

on being  
a hungarian  
wallflower

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by Susan Alper

Ready for the get-away and other adventures

**András Vajda** hardly missed a beat as he grew into manhood and discovered the charms of older women. But there were those who stood on the sidelines, both in his life and in the movie which tells the story. Either way, they were the extras. Susan Alper was just such an extra, and she tells us about her adventure during the filming of *In Praise of Older Women*.

Lunch break at 10:00 p.m. and all is groaning at Ben's Delicatessen. There is much commiseration among the extras. And hunger. We have been working since 5:30 p.m., are tired, and like talking about it. After some deliberation one of the crew, wearing the title "In Praise of Older Women" on his chest, chooses a seat. When asked about his job he answers. "I'm not really sure what I do." Up until that very day he had himself been an extra; somehow, he has managed a promotion. His present contact with the lower caste is making him uneasy. Eyes shift to door and enter PR man Douglas Leopold with clipboard and model-cum-psych-student-cum-extra temporarily at hand. Ex-extra leaps from his chair to the higher strata, abruptly turning his back without a word, and joins the new arrivals. That, I have learned, is show business, and for eight hours and fifty minutes I too, am part of the show.

Dressed à la Budapest 1951, I and approximately 125 other hopefuls have been gathered together in a downtown Montreal church hall to perform in the dance sequence of *In Praise of Older Women*. Flanked on one side by posters of Lenin, Stalin and Rakosi (the former Hungarian President), and, by a window in the shape of the Star of David on the other, it is no wonder that most of us are confused. High above us, from a balcony, director George Kaczender via an assistant is commanding action. He asks for light and there is light and we look good. We do not look into the camera, however, which is also good. In this small world created out of balloons, crepe paper, and Salvation Army surplus, one must not talk, eat, drink, or stare into the machinery. One dances. Or, as in my case, one hugs various walls. While walking from "hair" to "make-up" I was told the news: "You are a wallflower. You will not dance, but you must circulate." For forty dollars and twenty-five cents it is the very least I can do.

There is a *mystique* associated with "movies" that draws the disenchanting believers, as well as the uninitiated, to such sets and keeps them there in spite of themselves. Most of the extras who have been taught for two sweaty hours to tango, fox-trot and waltz their way into the heart of pre-revolution Hungary are fourteen and fifteen year olds recruited from nearby Montreal High School. Very excited and energetic, they begin the evening wide-eyed and, if not dumbstruck, at least impressed with the goings on. At the other end of the ego-system, an older group made up of acting and university students, and professionals, is considerably less enthused. These people have been in this kind of situation before and are not amused. The fact that they are to be paid does little to arouse them to greater efforts.

In bringing Stephen Vizinczey's 1965 novel to the screen, Kaczender is treading softly and smoking a pipe. He and his crew have descended from the balcony and continue shooting on the floor. The star, Tom Berenger, fresh from filming *Waiting For Mr. Goodbar* opposite Diane Keaton,

photo by CinéMag



Kaczender orchestrates the ballroom scene

photo by CinéMag



Wall to wall wallflowers

photo by CinéMag



Fruit syrup and pretzels! Could this be Hungary?



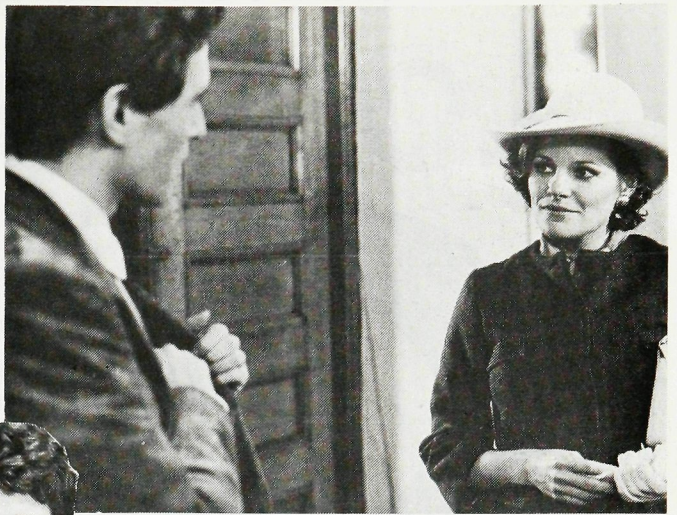
Waltzing away the evening in the old country

is being given direction. Something is wrong. Movies based on books make me nervous – I tend to feel over-protective toward the author. This scene, which appears in Chapter Four of the novel, has been re-worked. András Vajda, the character in the book, tells his readers of his experience at a Communist Youth Organization party. While dancing slowly with his date for that occasion, the unattractive and skinny Bernice, sixteen year old András is amazed by a sudden, unexpected display of masculinity. Bernice, true to her youth, is reduced to a fit of hysterical giggling. Eventually, all her friends are afflicted, and refuse to accept András' requests to dance. One dismisses him with a contemptuous, "I wouldn't dance with *you!*" Feeling quite a pervert, although not understanding exactly why, András slouches moodily home to his mother.

The movie version has its inevitable differences. Tom Berenger, according to one male dancer, "looks like a star". He is also "tremendous in the love scenes with Susan Strasberg and Karen Black", says one female bit player. It seems Tom is above reproach and is making an admirable András. Bernice, portrayed by a nervous actress who is slim but not unattractive, does not resemble her fictional counterpart in spirit. Instead of embarrassed laughter, this Bernice responds to András' indiscretion with sulks and blushes. Nobody is laughing. Berenger asks a chosen, much-envied extra, "May I have this dance?" and is answered, quite theatrically, "You may, *if* you can find a partner." At some other point, Berenger and an actress who plays the role of a middle-aged teacher, dance to the tune of "The Anniversary Waltz." They are encircled by extras who, although smiling and applauding, do not understand exactly why. The actors are pleased with the take. The director and producer are pleased. The extras are hungry.

Among the unpaid group there is talk of feeling 'used'. One student is considerably offended, "God, they really treat you like dirt here. I was in another movie and there they really appreciated us. They gave us Kentucky Fried Chicken." The camera did not seem to be paying enough attention to her, she complained. After seven hours of shooting and six lines of dialogue, the business of making movies seems more tedious than glamorous – too much waiting and not much worth waiting for. The high school students worry about getting home. This party, over-chaperoned and overlong, is losing ground.

In the preface to the novel, András explains his artistic intent as follows: "I have the extravagant notion that my recollections may help to bring about a better understanding of the truth that men and women are created equal regardless of their dates of birth – and may thereby stimulate a broader intercourse between the generations." Broader intercourse between the paid extras and the crew results in new developments. The actress who turned down Berenger's invitation to dance is conversing with an assistant director on the subject of recent film festivals and Frank Capra's talk at Concordia University. He, unfortunately, missed both. He straightens his scarf, adjusts his smile and turns to model seated close by. Being in the right place, at the right time, is what getting into a movie seems to be about. The assistant director approaches a couple that has been together since the shooting began, splits them apart, and tells the boy to dance with the model in the next number. The two are shown exactly where to stand in front of the camera. The jilted firl fades into the bench crowd. The high school extras have forgotten they are involved in the filming of a dance and wonder how they get conned into coming to such a bad one. At 2:00 a.m., upwardly mobile model and assistant director fade out into the night. Grand illusions die quickly on the dance floor. And so do circulating wallflowers.



András (Tom Berenger) musing about the flowers to be picked. They will include (starting upper right and going clockwise) Helen Shaver, Marilyn Lightstone, Karen Black, Alexandra Stewart, Louise Marleau and Marianne McIsaac.



## and in april ...

A *Playboy* photomontage is expected to pick up, approximately, where *Cinema Canada's* ends.

# LOOK



## Grants to Ontario Screenwriters

The Ontario Arts Council announces a competition for a limited number of Grants of up to \$3,000 each for Ontario writers wishing to create scripts for feature-length dramatic films.

**Deadline for Application is December 15, 1977.**

Applicants must be Ontario Residents and must submit:

1. Completed Ontario Arts Council Application Forms;
2. A previously completed screenplay to indicate familiarity with the craft of writing for the screen;
3. An outline for the proposed script on which the writer wishes to work with Grant Assistance.

Results of the competition will be announced in early March, 1978.

**For Application Forms and additional information contact:**

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