
Ken Zeilig and Harry Gulkin give their account of Kino Productions in the early days of 1970, and Gulkin talks about the financing, the false starts, and the ultimate completion of *Lies My Father Told Me*.

fearless harry gulkin

by Ken Zeilig



Len Birman and Marilyn Lightstone in *Lies My Father Told Me*

My first impression of Harry Gulkin was an impression of magnetism: not mesmerism, but the drawing power of someone who charms, warms, and stimulates your intelligence.

We met in late August, 1969, at Place Bonaventure in Montreal through the introduction of a mutual friend. Our common interest was feature films. I was looking for a job and he might have one. Well, it didn't turn out that way; at least, not at the very beginning.

I returned home to London, England and began to lose hope of ever speaking to him again when the phone went unexpectedly one May afternoon in 1970 and there was Harry. "Hello, Ken! How are you? And the family? - Look, I'm arriving in London tomorrow, do you think you can meet me? I'll be at the..." And that was it! It was the real beginning of our association. Some of it was business but most of it was friendship.

I was shortly made the official London Representative of Kino Productions which was a Canadian-based feature film company designed to acquire and develop film properties. The company had been incorporated by Harry himself in Montreal earlier in the year and later it was funded by four, then, when one dropped out, three, Montreal businessmen. Their credit rating was over a million dollars but the hard reality was \$150,000 for development. And too soon did that money run out!

My task was to seek out properties, to evaluate them, and also to establish contact with British-based producers, directors, writers, agents, and others, who might be interested in Anglo-Canadian co-productions.

When I questioned Gulkin recently about those times he acknowledged the pioneering side of his work, "I felt relatively alone. I was reinforced in this feeling by the incredulity with which my plans were greeted by people in the industry. I had no credibility at that time; they felt that since they had not tried to do it, or having tried, had failed, that there was no possibility of an outsider, an interloper doing it."

And what about motives? Basic principles? He continued: "I was basically interested in helping to generate a film literature which reflected something of the life of this country. My approach to it then and now was that one required a battery of developed screenplays which is really the basic building block of any project. So many disasters take place because either the screenplays have no potential to begin with or their potential hasn't been realised before shooting begins. And that's dangerous."

One of my first tasks during Harry's ten day visit in May of 1970 was to line up a number of meetings with people in the London film world. They included Dick Lester, Ken Loach, Tony Garnett, Jack Gold, Alan Sapper of the ACTT (the British cinema union), John Terry, the head of the National Film Development Corporation, and numerous others with whom we established an on-going relationship. Interestingly enough, our discussions with the government and union officials covered details of a co-production arrangement; and just this month (Sept. '75), the ink was dried on such an agreement by the British and Canadian governments. I should reiterate here that the ideas and plans were all set into motion by Harry Gulkin. He was quite literally, the Leader!

An aspect to this story with the widest and most serious early ramifications began in late 1970. I told the Czech film director Jiri Weiss that this man Gulkin was interested in setting up a Canadian feature film company and that he intended inviting experienced foreign talent. Weiss, a director of note in his own country where he had over 30

films to his credit, fired off an engaging and humorous letter to Gulkin. The up-shot of it all was a contract.

But at this point, I will let Harry Gulkin take up the details: "I needed guidance and counsel. So, I offered him a situation where he could come to Canada - stay for a year - and simply act as a creative director, without necessarily committing himself to directing a particular film. Rather, he would advise me, work with me, with writers, and develop screenplays so that we could move leisurely into production."

Apparently this arrangement didn't suit Jiri Weiss and within a short time he latched onto one of the properties which Gulkin had optioned. It was Mort Forer's book **The Humback**, a story of a Metis logging village circa 1950. The outstanding character was a woman in her forties called 'Toinette who had 17 children by various lovers and husbands.

Despite Mort Forer's expressed wish not to get involved in a feature film, Jiri Weiss went to Toronto to convince him that he must collaborate with him on a film script of his novel. Forer gave in and in short order the two men, director and writer, signed a new agreement with Kino to do the screenplay. It was ill-fated from the start.

Weiss insisted upon secrecy. Forer must not discuss anything with Gulkin. Bad vibrations. Under these circumstances it is understandable that very little progress was made. Gulkin suggested that the two go West to Manitoba and actually visit a Metis site; the suggestion was accepted with some initial hesitation and, accompanied by Jo-Jo Kirkpatrick, filmmaker and guide through the Indian Brotherhood, they set out. Harry Gulkin takes up his version of the story: "So, off they went, I didn't go. I only got the subsequent reports of the visit. Some of it was very very funny. But Jiri was afraid to talk to the Metis when he was in those villages. He kept a distance, whereas the others didn't. And it became clearer and clearer that he was becoming quite uncomfortable with it."

Harry Gulkin and Jan Kadar (l. to r.) discussing **Lies**



Ken Zeilig, a Canadian writer living in London, has spent the past few months in Toronto working at the CBC on Sunday Supplement and other programmes.

Time and space don't allow the intriguing anecdotes which provide insight into the laughter, agony, and time-wasting exercise which this project brought to Harry and Kino, but, it is sufficient to say that some 42 to 43 thousand dollars of Kino's 150 were used up over the six to seven months of Jiri Weiss' unhappy stay in Canada. The contract was terminated in February of 1971. Weiss went to New York where he began lecturing on film and Mort Forer, after a severe heart attack and an abortive attempt to complete the screenplay with Eric Till, abandoned the project altogether.

In the meantime Gulkin had been busy on other projects, in other parts of the world, notably, in India and England. In October of 1970, Harry made an extended five week trip to India. There he visited Mr. Gopal Krishna Singhania, who headed the J.K. Organisation. The basis of that visit was investigative; was it possible to produce films for an international audience in India? The theory stated that Canadian investors would provide the hard currency required and all the rest would be provided by the Indian investors. The films would be distributed in the West; they would be designed for our type of consumption and would be a means of exporting Indian technology rather than just labour intensive goods which is primarily what India exports in order to earn hard currency. The answer was yes: apparently the proposition was viable; only the time credibility was too long for most Westerners. One has to establish a physical presence in the country and for that task, Kino's diminishing resources were clearly inadequate.

Yet, if India was a non-starter, England turned up trumps, for on his return home from the sub continent, Harry picked up the option to **Lies My Father Told Me**. He paid one dollar for it. In the interim a project involving an original screenplay by Mort Forer on Louis Riel and a Rock Documentary on the Lost Continent of Atlantis starring Donovan was mooted and ultimately rejected. Time-wasting, but these projects took precedence over **Lies**.

Regarding **Lies**, Harry states: "as the other projects were getting sicker and sicker, this one was getting healthier and healthier. The picture found a director of great

stature [ed: Jan Kadar]. The director found an actor [ed: Zero Mostel], and the two combined inspired the writer [ed: Ted Allan]. Together, the combined energies of this group became the reality that eventually got the thing going. In particular, the final group being Kadar, Allan, and myself." Gulkin has this to say about his relationship to Ted Allan: "We became friends. I think that our social political background in Canada is similar. We both came out of the Left, out of the Labour Movement – although we both moved away from some of the doctrinaire beliefs we held earlier in life. So there was a kind of community of feeling which we found fairly quickly in each other as well as a considerable joy in working together. Ted was enormously helpful. He really taught me a great deal about the film business, not just how one writes for a film or how a film is made; he introduced me to people whom he knew and was a constant critic: hyper and very abrasive at times but in the end very sound."

Meanwhile, less and less work came my way. Money was in short supply. Gradually Kino in London faded away and my connection with Canadian feature films, with Kino Productions, ended. The viable period for Kino, both in the U.K. and in Canada, was some 16 to 18 months. The Company never went bankrupt; in fact it still exists today. But it is inactive.

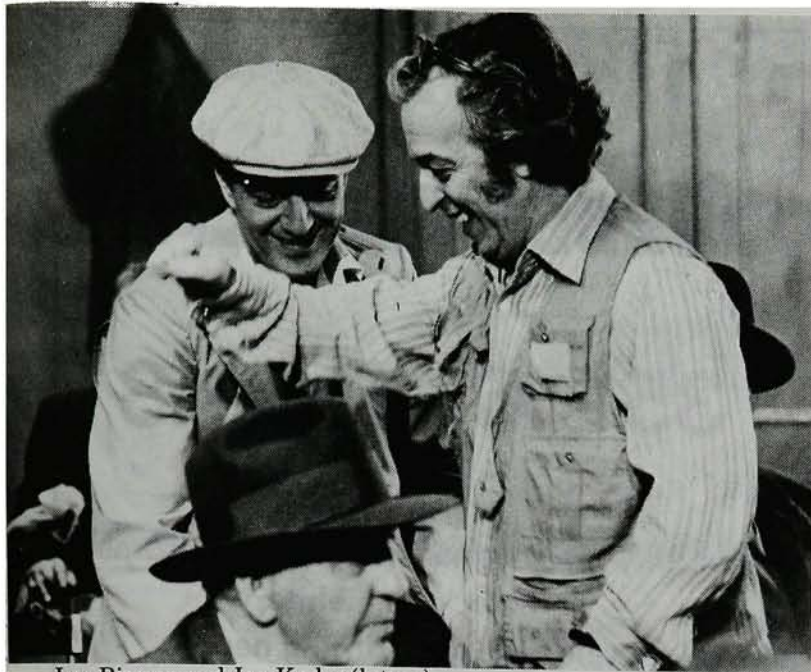
Before Kino faded completely from the board, one switch remained open. And that was **Lies**. Some time after March of '71, some two or three months according to Harry Gulkin, Jan Kadar was engaged to be the director on **Lies**. That is about as close as I could get to contractual matters. But, as I was fading fast, I'll let Gulkin continue: "Zero Mostel had introduced us to Joe Levine who at that time was still head of Avco Embassy and Levine was going to put up the money for the completion of the screenplay. Mr. Levine kept me in New York each week, jumping down there until I discovered that he had no money. The Avco Embassy board had cut him off of any development money. Certainly, I had no reason to believe that he was kidding or stalling because he had made an announcement of it in *Variety*, June 16, 1971. So, when that ended in naught, I was put in touch with Samuel Arkoff the head of American International Pictures. I met Mr. Arkoff and he expressed interest in the film and we did indeed reach the point of the completion of the draft distribution agreement. AIP undertook to put up one third of the budget. Now, that fell apart, because the form of the investment called a guaranteed negative pick-up fell apart, because no Canadian bank knew what it was, let alone would honour it. And even people in the industry weren't of much help on that. By the way, quite simply, it means that when you have completed the film and if you have met the schedule as set out in the agreement with the distributor, then he'll give you X amount of dollars which in this case was \$220,000. The Canadian Film Development Corporation was young and didn't know much about that type of financing either. And the internal finances of Kino had just about run dry and the kind of junketting required to organise that type of financing in the U.S. was out of the question for me at that point."

"Now, the CFDC was in for \$200,000 and we had a commitment from a private investment group for an equivalent amount and that was our budget at that point. Our budget was \$675,000. It was \$225,000 each from the A.I.P. and the private investment group and I think the CFDC had committed \$200,000 and we were going to ask them to bring it up to \$225,000."

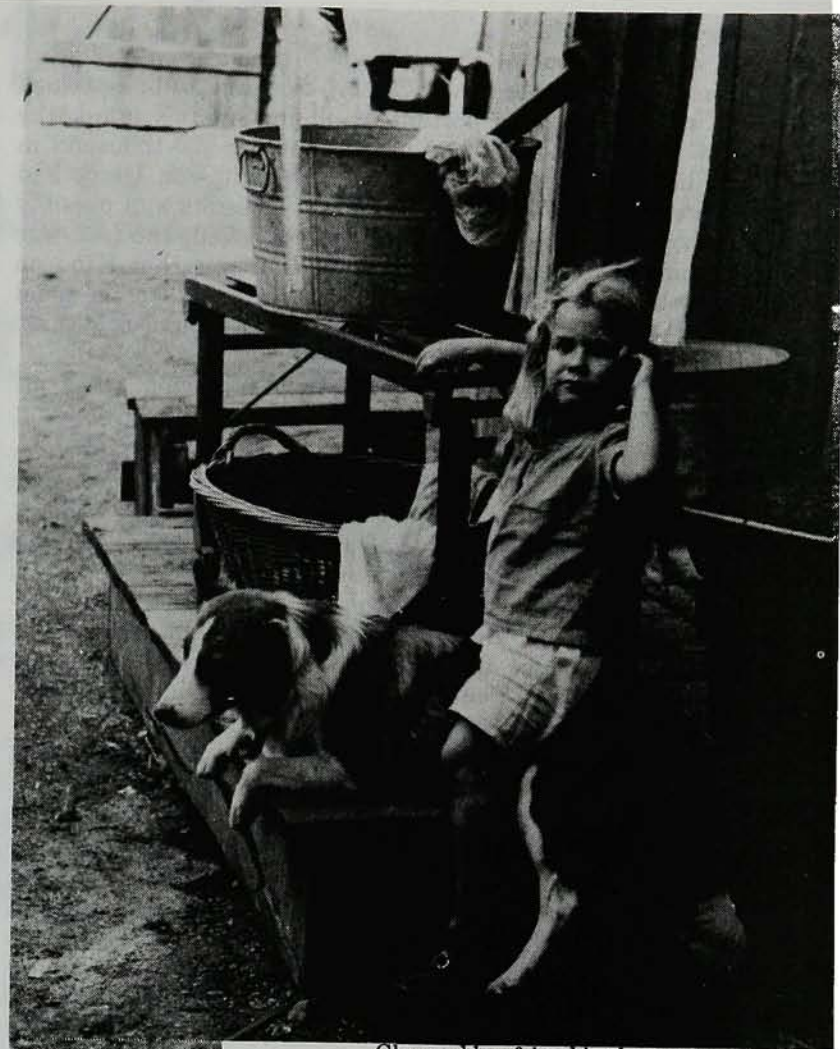
"We were then into late Sept. 1971, we had at this point cast the film completely. We were not ready to go although I was under the impression that we were, but that was my inexperience. But we could have been ready within three weeks and we could have shot most of the film that year."

Jeffrey Lynas as David in **Lies My Father Told Me**.





Len Birman and Jan Kadar (l. to r.)



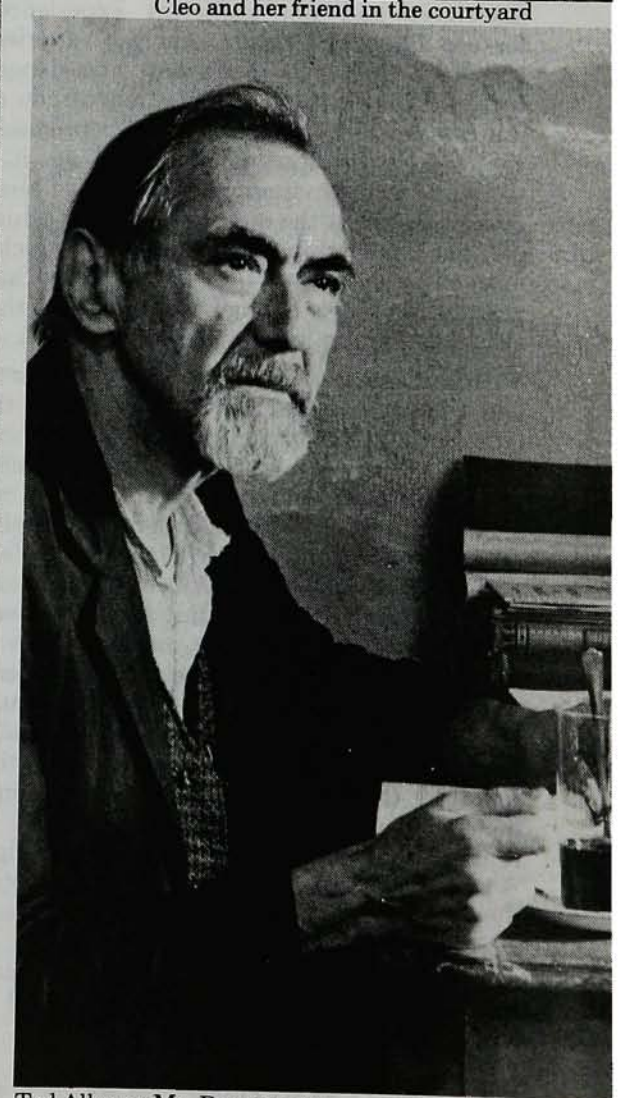
Cleo and her friend in the courtyard



Grandfather tells David a story at bedtime



Harry and Annie show off his last invention, permanently creased pants.



Ted Allen as Mr. Baumgarten

Or perhaps all of it?"

It was at this point that the whole project went belly-up. Options needed to be renewed, cash-flow had to be re-issued to Kino, and most important of all in Gulkin's mind, the CFDC or someone else had put up another \$20 thousand in the film to save it at that point. But as it was, Harry had lost credibility with the original Kino investors and possibly with some justification the way things looked; the film was not going to be made! So, the situation was that Kino no longer had any legal rights to the screenplay; financial credibility and a certain amount of good will had been lost. Exit Kino. Exit *Lies*... at least temporarily.

It took another year to reorganise the financing. On Sept. 10th, 1972 the cameras started to roll. The shooting schedule was 45 days on an original budget of \$715,000. Finally, the shoot was 72 days and the budget was \$1,300,000.

The refinancing of *Lies* is another long and tedious story. In summary, it involved Pentacle Eight Productions of Toronto which was headed by Tony Bedrich which was a partnership between Bedrich and Southam Press. Bedrich entered into an agreement with Gulkin for both of them to co-produce the film. Subsequently when Pentacle ran out of money, Pentimento Productions headed by Arnold Issenman, took over and completed the film.

But the overriding question is *What happened?* Why three years for the delivery of this great film production? Well, here's Harry Gulkin again, terribly candid: "There are many reasons for it but I guess the overriding reason for it is that we ran out of money and we didn't get sufficient additional funds... quickly enough... I mean, had we not run out of money we would have finished either on or close to our initial schedule. We went over budget because our initial budgeting was too low, without question. But, why did we budget too low? Well, I certainly had no experience. My associates had not sufficient experience in working on feature films in Canada and the experience from working elsewhere was not sufficient experience in working on feature films in Canada. The magnitude of the project was underestimated by the skilled professionals who were working on the film and we went over it. The director was working in an environment which was alien to him. He was concerned about the quality of support which I think he could get. He was working in a country in which there was not an evolved or developed film industry and he had come out of a country where he had been part of the development of that industry. So, he was alone, I'm afraid.

"But I assure you, that the days were filled with work and the nights were filled with anguish thinking about the following day's work and how to get it done. And that many people put themselves out. We eventually had to resume shooting some 15 months after we had completed the first shoot. And we needed additional snowfall. We had a snow machine ready on March 17th 1974. Well, we were fortunate, we had snowfall; but before that shoot I had to borrow money from the crew to buy the stock we needed to shoot. This was borrowed money, none of them were paid. Everyone worked without pay; the unions cooperated with us completely. On that issue I explained the situation to them. We were operating in a position of financial desperation with really very little support and a lot of the production was financed that way: the trips, the moving around was all done without finance. But the money for that shoot was all repaid and we managed to meet all our obligations."

Lies My Father Told Me is being distributed in Canada by Astral Films and by Columbia Pictures in the rest of the world. And if it succeeds in this country, Harry Gulkin and all the many sacrificing film workers and investors should see profit in six to nine months. And I for one, certainly wish them good luck! They deserve it! □

For a review of *Lies My Father Told Me*, see p. 47.



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