

# Kotcheff and Lanctôt on Kravitz

—interviewed by Kiss/Koller/Kirshenbaum

—edited by Á. Ibrányi-Kiss and Laurinda Hartt

## Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz

Directed by Ted Kotcheff. Produced by John Kemény. Screenplay by Mordecai Richler, based on his novel. Adaptation by Lionel Chetwynd. Executive Producer: Gerald Schneider. Director of Photography: Brian West, B.S.C. Production Designer: Anne Pritchard. Film Editor: Thom Noble. Music Supervision: Stanley Myers, Standard Music Ltd. An International Cinemedia Center Ltd. production in co-operation with the Canadian Film Development Corporation, Welco United Canada Ltd., Famous Players Ltd., and Astral Bellevue-Pathé Ltd. Canadian Distribution: Astral Films Ltd. Cast: Richard Dreyfuss as Duddy; Micheline Lanctôt as Yvette; Jack Warden as Max; Randy Quaid as Virgil; Joseph Wiseman as Uncle Benjy; Denholm Elliott as Peter John Friar; Henry Ramer as Dingleman; Joe Silver as Farber; Zvee Scooler as Grandfather; Robert Goodier as Calder.

**So much of the film's strength depends on Duddy alone, and Dreyfuss did a marvelous job of portraying the two very conflicting sides of that character . . .**

**Kotcheff:** It was something Rick and I discussed a great deal, about where we were going to make him sympathetic and where we were really going to make him coarse, since the whole thing was based on this counterpoising of two elements. It takes a lot of courage for an actor to do that. Even when most actors say, "Yeah, yeah, he is really nasty here", at the last second they always sweeten that moment to engage the sympathy of the audience. We had a lot of integrity about attacking that. I would say to Rick, "Look, this scene has really got to be nasty. You've got to see him for what he is."

Remember that scene right after the bar-mitzvah film when Duddy, Yvette and Peter John Friar have a celebration? Duddy's drinking champagne and he kisses Yvette, and it's really a nasty, licking, wet kiss and he's all over her. Rick did it with an uncompromising quality which I liked. It was a delicate balance to maintain all the time. We didn't want it to fall one way or another.

But so much of the film is also the moral wrestling that goes on between Duddy and Yvette. In the book, you can ignore Yvette. But in the film she is *there*. I thought Yvette's character was much more interesting in the picture. Yvette is sketchily conceived and drawn in the book. Her whole development from a simple backwoods French-Canadian farm girl into a complicated, sophisticated person is one of the strands in the development of the film.

**Did you give it more body, or was that Micheline's doing?**

**Lanctôt:** Ted gave it more body — I gave it the physical body, but he gave it the importance.

**Were you very excited about doing that role?**

**Lanctôt:** Oh yes! I was excited about the whole thing even before I read it. I hadn't read *Duddy* — I'd read *St. Urbain's Horseman* and *Cocksure*. When they contracted me originally, I said, "Even if it's a walk-through I'll do it." Knowing Ted's reputation and having read Mordecai's work, I just thought it was going to be a very amazing film. The part was a great challenge because Yvette was under-written — it was really starting from scratch. We had to give her a very definite substance which wasn't in either the book or the script. That was great.

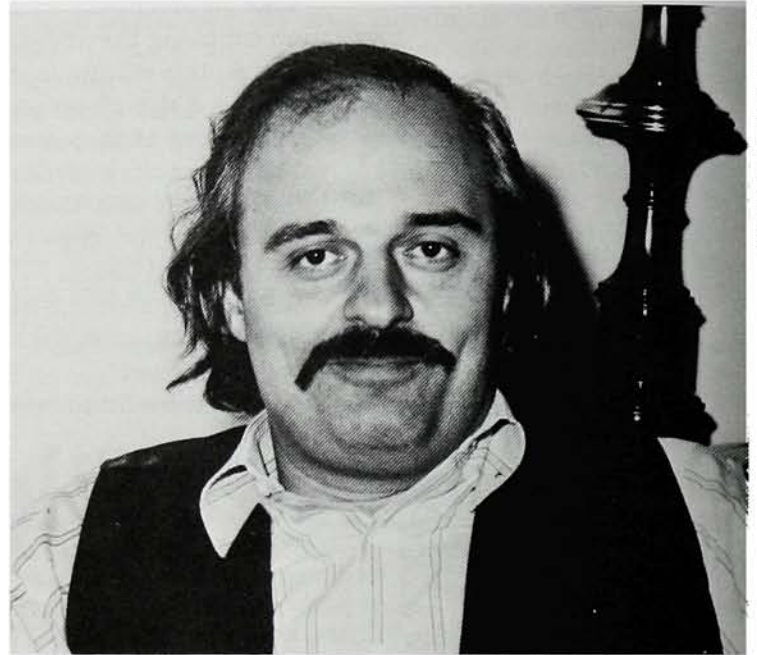


Photo: Stephen Chesley

**Physically, I don't know how you managed the role since you're such a beautiful woman and Yvette is not . . . that physically appealing (laughter) . . .**

**Lanctôt:** Mind you, the whole physical style of the late 40's period is not very appealing. For anybody.

**Kotcheff:** But Yvette's supposed to be a farm horse! Here's Duddy, flashing and sparkling and ideas — but *she's* laying all the foundation work. I think that one thing Micheline brought to the role was the sense that Yvette also wants that land. That was terrific. She has a French Canadian peasant materialism about that land. It's not just his dream, Yvette's a dray-horse and Duddy's riding her . . .

**Lanctôt:** It's the sort of part which appeals to me — she's second line to the main character and she's not glamorous and she's basically a slightly boring character. I found her fascinating to do . . .

**Kotcheff:** It would be wrong if she were a glamour puss. The point is also that Duddy feels ugly, unwanted, disregarded, unimportant . . . He couldn't have a beautiful woman. He feels at home with a plain woman . . .

**Lanctôt:** She's just a mere chambermaid. She's not really attractive to anybody but him because she serves him. She serves his interests. I'd much rather sacrifice glamour for reality. And this was one place where that really applied. Glamorous parts are always tricky — you fall into all sorts of artifacts and tricks and it's very easy . . .

**Do you wish people would stop comparing the film to the book? It's obviously inevitable, but the film should work without it . . .**

**Kotcheff:** No . . . I don't mind. The only thing is, it's hard for people who've read the book first to judge the film . . . You know what I mean? If you read the book a few days before seeing the film, I don't think you can judge the film properly

because it will be like an illustrated version of the book. Whether the film works independently of the book is then problematical for most people. But I don't mind people comparing it to the book.

**Was it your intention to film the entire novel?**

**Kotcheff:** A good part of it. Actually, I don't think there's much missing in many ways. Of things that I shot and subsequently cut, there are one or two things I'm ambivalent about. There's one very very funny scene at the beginning where Duddy's writing his final exams at Fletcher's Field High School and he's cheating. What he's done is — he's got all the answers written on his arm. All the studious people are writing and Duddy Kravitz is sitting there bored. Finally, the teacher turns away and Duddy undoes his shirt and copies it all down. He's copying at a furious rate and some other teacher sees him and charges towards him. As the teacher charges towards him, Duddy starts licking his whole forearm. By the time the teacher arrives, Duddy's licked off all the writing! The teacher grabs Duddy's arm and looks and sees absolutely nothing there except this blue smear. And then you have the famous line when the teacher looks down and says, "You'll go far Kravitz, you'll go far." (laughter) Rick was so funny in that scene! He did it marvellously! That's the only scene I'm a bit ambivalent about having excised. Otherwise, I wanted the picture to have a kind of staccato, jerky energy about it. You know, a kind of mirror of the febrile pace of Duddy Kravitz's life.

**Richler must be very happy seeing his novel brought to screen so beautifully even with those cuts.**

**Kotcheff:** He is. Yes. Mordecai shared my ambivalence about the schoolroom scene. He was sorry to see that go. And the only other scene he regretted being cut was the scene where Duddy reads Uncle Benjy's letter by the lake. It happens after he's had his nervous breakdown and Yvette has taken him back and he's living up at her place in Ste. Agathe, slowly reconstituting himself. That was one of the first scenes I cut

and the reason I cut it was because in the letter there's an overt statement of the theme. In the letter, Uncle Benjy says, "There are two sides to you Duddy. There's the behemoth — the nasty, opportunistic Duddy Kravitz that I saw — and there's the gentle intelligent boy that your grandfather saw, bless him. But you're becoming a man now, and you have to choose which one you're going to be." And I hate those kind of things in a picture, where you state the theme. To me, the whole theme is implicit in the structure of the film: the way cheek to jowl there's always a counterpoising of the coarse, vulgar Duddy with the other side of Duddy's makeup. The structure of the film always keeps a perilous balance between these two elements. Somehow, ten minutes to the end, to come right out and say, "There are two sides . . ." — that's what I'd been trying to do through the whole picture! So I thought the scene was unnecessary.

**How much of your initial plan of bringing the book to the screen was dictated by commercial considerations? Very unfair question . . .**

**Kotcheff:** Yes. Impossible. (laughter) Well, I don't function that way. I like to make my films entertaining and funny. I cannot stand solemn films. I don't like humourless people and I don't like humourless films. I like people with a sense of irony and I like films with a sense of irony . . . So I don't think about commercial considerations very much. I make a film that pleases me and hopefully it pleases other people. That's the only way I can make films. I don't think anybody can court financial success directly anymore, anyway. *The Great Gatsby* is the first film recently that's tried to court financial success directly, and we'll see now whether it can do it or not.

**"Duddy" has very high on-screen values. We were talking about this after the screening and somebody had guessed the budget to be over \$2,000,000. Yet it was actually closer to \$800,000.**

**Kotcheff:** I agree — that had a lot to do with the fact that executive producer Gerry Schneider (he was the private finan-



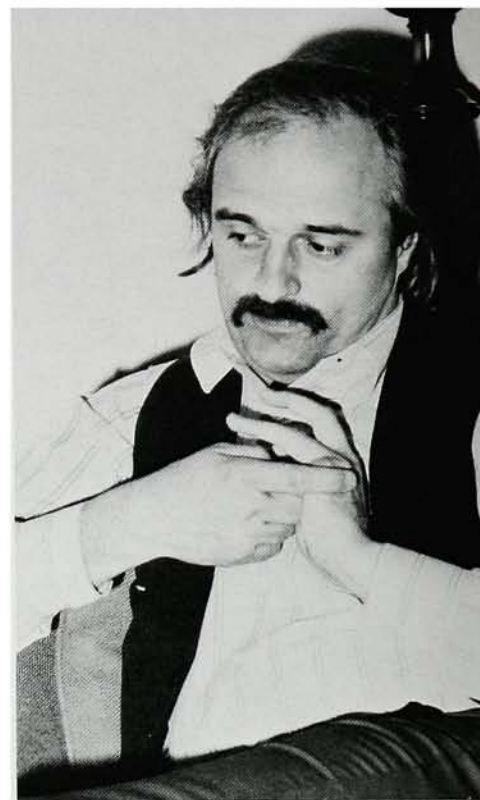


Photo: Stephen Chesley

cier) bankrolled the money from his own pocket. And, aside from that, he did a tremendous amount of work rounding up members of the Jewish community in Montreal to be extras. He organized buses, and when the shooting was held up he'd take people out to dinner . . . That's the kind of money he spent.

**Where's your base of operations right now? England?**

**Kotcheff:** Nowhere right now.

**You're just floating around . . . Do you consider yourself Canadian?**

**Kotcheff:** Yes.

**How do you feel as a Canadian working "in exile" most of the time — self-imposed or otherwise?**

**Kotcheff:** People seem to forget, conveniently, that in 1957 when Arthur Hiller, Norman Jewison, myself . . . and all those people left, it wasn't some act of betrayal — turning our backs on "little provincial Canada". We all wanted to be film directors and there was no film industry here. It wasn't dreamed of; it wasn't even a gleam in anybody's eye in 1957. We didn't want to wait around to be 95 before we directed our first film! We were full of burning aspirations and so we were forced to go abroad. Some went to Hollywood — Norman and Arthur — . . . others went to London like myself. Originally a lot of us thought we were going for a fairly short time . . . but we stayed longer and there seemed to be little reason to come back if you wanted to work in films.

So some of us have been away for a long time. I feel very prickly on the situation because people keep saying, "You're not a Canadian." I get furious. Because in effect what they're saying is, there's no such thing as a Canadian temperament, a Canadian personality — that there's nothing Canadian except geography: "You are now standing on this piece of ice, therefore you are a Canadian." But to be born here, raised

here, to have had your sensibilities shaped here, that's *vernicht!* As soon as you step across the border you're American!

I saw an interview — in your magazine as a matter of fact — with Don Shebib. It angered me. Someone asked him what Canadian films he admired and he mentioned two or three. And they asked him, "What did you think of Daryl Duke's *Pay Day*? — which to me is a terrific film, and something of which all Canadians should be proud. He said, "Well, that's not a Canadian film, is it? He's not a Canadian anymore, is he?" He's not a *Canadian*? Well, what is he? He's only gone to America for three years!

In effect, what you're saying is that this country has a real identity problem: they look like Americans, they talk like Americans, they dress like Americans, they read American magazines, they drive American cars, they watch American television. So what are they? "They're north of the 49th parallel." And that's when you become a Canadian . . . "What's the distinguishing characteristics of a Canadian?" "That he has no distinguishing characteristics." I keep *fighting* those notions. I think there *is* a Canadian quality and that I'm a Canadian and that we have to find out what it is. But we can't just say, "As soon as you leave this country, you're not a Canadian."

Everybody says, "Norman Jewison? No, he's not a Canadian. He's an American." But as soon as they go abroad they say, "Hey! Did you know Norman Jewison was a Canadian?" There are some people with this ambivalence about the people who leave . . . I think there is the dawning of something different from Americans — I think we *are* different from Americans. Americans are utterly plasticized, they're living in some horrible 21st century utopia . . . But I think Canadians are at a point where they're going to diverge from the American nationality. They're at a crucial point. They are similar now, but I think there's a divergence coming up. I've got a feeling. I may be wrong. ●

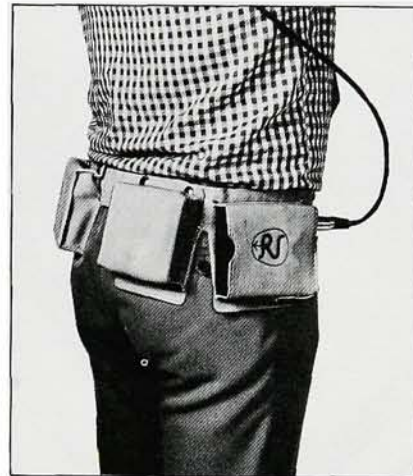
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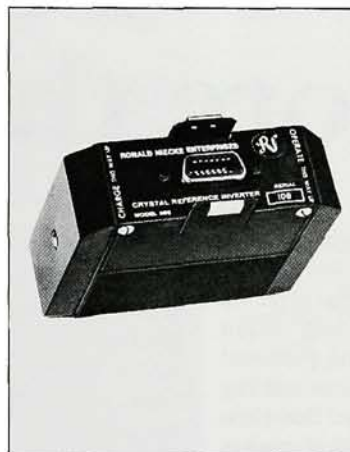
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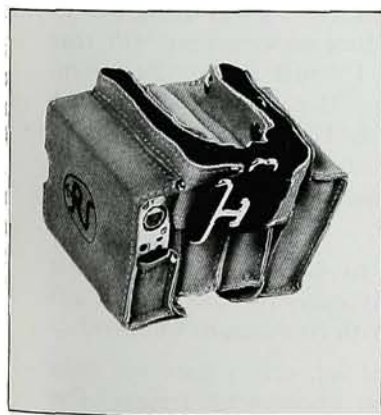
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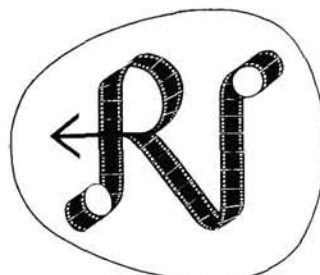
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