

# producing down south

by Connie Tadros

*"Columbia Pictures and International Cinemedia Center, Ltd. have entered into an exclusive multiple-picture agreement... Under his new agreement with Columbia, John Kemeny will develop and produce an open-end slate of diversified projects, to be filmed in both the U.S. and Canada, with emphasis on a number of properties utilizing Canadian story themes and locales."*

**It is true that to be important in Canada one must make it in the States? Or is this the start of a new brain drain? Kemeny, riding high on the success of his American film *White Line Fever*, thinks for the moment that the grass is greener...**

Variety says, in vartieteeze! "Good actioner about a trucker fighting corruption. Exploitable in general situations." That's good, coming from Variety. An ad in a later issue states that **White Line Fever** has already grossed \$1,027,342 in its first 12 days in San Francisco and first 10 days in Dallas. On the first of August, the film opened in 39 theatres in Ontario, and grossed \$300,000 in its first week.

Kemeny spoke about his new film **White Line Fever** just a few weeks before it was scheduled to open in Canada. Perhaps that accounts for the fact that the producer was involved and excited by the marketing aspects of his film. At any rate, he seemed a happy man, confident about the film's box-office success.

Several questions come to mind. Why does the producer of **The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz** turn to Columbia to produce? What was the experience like, and how has it influenced his future plans? What are the repercussions for his Canadian production company International Cinemedia Center? And, of course, what are his latest thoughts about **Duddy Kravitz** which is about to be released by Paramount?

Over the years, Kemeny had been in touch with most of the American majors, but it was the men at Columbia who made him feel comfortable and who won his confidence. "I had been talking for some time with Columbia about doing a project together.

*They sent three scripts and I chose this one (**White Line Fever**). They turned over the project to me and I became the producer, responsible for the project. The experience was extremely good; there was no interference at all. I had complete, absolute freedom. The people at Columbia honored the position of the producer."*

Kemeny had already produced educational films for Learning Corporation of America, a large educational distribution company owned by Columbia. "Among the films were some important half-hour dramas which turned out well and had high production values. I know that when I started to talk about something else with them, they remembered my name... I think they also saw **Kravitz**. Columbia had been among the potential distributors for **Kravitz** and are still sorry that they didn't get it." Nevertheless producing educational films finally led to features with Columbia.

## The Production

Kemeny had hoped to make **White Line Fever** in Alberta; he spent three weeks working on the possibility. Two factors made that choice impossible: the weather and the commitments which would have to be postponed. For a trucker's film, one needs dry highways. Alberta couldn't give any guarantee of good weather before early summer. Since the film was scheduled for release during the summer, they had to start shooting the film in early spring.

Kemeny also had some important people contracted to work on the film. "The Director of photography was the man who did **The Towering Inferno**. He has just got an Academy Award, and it was important to keep him. The stunt driver was the same man who did the chase in **Bullitt**. Postponing would have meant

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recontracting these people which might have been difficult." So Kemeny's first action film got underway near Tucson, Arizona in February.

With a crew of around 50 and a budget of \$1,400,000, he was comfortable. "People were very nice and helpful, ready to assist you. Making a film in Hollywood is different; the rates change, the customs are different, so you need people around you who are willing to help." Starting out with a realistic budget, the costs were cut and the film came in considerably under budget. What more could a producer ask for?

"I enjoyed the experience tremendously because I was able to act in the best possible way a producer should: in the financing, the production, the packaging and finally, I'm very active in the release."

Financially, Columbia has the overall majority. Although Kemeny influenced the financing, he was not responsible for it. The film itself belongs to International Cinemedia Center. "Columbia didn't care about it. They have a very profitable distribution deal and a profitable production deal. We thought that it can be an advantage for us to own the film."

One highly stimulating aspect of **White Line Fever** for Kemeny is its saturation distribution in the States and across Canada. By early August, Columbia had authorized 500 prints of the film, a sign of faith and hope if ever there was one. "It's a bad producer who doesn't get involved in the release. I have seen every piece of promotional material and many of them were initiated by me. When I finished the production I wrote a seven page memo about all the marketing and promotional ideas. The memo served as a basis for discussion. I discussed the release pattern, worked with the company which was doing the T.V. spots and the radio commercials. We also have a featurette about the film and two kinds of theatrical trailers. I worked on all of this and I think that it should be natural for a producer to do so. It's not enough to put the film in the can... That was one of my main complaints about **Kravitz**."

## After Thoughts

**Duddy Kravitz**. The title of the film still evokes painful memories for many. It was a film of great promise. It is a film which is doing well and which will soon begin its second career when Paramount rereleases it in October. But it is also a film which was tough to finance, tough to produce, and which created controversy when it was first turned down by the Cannes Film Festival, only to be awarded Berlin's Golden Bear one month later. For Kemeny, it is a film which was not released with all the muscle it deserved.

Astral Communications Ltd. was the Canadian distributor. "We finished the film and they grab it and think it's their baby. The distributor is only an agent of the owners of the film, right? They are working for a fee, a commission... It's easy to be successful with **Kravitz** in Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal. And it's easy to say 'That's \$1,800,000, what else do you want?' Well, how do you know it couldn't make \$2 million. Or even \$5 million. One can't take a complacent attitude. If a film can make \$2 million in Quebec, who can say that a film can't make \$3 million in English Canada. I'm not stating that **Kravitz** could have necessarily made \$3 million but I am definitely stating that there was more than \$1.8 million. But when you find deaf ears..."

# THE FILM

## White Line Fever

A film by Jonathan Kaplan. **Screenplay:** Ken Friedman and Kaplan. **Cinematography:** Fred Koenekamp. **Music:** David Nichtern. **Sound:** Tex Rudloff and Darren Knight. **Editing:** O. Nicholas Brown. **Performers:** Jan-Michael Vincent, Kay Lenz, Slim Pickens, L.Q. Jones, Don Porter. **Producer:** John Kemeny. **Produced in 1975 by International Cinemedia Center Ltd. Colour:** 35mm. **Running time:** 89 min. **Distribution in Canada:** Columbia Pictures.

**White Line Fever** comes from the partnership of Columbia Pictures and International Cinemedia Center, the Canadian production company headed by John Kemeny. Shot entirely in Arizona with American actors, the Canadian content stops there. Jan-Michael Vincent plays a young truck driver who, returning home from the Air Force to start up as an independent trucker, quickly becomes embroiled fighting corruption in the trucking industry.

The film soon reveals its parentage as Vincent is bashed, beaten and abused by the bad guy stereotypes until violent vigilante justice is longed for by the audience and righteously administered by the hero. **Walking Tall** was the obvious inspiration for **White Line Fever** and, with the large size of the hero's truck, **Riding Tall** would have been an appropriate title for this spiritual sequel.

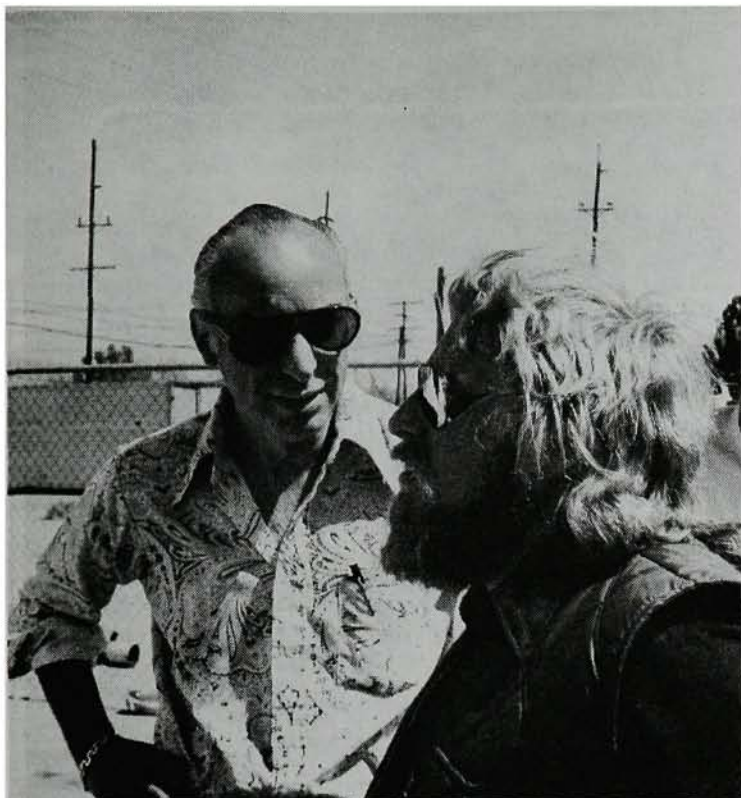
Jan-Michael Vincent is plausible in a role that calls for little more than clean-cut looks, a square jaw, and determined steely stares. His last film was **Buster and Billie** and his best was **Going Home**. Kay Lenz, who plays the truck driver's wife, was the title character in **Breezy**. In **White Line Fever** her role ultimately serves the same function as Buford Pusser's wife in **Walking Tall** — as a victim who heightens the motivation for her husband's climactic action.

The film is ably directed by Jonathan Kaplan who works effectively within the action drama genre. Kaplan specializes in making films that play out previously established popular themes — **The Slams** and **Truck Turner** as black exploitation movies, **Night Call Nurses** and **The Student Teachers** as soft-core porn films.

There is an attempt to exploit the half-hearted populist element in **White Line Fever** with one of the ad lines calling it a movie about 'a working man who has had enough'. John David Garfield, looking and sounding like his great father who excelled in playing working class heroes, appears as a minor character. Appropriately he plays a bad guy in a film that justifies the ways of violence to man. An American film, with an American theme, made by a Canadian producer, **White Line Fever** can only be measured with a Fahrenheit thermometer.

**Austin Whitten**





John Kemeny and Jonathan Kaplan (l. to r.) on location.

*"There are two attitudes a distributor can take towards the producer. One is 'This idiot is coming and bothering us again.' The other is, 'Hey, sit down. Maybe he has something to say.' There is nothing in my contract with Columbia that says that I have control or veto or anything over promotional release. But, voluntarily, they have never released one piece of promotional material without my going over it. They even showed me the marketing manual. Sometimes they didn't accept my objections, but 90% of the time they did. I have known the film a long time, better than some writer who comes in, looks at the film, sits down and writes."*

If **Kravitz** were to be done over again, things would be different for the producer. Last year, the Canadian Film Development Corporation was not authorized to get involved in the distribution and promotion of a film. This year, a sizable budget has been allocated for expansion into these areas.

*"I blame the CFDC that they didn't move in with their power and strength to deal with the distributor. The distributors depend upon the CFDC which controls and influences a large number of films. One producer doesn't have this strength. The CFDC is so tough on producers when they negotiate, why aren't they as tough on distributors? If I were in their position I would never agree. The distributors have a minimal investment. On **Kravitz** they contributed \$25,000 of a \$925,000 budget. The CFDC had \$300,000."*

Financing **Kravitz** was a financial nightmare which, in the end, was worth it. It's difficult to settle on gross receipts since the film is still being released in some countries, but Kemeny estimates that it has grossed \$6 or \$7 million in North America alone. It turned into a profit position in November 1974, 8 months after its original release.

The production of **Duddy Kravitz** presented problems. *"There was always the tightness of money and the demands for more on the side of the production. It was an ambitious film. Once we started shooting, we realized that we had a higher potential than we had*

*thought. So we made the decision to try to expand it. You have the choice; when you have a crowd, are there 20 people or 100. In a period piece, do you have two cars in the street or 20? We made that decision, but there were financial consequences, and there was always the fear of running out of funds."*

Producing **White Line Fever** in the States has been less strenuous than producing **Kravitz** in Canada for Kemeny. He concedes that filming **Kravitz** in the States might have made it "smoother". *"For example, to find props in Montreal was almost impossible. And now I see that (in the States) you can walk into a prop company. Or that you can rent the costumes which we had to manufacture... But you can't blame a young industry for that. What I think I do blame in **Kravitz** is that we had to post-sync a lot. And here in this film about truckers, we only had to post-sync three lines. So the professional standards and the knowledge of certain technicians may be higher. Experienced people always can help you to make your production easier. If you have a better typewriter, it's easier to write."*

One feels that a great deal was learned during the production and distribution of **Kravitz**. One of the most important lessons, at least for the Québécois audience, is the one about language. **White Line Fever** was released simultaneously in French and in English in late August. It is ironic that this American feature has been seen by French speaking Québécois before the French version of **Kravitz** is out. *"I want the two versions. I think it's madness not to let the promotional value spill over. Pierre David (of Les Productions Mutuelles) happened to be in Los Angeles and he said that he would be interested in distributing the French version."*

Columbia still maintains its own foreign distribution circuit and a screening of an 18 minute reel is already taking place abroad. Estimations are that 90% of the exhibition of the film will take place before November 1975. When Kemeny talks about the release of his film overseas, we've come full circle.

## Meanwhile...

Back home, there's a production company to run. Kemeny commutes between California and Montreal, leaving Mr. Don Duprey in charge in Montreal. And International Cinemedia seems to be carrying on as usual. It has just bought an educational film distribution company, Cinemedia of Toronto, in which it previously had 50% of the holdings. This will increase the need for educational production. George Kaczender has finished directing a film for International Woman's Year, and a new series is being started for Learning Corp. of America dealing with social history. Louis Frund is directing a film in the Arctic about the snow goose, and negotiations have been concluded with the CBC and Hungarian Television about a co-produced one hour drama based on a Canadian script.

International Cinemedia's clientele changes every year. *"We had a year in 1970-1971 when 85% of our clients were American. Then we had years when it was 75% or 80% Canadian. I'm sure that right now it's more Canadian than American. Presently, some of the materials that we produced in the first five years are starting to bring in royalties on a regular basis. We're still licking our wounds from some bad moves, like 7 fois... (par jour) but that's part of the business. You do good things, you do bad things and you take the responsibility."* □



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