when we made it. But in the States and elsewhere it played very successfully at first-run cinemas. Once it went out on what they call those flagship releases, it didn't do very well because nobody knew who Rick (Dreyfuss) was at that time. Why the hell they never re-released it when he became a star, I don't know. I guess we could have. I just don't know.

**Cinema Canada:** Going through the files on *Duddy*, there was a piece by Penelope Gilliate in the *New Yorker* saying that your book wasn't literature it was book-making and that the film wasn't a film but a drive-in movie.

**Mordecai Richler:** That was one of the few bad American reviews. But then Pauline Kael came back and she wrote about it very positively in the *New Yorker* after...

**Cinema Canada:** You had the two *New Yorker* critics going at each other?

**Mordecai Richler:** Yes, but there were enough very good American reviews to move it.

**Cinema Canada:** Do you feel that the making of *Duddy* which, on the level of production, for instance, was this enormous strain of the Canadian infrastructure at the level of technicians, that the competent personnel weren't available?

**Mordecai Richler:** They exist now. We certainly had a very good crew on *Joshua*. They were really terrific. So we certainly have that. And there were some very good actors.

**Cinema Canada:** I get the sense that a *Mordecai Richler* book turned into a film is always an immense growth experience for Canadian filmmaking. Do you have any sense of *Duddy* having established something or just that a film was made and that was that?

**Mordecai Richler:** It didn't really establish anything because they never went on and made much more. And after *Duddy*, I was besieged with invitations from California none of which I ever took up because it's not something I was into, but not here. Nobody asked me to do anything here. There were a lot of offers in California but none here.

**Cinema Canada:** Did you hope that it would produce something?

**Mordecai Richler:** Yes, I think if we finally made, if there were two or three films here, then it could do everybody a lot of good. Like it's too bad *The Wars* didn't work out. I wish it had. As a film. They're very quick and happy to say: well, you can't do this kind of thing. But

if this works, maybe they'll like the stories of Alice Munro or Robertson Davies. I mean, there's enough material here. I don't know but I have the feeling these people are never, or their work is never thought of in terms of film. Whereas the Australians do their own books and things to an enormous extent and they are accessible. I mean when we made *Duddy Kravitz*, (Paramount President) Frank Yablans said: You pricks, if only you'd set this in Chicago we all could have made a fortune. Well, it's not Chicago, you know, it's about Montreal. And we never tried to pretend it was anywhere but Montreal, neither did we in *Joshua*. I think Montreal is really a very exotic location for Americans and Europeans. There is a real advantage shooting here. What I do regret is that we've now made two films, Ted and I talked about this, and they are both set in the summer. We've never shot here in winter, which seems an outlandish thing... so we'd like one day to make a film which shows Canada in the winter instead of the summer.

**Cinema Canada:** Have you worked as closely with any other director?

**Mordecai Richler:** I've worked closely with Jack Clayton. The first film I ever did, I rewrote *Room at the Top* for him. And then I did, we were going to make *The Looking-Glass War* which is a John LeCarré novel. I did the script and we were hoping for Columbia and just before it got made, I don't know if you remember, there was some Bond film without Sean Connery with about eight people including Woody Allen and David Niven and it cost a lot of money and it was a big bomb, so the word was spy pictures don't work. *Looking-Glass War* was about a pathetic old Pole in London who's brought back into the Secret Service and they wanted to change it to a very young man. So we both walked out and they did make it with a new script. With a very young man with his shirt open. I never saw it. But, yeah, I've worked closely with Jack.

**Cinema Canada:** Because it seems important to you to have a close relationship with the director, on the level of having the ideas respected.

**Mordecai Richler:** A very good director can protect you from all the studio people. He'll take all the flak and leave you alone to write. But these are the only two directors I've worked closely with. I worked with Peter Hall, we were going to make *Cocksure* for Marty Ransonoff but by the time I finished the script, Marty and Peter were suing each other over the filming of *Midsummer Night's Dream*. I worked with Peter but he's really a stage director. The other problem was he'd just released a film with David Warner, *Love is a Four Letter Word*, or something like that, and it didn't work so they were no longer interested in Peter as a film director.

**Cinema Canada:** Has your view of this country changed any since you've come back? It was interesting going through the clips about *Duddy*, for instance, all the tumult and outrage and so forth, in the sense, well, it doesn't change all that much. Has it?

**Mordecai Richler:** It's a lot different from the country I left in 1951. It's a country that's certainly very good to its writers, it spoils them. You know, Montreal is my home. Once our youngest kid is in university, my wife and I will spend about four months out of the

country and go back to Europe. My wife much prefers London to Montreal and I don't blame her. So it's been a difficult adjustment for her to make, but it's a rough world for a lady, you know, if her husband wants to go somewhere. And I have a very loyal wife, she came back to Montreal.

**Cinema Canada:** *The return was something you wanted?*

**Mordecai Richler:** I always felt I would come back some day. What I did not know was when I would come back, I guess. It was 1972, I was 41. I'd been away for 20 years. I didn't know whether I'd left it too late. But then I began to travel a good deal in North America and I had a very good time. And I still spend a lot of time in New York, I'm in New York every third week for a couple of days. And my wife generally comes down with me.

**Cinema Canada:** *Joshua took, I believe, nine years to write?*

**Mordecai Richler:** No, it took three years to write. Now there was a gap of about nine years after *St. Urbain's Horseman*, but I worked for a long time on another novel which I'm working on now. And then, you know, I wrote a children's book, a couple of books of essays. I don't know, but it took three years, on and off. I usually work on a novel for about four or five months and then I've got to get away from it. Then I go back to it...

**Cinema Canada:** *Does it get harder for each one?*

**Mordecai Richler:** Everything gets harder!

**Cinema Canada:** *There's a line in Joshua which jumped at me. You write that once writers worked for revolutionary change instead of their own absurdity.*

**Mordecai Richler:** I don't remember, but I've certainly never been political.

**Cinema Canada:** *No, but was there, stretching perhaps the meaning of the word political, a sense of the writer's vocation as being revolutionary in a sense of changing something?*

**Mordecai Richler:** Writers describe the world. God help the man who thinks he's going to change it.

**Cinema Canada:** *In what you are working on now, are you changing locales?*

**Mordecai Richler:** I never talk about what I'm working on.

**Cinema Canada:** *Again in Shovelling Trouble, there's a passage where you write about basically "no regrets" in that you haven't done anything that you felt was personally compromising. Have you become, now, the writer you wanted to be?*

**Mordecai Richler:** You never become a writer you wanted to be. No.

**Cinema Canada:** *What would you have wanted?*

**Mordecai Richler:** I would have wanted to be a better writer. If I had done what I wanted to do, I would have stopped by now. I keep trying.

**Cinema Canada:** *You've often written*

*about wanting to write something that would last. Do you still feel that as a goal?*

**Mordecai Richler:** Sure.

**Cinema Canada:** *You were saying that it gets harder with each novel. Has your relationship with your writing changed in any kind of major way over the years?*

**Mordecai Richler:** Well, you worry more about losing it. You don't know whether you can still do it or not.

**Cinema Canada:** *Writing in general or with respect to novels in particular?*

**Mordecai Richler:** Novels. You become much more critical of your own work. So it takes a lot longer because when you are a kid it's just great to publish and it's more exciting. Then it no longer becomes the event it was because it's there. So, in your own mind, you become rather more selective. It has to be special. I could be wrong anyway. You seem to get a lot more critical. It takes longer.

**Cinema Canada:** *The actual process of writing?*

**Mordecai Richler:** Writing and re-writing and expressing certain ideas as well. You know like, well, it's been done and so what? So what if you publish that novel? You go through a lot more self-criticism even before you sit down.

**Cinema Canada:** *Do you feel writing as some kind of curse?*

**Mordecai Richler:** No. I lead a very fortunate life. I do what I want and I'm paid for it. I work short hours. I'm lucky, I'm not cursed. That's all bullshit talk

about writing. It's difficult to be a plumber too. They work long hours. No. I'm a very lucky man.

**Cinema Canada:** *Do you concern yourself with such things as your place in literature, be it Canadian or whatever?*

**Mordecai Richler:** No, I mean who knows? Sure, I'd much rather be written about nicely than not. But it's not up to me. You try to do the best you can. And be as honest as you can. But, in the end, I don't know whether my novels will be read 50 years from now. How would I know?

**Cinema Canada:** *You would wish that?*

**Mordecai Richler:** Yeah, but I won't be able to check it out. Sure I'd wish that.

**Cinema Canada:** *Do you have the feeling you understand what made you want to become a writer? Do you understand the source?*

**Mordecai Richler:** Well, you know, when you are a kid, you think that everything's possible fortunately. If you want to be writer, you buy a typewriter and you go on and you write and you think: I'm a writer. I mean it's very fortunate having that kind of arrogance because if you worked it all out, and all the casualties and all the failures, you'd never even sit down and start. So you don't really make decisions at 20, you just do it. And you don't have as many second or third thoughts as you do later on. So it was the only thing I wanted to do and I sat down and I went to Paris and I did it. I didn't know what the odds were. Fortunately.



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