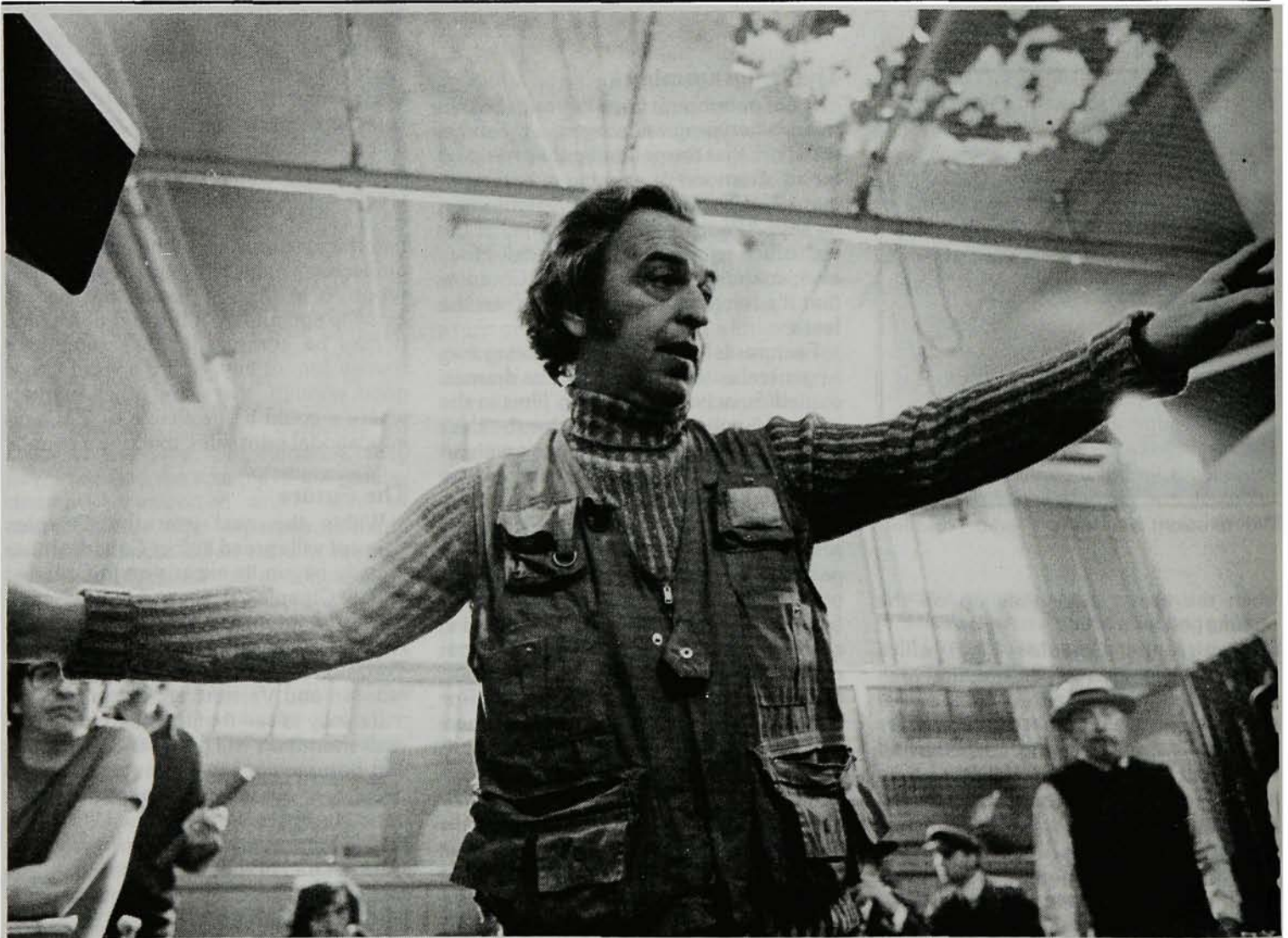


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# jan kadar

by nicholas pasquariello

For Czech director Jan Kadar, the making of *Lies My Father Told Me* proved to be a mixed blessing. Today, his comments are especially pertinent as the film industry measures the distance it has come since 1974, and questions the direction in which it is headed.



In the limelight, director Jan Kadar on set with *Lies My Father Told Me*.

To most North American cinephiles the name Jan Kadar is probably synonymous with one feature film, **The Shop on Main Street** (1965), which won the American Academy Award for Best Foreign Film of that year. **The Shop on Main Street** — which Kadar co-directed with Elmar Klos — heralded a veritable renaissance in the Czechoslovak film industry, accompanied as it was during the 1960's, by an outpouring of fresh and invigorating feature films by directors such as Jan Nemeč, Milos Forman, and Ivan Passer.

With the fall of the Dubček regime in the late 60's, many prominent Czech directors — among them Kadar, Forman, Passer — finding working conditions in their home country intolerable, emigrated to the West.

Jan Kadar, at first, went only across the Czech border to Vienna. While there he received an offer to direct his first North American feature, **Angel Levine** (1970), an offer, he later described, as one he could not refuse. For a brief time, he was commuting between New York and Czechoslovakia, to complete **Adrift** (his last Czech feature), whose shooting had been interrupted by the Soviet invasion of '68.

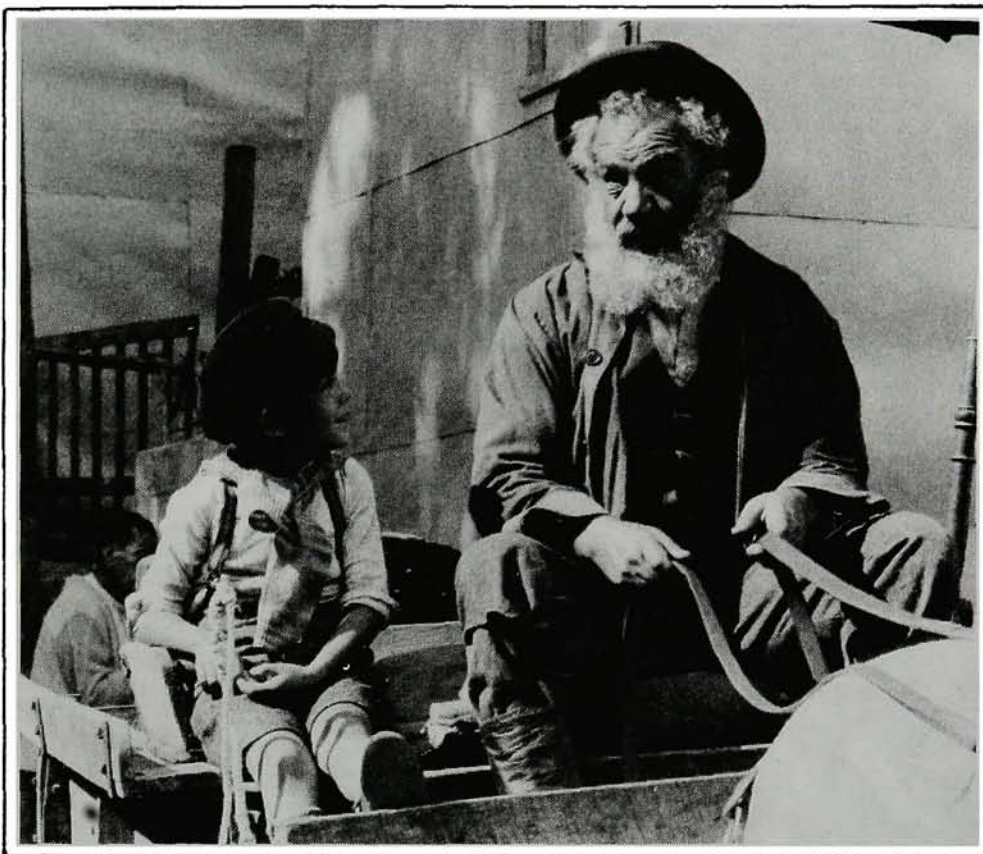
From 1973 through 1979, Kadar directed five TV movies for non-commercial and commercial networks in the U.S. and Canada. As with his earlier pictures, these generally dealt with themes of human rights — notably, freedom of conscience in a hostile and often brutal society (**The Case Against Milligan**); and the sane man/woman in an insane society (**The Other Side of Hell**).

For Kadar, it was very important that he be able to identify with the subject matter — if not the main characters — of his films. At one point, he said:

*"The main problem is that you shouldn't make such a compromise that you always feel that you're doing something you don't want to do, or which you cannot identify with, or which you feel you cannot be responsible for."*

In a number of Jan Kadar's pictures one can readily see his reasons for identifying with their subject matter, based on two important facts of his life: his Jewish background, and his incarceration in a concentration camp during the war. These subjects immediately form the basis of **Lies My Father Told Me**, and **The Shop on Main Street**, respectively.

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Young David (Jeffrey Lynas) with his two best friends in the world: Zaida (Yossi Yadin) — his idol — and Ferdeleh, the horse (rump right)

**Mendelstam's Witness** is based on the biography of the Russian Jewish poet.

An amount of controversy has surrounded the making of **Lies My Father Told Me**, which was shot in Montreal in '73 and '74. Questions such as the following remain less than fully answered: the picture went overbudget by approximately \$300,000 (about 30%). Why? Whose fault was it? What role did the Canadian Film Development Corporation (which helped finance **Lies**) play in the problems and/or their solution? How difficult (or easy) is it for foreign directors (especially of non-Commonwealth countries) to work in Canada? In the course of this interview Kadar discussed some of these questions.

A more personal note. I knew Jan Kadar *en passant*, while I was associated with the American Film Institute in Beverly Hills, California. He was Filmmaker-in-Residence there from 1975 until his sad and untimely death last year. When one thinks of meeting and talking with Kadar, comparisons with his films seem inevitable. Words like: sentimental, jovial, temperamental (and willing to admit it), always smiling (every production still from **Lies** that I've seen, shows him smiling, immensely enjoying his work). He always seemed to have a cigarette dangling from his lips, or in his hand, and rarely seemed



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A family circle, but not always happy — for David and his father cannot see eye-to-eye on anything

very relaxed. Jan Kadar displayed an amount of Old World charm, humility, and perhaps even, naïveté, rarely if ever found among film directors on this side of the Atlantic.

**NP:** *Would it be correct to describe **Lies My Father Told Me** as a realistic portrayal of events?*

**JK:** The picture is not realistic because it is a childhood filtered through memory, and does not present it as it really was. The characters are not realistic. The characters are also filtered through remembrance, therefore they sometimes have cartoon-like qualities.

In **Lies**, there are basically two philosophies: the naïve philosophy of the old man, and the very realistic view of life of the father.

**NP:** *Well, the father is not at all close to his son.*

**JK:** He is not close to the son, but he is not far. I did not want to create a monster for the father. I know that Ted Allen (screenwriter on **Lies**) was very influenced by his relationship with his own father.

And he didn't like his father at all. But I tried to soften the whole thing because I'm trying to understand the father; I do not hate him.

The father is basically a dreamer, the old man is also a dreamer on his own, and a believer. The Marxist is a dreamer and a believer on his own. It's interesting that these two extremes can communicate very well though they are at different points on the political spectrum. But both of them had some kind of belief.

**NP:** *How did you work with Ted Allen, your screenwriter on **Lies**?*

**JK:** Very well. The relationship between the writer and the director on a picture depends on the personalities, and also on what kind of picture it is, and what kind of director it is. Some directors work alone on their scripts, some directors take scripts and film them as is.

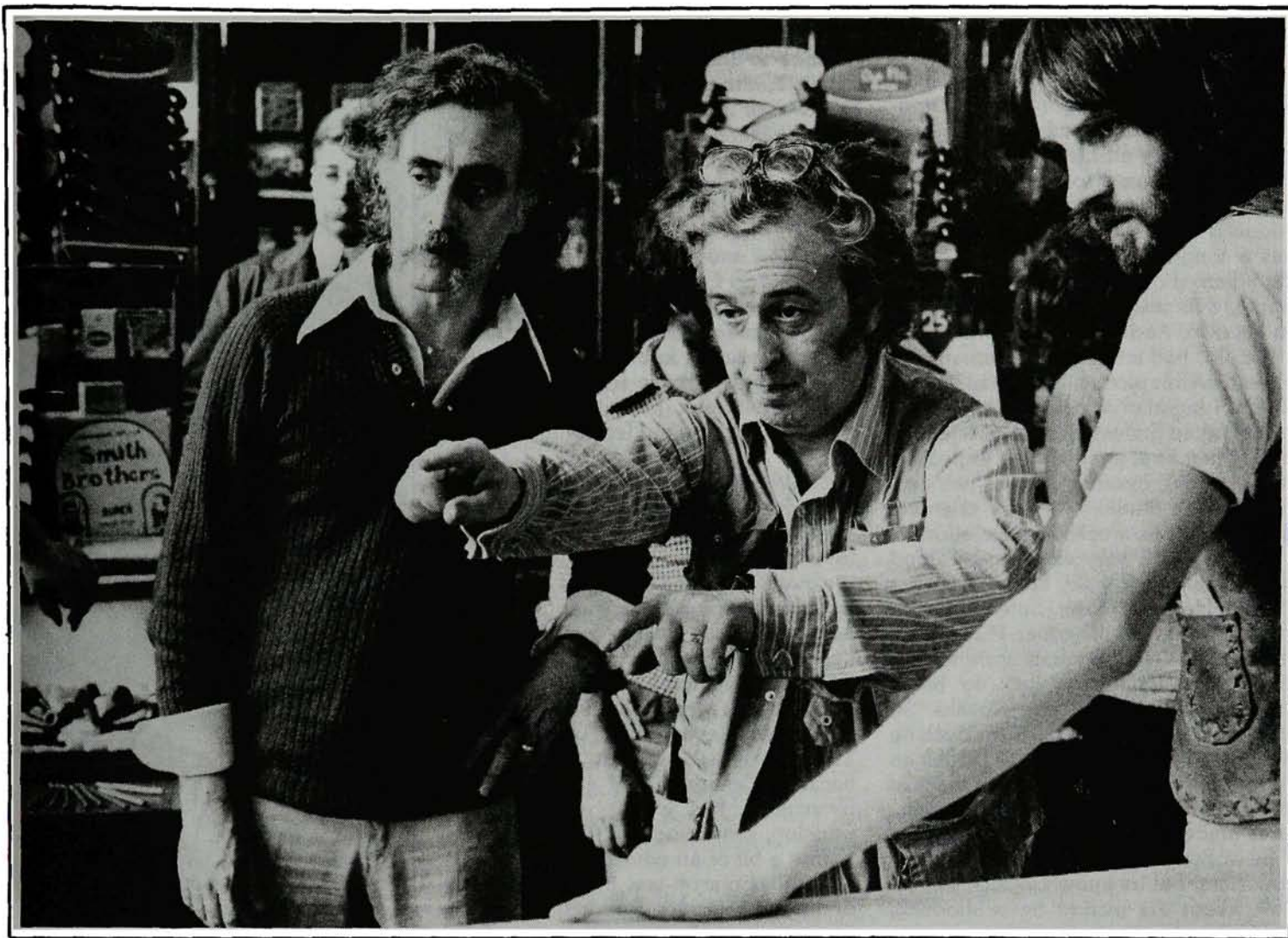
One day I got from Mr. Gulkin from Canada, a script which Ted Allen had written as an adaptation of his original story. And I read this script and I liked certain basic ideas — but not everything that was written in the script. This was in

'72. I liked the basic feeling of the whole thing. He wrote, with my cooperation, basically a new script. It would be hard to recognize what exactly remained from the old script.

The material of the original script, which Gulkin presented to me, was based on Ted Allen's experiences as a child and his relationship with his grandfather. I told him that I liked the basic idea and the feeling of the material, but that I couldn't make a picture about him and grandfather... I *could* make a picture about a grandfather and a little boy, about a family, which would be everybody's experience, with which I could identify myself.

The basic conception of Allen's original script that inspired me was the idea that finally, in the end, everything which is beautiful is destroyed. The little boy has his own world which he likes so much. The first enemy of this world is the father. The second enemy is Mrs. Tannenbaum. Then the third enemy which is going against the boy is the coming of the new baby.

The little boy is living in his own world



No question of direction for Jan Kadar, working it out on location with Howard Ryshpan (left)

with his grandfather and the horse. The father, who hates this way of life, would like to get out of the ghetto. With his inventions he hopes to make it. Mrs. Tannenbaum hates the smell of the horse... But the little boy and his grandfather overcome all of these obstacles. But then the new baby is born. That's overcome, too. Then the society is getting involved when the official comes and tells them to close the stable and get rid of the horse. And they overcome even this obstacle. But then the old man is dying. Dies.

This kind of structuring and philosophy was not basically in the original story. But there has to be some kind of drama. This approach is realistic in its outlook, but is not completely realistic in its details, or the characters' feelings.

The question is: while not being realistic can you sometimes be much more truthful?

**NP:** Do you storyboard your pictures?

**JK:** No. For my first picture I prepared storyboards. It doesn't mean that I'm not making the necessary preparation, but in

a different way. I don't need to make a storyboard because I see it. I'm not a very good drawer myself. I make sketches and breakdowns, and the like; especially from the point of view of the editing. And I make some preparation which is strictly for me, done before I go on the set, certainly...

You have to shoot for the editing. Let's say you are editing in the camera. You are not editing cuts, you are editing composition of the sequence; you prepare for yourself sufficient material for the editing. It means that you could change the pace of the whole thing as written, and not face a problem with coverage.

I make some sketches that relate to the line script: from where and up to where you are shooting; how you are covering it, how the medium shot and close-up, and the reverse shot all relate to one another. I make these notes in order to remember — *not* to shoot according to them. In other words, I'm making these preparations just to make up my mind. And the person with whom I most often discuss these notes is the script supervisor. At the beginning of the day we discuss

what we shall shoot that day.

Usually, if you are well-prepared, you don't need a script on the set. You have in your eyes the whole sequence anyway. At the beginning of the setting up of a new sequence I might refer to my notes. But once it is in progress you just continue the next day. I do my preparation each evening during a production. That cannot be kept a secret, so I have to tell everything to the script supervisor, to my first assistant (director), and to the cameraman.

In a sequence such as the birth in *Lies* the cameraman had to know exactly what we would shoot and how the whole thing was conceived; because he had to make his plan. He had to know what we were trying to achieve...

I like to select the locations with the cameraman, myself. For the cameraman, the period of the preparation is very important. When I first came here (to North America) I was surprised that the cameraman has so little time to prepare a picture. In Czechoslovakia, it was usual for the cameraman to be involved in the

preparation for the picture two months before shooting began.

**NP:** *How did you begin your relationship with Paul Van Der Linden (director of photography on *Lies*)?*

**JK:** When I came to Canada, I didn't know anybody, and the producer introduced me to several cameramen. Paul was a long-time assistant to two good Canadian d.o.p.s (directors of photography); he also had made one picture on his own. And I liked his work.

We also had another cameraman who worked on this picture, Mr. Arpad Makay. He's a Hungarian cameraman who came to the United States in the fifties. I had the feeling that Paul needed help, especially in the studio, because he was not very used to the studio, but very talented. Basically, it was a collaborative effort.

Makay was a very experienced good cameraman in Hungary before and after the war. He came to the United States, in the fifties, before the other Hungarians came (after the Hungarian uprising). He didn't have quite the luck to break through as Zsigmond and Kovaks. So *Lies* is the first picture, here, in which he shows that he is a very good craftsman and a good cameraman. He shot many of the more distinguished Hungarian pictures made before and after the war.

In working with the cameraman, it is important that he know as much as possible about the picture he is shooting, because he has to work with his means to achieve the main goal of the whole picture. He has to prepare himself the same way as the director prepares himself with this actors. The cameraman is not someone who is just coming on a set merely to set up the lights. He has to have his own conception.

Look, for instance, at the ideal cooperation that exists between Nykvist and Bergman. They don't even need to speak to each other, they know each other so well. In Prague, for instance, it was quite possible that you would work with certain cameramen regularly. In my whole career I used basically three cameramen, most of my pictures were done with two of them. *Shop On Main Street* and *Adrift* were shot by the same cameraman. *The Kidnapping* and *The Defendant* were shot by the same cameraman.

I prefer to work with the same crew, with the same art director, with the same cameraman, and with the same assistant director.

**NP:** *Isn't it very hard for you to do that now?*

**JK:** It's hard for anyone to do that here because you have a completely different setting. You know, the people there

[Czechoslovakia] were on monthly salaries so that they could survive, for instance, if they had to wait for a picture for two or three months. They could afford it. Here, it is different: you need to be in a certain position where you can afford to keep your people on salary from film to film; certainly a rarity.

**NP:** *How much preparation time did you have on *Lies* with the cameraman?*

**JK:** When I came to Montreal, we selected the locations, such as the courtyard. The cameraman knew about them. He then started to make tests there. It was many weeks later (probably four or five) that the shooting of *Lies* commenced.

**NP:** *Why did *Lies* go overbudget?*

**JK:** First of all, the producer made up an 'ideal' budget which made no allowance for contingencies. The producer made the budget with the hope that everything would run completely smoothly. Right away, making an ideal budget is a mistake because nothing is going ideally. Here [U.S.], for instance, when a studio makes a budget it's a very well structured budget, and basically, everything is under control. This is not a complaint, it is a fact; because Canada is not a place where filmmaking has a big and longtime tradition, producing any feature there is always a bit of an adventure.

Another reason was the inexperience of the producer. Mr. Bedrich, who was a very good production manager in Czechoslovakia, came to Canada to try to become a producer. It was a very different thing to be a production manager, and then to be a producer here; because it's a different task. The other producer, Mr. Gulkin, with *Lies My Father Told Me*, was making his first picture. He can become a producer, but one has to pay one's dues. But I'm not blaming them for it; but I just refuse something else: that they should blame me. Everybody makes mistakes. In retrospect, I think *Lies* could have cost less to make, between \$800,000 and \$900,000. They're now claiming it went to \$1.1 and \$1.2 million. It would have cost less to make if the whole thing had been executed by the producer on a really professional level, it had been well organized, and we hadn't had to wait a year to finish it. The producers wrote to me saying that *Lies* had to be edited by a Canadian editor. I complained, saying that I would like to have my editor on the picture — whether or not we had a Canadian editor, and whether or not it made sense. Under these conditions, one should not be surprised that things were getting more expensive. I did finally achieve everything that I wanted in terms of the final editing.

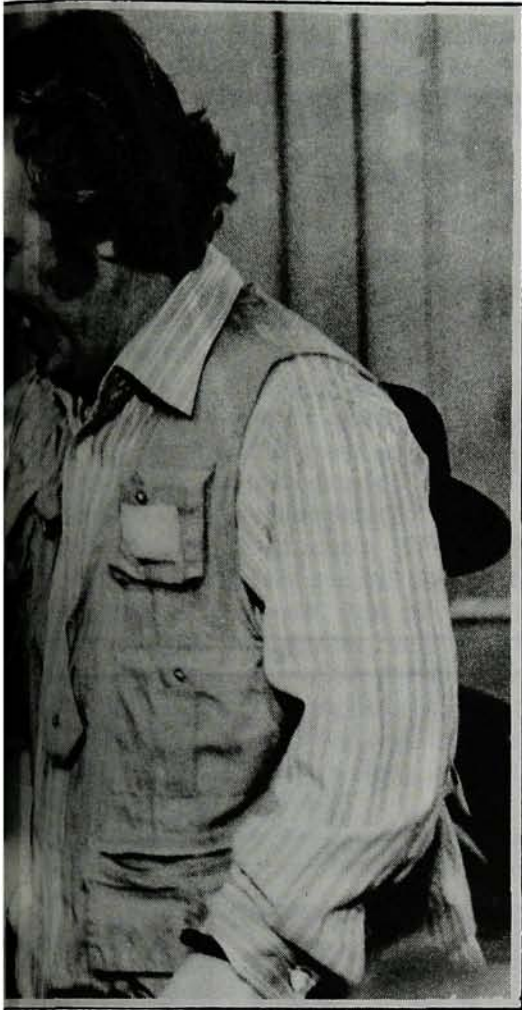


Actor Len Birman sharing a joke with director Jan Kadar.

The main problem was that *Lies* should have had a more realistic budget. Whatever amount the picture went over budget represented the dues this new producer was paying due to his lack of experience. I also made my mistakes — a lot of minor things — some sequences were better prepared, some less so. But not more than in any of my other pictures. 95 percent of what I shot is in the picture. If I had made mistakes in this area of the production, then it would have been costly. To a minor degree everyone contributed to *Lies* going overbudget. I was very upset by what I heard in Canada: that I was entirely responsible for *Lies* going overbudget. That, I refuse to accept.

**NP:** *I understand that you had some disagreements, specifically with the Canadian Film Development Corporation (CFDC)?*

**JK:** It is understandable why some of these disagreements happen. Canada is developing its own film industry, and trying very hard to do it. And doing it under quite difficult conditions, namely, the pressure from the American competi-



tion. And the CFDC, which is set up for helping the Canadian film industry, intends to give to Canadians the greatest opportunities to work. That is absolutely fair... I agreed with it, and I had, basically, a full Canadian crew, and a good crew. In the beginning, certainly, they had differing kinds of experience, so some were better, some were less-experienced. During the making of the picture it became a really good crew. But there were certain moments, especially in terms of the editing, the music and the mixing, when I tried to get the best possible conditions — as anybody would — for the finishing of the picture; and here we had our disagreement. I didn't refuse to use Canadian talents, not at all. I tried to get certain people whom I felt more confident working with. And we did have some disagreement which, finally, we were able to resolve.

So, I have no special complaints, only one. That when the picture was in trouble, the Canadian Film Development Corporation didn't really give me the opportunity to speak about it. For what reason I don't know.

But look, I am not opposed to the rules of the Canadian Film Corporation, that's alright. But sometimes situations and problems have to be solved in a flexible way. But they didn't bother me. I would rather they had bothered me than allow to happen what happened. But, at least, they did not prevent me from doing what I felt was necessary to do.

If the picture hadn't been finished or hadn't come to some kind of end result, then maybe all of these disagreements and confrontations would have more importance. When the end is good everything is good.

**NP:** *Did you know this going into the picture?*

**JK:** I should have known it, and perhaps I made a mistake in not being tougher in asking for a more secure budget. It would not have made any sense anyway because there was no money there.

Weather conditions also played a role: we couldn't catch the winter sequences in '73, and we had to finish it in '74.

**NP:** *Was it a compromise for you to direct *Lies*?*

**JK:** No. I still have the same dreams and ideals as before — projects which I would like to do... really — and *Lies* came about as a project which I never knew about.

**NP:** *Did it fulfill some of those dreams?*

**JK:** No. The dreams are something else. I have talked about them before, many times, and I have promised myself that I won't speak about them anymore until they become more of a reality. If I have to speak very frankly, you cannot wait for dreams, you have to work. And you have to choose a subject with which you can identify yourself in the best way. I am glad that I did this picture and not something else.

**NP:** *You are proud of it.*

**JK:** Be careful with this word of being proud or not proud. I would rather say I feel comfortable with *Lies*.

Look, in this entire business, when the technique is so complicated, when it costs so much money... it has to be this way. The main problem is that you shouldn't make such a compromise that you always feel that you're doing something you don't want to do, or which you cannot identify with, or which you feel you cannot be responsible for.

What I will try to do in the future is to think twice before I commit myself to a project. The built-in failure can most often be in the property that you are picking up, and in the subject and content that you are working with.

**NP:** *Last year didn't you also direct a film for television for CBC-Toronto?*

**JK:** Yes.

**NP:** *Did you experience any production problems similar to those experienced on *Lies*?*

**JK:** No problems. It was the opposite experience. An unheard of thing happened. I was invited by Mr. John Hirsch of the CBC, to Toronto, to work on a project with them. There were logistical problems that prevented me from leaving New York. During our meeting Mr. Hirsch presented me with a script, and asked my advice about it. The script was scheduled to be directed by Mr. Joe MacGreevy, a very good and intelligent TV director on the staff of CBC. This one-hour special was about the Russian poet, Mendelstam, based on the biography by his wife.

I gave them whatever advice I could; because I had lived very close to this type of situation. I suggested that they cast Miss Kaminska [who had been in Kadar's *Shop On Main Street*] as Mrs. Mendelstam. Cut. A week later I received a call from Mr. MacGreevy and Mr. Hirsch. Mr. MacGreevy said: it is my opinion that you would be a better director for this project than I. Please, would you accept directing this piece with me as the producer?

It never happened to me on this continent before: 'I think you would be better for this project than I, and therefore please do it. I shall do everything that I can to help you do it well, as a producer.' This was when I went to CBC to do this picture [*Mendelstam's Witness*].

So, here you have two Canadian experiences: one not very happy, and the other one, really excellent. ■

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## Jan Kadar's North American Filmography

### Theatrical

1970 : *Angel Levine*

1975 : *Lies My Father Told Me*

### Television

1973 : *Blue Hotel* PBS-TV

1974 : *Mendelstam's Witness*

CBC-TV

1975 : *The Case Against Milligan*

CBS-TV News

1978 : *The Other Side of Hell*

NBC-TV

1979 : *Freedom Road-Part One*

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