

breaking through the hiatus

George Kaczender's first feature was Canada's entry in the Cannes Festival five years ago and *In Praise of Older Women* was chosen by the Canadian pre-selection committee this year as the 'best of the crop'. Jane Dick has a short look at his earlier films before talking with Kaczender about his latest one.

by Jane Dick



Berenger and Black discuss a difficult scene with Director Kaczender

"**In Praise of Older Women** is dedicated to women. The main character loves women, the author loves women, the director loves women..." (laughter)

There is a lot of hoopla surrounding George Kaczender's third and latest feature film **In Praise of Older Women**, based on Stephen Vizinczey's novel and due for release in the fall. Partially because it is an erotic film but also because it is the breaking through of a five year hiatus period (following the release of **U-Turn** in 1973) in which Kaczender made a few short documentaries, sweated over various scripts that never reached fruition due to lack of funds, aligned himself with RSL Productions of Montreal, and finally had his labors rewarded with that necessary portion of luck to get **In Praise** off the page and into the can.

It was a pretty straightforward shoot, as shoots go; the biggest problems encountered were in perfecting the script and raising money. Just the sort of problems one would expect to loom large and exactly the ones that have plagued Kaczender throughout his career. Let's face it — no matter who you are, writing a film script is no easy task, and as for raising money in this fair land — a picnic it's not.

Kaczender came to Montreal from Hungary via Italy, where he fled at the defeat of the Revolution. He arrived in 1957 and began work almost immediately at the NFB.

"I went there on a Monday and Tuesday I was working. The Film Board had just moved from Ottawa. They had a huge organization and they didn't have enough people. They were also looking for an editor. My English was rotten at that time... very bad. So I said, 'I'm a pretty good editor.' (laughter) I was always so arrogant about these things.... After a couple of weeks they hired me for good and I stuck out thirteen years there."

In addition to editing, he also directed several short films culminating in his first feature film **Don't Let the Angels Fall** in 1969. This was the first Canadian feature ever selected for competition at Cannes. It won critical praise but scarcely caught public attention. Not surprisingly. It is a well-made but too-sober film, passionate and loyal to a fault in its commitments, but with only the merest scraps of relief from its steady downhill climb.

"I was ruined by the NFB in a way... taking myself so goddam seriously and not considering humor as an absolutely major part of the dramatic art form. It doesn't matter how serious your subject is, you have to treat it with a sense of irony and humor; otherwise it's not worth doing. I wish I would have realized that before. Now I won't ever make a film that lacks those qualities."

After **Angels** George left the NFB and together with John Kemeny and Joe Koenig set up International Cinemedia Centre. Ltd. There he made educational shorts. In 1971, an artistic rift set George off on the independent trail. He formed George Kaczender Productions Ltd. and soon after made **U-Turn** which he produced and directed himself — a feat he swears he will never attempt again. 80 percent of his energy went into trying to make the film and 20 percent into actually making it. Nevertheless, **U-Turn** was an engaging film; its wit and style, among other things, marking a distinct and happy departure from **Angels**. No doubt, **In praise**, with its eroticism and whatnot will be a striking departure once again.

Kaczender wants to make films "like nobody else" and is also trying to say something about the human condition. While maintaining a distinctive and growing personal style, he is not interested in repeating formulas of filmic style and each of his films explores a different mode of expression.

Not yet having seen **In Praise**, a critical discussion of Kaczender's development seems fatuous. But his signature is apparent in his previous films. He has a well-developed social consciousness and places his characters in distinct social milieus. His characters are not happy where they are but are striving to function within their given social structures, the family being one institution that is questioned but not discarded. They are both cowed by authority (**Angels**) and laugh in its face (**U-Turn**). One hopes the situations in **In Praise** will give rise to a real confrontation and that his future films will arrive at some resolutions.

He views his characters with a sharply critical yet unflinchingly sympathetic eye — the effect being that you can't hate any of them but would sure like to give some of them a good smack in the head. Yet he also has a taste for the whimsical and a knack for rendering action spontaneous that his openness to improvisation ensures he will never lose.



As the quest ends in **U-Turn**

Much of Kaczender's style arises from the fact that he is somewhat of a misfit. He left his homeland more or less by force and Canada is by no means his idea of dreamland. Where would he like to be? "Not just one place. I'm a wanderer," he says. But having chosen Canada he has also determined to work with the situation to his best advantage. The result is a product that is very much Canadian — no other place on earth could have given rise to his films. And, being an outsider, he sees us in a way that we cannot see ourselves, not having been weaned on our cultural frailties. It's a classic irony. This is not to say that his Hungarian vision of Canada is the definitive one but his characters, although often universal types, are unmistakably Canadian in essence.

Also — an integral part of his style — he likes to work with the same people to establish a confident working pattern. "It's so difficult to make a movie, why not make it easier by working with people who support you and who are enthusiastic." And whom you can trust.

Kaczender, though still an independent, has what he terms an ideal working relationship with Robert Lantos and Stephen Roth of RSL Productions, who produced **In Praise**

and are also producing his next feature **Agency**, from the novel by Paul Gottlieb. He has nothing but praise for this happy liaison.

Cinema Canada interviewed George Kaczender recently in his Montreal apartment. There is an air of arrogance about him but it is tempered by a quiet sense of humor that is, above all, self-deprecating. He vows that he loses his cool very quickly. "I start shouting and I probably alienate a lot of people because of that. Also when someone is stupid I become very impatient and aggressive." But when he speaks he does so off-handedly, flatly, as though everything is easy and of equal consequence. The rare moments when he does raise his voice to emphasize a point, the glasses on the table rattle and a loud 'tok' registers on tape.

On the eve of release of his third feature, George Kaczender is an artist in progress. "I'm growing up," he says. "My goal is to make a masterpiece. If I can't, it's too bad, but I enjoy the process. It applies not just to work, it applies to life as well. You really have to enjoy the process."

Careerwise, does he have any regrets? "No-o-o-o-o," he says.

Cinema Canada: *Your films have won several awards and critical response has been very good. How important is that to you, both personally and in terms of the future success of your films?*

George Kaczender: "Anybody who tells you he's not interested in what the critics say is a liar. It's very important to be criticized. You shouldn't be able to get away with sloppiness."

"I respect intelligent criticism regardless of its effect — its emotional effect on me. I'd rather read good reviews than bad reviews but I don't mind reading an intelligent analysis of the mistakes I made. What I hate, and I have encountered this in Toronto with **U-Turn** particularly, that some of the criticisms were merely malicious and personal... I mean criticism should be an art form — and if it's not done in that spirit, then you don't really want to listen to it.

Angels was the official entry at Cannes in '68, U-Turn was the official Canadian entry at Berlin in '73, and In Praise was pre-selected but not chosen for this year's Cannes Festival. What importance do you attach to festivals?

"It's important if you win a prize. But if you don't, it's a letdown. It's prestigious to be representing the country and to be chosen... It makes you feel good, but is it going to help the film?"

Isn't it good exposure?

"Yes, it's good I suppose. But what if you get some bad publicity that may damage the film commercially before it comes out? It's risky."

What's been the public response to your films? How well have they done commercially?

"Not well.... **U-Turn** did well in Montreal. I don't understand why the film did so much better in Montreal than in Toronto, for example. In Montreal the film ran for about three months in the Avenue. But in Toronto it didn't do well and in the States it didn't do well either. They liked the film

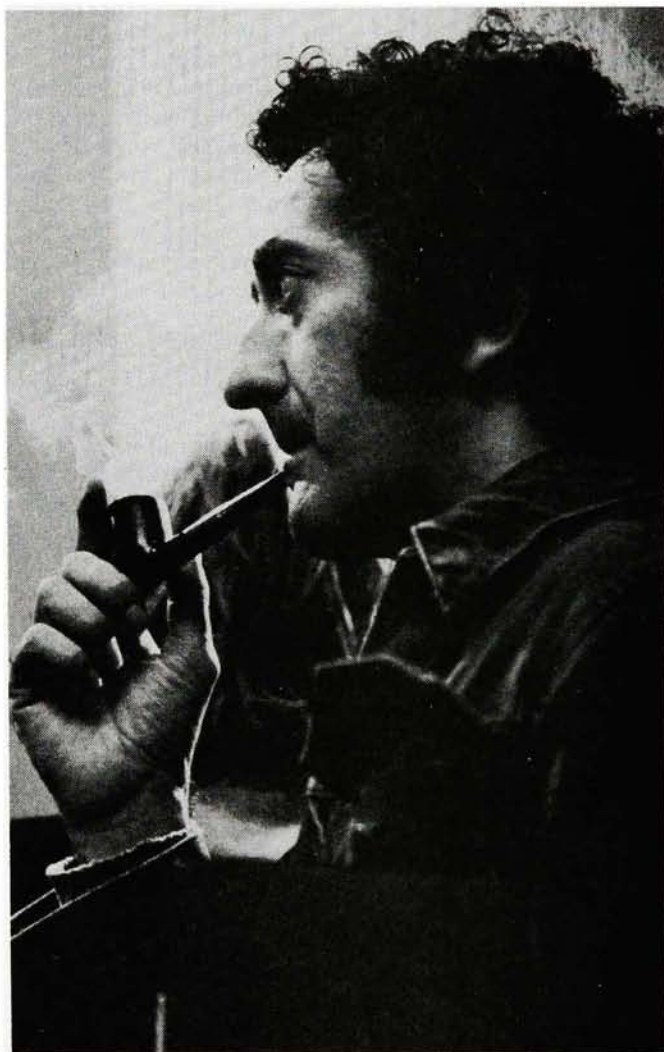
but it's just too quiet for Americans. Maybe it was boring, I don't know. (laughter) You saw it.

"Probably if I looked at it now I would want to take it back to the cutting room and recut it or remake it..."

"I'm not one of those directors who like to think and talk a great deal about the films I've done — I like to look forward to my next project and I'm more interested in what I'm doing now.

"I should be able to make at least one film a year... The way I make movies is not just directing them on the floor, but I like to work on the script, I like to edit the films myself — that takes another three, four months. I like to supervise everything.

"I could make a film every year if financing were easy. But in the past I wasted so much time and energy just trying to make a film and not succeeding. You could lose your touch with big hiatuses between films. You don't really want to pause too much.



Director George Kaczender

photo: Lois Siegel

Angels and U-Turn were based on stories written in collaboration with you. How do you feel now working with someone else's material, i.e. Stephen Vizinczey's In Praise...?

"I don't mind it because if something is not close to me I won't choose it. I must have an affinity with the original



A steamy scene left on the cutting room floor

work, either emotional interest or intellectual interest, before I can generate enough enthusiasm to be able to work on it.

"I worked with Paul Gottlieb quite closely on the screenplay. That was his first screenplay. Paul is a very good writer and we work well together. He's doing *Agency*."

In Praise would seem to be the most personal of your films. Andras (Tom Berenger) is your contemporary.

"That's right! Exactly! We are exactly the same age. I've lived through a great many situations from the book and Stephen, when he was writing the book, was my best friend. We talked a great deal about the book and we experienced a lot together in Hungary and here. It's almost like reliving and reexperiencing an era for me. As you say, it's very personal."

How closely does the film follow the novel?

"Pretty closely. It's a picaresque novel and there are more episodes in the book than in the film. For logistic reasons we did some juggling, incorporating two or three characters into one, shifting of countries, and dropping out characters entirely, but the spirit is the same. When you're translating a literary work into film you are obviously taking liberties — you're not illustrating a book if you're really interested in cinema. You're translating and adapting it into another medium that is entirely different — based on different values. But I don't think Stephen is going to be upset about it. He understands cinema..."

How big a role do the politics and history play in the film?

"There is one segment with Bobbie (Susan Strasberg) and she's involved with Andras in the Revolution. Politics come in heavily with this woman. But even with Maya (Karen Black) certain things are implied in a more subtle way. You never forget that you are in Hungary and you never forget that you are under Stalinism. It's there and it's very important for me that it's there because I suffered that. Immigration was also very important for me. That's not much politics but it's important in terms of establishing yourself in a new culture."

Your political background is evident in your previous films, short and feature-length. There is always some threatening figure — usually a power figure or a peer group. Some of the images are also threatening. Is this conscious?

"Partially. Look, I was brought up in a country that was never free politically. I've always been very conscious of freedom and repression because I suffered so much as a child in terms of being hassled and politically molested. Persecuted. I lived in fear and trembling all the time and it must have an effect on you. You learn to hate the status quo. After awhile you have to fight it or escape it. It stays with you. Stays in your nightmares..."

"Freedom for me is very very important. I suppose I'd go so far as to say that maybe I am trapped in my struggle and quest for freedom..."

"My real fight is against authoritarianism."

Watching your films I've been impressed with what seems to be a natural flair for comedy. Are you interested in doing an outright comedy?

"Yes, I am. It's such an incredibly difficult style of expression and I am slowly working myself into it now. You'll see in **In Praise** that there are a great deal of comedic elements in it that I hope will come through effectively. And in public screenings I'll watch the film very carefully from this viewpoint to see whether all the intentions are realized properly or not. If I find that everything comes off the way I'd planned, then I'll have more confidence to do a comedy next time. There's nothing more pleasing than to see the audience having a good time."

*Are you happy with **In Praise**?*

"It feels very good. I am very comfortable with the film. It's possible that in time I won't look at it so comfortably as I do today. But right now I am really happy with the film."

*Did you try new formal experiments in **In Praise** in terms of style?*

"Very much so. I was trying to give the film a great deal of visual fluidity, and avoided breaking up the scenes. I was trying to edit them in the camera as much as I could. I was extremely conscious of spatial relationships in terms of emotional content. I prepared this film very carefully. But at the same time I always leave room for improvisation – within the parameters of the scene. Also I was very conscious of lighting. I wanted a sort of Rembrandtish mood to the film. I made sure there's always a visible light source in the frame – either a lamp or a window – to give realism and beauty to the image."

How did you handle the erotic scenes? What criteria do you set up for yourself?

"Well, the criteria is realism in its pure literary meaning. I don't mean naturalism, I mean realism. I am very conscious of suggesting, of not overstating, of not revealing too much visually. I'm most conscious of taste – acceptable taste, so you don't cringe watching it. It's very important in love scenes to make them just beautiful enough... Even if it's very sort of down-to-earth it has to have a certain mystery and a certain feeling and a certain visual treatment that is unique. It's difficult to say what makes it work..."

What's the most important thing you've learned in your directing career?

"Mmmm... Inspiration. To give inspiration to everybody around you is the most important thing. To create an ambience where actors can work. To inspire them; to create an environment where they can create. It becomes a temple of work – the set."

Do you find that difficult to accomplish?

"No. Well – it comes naturally. In the past I probably had to work on it but now it's easier and easier. In fact, the best result I ever had was on **In Praise**. The first time it happened

in my life that I shot a film without negative anxiety if you know what I mean. I had such a marvellous time doing it that I didn't want to stop shooting. It never happened to me that I didn't look forward to the end of a shoot. I dreaded the thought that it was going to be over. I would have liked to just go on and on shooting."

Sounds exciting.

"Yes. And it never happened to me before. I was deeply depressed after it was over. I lived in a world of illusion that I created on the set and I was thrown back to horrible reality." (laughter)

Then the editing.

"Yes. Editing is loving. I love editing. In the winter there's nothing more gratifying than sitting in the cutting room and editing your film."

*Why did you choose **Agency** for your next film?*

"Various reasons. I wanted to work with Paul Gottlieb again. I liked the concept of the book. And it's a commercial treatment of a major theme that I'm interested in."

*I understand you're starting to shoot **Agency** this fall.*

"Well I'd better. Because I'm already broke." (laughter) □

GEORGE KACZENDER'S FILMOGRAPHY

Feature Films

1977	In Praise of Older Women
1972-73	U-Turn
1969	Don't Let The Angels Fall

Half Hour Dramatized Shorts

1971	Brown Wolf
1967	Little White Crimes
1966	The World of Three
1966	The Game
1965	You're No Good
1964	Phoebe

Documentaries

1976	It Happened to Me
1975	Women Want...
1975	Ontario Election '75
1975	Colonel By's Peacable Waterway
1975	Up to Standard
1974	They Don't Build Them Like They Used To
1967	Sabre and Foil
1967	Track a Shadow
1963	City Scene
1963	La Femme des Reves
1962	Ballerina
1962	Nahanni

Educational Films

1971	The Story of a Peanut Butter Sandwich
1970	A Pair of Blue Jeans
1970	Almost Anyone Can Build a House
1970	Newton
1969	Marxism
1969	Freud