on being
a hungarian
wallflower

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 disenchanted 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,...
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 sud-
den, 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 contemp-
tuous, "I wouldn't dance with you!" Feeling quite a per-
vert, although not understanding exactly why, András slouches
moodyly 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-chap-
eroned 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 understand-
ing of the truth that men and women are created equal re-
gardless of their dates of birth - and may thereby stimu-
late 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 as-
sistant director on the subject of recent film festivals and
Frank Capra's talk at Concordia University. He, unfortu-
nately, 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 girl 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.
Andras (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.
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.

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2. A previously completed screenplay to indicate familiarity with the craft of writing for the screen;
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**For Application Forms and additional information contact:**

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