The apprenticeship of Robert Lantos

RSL's Robert Lantos, together with partner Stephen Roth, and ICC's John Kemeny and Denis Héroux have just joined forces as equal partners in a new separate venture, Alliance Entertainment Corp. The foursome of Lantos, Roth, Kemeny and Héroux represent the closest Canada comes to having movie moguls of its own, and, as Lantos explains below, Alliance is a last stand attempt to establish a US-modelled approach to volume film and television production in Canada.

For Lantos, the achievement of Canadian producers like himself is that they have realized what he terms "the dream" of every foreign producer alive, namely to penetrate the American system from within.

Lantos very candidly revealed in three lengthy interviews with Cinema Canada's Tom Perlmutter what that process has meant for one Canadian film producer.

The interviews have been edited from a 100-page transcript.

From a film and communications student at McGill University in the early '70s, the Hungarian-born, Latin-American-raised Lantos has become, with this fall's Canadian premiere of Joshua Then and Now, the co-producer, with Roth, of the largest budget feature in Canadian film history.

The following interview is Robert Lantos' view of the road he has travelled.

A Cinema Canada interview with RSL's president by Tom Perlmutter
Robert Lantos: I was looking to get into filmmaking. I was in graduate school at McGill studying film and communications under a new program, and I was one of the first baptized under that program. I wanted to write and direct and produce probably in that order.

This was between the late ’60s and the early ’70s. And I guess the best way to tell it is with a couple of anecdotes.

One of my professors was John Grierson, probably the one I learned the most from. He gave a course to about eight or nine people in his hotel-room in a hotel on Crescent Street. At the end of the year, he asked everybody what their plans were. When it was my turn, I told him I wanted to write, direct and produce. He said, “How are you going to do that?” At the time there was any independent production in Canada in English, no one was aware of it. So I told him I was going to make the rounds of the CBC and the NFB with his help. I told him he had to write me a very warm reference letter and set up a couple of watchogs for me in the NFB. He said, “I’ll do that for you but I’ll tell you that if you really want to get a job at the NFB, then don’t go with your curriculum vitae and reference letters and student credits. It will go much faster and be much more efficient if you apply at the front desk and fill out a form as a driver. And then once you’re inside, it’s a different world.

I did it, of course, and have never had since, the patience or the humility to be a driver, so I disregarded that advice. I asked him to set up appointments and went with my reference letters, student scripts and student credits. It all went very well. I heard from one person and vodka martinis with somebody else and made the rounds, and it became quite clear that this was going to be a very slow, very arduous process. There were easily 1,000 people for every possible opening. On top of which my own constitution and genetic make-up was not necessarily designed for working with government institutions. That’s putting it very mildly. It was not a very encouraging first round.

Cinema Canada: So you turned your attention to distribution.

Robert Lantos: I began in film distribution by a complete accident. It was something I knew absolutely nothing about, certainly not by previous experience. And certainly not from my film studies which primarily involved watching Eisenstein’s Potemkin 30 or 40 times and dissecting it frame-by-frame, which I found far more appealing than underground movies and becoming very familiar with the birth of each of his children through his films. And, as well in my case, I was then translating Lukacs’ ‘Theories of Marxist Aesthetics’ into English from Hungarian. So it meant a lot of esoteric things that had absolutely no relationship to the business of distributing movies.

Which is why it was a very good thing that I did start out through film distribution. It was an accident and the accident came about in the following way. I was still in graduate school and was freelancing for The Montreal Star and for CBC radio as a writer and as a researcher. I heard of something in New York called the New York Erotic Film Festival, an event that grew out of 60’s experimental and underground filmmaking, that had merged with very strong exploitations going on in erotic cinema at this time. It was the beginning of the lifting of censorship and the beginning of the respectability, so to speak, of porn. It was a big event in New York where all sorts of experimental filmmakers sent in their five- or ten- and 20-minute shorts in a competition judged by Andy Warhol, Milos Forman and Gore Vidal. All sorts of very prestigious names were involved – a feminist called Betty Dobson as well as Germaine Greer.

So I got myself sent down to New York to cover the New York Erotic Film Festival and it made for some very unusual stuff for CBC radio. It also gave me the idea that maybe I could buy the Canadian rights of the prize-winners and somehow bring them to Canada and get them through censorship. It would have been the first time that material that explicit would be shown in Canada. These films were so new and so fresh; a very strong artistic cachet and veneer came with them. They would probably find an audience – a young sophisticated audience such as I was very familiar with because I was still in university and I was very active in university and had come out of the left-wing activist movement of the ’60s. It would be an audience that would have never seen movies like that and certainly would have never been caught dead dealing pornography, but would be very interested in this. I negotiated without knowing anything about distribution. I knew enough to know that you had to buy the rights to something before you could show it. I made a deal to buy the Canadian rights to the films that won the prize, but I didn’t have any money. When I came back, I attempted to raise some funds which I failed at and finally I put together a few hundred dollars based on which I got the various filmmakers to agree to send me a print of their film on loan for 30 or 60 days while I tried to get it through censorship and tried to raise additional money to pay for the rights.

I found myself making the rounds of Famous Players and the theatre chains with a can of 16mm film under my arm which consisted of a dozen shorts. And there I discovered a whole slew of fascinating things. First of all, I discovered that movie theatres were programmed by central offices that controlled an entire circuit and that they in turn were just about totally inaccessible to someone off the street. In order to show a movie, you would have to have a distribution company that had ongoing relationships with the theatre circuits, which I didn’t have. I also discovered that they didn’t play 16mm film in movie theatres and I also discovered that they play shorts spliced together. It became completely impossible to get a movie theatre for what was called the Best of the New York Erotic Film Festival.

My best friend at the time was the Montreal Star, the McGill Student Council. We had this idea that perhaps it would be a good idea to bring the Best of the New York Erotic Film Festival as part of the McGill Winter Carnival, charge admission and let McGill keep all the profit. This would act as a test to see if there was an audience for the film. So we put up posters all over the campus. I think we had three screenings, all of which were not only sold out but, by the third one, the mob-scene was so phenomenal that tickets sold for two dollars were being scalped for $10 and $15. The Montreal fire-squad was called out because of the crowds. It was an absolute riot. At that point I really knew that we did have something. Both the Montreal Star and the Gazette came to one of the screenings and the next day there were rave reviews about the New York Erotic Film Festival and a tremendous amount of enthusiasm and interest in both English papers. It was really hailed as a kind of hybrid cultural accomplishment.

Following that I had an offer from a movie theatre – the Vendome Theatre at Place Victoria. The theatre no longer exists, it was dying and never grossed any money on a film. It was offered to me by a company which had a lease on it. Their interest was that they had heard of the New York Erotic Film Festival through the press and they really couldn’t do any worse than they were doing then. Just before that they had rented their theatre out to the Russian Embassy to show Russian movies. So we made a very unusual deal. Normally in the distribution, the theatre splits the box-office with a distributor and the terms are on a sliding scale where the distributor gets a minimum of 25% and sometimes as much as a maximum of 60% or 65% of the box-office, if the box-office is very high. In this case, they proposed something that, had I known anything about the film business, I would not have accepted. The deal was that they keep the first X dollars, the house-expense of the theatre – I forget the numbers – and the rest would belong to me. They were really interested in covering their expenses because they were losing money. And so I agreed. We had to guarantee the first week’s rent which we didn’t have, but the film opened on a Friday and the money for the rent was only payable on Monday.

So I thought at the time, either the film would make money, in which case the deal was totally in their favour, or it didn’t, then my entry into the world of film distribution would be very short-lived and I would take up a job which had just been offered to me as restaurant critic of The Montreal Star. As it turned out, this New York Erotic Film Festival was a huge success. It played at theatre for some 20 weeks, grossed something like half-a-million dollars in one theatre district alone. I had one across Canada. It broke the censorship barriers of the time. It became the first time that the Quebec Censorship Board allowed something like that to get through without the names associated with it. Because of this ridiculous deal that we had made, which turned out to be totally in our favour, we made a lot of money.

Cinema Canada: What year was that?


Cinema Canada: That must have been an education, a very rapid education in the film business.

Robert Lantos: Aside from my desire to make films and my fascination with movies which goes back to when I was a kid and it didn’t disappear, of if anything it increased, I have a very strong entrepreneurial instinct. It was quite clear after my first round of teas and martinis that was not going to be the way I was going to do it. I had an idea and ideas were a dime a dozen and I had one very early on that happened to work, and gave me that entrance.

Cinema Canada: This fascination with film from a very early age goes back to Hungary?

Robert Lantos: Not to Hungary. I grew up in South America. I left Hungary with my parents, but in South America my school was downtown, and all the movie theatres were within five blocks of my school.

Cinema Canada: What sort of things would you go to see?

Robert Lantos: Westerns – double bills, lots of Westerns; Westerns and war movies.
York something like that, really comes you valued. But, my hearing about the Hollywood movie you didn't talk spent much more time screening and very, very politicized at the time. We Grierson's world of film was. But that in this very academic edifice. For which there were happened to be the most interesting one course over a two-year program in films. We were new and there was no simply because for a long time, perhaps even now, I find it necessary to analyze things. I find it very difficult to think in terms of black-and-white because of my academic background and training. And yet, in the commercial world, it is very important to see things in black-and-white. Decisions have to be made rather quickly and over-analyzing tends to be counterproductive. If you went to a film and training from the university was precisely the opposite — to analyze, to look for shades of meaning and interpretations, and to know there are not only many interpretations but always many points of view. The world of the arts consists of a series of dichotomies that, in turn, through their contradictions, cause a harmony. To think in those terms is not very conducive to a commercial success.

Robert Lantos: That was only one course over a two-year program in which there were 25 of us. It had been to be the most interesting one because he told great anecdotes. Those anecdotes were my only real glimpses and insights into the real world of film. You can imagine how uncommercial Grierson's world of film was. But that was still by far the only touch of reality in this very academic edifice.

Robert Lantos: Of course, I am still very sentimental about the time thinking about how to put a film together. That took roughly three years.

Robert Lantos: I always went to see ... any time in my life, which is kind of luxury that will never recur in my life — to analyze and to look at films and at the world from a purely the sertical point of view. It was an intellectual exercise that I liked a great deal. It didn't have direct practical application of any sort. If anything, I think, probably it retarded my ability to make money simply because for a long time, perhaps even now, I find it necessary to analyze things. I find it very difficult to think in terms of black-and-white because of my academic background and training. And yet, in the commercial world, it is very important to see things in black-and-white. Decisions have to be made rather quickly and over-analyzing tends to be counterproductive. If you went to a film and training from the university was precisely the opposite — to analyze, to look for shades of meaning and interpretations, and to know there are not only many interpretations but always many points of view. The world of the arts consists of a series of dichotomies that, in turn, through their contradictions, cause a harmony. To think in those terms is not very conducive to a commercial success.

Robert Lantos: We thought we had found an audience here that wanted to see erotic films in a certain context, and when you find an audience, you don't let go of it. Unfortunately there just wasn't the kind of film that fit that kind of description. We found over the next couple of years perhaps a half-dozen; otherwise they were straight porno movies which I was not interested in distributing and for which I knew that audiences would not pay. More and more the energy and the time and the concentration of the business was in importing quality films from France, Italy, Germany, Spain.

Robert Lantos: Well, that was difficult. It's all a matter of people believing that you really mean to be in the distribution business and you plan to stay. Eventually we gained more and more credibility.

Robert Lantos: As a matter of fact, my very first business deal ever, my very first business sale in my career, was with Moses Znaimer. When I had to make payment for the New York Erotic Film Festival, he wasn't interested in importing the films and I gave him the right to run the New York Erotic Film Festival on CITY-TV which he promptly proceeded to do.

Robert Lantos: I wanted to make films and for so many of all this was a huge opportunity. I really did not have a great deal of interest in purchasing movies and then booking them into the theatres and promoting them, which is what distribution is about. So, after I had gone through the major baptisms and learned what I thought were some crucial things about distribution, I spent a lot of my time thinking about how to put a film together. That took roughly three years.
Robert Lantos: The first thing I did as a producer was buy the rights to In Praise of Older Women, the novel by Stephen Vizinczey. That was in 1975.

Robert Lantos: $50,000. It was a good buy in retrospect, although at the time it seemed like a lot of money.

Robert Lantos: It was me personally. It wasn't the distribution company, simply because Victor Loewy didn't have any interest in production. The way it came about is that I had read the book when I was very young — when it was first published I was only 16 or 17. I liked it a great deal. I had a feeling that this was a story that could have broad appeal.

Robert Lantos: I went to see him and I was lucky. When I met Stephen Vizinczey, he was young and it was a time when he was just starting out. I showed him my enthusiasm for the book and I could see that he was interested. I explained to him that I wanted to make a film about it and that I would do it by any means necessary. I said, "If you don't want to do it, I will do it for myself." He agreed and we started working together.

Robert Lantos: We needed to raise money to produce the film. We approached several companies and eventually we were able to raise $500,000. It was a significant amount for a film at that time.

Robert Lantos: It wasn't the distribution company, but rather a separate company with him to buy the rights to the film. This was a wise decision as it allowed us to maintain control over the project.

Robert Lantos: We were in a meeting where we were discussing the logistics of producing the film. We talked about the budget and how we would finance it. The producer was concerned about the financial risk.

Robert Lantos: At the time it was not even a commercial film. It was a story that resonated with me and I wanted to bring it to life on the screen.

Robert Lantos: We worked with a commercial lab to produce the film. The film was shot in 16mm black-and-white by Famous Players. We went to Famous Players because they had experience with independent films.

Robert Lantos: We were able to raise $250,000 and ended up costing about $300,000. It was a matter of $25,000. We went to Famous Players because they were looking for new talent.

Robert Lantos: They had set up a lab in their basement to make movies. The film was to be shot in 10 days on a farm in Eastern Township.

Robert Lantos: It was something that, while we were putting together In Praise of Older Women, had come to me via Carole. When they told me what they wanted to do, I saw that it was something that I couldn't pass up. It was an opportunity I had been looking for. It was something which I could do immediately, as opposed to In Praise of Older Women where I still had to raise a million dollars. It was a matter of $25,000. We went to Famous Players who put up $25,000 against the exhibition rights and that was the only cash we had. The script was written in two weeks.

Robert Lantos: But by that point I knew them and they knew me. How can you go wrong with $25,000 in Quebec, on a Gilles Carle film starring Carole Laure? I didn't tell them that it was only going to cost $25,000, but it didn't really matter.

Robert Lantos: It was a very successful film. It was something that, while we were putting together In Praise of Older Women, had come to me via Carole. When they told me what they wanted to do, I saw that it was something that I couldn't pass up. It was an opportunity I had been looking for. It was something which I could do immediately, as opposed to In Praise of Older Women where I still had to raise a million dollars. It was a matter of $25,000. We went to Famous Players who put up $25,000 against the exhibition rights and that was the only cash we had. The script was written in two weeks.

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the box-office was quite shaky. It didn’t even recoup its cost in Quebec at the theatres.

But then two things happened. First the film was invited to the Avoriaz Film Festival in the French Alps. It was a film festival for science-fiction and fantasy movies. It won the critics’ grand prix. And out of there came 20 or 25 absolutely sensational reviews. The film was loved by every French critic. It was compared to Fellini’s 8 1/2 and Bergman’s Persona. I still have the reviews; they are the best reviews any film I ever made got anywhere. It was a critical prodigy and it was picked up by Gaumont for distribution in France. The advance Gaumont paid for the French rights was greater than the cost of making the film. After that it was sold in three or four countries, in Brazil, in Belgium, in Switzerland. It has never played anywhere else. It played really only in the four countries.

The second thing that happened is that it was subtitled in English. We had a screening for the English Canadian press – Maclean’s, the Toronto Star and the Globe and Mail. They gave it, if possible, even better reviews than in France. That, in turn, lead to a respectable run in Toronto, in Vancouver, in Winnipeg, in Ottawa and in all the big English Canadian cities.

Cinema Canada: How did Gilles Carles get involved in this? Was this something he really wanted to do?

Robert Lantos: It was late 1976 and there was absolutely nothing happening in Quebec. There were no films being made, so the top people were unemployed. Gilles Carles was unemployed; Carole Laure was unemployed; nobody was doing anything. So there was actually this idea in various forms to all the producers over the years and everybody said, “No.”

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Cinema Canada: How did you get involved?

Robert Lantos: We got the hook in the fall of ’75 and we started shooting in ’77. It took two years. I later realized that that was not such a long time to put a movie together. At the time it seemed hopeless to me. I couldn’t believe that it could be so difficult. I was amazed that a book so good, so obviously commercial, lively, entertaining, funny and charming could take so long. How could
it be so difficult? In hindsight, two years was nothing. Joshua took us almost five.

**Cinema Canada:** In terms of financial structuring, Stephen put together the deal?

**Robert Lantos:** Yes, Stephen’s law was nothing. Joshua took us almost five. Practice had access to investors. He was the deal?

**Cinema Canada:** Financing, which was, I think, about it be so difficult? In hindsight, two years of the budget.

**Robert Lantos:** It was a tax-shelter, one of the earliest. It wasn’t a one-page circular. There was no bank. It was Stephen Roth going to the people, finding them - in the street, in their offices, button-holing them wherever he could, at parties and saying, “Let’s put $10,000 into this move. Sign here?” That’s how it was done. I got my dentist to put in $10,000 after he finished drilling my teeth.

**Cinema Canada:** In terms of the actual film, did you feel pleased with what came out?

**Robert Lantos:** Yes then, and even now. When I look at it, I still like the film. I regret only that I didn’t make the film 10 years later. Because if I could make the film today, I could make a very, very memorable movie, which would also be an absolute blockbuster, at least as good as Tom Jones.

It was so early on in my career, I had to make so many mistakes on it, because I knew so little - how to tell a story, everything that goes into making a movie. Also, we didn’t have enough money. We shouldn’t have made this film for $1 million. As a result, we couldn’t go to Europe to shoot the European scenes. We had to cheat them in Old Montreal, and it didn’t look very good. We shot the film in 27 days. It should have been in 55. All sorts of compromises were made, the biggest of all was the script. I would not today put a script like that into production. It was very far from being good enough. Nonetheless, I still like the film. It has a freshness and a charm that works and the film was very successful. At the time, though, I had no idea that it could be made any better.

**Cinema Canada:** As you put together In Praise of Older Women, were you developing a sense of the kind of producer you wanted to be and what kind of a business you wanted to create?

**Robert Lantos:** In some ways the story of the making of the film In Praise of Older Women is so good that I want to keep some of it for a day when I write my memoirs. It’s an exquisite case-study. Everything that could possibly go wrong with a movie went wrong. After the quest for the rights came a two-year period, developing the script and trying to get the financing mounted. Operating from a position of great inexperience and a lack of track-record, we barked up every tree. I was a rookie producer and a rookie producer gets a lot more rejection than he gets yes’s.

After a couple of years making the rounds, finally we had the financing assembled. Finally we had the film cast. The female lead was going to be played by Bibi Andersson. About a week before shooting, a lot of money had been spent and a lot more committed; the crew had been working for five/six weeks. Tom Berenger was already in town, rehearsing. The sets were built and we were in the last throes of pre-production when... in fact, I was in the boardroom of the CFDC signing the final long-form contracts, which was the final step before the full production financing was turned over to us. Until then we had been floating most of the production with our own funds. There were a dozen people in the boardroom. I got a call. It was a Friday afternoon and I got a call. It was from an AD who said, “I think there’s a problem because I was just making Bibi Andersson’s flight arrangements with her agent and the agent said, ‘She’s not coming.’” She was due up the next day from New York. But she wasn’t in New York, she was in Sicily. I had a choice of going back to the boardroom and finish signing the papers – all the contracts had to be re-contacted, some of whom might pull out and I saw the whole thing falling into limbo. It was a very very tight bud-
get and we couldn't afford to stay idle and put everybody on payroll on hold while it was settled. It was a panic.

We had to go back to the production office and tell the union crew that they couldn't get paid on Friday because the funds had been frozen and we had no more money to pay them. Later that night, I stayed in the office for the next 72 hours. Stephen Roth and myself and a couple of other people stayed at the office trying to figure out what to do. People started coming back one at a time. One crewman brought a bottle of Scotch. They all brought little treats.

**Cinema Canada: How did you feel at that point?**

Robert Lantos: I was collapsed. It was two years of really hard work threatened by some capriciousness for which I really didn't know the reason. If we could try to do it again on the fly, by three days, I would have bankrupted. I would lose all the money I had in the world. It was a high angst moment in my life. We had very little time to put it back together. We couldn't afford to keep the crew on doing nothing while we were trying to put the film back together. Also, the money they had committed to In Praise of Older Women. They had to know immediately whether it was going to go or not, so they could reload the film if it wasn't.

That week-end we tried to find Bibi Andersson to find out why she was doing this. But she was at the film festival in Taormina, Sicily. Making a phone call to Sicily alone takes about an hour each time. We had no idea where she was. We tried to track her down. Then we tried to make up a travel-agent friend who had some brochures and a phone number of the main hotels were in Taormina and start calling them, but we couldn't find her. The next day was Saturday, I lived in Montreal next door to the Italian Consulate. I was walking by the Italian Consulate. I had gone home for a few hours and was walking back to the office in a daze and I thought maybe they can help me track her down. So I went to the Italian Embassy on Saturday, knocked on the door, and there was somebody there. It was a lady cultural attaché. In my state of emotional stress, I told her the whole story and she got very involved and got on the phone...eventually tracked down the Taormina police department through some diplomatic officials in Rome. By Sunday, I had the name and number of someone to call in the Taormina police department. I found somebody who spoke Italian and found a phone number for Bibi Andersson by Sunday afternoon. On Sunday night we spoke to her to find out that she really didn't want to do the film, even though she had a signed contract and had been paid. She decided that she was afraid of the nudity after she had read the script and agreed to do it. Later, later she played a lesbian with Maria Schneider in Hollywood. So that was naught.

At the same time we tried to find her agent who was on holiday. The third quest was to try and replace her with somebody who was immediately available, would work for our money and would work with a first-time producer and barely known director on such short notice. On Friday afternoon we made a list and the first name on that list was Karen Black. What happened here is really the best part of the story, certainly something that has never happened to me again and probably never will again in my career.

Her agent turned out to be one of the senior agents of ICM and I called ICM about 5 o'clock on a Friday afternoon, AA-time 24 hours later, later I called her back once or twice. I got different stories - he's gone... he's not gone - couldn't get through. Finally, the third time I was pleading with the secretary trying to convey a sense of emergency when a familiar voice comes on the phone in L.A. He says to me in Hungarian, "Up yours." I asked, "Who are you and what are you doing, who are you?" I thought I was waiting to speak to Karen Black's agent. It turned out that it was a friend of mine that I had met at some festivals around the world a number of times. His name was Andy Vajna, now known as the producer of Rambo. At the time he was just starting a foreign sales company called Carolo. He happened to be sitting in the office of this agent when my call came and overheard my name over the speaker and picked up the phone. I asked Andy if he was in a position to get a favour from the agent. He said he was. I asked him to get the agent to arrange for Karen Black to expect the script which I would send to her directly to read over the weekend. We packed somebody off to the airport with a script. George Kaczender's brother who lived in L.A. At the time, drove out to the airport, took it off the plane and by late Friday night the script was in Karen Black's hands in L.A.

Meanwhile, we're all gathered in the office Sunday night - Stephen Roth, Kaczender, myself and a couple of the faithful. The phone rings and it's Karen Black. The phone number was on the cover of the script and she says, "I love your script. I want to play this part. I want to make this movie." And she spent the next couple of hours talking to the director and myself about it and made an absolute total commitment to play it. We obviously were very relieved.

That's only the first chapter. The second chapter started Monday morning. I get a call from her agent. He is beside himself because he hadn't found out that Karen had committed to make the film. I told Karen what the dates were and he said, "She can't do the film next week. She's signed and committed to do a picture in Australia which starts to shoot also in a week. She can't possibly do both films, you have to wait. And, how much money have you got?" All we had was about half of her fee, but I had told her that's what we had and she said that was okay. The Australian picture happened to be an ICM package. They represented the producer, the director and the entire cast. If she pulled out of that they would have the same fate that we had with Bibi Andersson.

But I had my own problems. We had conference calls. Karen said if she had to make a choice she was going to do In Praise. The middle of the night I get a call from the Australian producer who is as panicky as I had been the day before. He tells me, "You can't do this. I've got a submarine and I can only get it for two weeks. I can't delay it" and so on. This goes on - three days back and forth. Meanwhile, of course, until it's resolved, we're in limbo. Pressure is on from everywhere to pull the plug on the film. Finally Karen says, "Can't you delay somehow, so that I can go and do the Australian and then do In Praise of Older Women?" And I said, "We don't have the money to delay." She says, "How much would it cost you to delay for two weeks?" I gave her a ballpark figure, with her agent on the phone. She said, "I know what to do. Don't pay me a salary." The figure I gave would be about the same as her salary. "Then you have enough money to postpone for two weeks and then I can do both films." The agent, who has since become a friend, tried desperately to end the conversation right there. He said, "You didn't hear that... you didn't say that." But I did hear it. That's exactly the deal we made. We postponed the film by two weeks. Karen went to Australia and then did In Praise. She got paid ACTRA scale - $150 a day and she got points instead of salary which, as it turned out, she did very well on. Afterwards when the film was made I felt it only fair that Caroleo should handle the foreign sales of In Praise of Older Women.

**Cinema Canada: How did the film do in the end?**

Robert Lantos: It was very successful. It wasn't a blockbuster. Box-office in Canada was $2 million. In the U.S. it was about $8 million. The foreign was about another $4.5-5.5 million. Altogether it was about $16 million box-office. It did well on video later on and TV. It must be one of the most exploited pay TV films on pay-television anywhere. It also got very good notices for the most part. It

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was particularly successful in Italy. It was picked up by Embassy for the U.S. and Warner Brothers in the rest of the world.

Cinema Canada: When you finished With In Praise of Older Women, did you have any clearer sense of what you wanted to do as a producer?

Robert Lantos: I didn't have long-term projects... I had no desire to do mini-series or one picture a year. What I wanted to do was to set up a boutique operation and spend a long time each picture I produced, stay very close with it as I had In Praise of Older Women. I was very involved in writing and in creating the project from choosing the director to the last electrician and into the budgeting and scheduling and the running of the set.

I was like glue to absolutely every frame of this film and that's how I wanted it to be. I didn't want to have a marketing department planning thinking beyond one project at a time. The next project was already settled. It was going to beAgency which was a thriller that took place in an advertising agency. It had no personal relationship, a very original concept and it had never been dealt with before. I was fascinated by it and I determined that that would be my next film long before In Praise of Older Women was finished.

Cinema Canada: About In Praise, you said that was a very personal choice. Did that have meant a lot to you. How was you going to select Agency?

Robert Lantos: Very different. I must say that I never again, after In Praise of Older Women, had long-standing emotional commitment to until Joshua Then and Now. Long-standing emotional commitments are not necessarily the best reasons to make a film. It happened to me with Joshua. And I didn't do that again until Joshua. I was turned on by the concept of Agency. I thought it had a very strong commercial potential because it was uniquely different and there was a closeness to, that I could identify with the story. But, to go back to the reasons I wanted to continue working. I was not interested in being sidetracked. As we got closer and closer, I thought that would be interested in a moving love story wherever it was set. The cultural-political dilemma could give a richness to that story. I wanted to find stories that dealt with the cultural richness we have here in Canada. I thought this drama-filled conflict hadn't been told well in English at all. The other attempt had been Two Solitudes which ended up losing money in Quebec. I can't imagine any compulsory book making a good movie. I wanted to do something more contemporary and to do something that was full of passion and not dry.

Cinema Canada: What happened in the States?

Robert Lantos: We had a great deal of trouble getting distribution. Eventually we decided to go to an independent distributor which we felt was really in a bad deal. Nothing you can do possibly solve the problems. If you can't lick it in the script you'll never lick it on the screen. You can fuck up a good script and you can mess up a bad script. It's impossible. So there was pressure to start.

The second form of pressure came from the brokerage firm raising the finance for the film. They put together a six-month package which the investors would have to make to make it. It's entirely done as a tax-shelter public offering done by Stephen Roth with our lawyers - Stanley Hartt, now deputy minister of Finance, designed the first public offering in Canada.

Cinema Canada: Did you have the same kind of involvement in this picture as you had in In Praise?

Robert Lantos: It was entirely done as a tax-shelter public offering done by Stephen Roth with our lawyers - Stanley Hartt, now deputy minister of Finance, designed the first public offering in Canada.

Cinema Canada: Did you have the same kind of involvement in this picture as you had in In Praise of Older Women? Basically what happened is that there were two names for us to have a name or two, in excess of $4 million was available to us which was more than we needed.

First the principal photography had to be completed by December 31 which means that we had to start ready or not. That was very very pressuring. Once you're into a deal, nothing you can do possibly solve the problems. If you can't lick it in the script you'll never lick it on the screen. You can fuck up a good script and you can mess up a bad script. It's impossible. So there was pressure to start.

The second form of pressure came from the brokerage firm raising the finance for the film. They put together a six-month package which the investors would have to make to make it. It's entirely done as a tax-shelter public offering done by Stephen Roth with our lawyers - Stanley Hartt, now deputy minister of Finance, designed the first public offering in Canada.

Robert Lantos: You had by this time started your next project?

Cinema Canada: Was there a particular reason for going to a Canadian theme with Suzanne?

Robert Lantos: I thought there was a story worth telling about the English and the French in Quebec. It was a story that I wanted to tell in English because it gave me from learning many things which I thought would be interested in a moving love story wherever it was set. The cultural-political dilemma could give a richness to that story. I wanted to find stories that dealt with the cultural richness we have here in Canada. I thought this drama-filled conflict hadn't been told well in English at all. The other attempt had been Two Solitudes which ended up losing money in Quebec. I can't imagine any compulsory book making a good movie. I wanted to do something more contemporary and to do something that was full of passion and not dry.

Cinema Canada: You made a syndication deal with Viacom. Were you satisfied with the story conveyed you what you wanted?

Robert Lantos: In all the movies I had a sense of the style I wanted -- a sense of how they should look. They all had the same look, that was very important. I can't imagine any compulsory book making a good movie. I wanted to do something more contemporary and to do something that was full of passion and not dry.
to work with a prospectus. Suzanne was actually quite difficult because I wanted to cast the film with Canadians and no stars. It didn't make sense to tell this kind of story and then ship in actors who had no identification, no knowledge whatsoever of it. Everyone was committed to doing it with Canadians. Normally that was anathema to the stockbrokers but the budget was very low. It was just over a million dollars - this was 1979, and Canada was full of five, six and seven million dollar packages. Agency was still in post-production and so the jury was out. The numbers for In Praise of Older Women were coming back and were rosier all the time. I was the star of Suzanne. It was financed by investors and brokers because I was producing it and I said it would be good.

**Cinema Canada:** How did it turn out from your point of view?

**Robert Lantos:** That too was a learning experience. But it's a film that I was happy with. It has flaws. Actually every film I ever made has flaws. Suzanne had glaring flaws. All of which had to do with the script. Once again the script wasn't ready. We went into production and were rewriting on the set each day. I think on the whole it was a good film and it stands up to time very well. Every time people watch it, I get a heart for different reasons from, say, In Praise of Older Women.

**Robert Lantos:** In Praise conquered my heart before shooting Suzanne. I think it was disgracefully savaged by critics in Toronto when it played at the film festival there, which caused a tremendous set-back in its commercial career. Suzanne got terrible reviews at the Toronto film festival for reasons I will never understand. Certainly it was the kind of movie; with all its faults, that everybody was screaming that the Canadian producers were not making. It was not a film that showcased imported has been American stars. It was not a film about some unnamed American city or where Toronto or Montreal were posting up as Philadelphia or San Francisco. It was a film that dealt with a very indigenous, uniquely Canadian theme. It showcased young Canadian talent. It was a film that gave a chance to direct to one of this country's young "turks" who had been committed to a career to make the films in Canada. It was based on a Canadian novel. It was all the things that most of the tax-shelter films weren't. Why it was savaged with such venom I will never understand.

Much later there were some second reviews published which were quite apologetic and everybody re-reviewed the film. After the Toronto festival we cut some six minutes or five minutes out of it. All of a sudden Toronto papers ran second reviews saying now the film is very good because they drastically re-cut it. But the damage had been done. The results of the reviews of Suzanne from the festival were that most of the play-dates which had been set in Canada were immediately cancelled. The exhibitors got nervous, the distributor, Ambassador, also got nervous. Understandably so, because when you open a film in Canada first, what do you have to sell it? You don't have the huge publicity machine that the studios put into place. The only chance a movie has is to rely on a great deal on what the Canadian media say about the film.

Even that wouldn't be that important if you were dealing with an exploitation film, an action picture or very sexy movie, something where the people who go to see it don't really care and don't read the reviews anyway. But when you're dealing with a film that is none of those things and it has to appeal to filmgoers on its own qualities and the reviews are unbelievably bad, how are you going to sell that film? The film sat on the shelf for several months after and then eventually it was released in one 100-seat theatre - Canplex in Ottawa - to see if there was any kind of audience. In Ottawa where nobody had heard of the bad reviews, the reviews were quite favourable and the people came. Subsequently it slowly spread across Canada. Eventually it had a moderately successful, respectable commercial career theatrically. It took such a long time.

**Cinema Canada:** Did it have any play outside of Canada?

**Robert Lantos:** It was released in a small way by Fox Classics in the U.S. where it got unanimously superb reviews. It didn't do significant box-office but it returned a few dollars to us. It was released in, I think, 15 or 16 countries abroad. It was a hit in Hong Kong. It wasn't a hit anywhere else but everywhere it had a respectable, quiet career. It didn't get a single bad review anywhere in the world outside of Toronto and I never understood that.

**Cinema Canada:** Did the investors recoup on Suzanne eventually?

**Robert Lantos:** Each year they get closer and closer, every time it plays somewhere.

**Cinema Canada:** Has it gone to video yet?

**Robert Lantos:** It's been out on cassette. I'm not sure what the numbers are. The last time I looked they were very close.

**Cinema Canada:** Did that embarrass you in any way about making that kind of a film?

**Robert Lantos:** Yeah. It did. That and what followed next with *Your Ticket Is"
No Longer Valid. Suzanne was a disappointment because of what the Toronto media-mafia decided to do it more than anything else. I never expected it to be a commercial very important movie but I certainly thought it would recoup its loss and be a movie I could be proud of, which I am. It was a disappointment, though not a catastrophe. It was picked up by 20th Century Fox which in itself was quite significant. The disaster was Your Ticket Is No Longer Valid. That made me rethink my whole modus operandi and change my way of doing business quite drastically.

Your Ticket is No Longer Valid was the last time I did a film without pre-sales. To this day I think it is a brilliant idea as a concept. We went into it with maché movie like Paradice you could compromise it to death. You don't need brilliant people to make them work and probably you won't get brilliant people. When you make a film like That's When the rubber meets the road, there's not much of a script. Suzanne had a different feel to it, it didn't rely on a script. Suzanne was a unique film, which I was proud of, which I am. It was a very unique film and I was very proud of it.

Robert Lantos: I didn't quite digest the lessons of Agency. It wasn't out yet. You don't really know what you're doing. There are 500 people who pay to get in and you watch their reaction. That's when you know. Until then you don't. The tendency, especially for novice producers, is to believe that you have something better than you really have. Everybody wants to believe that. So you don't really know. I didn't really know how badly Agency was going to do until I saw it in a theatre with 500 people, and then I knew.

Robert Lantos: Your initial reaction to that reality was that I was determined to challenge it. I was convinced that if I really liked something, sooner or later someone would see the merit of it. If even that is the case, the reality is the shadow between the dream and the reality itself. Even if your dream is well-conceived, by the time it's executed, the outcome is not what you had intended.

Robert Lantos: When you're making a film that has to do with the prison system, which is in itself a kind of exploitation film, or whether it's for pay television or network. If a project cannot find an end-user before it goes into production, and there are always exceptions, it shouldn't penetrate the mainstream distribution system after the fact.

Robert Lantos: If you can't sell your dream to those that have to buy it, i.e. your distributors, when it's at the dream stage, which is before you've had to make all your compromises, it's going to be tougher to sell the reality, which is often less than the dream, because of a lot of shadows that happen in between. And so penetrating the distribution system is like a limousin test. If you can't pass it, you really shouldn't be producing it, even if somehow you can get the financing for it. Because your odds of pulling it off are so slim. I have to focus the little energy that I have to projects which have passed that limousin test and which at least have a guaranteed access to the mass-market. Whether they will succeed in the market is, of course, another question. But I cannot succeed if you have no access.

Robert Lantos: In terms of that, if you look back at your career as a Canadian producer, what would you say about it? Would you like to point to a specific film or would you like to be able to say that you were able to create a company that could survive as a company rather than as a one-shot boutique operation?
Robert Lantos: Both. I think the most important thing is, if we are able to, and so far we have been and have just taken a very big step, if we're able to function as mainstream producers on the world-production map based in Canada on an ongoing basis, which is something that has never been done successfully, then I have accomplished something important. And not only to myself. It proves a point that is very much in question and has been very much in question everywhere in the world. It is possible anywhere outside of the United States to run what you would define as a studio? In England, Goldcrest has been doing it with a great degree of success, but I can't think of many others outside of the U.S.

Cinema Canada: So the model is a studio operation which would have the ability to finance and have the kind of distribution connections for products?

Robert Lantos: Yes. Exactly. But at the same time it's not enough of a goal for me personally. That is the shell one must have in order then to concentrate my own personal energy, from time-to-time, into projects that I can later look back on as landmarks in my career. The landmarks are kind of like a roof on a high-rise. You must have a basement and then you must have a retaining wall. Then you can more realistically think in terms of putting a roof on the whole thing. The roof in this case stands for making dream-projects that you and you alone believe should be made – Joshua Then and Now stands out.

The first five films that we discussed before are all in that genre or rather they're not in any genre at all. They are all completely unique projects that were either conceived of by myself and my associates or they are based on works of literature that were selected by myself with the attitude that I will make it work somehow. To make those kinds of projects you have to have a structure on which they can stand – financially, esthetically, and in terms of personnel, in terms of relationships and distribution contacts. The landmark projects are the ones that benefit the most from the existence of such a structure because they are always more difficult to find distribution interest for. It is always easier to package one such project in the midst of five or eight or twelve easier projects where the demand comes from the distributor.

Take, for example, Night Heat, where we had orders for X number of episodes from CBS and CTV. Then we made the episodes. Those are shows that are so totally pre-sold, not only are they pre-sold, but they are made to measure. They are tailored for the demands of the slot the distributor has allocated for the show, including the time and the day when it will be broadcast. All that goes into consideration when designing the material, the script, casting and so on. A balanced diet is having enough production which is made for the distribution system. In a sense that is where phase two comes in because – to take specific examples – we could never have made Joshua Then and Now if we had not made Heavenly Bodies or Bedroom Eyes or Paradise. And the realization that came out of that is that we can continue to make films like Joshua Then and Now, but only in the context of a very well thought-out, very solidly-structured production house which does not depend upon a project like Joshua to survive financially, to pay a staff, to earn money required to develop other projects, a production house where those basic needs are taken care of by other projects.

Cinema Canada: In your remembering Your Ticket is No Longer Valid, one could see the frustration in you still coming out. The statement had you worked out the way you wanted – that you hadn't been able to produce a film that you had seen in your head seemed to affect you greatly. At any point did you say to yourself, "The hell with this for now?"

Robert Lantos: We made a decision dictated by two things. First, by having learned from the experiences and, second, by economic reality. I had every intention of surviving and it was clear that we had to start making, not only serious money, for ourselves and for our financial backers. We had done that on our first couple of films, and had done it less and less on the subsequent films which led to a disaster on Your Ticket is No Longer Valid. The sole criteria for selecting a project at that moment became to what degree it could be pre-sold. If they couldn't be pre-sold, no matter how much I liked them, we would not pursue them. If they could be pre-sold, no matter how much I disliked them I would pursue them.

Cinema Canada: Did you select that particular genre of bedroom farce as your economic life preserver?

Robert Lantos: Not exactly. What I did was I took a totally dramatic turn. Whereas the selection process prior to that had been I produce what I like, I was now going to produce only that which others within the distribution system liked, regardless of whether I liked it or not.

Cinema Canada: Were you at that time close to financial failure as a company?

Robert Lantos: After Ticket is No Longer Valid it was very difficult. Let me put it this way. We were not a giant profit-making machine for our investors. I had to come up with a project that was so well-covered by advance distribution commitments that the risk to financial backers would be minimum or nil in order to attract financial backers after having lost so much money on the last film.

We were never facing bankruptcy, but we were facing an erosion of confidence. We made a film on which a lot of people lost a great deal of money. That leads to an erosion of confidence. It happened to coincide with the collapse of the tax-shelter in Canada. That did not augur very well.

The adjustment from a position of supreme arrogance – when if I thought something worked I automatically assumed that it would be good enough – to a position of making my own judgments subservient to others was not easy. It involved a serious re-examining of just how much I knew about what I was doing. I'm glad to report that after a couple of years I came to the conclusion that actually I knew quite a bit, but I was operating from a position of extreme weakness in Canada, outside of the system.

Cinema Canada: Survival of the company and as a producer and as a force in the Canadian film business seems to be a central concern.

Robert Lantos: That would be most important. There is a cliché that before you can dream of flying, you have to be able to walk. It was more like growing up. In the process of growing up we have to shed our skins in order to put on new skins. We outgrow certain ways of thinking. There is some pain and anguish that goes with that process. That kind of thing doesn't go without a great deal of anguish.

The next film I made was a movie called Paradise. The person who wrote and directed it came to see me with Franco Jean Corman. They had this idea of doing a film that was very similar in style and genre to Blue Lagoon which had been a tremendous success. I then tested that idea on the head of a distribution company, Avco/Embassy, who was very enthusiastic about it. We made a deal with Avco/Embassy to co-finance and release the film world-wide before there was a screenplay, before there was a treatment, before there was a cast with only an inexperienced first-time director in place. It was based on nothing other than a one-hour conversation and a one-page outline of the idea. What enthused the distribution company most was the title and the concept for a poster for an ad that came out of our first meeting. The film was done backwards. It was designed for the advertising campaign, which is how films and television shows are often made. The film was then developed very quickly – script and the creative element and the financing were all put together very quickly.
Robert Lantos: It was financed with private investors in Canada. The broker who raised the money was Larry Nesis. That was only possible because the risk had been drastically reduced through Embassy’s guarantee. The majority of the risk was in fact covered from a minimum guarantee of revenue from Avco/Embassy. That combined with the capital cost created a situation where an investor had no risk. That made it possible to raise the financing. At the point the investors were not so much betting on us, they were buying a deal that made economic sense regardless of who the players were.

Cinema Canada: What was the budget?
Robert Lantos: Paradise was $1 million. There was a film for which I had absolutely no affinity either to the story or to any of the elements involved. It was so different from all my previous involvements with film. Here, I had absolutely zero emotional attachment. Perhaps in some ways I was a better producer for it. I found it so much easier to make strictly production decisions. The film itself was a box-office smash. It was released when it was supposed to be released, over a thousand prints on the same day. Avco Embassy with a huge advertising campaign reached every country in the world. It was a success in a couple of places. In Italy where it was one of the top five films of the year and we made a lot of money.

Although the film was a box-office failure, it grossed world-wide some $15 or $16 million of which more than half was in the United States and yet it was a failure. It proves, even though ultimately the public did not buy it, just because it was in the system, it could make money.

Cinema Canada: You found a method of pre-selling knowing the kinds of films you wanted to do—package then, satisfy the investors, establish a reasonable financial base for yourself and your company. Yet the reviews of the sort of things you were doing were very uncomplimentary. How did you feel about that?
Robert Lantos: Did I talk to you about what I think is the bizarre phenomenon of Canadian critics? The reviews in Canada of Suzanne were far worse than Paradise so I certainly was not going to concern myself very much with what critics have to say. The way they reacted was not consequential to my business plans. We were making very cold and hard decisions and how The Globe & Mail or the Cinema Canada was going to react to what we were doing was making really was not one of the ingredients that went into the decision.

Cinema Canada: I keep reading comments from Canadian producers in general, and this is not just yourself, are a terrible lot. They only do bad imitations of bad American films. They can’t do things properly up here. You get tarred with the same brush. How do you feel about that?
Robert Lantos: You know, Canadian producers have been castigated to the point of utter boredom in Canada and the most absurd comparison comes always with Australia. As if somehow Australia would be a golden model: they have succeeded where we have failed.

I have a couple of things to say about this. In Australia they don’t feel about it that way. If you read interviews that Dusan Makavejev gave to the Canadian Press when he was here to open The Coca Cola Kid, a new Australian film, you’ll find that he talks about Australian producers as a bunch of tax-shelter merchants who have no concern whatever about the films they are producing. He found it a nightmare working in Australia, and if you talk to a lot of Australian directors and a lot of Australian press, you’ll get the same reactions.

I think everywhere in the world where you have a new industry born in a gold rush you have a certain pirate mentality. The gold rush, attracts more than the usual number of fastback artists and calous individuals who are really not interested in filmmaking but in reaping quick profit. Canada is not unique in that. This same thing happened in Germany and in England.

The degree to which it happened here has been so blown out of proportion that it’s absurd. In fact, Canada has been quite successful, if you look at it in terms of the overall picture. No matter how many poor films were made here during the boom years, a few good ones were made too. If you look at the law of averages, you’ll find that in Hollywood, where they’ve had some 80 years’ experience and enormous resources, financial and creative and technical which we can never match, the studios make money on maybe one out of every three of four films they produce. Each studio has amazing numbers of unreleased films sitting on their shelves that they had fully financed.

That’s the nature of the industry that we’re in. For every good film made, that is also financially successful, there are 15 films that don’t fit both of those criteria, or more. That’s in the U.S. where there is a wealth of experience and talent. In other countries, like France or Italy, the rations worse. The only Italian or French films that get released in North America are the cream of the crop of annual production. For every Antonioni or Fellini or Bertolucci, there are 50 or 40 or 50 cheap sex films or Italian Westerns or cop movies which are released only in Italy and which you never hear about. But they’re made.

Here there are a lot of uninformed people who have access to the press who will pointed fingers to other film industries and compare the Canadian film industry to them and come to the ridiculous conclusion that somehow we are not as good as they are. It stems, I think, from a national inferiority complex. I find it difficult to share as an immigrant. It tends to attempt to look always for what is worse, and when there is a Canadian who is successful, attempts desperately to cut him down to size. Personally I accumulated I think more than my share of enemies while I was in my initial phase of success. They were kind of laying in ambush for me at the first opportunity, so that they could cut away at that success because it was disturbing to them.

Cinema Canada: Let me bring you back to Joshua Then and Now. At what point did you feel ready to undertake a project which you have called unique. Wasn’t it a big risk?
Robert Lantos: Why don’t we set the record straight about the whole myth about the disastrous performance of the Canadian film industry which is no more disastrous than the performance of any other film industry in any other part of the world?

Over the last ten years I won’t bother making a complete list now—more Canadian films had world-wide exposure and varying degrees of commercial success and critical recognition outside of their own country than French films, or Italian films or German films, or Australian films. There have been some 40 or 50 Canadian films picked up by major studios for international release. No other country in the world has ever accomplished that except Canada. There are years when every major studio was involved in at least one or two Canadian films, releasing Canadian films, financing Canadian films. A lot of American money has come into Canada to finance Canadian productions because of a recognition. A lot of French money has also come in to financing Canadian productions. I can give you many examples. They range from Porky’s to our own In Praise of Older Women, from The Grey Fox and Ticket to Heaven to Terror Train, Father of the Bride or Joshua Then and Now, or Tribute or The Changeling or Quest For Fire or Atlantic City—a long list of films that accomplished the dream of every producer living outside of the U.S. which is to successfully compete with the gigantic American monster by penetrating its own systems.

Cinema Canada: But Joshua Then and Now is a very Canadian film, isn’t it?
Robert Lantos: I’m not saying that one mustn’t, one shouldn’t make films which are indigenous Canadian. Quite the contrary. But I could have never produced Joshua Then and Now and I don’t think anybody else in this country could have, with the possible exception of Kemeny and Heroux, had I not made all those other films. I would not have had either the clout or the know-how or the financial ability.

Cinema Canada: At what point did you feel you had all those things together and were ready to take the risk?
Robert Lantos: It doesn’t really happen that way. It was more organic than that. When I read the book sometime in late ‘79, I liked it a great deal. As soon as we could we acquired the rights. It was something that we very much wanted to do and then after we acquired the rights we started worrying about how will we finance it? But there were so many creative hurdles that had to be crossed. These things develop more organically. It’s easier to sort them out in retrospect. Most of our activity at this point was geared towards making films that had their market carved out.

We felt that we could have one product which was totally different. We launched long and hard over many years
to get Joshua Then and Now made. We fuelled our coffers with all the other films we made during that time. We had a sense that this was going to be long, it was going to be difficult. We didn't realize how long and how difficult. And that was precisely our reasons for concentrating the rest of our resources on obviously commercial ventures.

Cinema Canada: Was the financing very difficult to put together?

Robert Lantos: It was extraordinarily difficult and finally took the development of the Broadcast Fund. Although the CBC had committed to Joshua Then and Now the first day we bought the rights, they never had the funds to make the production happen until the Broadcast Fund came along. For the first time the CBC could really become a serious player. That wouldn’t have sufficed had we not made a deal with Twentieth Century Fox. And that deal was made after the film had been turned down by every major studio. It was turned down by HBO, it was turned down by the networks, it was turned down in Europe, it was turned down in England and in France. In an industry where everybody is looking for the next $100 million break-out picture – defined as a film that the average 14-year-old will go back and see three or four times – Joshua Then and Now obviously didn’t rank.

We had a very tough time in selling Joshua Then and Now: Ted Kotcheff’s involvement was not by itself an automatic ticket to major studio financing. They wanted Kotcheff for First Blood part 2 and part 3, and what they judged to be commercial properties. We didn’t have Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford to make it easier. Eventually we made a deal with Fox through sheer refusal to accept no. We were turned down by Fox three times until finally a deal was made. It was a deal where Fox only financed about a third of the budget.

The architect of that deal is a guy called Wayne Case. He was running Fox in Canada and he was the person who believed that Fox should be highly active in Canadian production. He was very partisan to Joshua Then and Now. He liked the book a great deal and fought very hard with Fox to get it involved. Everytime Fox would pass, Wayne would tell me, “We’re going to try again. Don’t give up”. And he would open some other door in some other way and go back to the studio. By the end I simply had no more hopes for Fox. I had given up and he was the one pushing me to go back again. And that way through a different executive. Fortunately, executives shuffle so often in Hollywood that if you’re with a project for a long time, you re-submit to different generations of executives. You get another chance. We really persisted. Wayne was not in a position to make any commitment for Fox but he could make enough noise at Fox internally. He felt that this was a very important project for Fox to get involved in – not only because of its importance commercially, but also because of its importance to Canada which happens to be their biggest market outside of the U.S. It was thought that if Fox became involved in Joshua Then and Now, it would show good will toward Canada. Timing had a lot to do with it as well. Fox had just

created a company, Fox Classics. Although it had no money of its own to involve in productions it provided a distribution arm which needed to be fed. The mainstream Fox pictures were not designed for the Classics arm. Suddenly they had a distribution machine that needed high-quality, high-brow movies. The combination of those circumstances led to a good moment in time which we grabbed. If we hadn’t, it may not have been there three weeks later. Fox was willing to make a deal on the film with certain limitations. They were certainly not willing to finance it fully.

Cinema Canada: Do you have any comments on the experience of making that film?

Robert Lantos: The only thing that remains once everything else fades away is that we made a good movie. That’s the only reason that we wanted to make that movie. And I think that we achieved the objective.

Cinema Canada: You made a radical change recently, joining up with Denis Héroux and John Kemeny to form Alliance. Was that something that had been in the works for some time?

Robert Lantos: I’ve known Denis and John for a long time. We were negotiating for a long time. The dialogue had been going on. It was not a sudden decision. This move is part of phase three – building the structure. The edifice is now partially built. We have a broad base of production which is financially sound. We make money so that we can continue to operate and develop projects. We also have the opportunity sometimes to make projects that are riskier without risking the whole company or our own lives in so doing. We have created an umbrella organization in which other producers can function and where we can, without actually producing all our films ourselves, provide expertise where it is needed. We’re doing that now.

Cinema Canada: And you’re all equal partners in this new venture?

Robert Lantos: Yes.

Cinema Canada: Is there going to be a titular president?

Robert Lantos: Yes, Stephen Roth will be president and chief executive officer and the one most in charge of running corporate affairs. John, Denis and myself are more in charge of specific projects.

We have a mix of projects which I’m not going to get into now because they are long and we don’t really want to make big announcements. We’ll announce our projects after they get made, but we have a mix of projects that span from low-budget to huge budget, from pay-television to theatrical movies, from movies to mini-series to on-going series, from exploitation oriented to much more difficult and personal films, from films with a very high degree of Canadian content, deeply-rooted in Canadian culture and indigenous events, to others far less so and others that have absolutely nothing to do with Canada.

They range from The Black Robe which is a Brian Moore novel about the missionaries and the Indians in Quebec to Sensualita a combination of live action/animation about an animator who falls in love with a dream girl he has created, another which is based on a Jack London story of the west, to George Jonas’ Vengeance from Night Heat to Force of Arms, a satire on World War Three, a futuristic satire we are doing for PBS’ American Playhouse. It’s a very wide range. Some will cost as little as $60,000 and some as much as $15 million.

Cinema Canada: How do you see the future developing for the industry as a whole and for Alliance within the industry? Do you see Alliance becoming the major Canadian production house?

Robert Lantos: I’m less interested in that kind of rank than I am in being able to stay in Canada personally. I like Canada a great deal – probably because I’m an immigrant. I have a kind of gratitude to this country. I came here with my family with absolutely nothing and whatever I have, even though I worked for it, Canada’s given to me. I really would like to stay here. I look at Alliance as the only chance I have of staying here. Hopefully there’s room for another two or three Alliances that would produce a continuity in production that has never existed. That would give an opportunity for old talent to remain, for talent that has left to come back and for new talent to develop. That has never been.

It has always been a haphazard industry! Alive today, dead tomorrow, or maybe resuscitated the day afterward. We would like to create a continuity of operations, of financing, of creative energy that proves that it’s possible to operated successfully in the motion picture, television production business in Canada. It is something that has never been proven before. We intend to prove that it can be done. It won’t work if we’re the only one. So I hope that there will be one or two other Alliances that will come to be in the next few years.