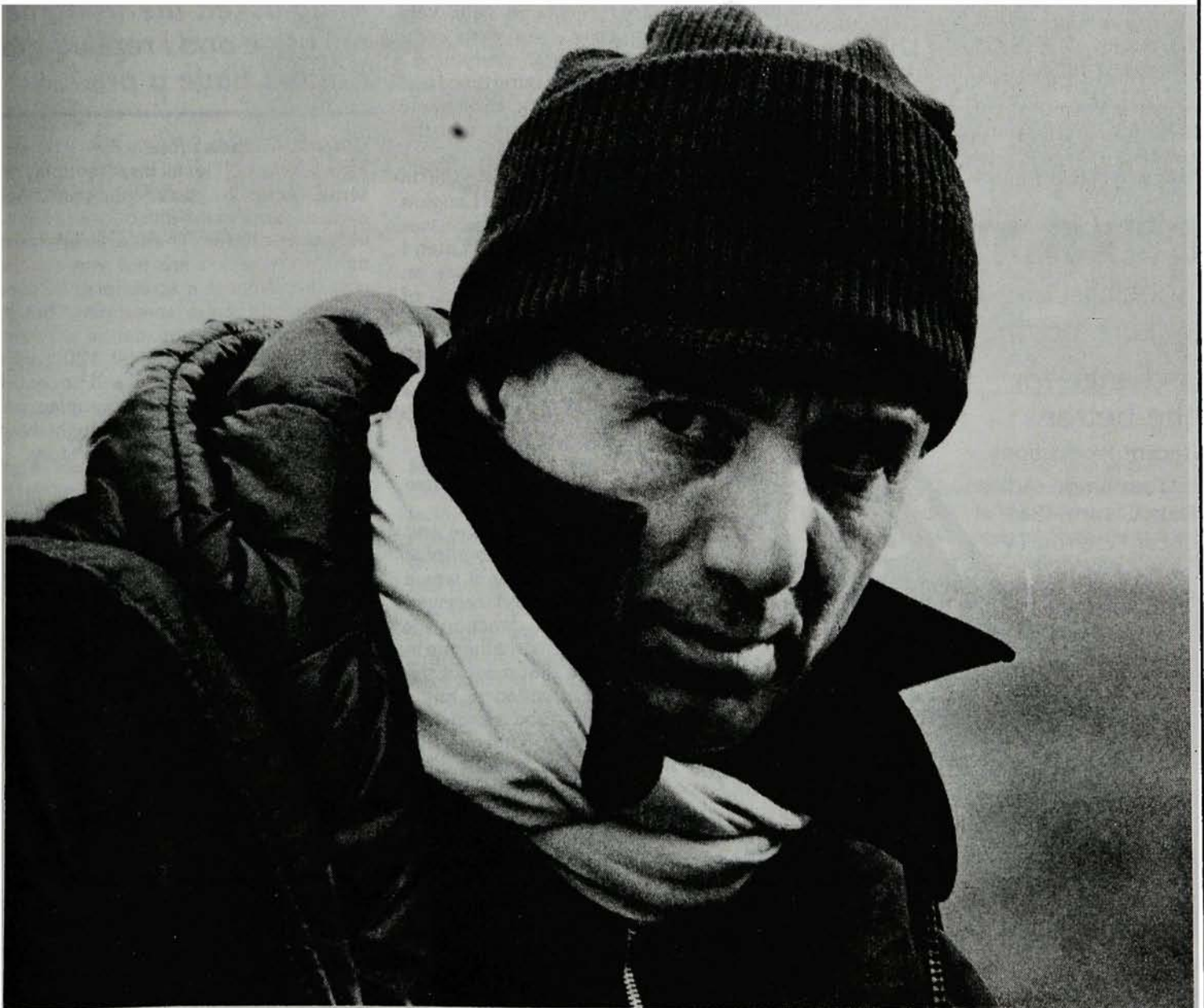


# shooting star

by kevin tierney

Nursing his project from conception through to completion, director Max Fischer has finally made *The Lucky Star* a reality: no mean feat for this "unknown", who refused to sell out.



The following is an interview with Max Fischer, director of the feature film **The Lucky Star** — which recently completed shooting in Montréal and Holland. Born in Egypt and now a Canadian by marriage, he has lived and worked in many places. He speaks reasonably fluent English with an accent Henry James would have found charming.

We met recently in the building which houses Télé-Métropole and Sonolab's editing facilities. He was accompanied by his wife, Susannah, and the three of us sat huddled in a corner of the cafeteria trying to look inconspicuous amidst the coffee-breakers. He began at the beginning...

**Max Fischer:** At the outset I was a student of two disciplines — Literature and Philosophy, and at the same time I took a course in the History of Art, which developed into Archeology and then Egyptology — especially the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th dynasties, which were my

Kevin Tierney is a free-lance writer in Montreal who teaches film and writing at John Abbott College.

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areas of specialization. At least I tried to specialize!

I was first confronted by the cinema when I was a kind of advisor on certain American super films made about Egypt, like **Land of the Pharaohs** and **The Ten Commandments**. My advice wasn't completely followed, but it was an extraordinary experience for a young man to be involved in these huge productions, with these monsters like De Mille and Howard Hawkes — fantastic, unbelievable.

**Cinema Canada:** Epics...

**Max Fischer:** Yes, real super epics. I was not in Hollywood with them for the interiors, but I was with them on location, advising where to shoot, or making remarks on the designs of the sets — where everything was wrong, of course!

**Cinema Canada:** But they 'looked' good.

**Max Fischer:** They looked very, very good; but historically, they were completely wrong. Costumes, everything... But it was exciting! At the same time I was doing that, I was a film critic, earning my living... well, earning my free passes to the cinemas.

As well, I created the first Ciné-Club in Egypt in collaboration with Henri Langlois of the Cinémathèque Française, who was a very, very dear friend of mine. Later, I was asked to do a series of films on Egyptology for the university and, of course, this was a gift from God. I did twenty-six films on ancient Egypt.

**Cinema Canada:** **The Lucky Star** isn't your first feature?

**Max Fischer:** No, it's my third.

**Cinema Canada:** Were the other two distributed in North America?

**Max Fischer:** One was. It's called — and in spite of the title it is not a pornographic film — **Wet Dreams**. Actually, it was a success here in Canada, and received very, very good critical reaction. It opened in France at the Cinémathèque in Paris, and I must admit that most of the major critics were in attendance, and I received unexpectedly good reviews: I didn't believe them myself. That was five years ago. It was a very strange film, where some of the world's most famous people expressed their sexual fantasies; like Nicholas Ray, the great English playwright, Heathcote Williams, Dusan Makavejev...

**Cinema Canada:** How did **The Lucky Star** come about? Is it your original idea?

**Max Fischer:** No. The idea is from an

original story called *La Belle Etoile* by the famous French illustrator Roland Topor. When I first saw it I flipped because I thought the idea was absolutely fantastic. I thought it could be better treated as a film, so I re-wrote it from the original. When I started to get some interest from various producers I jumped to get the screenplay written. I got Jack Rosenthal, three-time Academy Award winner and one of our greatest living writers, to do a screenplay.

**Cinema Canada:** So it's his adaptation of your adaptation?

**Max Fischer:** Right, if you describe it that way.

**Cinema Canada:** Well, he's credited with...

**Max Fischer:** ...Screenplay.

*They asked me to name my price and I replied that I didn't have a price.*

**Cinema Canada:** Really?

**Max Fischer:** It is still his screenplay in a sense. Actually, you've put your finger on it, because in the film business this is a very strange area. There are certain terminologies which are not very precise, you see. What is a screenplay? People put a credit on a screenplay, but it's difficult. How do you define a screenplay? I wrote the original 120 pages; then I gave it to Rosenthal and he converted it into 120 pages of screenplay, with dialogue, where the words brought things to life. Mine was, you know, a story.

**Cinema Canada:** So yours was like a sketch and his became a portrait.

**Max Fischer:** Right. Exactly. Then I got it back and did a shooting script out of the Rosenthal version.

**Cinema Canada:** At what point in all of this did financing come in?

**Max Fischer:** All of it, up to script completion, was financed by me. We spent a lot of money, and four years. Three times we had opportunities to do the film, with Americans, with the French, and with the Germans. The Americans were very generous with their offers because they wanted to buy the property. They offered me an incredible amount of money, but I told them I was not interested in selling. I wanted to direct the film, and as I was unknown, and still am, they wanted someone else to direct. In effect, they wanted to pay me a lot of money for not directing — and I refused. They asked



Fischer is the focus for this crowd on location with **The Lucky Star**

me to name my price and I replied that I didn't have a price. They said, *everybody* has a price, what's yours? So I waited four years until I found somebody who had trust in me and would allow me to do it.

**Cinema Canada:** *Your status here in Canada, did that allow you to make the film?*

**Max Fischer:** Yes, because I am married to a Canadian, I am a Canadian — it was very simple.

**Cinema Canada:** *You've been accepted as a Canadian director?*

**Max Fischer:** Yes, as soon as I decided to come and live here.

**Cinema Canada:** *Part of your reason to come and live here then, is because of the growing film industry. Do you feel that Canada is the place where you can make your films?*

**Max Fischer:** Personally, I think that Canada is the only country in the world today that has a chance of doing something in the film industry that Europe has never been able to do. Let's face it, I mean this has been my fight for twenty years, and for twenty years I have lost my fight. I'll explain why. I went to the expense in Europe of working my head off, making commercials and other films, which I enjoyed doing because they were the perfect platform for learning the film business — lights, editing, cameras, everything. I bought myself a studio to make myself completely independent; all the camera equipment you can think of, a sound engineer, and the facilities to explore the possibilities of sound. Then I concentrated as much as possible within my studio on getting the freedom to create films. And I never succeeded.

Yes, I made **Wet Dreams** and I succeed very much in helping others — people like Martin Scorsese, whose first

feature film was finished thanks partly to my facilities and the help I gave him. With my equipment I helped Nicholas Ray and lots of other people to finish their films. But still, no matter what you have in Europe, you cannot go with the high price of films: you cannot penetrate world distribution of films. It is impossible. You are blocked, and it's a terrible situation. Who in the world sees Italian films? And we all know they are the best. Who does? **A Special Day**, yes — but it was the exception.

**Cinema Canada:** *And it was a Canadian co-production.*

**Max Fischer:** Here we are. But a brilliant film like **Bread and Chocolate**, which I saw in Italy nine years ago, and came back shouting that it was beautiful and brilliant, took seven years to get out of Italy. Let's face it, if it isn't spaghetti westerns or karate films, they don't get out of Italy. Where are the films that come

out of France? Few, if any. Do you know anybody who sees Japanese films? One or two Kurasawa. This means what? It is a question of distribution.

*...these companies are practically impenetrable.*

World distribution is in the hands of three, four, or five major companies, and these companies are practically impenetrable — if they decide not to give you the possibility, you don't get it. Yet the world market is overflowing with absolute trash, and you know it as well as I do! It's incredible... I mean the trash that is shown from Timbukto to Cairo, from Tel Aviv to Delhi, it's unbelievable...while **Bread and Chocolate** remains in Italy.

But I think that Canada — being so close to the United States, and with the financial possibilities and a lot of intelligence — could penetrate the world distribution market. I think *that's* what's important.

My friend, Henri Langlois' biggest dream was to create a world chain of cinemas, and a completely independent distribution system. He had already bought three cinemas in France to be able

to start such an independent circuit, but unfortunately, he died before he could start it. He had begun negotiations with a group in Holland and they, too, were interested in creating an alternative world film distributing possibility. And that's what I think about Canada's potential. This potential should be exploited to open up distribution possibilities. Part of the money available should be dedicated to opening up channels of distribution. You must create the films *and* create the distribution markets at the same time. What is the use of making films if you haven't got the distribution?

**Cinema Canada:** *Is the distribution of The Lucky Star set?*

**Max Fischer:** I don't know. That's in the hands of the producer. I think it is and I hope it is. I mean, I am busy finishing my film. But it is very important. If not, Canada will fall into the same problem that Italy has. Of course, Canada has some advantages: it is English-speaking, there is a common border with the Americans, Canada can use the American star system to penetrate, and all of that. And the things Canada is doing, like encouraging more and more co-productions, **A Special Day** and other films — if the world cinema can channel their films through Canada by way of co-productions, it is already an enormous step.

**Cinema Canada:** *Some people seem to feel that the Canadian film industry is in the business of making films to be seen at drive-ins.*

**Max Fischer:** You know, it is very early to decide. You cannot change the public. The film industry is a very expensive industry and the money that is put into a film has to regenerate itself and create new money, or we are going to face the end of the industry before it starts. I agree with your assessment of some of these films, although I don't make them and I never go and see them. But the general public has to go and see these films in order for there to be money rolling in; then, probably, some of that money can be dedicated to, let's say, 'bette?' films. It is impossible to start out making what we call 'better films' for a limited audience, because what we will do is kill the industry.

I am making **The Lucky Star** because this film has both sides to it, and one shouldn't go without the other. I mean there are sensational films which are also money-makers; **Amarcord**, for example. Many excellent films are not only fine public films, but also great stories with great direction. The history of the cinema has known people like Frank Capra and Howard Hawkes and Hitchcock; films which are seen again and again. They are

great films in every sense; they made money and they are monuments to the history of cinema. Today, because seven people want to be intellectual, they seem to want to annoy the public, and so we get into Rohmer: I adore Rohmer, but the big public does not. I have seen them walk out of Rohmer films. He is limited to Ciné-clubs. I think that film absolutely needs the Hawkes' and the Capras and the Hitchcocks — we need these people, their energy, their power.

**Cinema Canada:** *Working here in Canada, do you feel pressured to make a certain kind of film? Have you been granted the time and the possibilities to make the film as you envisioned it?*

**Max Fischer:** Yes. Absolutely. I must admit that I have been. Let's face it, when you are a professional and you talk to a producer and you decide to make a film, you say, okay, we've got this amount of money and a certain schedule to do it in. If you're a professional, a good director, you try to do it within the scheduled time without making any concessions. Of course, you can't do **The Ten Commandments** with ten people making the pyramids; but this is only an example, not an excuse.

The work of a producer is to find money and it's very difficult. I have an enormous amount of respect for people who can rise on what? On wind. The same amount of money that is put into a film you could put into estates, or whatever, where you are sure to make money. I think it's remarkable that a guy from nowhere can convince people to put their money into a film.

**Cinema Canada:** *When you spoke of the difficulty of penetrating world distribution markets, you mentioned the American star system. In The Lucky Star you have two 'star's; were they your idea?*

**Max Fischer:** Yes, Louise Fletcher was my idea completely. Louise has been involved in this film for three years, since I met her for the first time. Steiger has been, not imposed, but suggested, along with a number of other people; and of course, since he is a great actor, there was no problem. We are living in a system of stars.

**Cinema Canada:** *And the casting of the boy Brett Marx?*

**Max Fischer:** The casting of the boy came about through sessions organized by Steve Spielberg when I first went to Los Angeles about three years ago. He organized calls in New York and Los Angeles — about a hundred kids in all.



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But we didn't find the right one. In the end, we saw about 400 kids.

**Cinema Canada :** *Did you cast in Canada as well?*

**Max Fischer :** No, for the simple reason that Canada came about at the last moment. **The Lucky Star's** history is a very funny one. In desperation — because I couldn't do the film in America as I had wanted to do, because of the problems we were talking about earlier — I said, what the hell! The film could have been made a long time ago in Holland, but what the hell's the use of making a Dutch film that will never be shown? Have you ever seen a Dutch film? Holland makes beautiful cinema, but nobody sees it.

That's why I wanted to do it in America. Then came France, where we had the same problems, and finally, Germany. I said yes at that point, and I would have had an interesting cast — Liv Ullman and Gert Frobe — and the money was okay. I went to my lawyer in Paris to sign the contracts with the German producers; but you know how lawyers are — he said he had doubts about the deal. He asked me if I would reconsider making the film elsewhere if the money was right, and I said I had no objections provided I got to make the film. Anyway, he went out of his office and left me there, and when he returned he had my Canadian producer, Claude Léger, with him. Claude just happened to be in Paris and that's how this all started.

It was just sheer coincidence. I mean, if I had gone to my lawyer's office one day

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## Canada needs good stories...that's the secret.

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before or one day after, I would not have met Claude Léger. It was an accident; and by another accident I was a Canadian and the whole thing just fit together. We made a deal in no time at all. Otherwise, the film would have been German today, and again, nobody would have seen it! But seriously, Germany is in the midst of gaining back its position, what with Fassbinder, Herzog and Wenders.

**Cinema Canada :** *You used a number of local actors in the film.*

**Max Fischer :** Yes, as many as I could: Yvon Dufour gave a beautiful performance; Jean Gascon, you just can't imagine how good he is. He has a scene with Brett in the confessional and it's one of the greatest moments of the film. Gascon is unbelievable. And Guy L'Ecuyer, very, very good; and Isabel Majesse, she

should be a big star some day...Canada has some great actors in these people.

**Cinema Canada :** *And if the film is well distributed, maybe they'll all get their due.*

**Max Fischer :** I hope so. I think that Canada needs good stories — although I'm not necessarily talking about **The Lucky Star**, because maybe it's a complete miss; I don't know, I have to wait. But that's the secret. That was the secret of Frank Capra, and most other great filmmakers.

**Cinema Canada :** *Although I try to avoid reading synopses — because they can usually turn the greatest film ever into something that sounds too preposterous — what struck me about the synopsis of this film was that there was very little grey area. When you examine it in clumps, this boy's development from a happy childhood through the devastation of war, to a cowboy fantasy, you say to yourself that at any moment it could turn into utter nonsense. As a result, it would seem that you will either end up with a good film, or a total miss. Is that a fair assessment?*

**Max Fischer :** It's a very fair assessment.

**Cinema Canada :** *Are you optimistic?*

**Max Fischer :** Oh yes, very; because the rushes are fantastic, the scenes are fantastic; everything that has been edited up to now has an incredible look to it. And, as in everything that I do, and have always done in my life, there is lots and lots of humor. I think that without humor you just can't make it. In the works of great filmmakers there is always humor; not that I put myself in that echelon, but there is always a sense that they don't take themselves too seriously. I never take myself seriously, and I always doubt what I am doing.

**Cinema Canada :** *What are your plans for the future?*

**Max Fischer :** I have a television series I am thinking about and I am writing certain things now. I'd like to write and direct because it is very difficult to find a script. Although I had the facilities to do features for many years, one of the reasons I didn't was the lack of good scripts. What's the use of making something you don't believe in.

Since **The Lucky Star** I've been offered a few things. People have heard that I can direct, that I can work inside a schedule and inside a budget, and these are very important; but the scripts I've been offered are so bad, you can't imagine. The trash that is written is just unbelievable.

**Cinema Canada :** *You've spoken at length about distribution problems, so how would you feel if your film was ready for release but there were no immediate takers? Would you continue to try and get your film distributed as widely as possible, or is your work over when the film is finished?*

**Max Fischer :** Well, my work is over when the film is finished, yes. I have other commitments. The problem is that I am weak in this situation. The financial side is, unfortunately, so different from my world that I am at a loss.

**Cinema Canada :** *Should those two worlds come together?*

**Max Fischer :** There are certain brilliant people who are able to produce and direct. The two worlds are sometimes compatible, but not in my case.

**Cinema Canada :** *But will you not feel disappointed if the film that you've lived with for the last five or six years isn't seen?*

**Max Fischer :** Yes, very.

**Cinema Canada :** *Who would be the ideal audience for **The Lucky Star**?*

**Max Fischer :** General, a total absolute audience. It's a story that has, in principle, all the ingredients: excitement, suspense, humor, gentleness.

**Cinema Canada :** *How important is it to you to have a critical success?*

**Max Fischer :** I would like both — commercial and critical. I've looked for that in everything I've done. I have already made experimental and art films, and I think I've gotten those out of my system. I know I can do them and I know I can bore the public to death!

**Cinema Canada :** *And please the critics?*

**Max Fischer :** And please the critics. Now, I want to take off from that — and please the public. □

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## THE LUCKY STAR

d. Max Fischer asst. d. Pierre Magny sc. Max Fischer adapt./dial. Jack Rosenthal ph. Frank Tidy ed. Yves Langlois sd. Patrick Rousseau a.d. Michel Proulx cost. Jany Van Huber l.p. Rod Steiger, Louise Fletcher, Lou Jacobi, Brett Marx exec.p. André Fleury p. Claude Léger assoc. p. Pieter Kroonenburg p. manager Matthew Vibert loc. man. Didier Hoffman unit pub. Denise Di Novi p.c. Caneuram Films Inc. pub. David Novek, Lucienne Appel for Berger & Assoc.