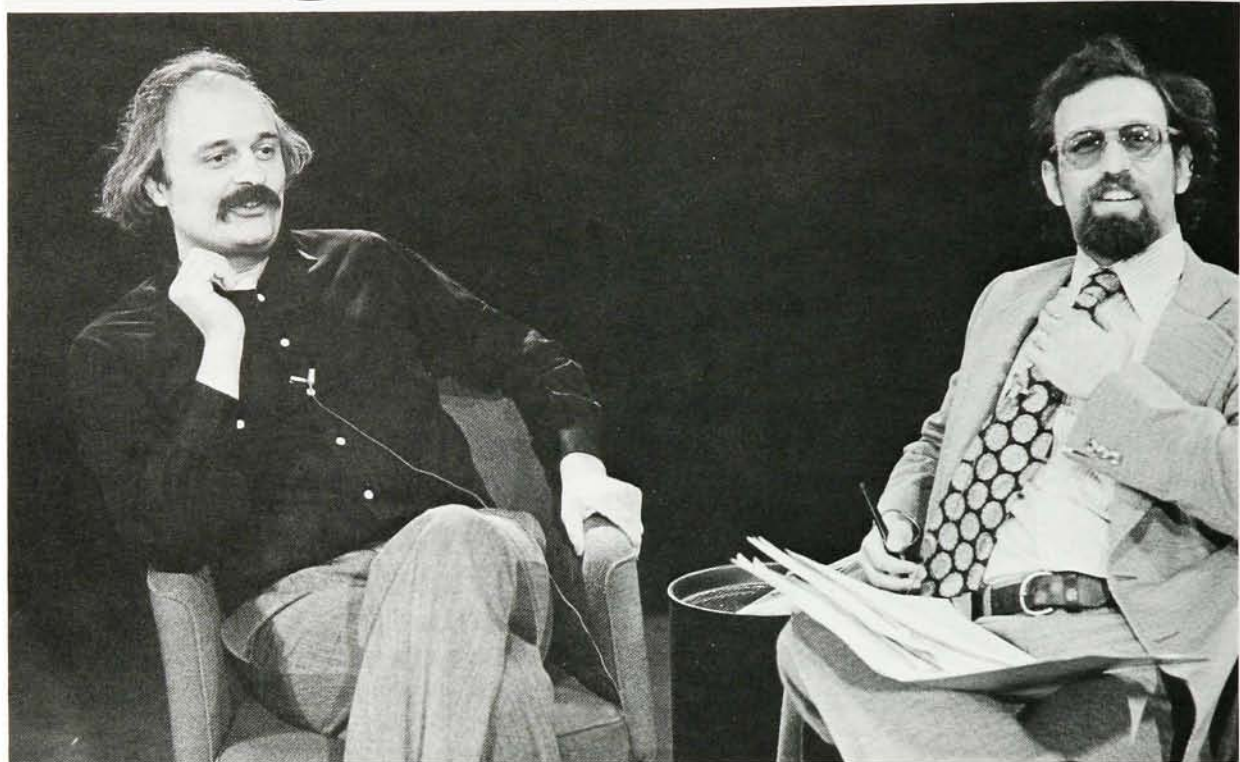


KOTCHEFF:



An interview by John Katz

*Following the enormous success of **The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz**, Director Ted Kotcheff returned to Canada for a few days last February to discuss his work with film students at York University. Kotcheff, an exiled Canadian who has directed stage and television plays in England and the U.S., and films in England, Tahiti, Australia, Israel and Canada often talks about returning home to live and work. The following interview is an edited transcript of a videotape interview conducted at York University on February 27, 1975.*

I would like to start off by asking you the stock question. How did you get started in film?

That would be a long answer to that question, and not a very simple one. I certainly didn't have any ambitions to be a director when I was at University. I studied English Literature at the University of Toronto and after I graduated I didn't know what I wanted to do and drifted around from one kind of job to another. At my father's instigation I went down to apply for a job at the CBC which was not on the air as yet; they were just opening up the television studio—this was in 1952 and my father felt that because I had studied English Literature at the University, that equipped me to be a television writer. I tried to disabuse him of that notion, but he kept nagging at me to go down and get a job.

So, I went down and was interviewed by Mavor Moore who was then the Program Director. I was a very callow lad, 21 years of age and he said to me, "Have you had any experience in radio?" I said, "No." He said, "Any experience in film?" I said, "No." He said, "Any experience in theatre?" I said I had directed a one-act play at University

College which never got on—it was cancelled at the dress rehearsal. Then he said, "What about television?" I said, "No, no" and I started to rise and move towards the door, picked up my coat and hat, and thought this was it. But he stopped me and said, "Would you like to learn?" I said, "Yeh, I'd like to learn." So he said, "Why don't you? I'll tell you what, I will give you a job as a stage hand with the CBC. Inevitably you'll pick up a lot from that vantage point and when the CBC expands we are going to draw from that pool of personnel. You are going to be one of the most experienced people in Canada; we are going to use you and you are going to have a chance to move up."

I thought, well, I've worked in the slaughter house slinging carcasses. I've worked for Goodyear Tire & Rubber, slinging rubber; I might as well sling scenery. So I took the job. I still had very little interest in pursuing a career in television, or acting. However, after a while, I began to watch other people directing and with all the youthful arrogance of 21, I said, "These guys are idiots, I can direct better than that, they don't know what they are doing", and slowly I shaped an interest in becoming a director. Then I went back to the University of Toronto where I had a director's course with Bob Gill, a marvelous director, but this was theatrical directing. I then studied acting, not to become an actor, but to know what the acting process was like from a director's point of view with a marvellous woman called Basya Hunter; she is still in Toronto. She was a terrific teacher; she taught a combination of Stanislavski and Michael Chekov. I really learned a lot in that period. Interestingly enough in that class there was Silvio Narizzano, who directed **Georgie Girl**; there was Bill Shatner whom you probably know; quite an interesting group of people. Finally, I did move up in the CBC and

became a floor manager and then I went to work for Sydney Newman, who was doing a documentary series. I wrote some documentaries for him and one day Sydney said to me, "You know, you really have talent as a director and I think you would be a very good director. You are being wasted here as a story director." I was editing scripts for him at that time.

He said, "Listen, I'm going to give you a chance, do this play, if it works, fine. I'll give you a contract. If it fails, you are fired."

I directed a half-hour play for Sydney and he seemed to like it because I then went on a yearly contract. So that's how it all came about. Inevitably, as Mavor Moore predicted, people who were there, all the stage hands, moved up in the CBC, directed, produced, and did all sorts of things, so I think it's a matter of chance sometimes.

Then you later had some dealings with Sydney Newman in England with ABC and BBC?

Yes, I went to England first and he followed me. Six months later he came onto the same drama series that I was directing as producer—**Armchair Theatre** for ABC Television in England. I was lucky to be in on the beginning stage of television in Canada and the early stages of television in Britain. It was all chaos. Very congenial for director anarchy. No one knew what they were doing. We were told, "Do what you like" and they didn't care how daring or unusual the program was. It wasn't like it is now, which is factory produced programs. I often say to people that the directors now who direct in tape never knew what directing in live television was like. No marijuana, no heroin gives you a high like doing a live television show. And it took you about 3 days to come down because you literally were conducting the show. That was an exciting time in England especially for Canadians. There was the apocryphal story that the best way to get a job in British television was to be a Canadian.

What we brought was a passion for television because all of us, like Silvio and myself, started in television as directors. We didn't come from the theatre with any theatrical considerations and we were trying to push the limitations of television as it existed, so that our camerawork was very mobile. A lot of the British directors at that time had approached television as in the early days of film, as photographed theatre. We had the idea that the camera was an integral part of the television drama and used the camera almost like a character moving to accentuate certain moments. That was what a lot of Canadian directors brought to English television.

*Then your first film in England was **Tiara Tahiti**, in 1962 with John Mills and James Mason. . . .*

I am always a little embarrassed about that film and I try to keep it secret if I can. It could have been a wonderful satire on the class situation in England. However, the producer and I didn't see it the same way; he saw it as more of a pantomime and he was the author of the script.

*Then you directed the follow-up to **Room At The Top** with **Life At the Top** starring Laurence Harvey in 1965. Your friend Mordecai Richler wrote the screenplay.*

That's right. I was very hesitant about doing a sequel to such a famous success as **Room At The Top**. No matter how good the sequel is people always look back at **Room At The Top**. So, inevitably you are going to suffer in comparison. I was very hesitant about doing it, but, in a curious way, of course, it links up. Mordecai and I shared a flat in London at the time and I asked him to write it.

*Do you see a relationship between Joe Lambton (the main character of **Life At The Top**) and Duddy Kravitz?*

It links up with Duddy Kravitz because Joe Lambton is another study in opportunism. I have always felt that it is a very common literary archetype, the rogue hustler, the opportunist who scrambles up the social ladder; there is a whole

American tradition of that kind of literary character. I think the failure of **Life At The Top** was that we saw it through Duddy Kravitz' eyes. Some people said the main character was quite English but I think there was a certain kind of North American slant in the way we looked at him. But certainly the two films are connected aside from the fact that Mordecai and I collaborated on both pictures.

In addition to having worked in Canada, you have also worked in England for a number of years and in Australia, Israel and the U.S. What do you see as the pros and cons of being a Canadian filmmaker working abroad?

Well, I had no choice when I started. I wanted to work in films. In 1957 when I left this country there was no activity here, and I wanted to be a film director and not restrict myself to television. I also wanted to work in theatre. That ultimately decided my choice in going to London rather than the United States because in London you have the three: television, film and theatre, all in one city. But there was no Canadian Film Development Corporation then. And as far as theatre goes, I think Canadians generally, at that time, thought that was better looked after by English directors. As one of my Canadian director friends said, "Oh, to be in England now that England's here." We realized that there was no chance here and that we had to go abroad. But, of course, it took longer for the things we wanted to do. It took me about 3 years to start directing in the British Theatre and then 5 or 6 years before I got my first film. Of course, inevitably you get locked into staying abroad.

I think it's good for everybody to go abroad but it's a problem that haunted me after I was abroad too long and a problem that haunted Mordecai Richler as well. Mordecai especially felt that his creative juices would dry up if he stayed abroad any longer and he felt that **St. Urbain's Horseman** was his last expatriated novel. I don't think it applies so much to a director because a director can work internationally. In my Australian film **Outback**, although it is an Australian setting, I always felt that this was my first Canadian film, because I feel it deals with the outback which is very similar to our own Canadian outback, the Northland. The story could be very easily transferred into a Canadian setting. I don't think it is only a question of nationality that is pressing on a director.

Still, I would like to have always felt in the back of my mind that my best work would be done here in Canada. I was very glad and gratified that **Duddy Kravitz** turned out as well as it did, which seemed to confirm my suspicions about myself. As directors in England we had an advantage bringing an outside, an almost Martian point of view to English society. That was our strength, because we saw things in their life that they did not see, out of custom and use. But inevitably I would never be British; I would never understand the minutæ of the life there. I think that ultimately to be a director is to come back to a world where you know the sights, smells, where you feel absolutely at home. There was nothing about **Duddy Kravitz** that I didn't know. I felt absolutely confident that when I told an actor to do something, that's the way it was. I think you need that kind of confidence to really work as a director.

Margaret Atwood has a thesis about Canadian literature being filled with victims, outcasts, losers, exiles and people who feel rejected by society; people who are somehow apart from it. Many of your films have that kind of main character.

I've always been attracted to outsiders, that's true: like **The Inebriate Woman** is about a woman who is a tramp. **Outback** is about a man completely at odds with his surroundings who is cracked wide open by the fact that he is in opposition with it. I think, though, that it has to do with my own Bulgarian-Macedonian background. My father was Bulgarian, my mother was Macedonian. They immigrated to this country

and they did not like it here when they came. They felt that people were cold and Toronto then was really an Anglo-Saxon town. My parents were used to a whole different way of life: good food, good wine, and people here seemed cold and forbidding, and the climate as well. They kept dreaming of going back. I always felt that I didn't belong here and that any minute we were going to pack up and go back to where we had come from. And there was a lot of prejudice against foreigners.

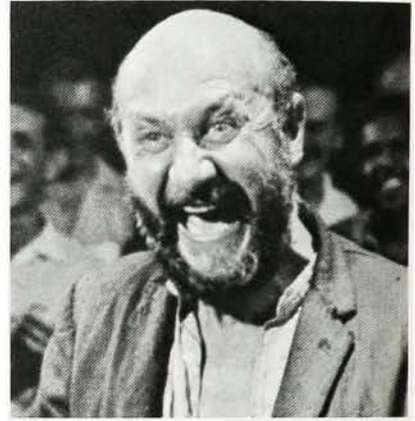
I often called myself the off-white hope of the Canadian theatre. The situation has changed, but I am trying to suggest a feeling that I didn't quite belong here. This was accentuated by the fact that my parents spoke Bulgarian at home. We had our own theatre, my Mother and Father, all my uncles and aunts were the actors and actresses in the repertoire theatre the Bulgarians had here. They acted every Friday night and Sunday night and I used to watch them; no baby-sitters then. I used to watch them rehearsing in plays and so there was a



Richard Dreyfuss in "Duddy"



Mordecai Richler



Donald Pleasence in "Outback"

whole sense of being apart from the mainstream of the life in Ontario as it was then.

Two Gentlemen Sharing, which I especially liked, also deals with outsiders.

I was always drawn towards the minority group and **Two Gentlemen Sharing** is about the impossibilities of a friendship between a black and a white man with things being what they are, so again, I was drawn to the black community and it fits in with the whole, with what you are suggesting; I am drawn to people who are outside the main currents of North American and English life. **Two Gentlemen Sharing** is novelistic; it's long and rambling and sprawling and has many characters and it is all convolutive low-key. I don't much like humourless people and I hate humourless art, and I tend to see the ridiculousness of things all the time. There is always a sort of comedic flavour texture to the films. I think it's my own personality, something emerging.

*I've heard that originally you were considered for Jeremy Sandford's **Cathy Come Home** which Ken Loach ended up directing. Jeremy Sandford is one of the most exciting screenwriters writing social commentary. How was it working with him on **Edna**, **The Inebriate Woman**?*

Jeremy wrote a stage play which I directed, called **Dreaming Bandmen**, back in 1960, so our friendship goes back a long way. After we did **Dreaming Bandmen** he said, "You know it's an incredible situation with the homeless people in England (**Cathy Come Home**). Would you be interested if we did a film about it?" I said I would. And I did a lot of research with him and worked for two years on the scripting of that. We thought the situation was so explosive that a good thing had to be done for social reasons. So I went everywhere; we agreed to do it for nothing. We were looking for two thousand pounds

to make it, but nobody really came through and the BBC turned it down. Finally, we lost hope that it would ever get done, and by accident and circumstance, I went to America to work for six months. Someone at the BBC sneaked it in and Ken Loach ended up directing it.

Subsequent to that, I said to Jeremy that I'd always wanted to make a film pointing out one of those ladies who have ten overcoats on and their worldly possessions in two shopping bags. Where do these people come from, who are they, how do they survive, where do they get their food and room? Finally, he said he'd think about it and 3 months later he delivered this script. It was the best script I've ever gotten. He followed one of these women around for days to see exactly what she did and he literally moved down into the subterranean life of our society. And he came up with this extraordinary document. **Edna** is one of my favourite films actually. We also have worked on a film which we are still trying to make about the gypsies in England, of the travelling

people and the extermination of the gypsy way of life in England.

*How about **Billy Two Hats**? What was it like filming a Western in Israel?*

I could have shot it anywhere. The reason I shot it in Israel was that Norman Jewison, who was the producer, was directing **Jesus Christ, Superstar**, at the same time. He said, "Well, please don't make it in Israel if you don't want to." However, I loved the landscape around the southern part of Israel and it was exactly what I wanted; bleak, hot landscape and there were areas there I think certainly no one else had ever photographed. I thought the terrain suited the picture marvellously. We flew the props and the sets over from Los Angeles, so that basically everything was authentic, from the art direction point of view. I think it did hurt the picture; it introduced a note of unreality in the picture. A Western in Israel. Well, obviously it cheated. It was like a spaghetti Western, of course. It can't be serious.

*I guess you were happy to return to Canada to direct **The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz**. Were there any sequences in the novel that you shot for **Duddy Kravitz** which you regret don't appear in the finished film?*

I only missed two things in the film which I threw out. In the Bar Mitzvah scene which is in the middle of the film, there was a wonderful, very funny sequence with Joe Silver who plays Farber, the scrap dealer. He gets drunk at his son's Bar Mitzvah; it was hilarious. I was sorry that had to go, but the Bar Mitzvah scene I felt just went on too long, so I trimmed it down. Another scene I really regret and felt should have stayed in, but I took it out—a very funny scene where Duddy Kravitz is in the schoolroom writing the final exams at high school. It was a very funny scene where everyone is writing

studiously but Duddy is looking bored and is not doing anything. The teacher wanders slowly around and as soon as he turns his back to Duddy and opens the window, Duddy quickly rolls up his sleeve and the whole of his arm is covered in facts and figures. He furiously scribbles them all down but suddenly the teacher sees him and advances towards him. As soon as he sees the teacher coming, he licks his arm clean. The teacher rushes up, grabs his arm, looks at it, and there's all these wonderful blue smears. So, Duddy looks up at him with absolute innocence and says, "Oh, what did I do, why are you grabbing me?" And the teacher just looks at him and says, "You'll go far, Kravitz, you'll go far." I did regret cutting that scene because it was so wonderful. I always did like funny scenes anyway. But I felt that at the beginning of the picture that it held up forward progress.

What was your working relationship with Mordecai Richler on Duddy Kravitz?

Well, you know he is my oldest friend and we tend to see things similarly. The reason I like Mordecai is that we have a kind of unspoken understanding. We really discuss a lot of things because we see things the same. In the case of **Duddy Kravitz**, I always wanted to make the film since I first read the novel back in 1959. As you know, Mordecai and I shared a flat in London and he was writing **Duddy Kravitz** then, and when he finished he gave me the manuscript and said what do you think of it. I said that it's a marvellous novel, certainly the finest Canadian novel that has ever been written and one day I am going to go back and make a film of it. So we all laughed because that was like a fantasy at the time; that was in 1959. But it was in the back of my mind for a long time. I tried once in 1965/66 to get it off the ground and the producer said that he would do it but I would have to modernize it and bring it up to the present time.

He didn't want to do a period piece and I tried to explain to him that it was an impossibility; these people would be entirely different today. They don't seem to exist any more; their attitudes, their aspirations, their values are entirely different. I said either I would do it then or forget it, so it was, forget it. And then about 3 or 4 years ago, I decided the only way this thing was ever going to get off the ground was to get a first draft script written, so I sat down with a Canadian writer in London called Lionel Chetwynd and he and I worked on the first draft which wasn't very good and then we did a second draft. **Duddy Kravitz** is not a difficult book to adapt. Mordecai writes very cinematically in his novels and he doesn't go in for a lot of interior monologues. He works primarily with dramatic action and dialogue.

A lot of things in the picture are edited down versions of scenes in the book, but in effect, what we did in the second draft was to lay out the structure. I wasn't happy with the dialogue and the beginning wasn't very good. Mordecai didn't wish to work in the screenplay; that's why he didn't work on it in the first place because he was very superstitious about going back to work he did in 1959. He felt it would take him back artistically and creatively to a period which might upset the work he was presently concerned with. But he always said to me that when you have taken it to a certain length, to a certain point, I will come in and do a polish job. Well, it amounted to more than a polish job because the whole of the opening was re-done and he did all the dialogue practically throughout. And so the screenplay is really Mordecai's. But it did have a very firm structure which had been laid out beforehand, so it was easy for him to work.

There is a story that David Steinberg at one point was thought about for Duddy Kravitz, when you wanted to use a Canadian actor.

Yes, I thought David would be very right for that part, but I'm afraid he was getting on a bit; he was in his early thirties then. It was not a question of his actual physical age, but you could

see the experience on his face and I thought he would never get down to age 18.

Had you seen Richard Dreyfuss in American Graffiti prior to casting him?

No, I hadn't, actually, but what happened was the casting director of **Billy Two Hats**, a man called Lynn Stalmaster, one of the best casting directors in the world, suggested Richard. I phoned him up after he had read the script and he said, "There is only one man who can play this part, Richard Dreyfuss." I said, "Oh, come on, Lynn, there can't be only one person." He said, "I'm telling you, come on down to Hollywood next week and I'll bring you 25 of the best young actors in Hollywood but you'll end up with Richard Dreyfuss. I promise you." And he said, "I've phoned him already and told him not to take anything else."

So I went down to Hollywood the following week and I interviewed him and sure enough I ended up with Richard Dreyfuss. Then Lynn said to me, (I had cast Dreyfuss by that time, by the way) "He is in a film, would you like to see it? I think there is a screening tonight." So I went along to see **American Graffiti** and far from assisting me in making the casting, it took me the other way. I saw this plump figure playing an introspective observer who doesn't participate in anything, the absolute opposite to everything Duddy Kravitz is—an introvert whereas Duddy Kravitz is an extrovert. And I suddenly had second thoughts, and doubt started to creep in. I called Richard again after I had seen the film to confirm my original feelings that he was right for the part, so that's how that came about.

Duddy Kravitz wasn't chosen as the official Canadian film entry at Cannes, last year. Why was that, do you think?

Well, it's a bit of mucky history actually. I was quite angry about it. There is a Canadian festival committee, a Cannes committee which has constituent members of film critics, some government people and people connected with professional film from the National Film Board. Two years in a row now they have chosen a Canadian entry; they have made a selection for the film that would represent Canada at the Cannes film festival. The year previously they had chosen **Kamouraska** and the head of the Cannes festival came over here and overturned that decision and said he did not wish to have **Kamouraska** and instead he chose a picture by Gilles Carle, **La Mort D'Un Bûcheron**. They had unanimously chosen **Duddy Kravitz** to represent Canada last year and stated that the incident that had occurred the year before was not to be repeated; that the head of the Cannes Festival was going to have to accept it and that if he didn't, they wouldn't participate in the Festival. Well, the outcome was that he came over and said "Let's see what else you have got." And basically, this man and others said they wanted a French Canadian film; they did not think that English Canadian films are really Canadian. The only real Canadian film is a French Canadian film; English films are too much like American films. That was one explanation, and possibly he was worried about protests of anti-semitism.

What are you going to do next?

I have a lot of balls being juggled in the air and I hope that one comes to earth. I've sold a story to United Artists of my own manufacture that I am developing into a script and I hope that will go next. And there is another film; this is for United Artists which is going to be privately financed and which I have been working on for three months. It's American financed but I'm hoping to shoot it up here. Ideally, what I would really like to do is to live in Canada. I am temporarily in California. I would like to make films here with American finance because I don't think films at the present moment can be entirely financed here. □

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