

# FILMMAKER™

VOL 1, #4 SUMMER, 1993



DIRECTORS VLADIMIR SLAVICA, GORAN GAVIC, AND AMERICAN PLAYHOUSE'S LYNN HOLST AT CASTLE ILLIC IN PRAGUE

## DOLLARS, CZECHS AND RUBLES

Few people would pass up an opportunity to spend four days in a 17th century castle outside of Prague, regardless of who the co-habitants might be. That this opportunity was being billed as a "film workshop" bringing together American independent and East European filmmakers only made it more intriguing. Indeed, most of the 40-odd invitees arrived at this late-May gathering with little idea what was expected of them. But, it turned out, all that was required was curiosity and openness — both of which proved to be in great supply.

"The Film Workshop at Prague" was the brainchild of Kim Snyder, a New York-based producer who reps East European films in the United States. With support from the Soros Foundation's Open Society Fund, Kodak, and the Czech Ministry of Culture, Snyder set out to provide a forum for bringing together East European directors to address their shared problems in the post-Communist era, while also introducing them to American independent filmmakers since their principal exposure to the American industry tends to be to Hollywood product.

"It was important to me to stay away from the 'East-West' paradigm," says Snyder, "and instead to create a global dialogue so that the easterners would feel ushered into the international community of filmmakers, rather than continuing to promote the divide they've already felt for so many years. I also wanted to expose Americans to some of the talent here so they can get the same sense I've had in the last few years of the very sophisticated filmmaking that exists in this part of the world."

The first day's seminars focused primarily on the East Europeans — representing Hungary, Poland, Romania, Albania, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia, Estonia, Latvia, Ukraine and Russia — as they described their difficulties with financing films in newly privatized yet impoverished industries and their struggles to hold the attention of an audience that is deliriously saturating itself with mindless Hollywood fare. While the parallels to American independent filmmaking were commented on by the Americans, not until the next morning

when the first panel of American producers and directors was presented did many of the East Europeans fully understand how much the two groups have in common.

Moderating the panel, producer Peggy Rajski (*Used People, Little Man Tate, The Grifters*) led a discussion on the financing, distribution and marketing of American independent films. As directors Keith Gordon (*The Chocolate War, A Midnight Clear*), Christopher Munch (*The Hours and Times*) and Dan Weissman (*The Precious Legacy, Terezin Diary*), and producers Caroline Baron (Outlaw Productions) and Lynn Holst (American Playhouse) each talked about the intricate processes they go through to get their films made, the East Europeans suddenly become riveted, seeing for the first time what these Americans had to offer them. In a lively question and answer session, an electricity seemed to fill the room as the Americans also began to see what the East Europeans needed that they had to share.

"I had a lot of fears about the potential for there being no spark, or no relevance, or of the two worlds still being too far away from each other to have a dialogue," says Snyder. "But instead I saw East Europeans who had become exhausted from coping with problems suddenly becoming inspired — going back to their rooms and writing. And the Americans conveyed such a sense of giving and concern and wanting to participate that I felt very good about dispelling some of the myths about Americans."

For the next three days, through seminars, screenings, informal discussions, a sight-seeing tour, a barbecue and even a big multinational soccer game, many bonds were formed and much information was exchanged. "The most interesting thing," says Polish director Piotr Mikucki, "was that you face in America almost the same problems that we do, but you're more flexible in solving them. For example, we are not used to many sources of financing. We may have three or four but Caroline had 32 sources on one film. So it is encouraging because I see that it's possible to match 32 people's interests. I was also impressed by Dan Weissman's report on marketing *Terezin Diary* when he wrote hundreds of postcards to people who might be interested in seeing the film because he didn't have money for advertising. These are things that could be done in Poland."

For Ukrainian director Vadim Castelli, the most important thing "was not so much the information as the feel of what is called American independent filmmaking. This is very foreign to us. The idea that there exists such a powerful structure in the world outside of Hollywood is something that gives a lot of hope. If in the shark-filled waters of western filmmaking so many people manage to survive and be productive, this is important proof that one can survive in the less competitive post-communist situation."

As it becomes clear that under the communist system the role of the producer was quite different than in Western terms, the third morning's panel — featuring, along with Baron, Holst, and Rajski, Nancy Abraham of HBO/Hungary, Deborah Riesman — was

changed to a discussion of the many different functions of the "creative" producer. "It was very important for me to find out the real role of the producer," says Romanian director Radu Nicoara. "Our former relationship with the producer was aggressive. You had to fight to make a film and they had to fight with you not to make a film against the system. Never, never a friendly relationship. After the changes, the producers said, 'Sorry, we had to.' And now they are doing the same job, but they don't know anything more about the job. So it's a gap that has to be filled."

Some participants even experienced an evolution in their own self-image. "I've started regarding myself less as a film director with film director aspirations," says Castelli, "and more as a producer — starting to try on the clothes of the would-be organizer of a local or wider organization. An artist by definition is an individual, but what we've been discussing here is not so much how the individual can survive but how the artistry can survive which requires joined efforts."

Indeed, the Americans put a great deal of emphasis on encouraging their eastern counterparts to form a pan-East European organization, citing the Independent Feature Project and the American Independents in Berlin as examples of how American Independents have achieved an international profile. "I was somehow expecting," says Nicoara, "that we can work together with Americans. But I find out that after all we have to rely on our neighbors. The best part of this week was making strong contacts with other East Europeans."

For the Americans, there were surprises with the screening of each new East European film. "The best of this work," says Holst, "no matter how specific to time and place, does cross over because it's so expressive. I feel saturated with this depression and anxiety, but also with their passion to transform and their struggle to emerge from that condition. I was expecting more naturalistic, perhaps even more sentimental films. Instead, I was not prepared for the surrealism of the sensibility and the complexity of these films. They had this futuristic, gut-wrenching, humorous quality to them that on some level any citizen of the world can identify with."

"It has been wonderful," says Rajski, "not only to see really interesting films, but to be talking with people from places that are in chaos and to have some sense of what's going on in a personal way. This is the kind of gathering that gives me hope because you start to achieve a cross-pollination of cultures that brings tolerance and understanding of each other."

"When I get home to Kiev," says Castelli, "I'm going to tell my friends, 'Imagine a medieval castle where a whole team of different nationalities play soccer in the castle yard, shouting 'Pass!' in English.' It will seem very exotic to them."

-- Jennine Lanouette