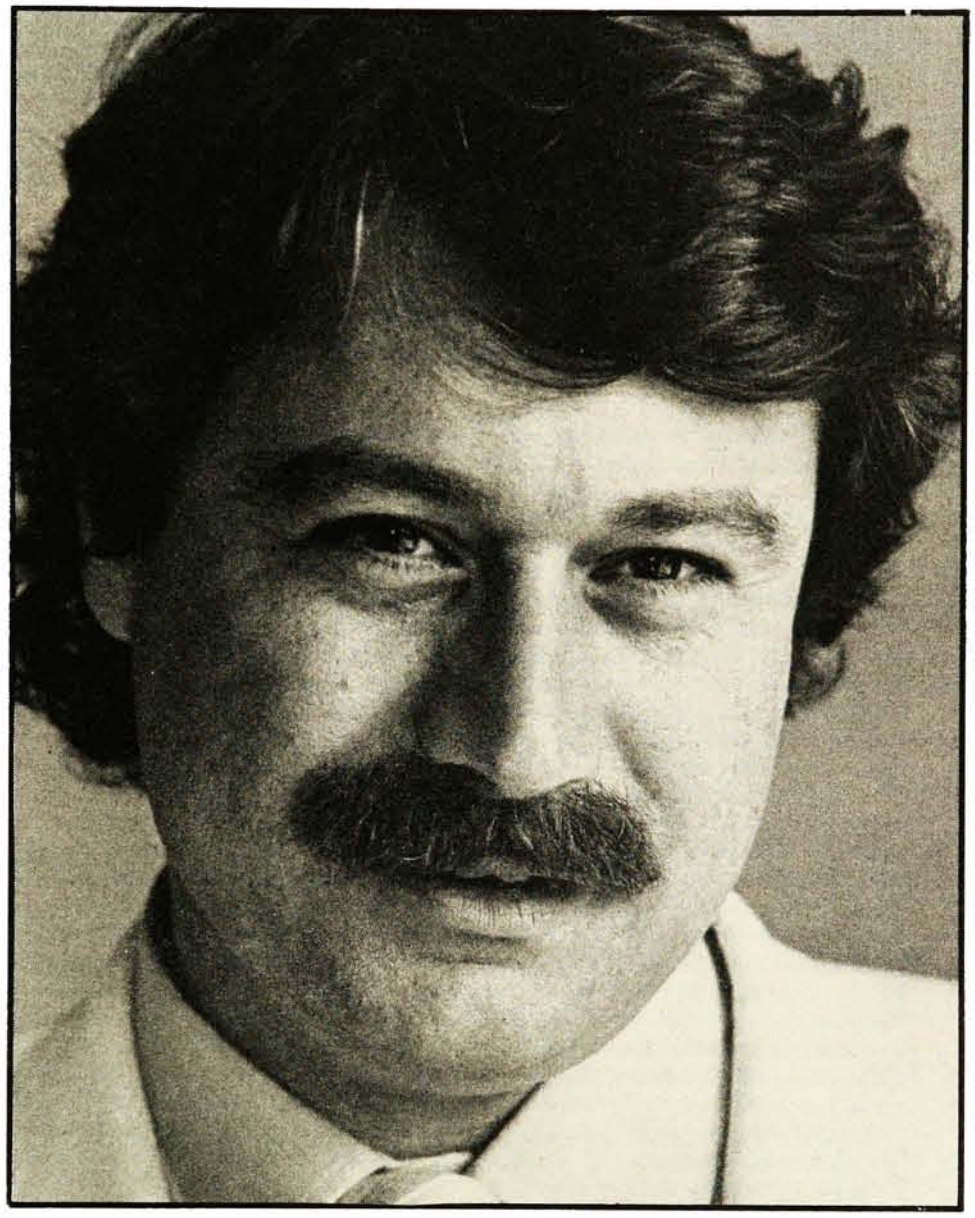
The apprenticeship of Robert Lantos



RSL's Robert Lantos, together with partner Stephen Roth, and ICC's John Kemeny and Denis Héroux have just joined forces as equal partners in a new separate venture, Alliance Entertainment Corp.
The foursome of Lantos, Roth, Kemeny and Héroux represent the closest Canada comes to having movie moguls of its own, and, as Lantos explains below, Alliance is a last stand attempt to establish a US-modelled approach to volume film and television production in Canada.
For Lantos, the achievement of Canadian producers like himself is that they have realized what he terms "the dream" of every foreign producer alive, namely to penetrate the American system from within.
Lantos very candidly revealed in three lengthy interviews with Cinema Canada's Tom Perlmutter what that process has meant for one Canadian film producer.
The interviews have been edited from a 100-page transcript.
From a film and communications student at McGill University in the early '70's, the Hungarian-born, Latin-American-raised Lantos has become, with this fall's Canadian premiere of Joshua Then and Now, *the co-producer, with Roth, of the largest budget feature in Canadian film history.*
The following interview is Robert Lantos' view of the road he has travelled.

A Cinema Canada interview with RSL's president
by Tom Perlmutter

Cinema Canada: *Why don't we start at the beginning. You've had a long career in filmmaking and it's taken you down some curious roads. How did you get your start?*

Robert Lantos: I was looking to get into filmmaking. I was in graduate school at McGill studying film and communications under a new program, and I was one of the first baptized under that program. I wanted to write and direct and produce probably in that order. This was between the late '60s and the early '70s. And I guess the best way to tell it is with a couple of anecdotes.

One of my professors was John Grierson, probably the one that I learned the most from. He gave a course to about eight or nine people in his hotel-room in a hotel on Crescent Street. At the end of the year, he asked everybody what their plans were. When it was my turn, I told him I wanted to write, direct and produce. He said, "How are you going to do that?" At the time if there was any independent production in Canada in English, no one was aware of it. So I told him I was going to go make the rounds of the CBC and the NFB with his help. I told him he had to write me a very warm reference letter and set up a couple of meetings for me at the NFB. He said, "I'll do that for you but I'll tell you that if you really want to get a job at the NFB, then don't go with your *curriculum vitae* and reference letters and student films. It will go much faster and be much more efficient if you apply at the front desk and fill out a form as a driver. And then once you're inside, it's a different world."

I did not have, and have never had since, the patience or the humility to be a driver, so I disregarded that advice. I asked him to set up appointments and went with my reference letters, student scripts and films, and was politely received. I had tea with one person and vodka martinis with somebody else and made the rounds, and it became quite clear that this was going to be a very slow, agonizing process. There were easily 1,000 people for every possible opening. On top of which my own constitution and genetic make-up was not necessarily designed for working with government institutions., That's putting it very mildly. It was not a very encouraging first round.

Cinema Canada: *So you turned your attention to distribution.*

Robert Lantos: I began in film distribution by a complete accident. It was something I knew absolutely nothing about, certainly not from any previous experience. And certainly not from my film studies which primarily involved watching Eisenstein's *Potemkin* 30 or 40 times and dissecting it frame-by-frame, or watching Brakhage's underground movies and becoming very familiar with the birth of each of his children through his films. And, as well in my case, I was then translating Lukacs' theories of Marxist aesthetics into English from Hungarian. So it meant a lot of esoteric things that had absolutely no relationship to the business of distributing movies.

Which is why it was a very good thing that I did start out through film distribution. It was an accident and the accident came about in the following way. I was still in graduate school and was freelancing for *The Montreal Star* and for CBC-radio as a writer and as a researcher. I heard of something in New York called the New York Erotic Film Festival, an event that grew out of '60s' experimental and underground filmmaking have merged with very strong explorations going on in erotic cinema at this time. It was the beginning of the lifting of censorship and the beginning of the respectability, so to speak, of porn. It was a big event in New York where all sorts of experimental filmmakers sent in their five- and 10- and 20-minute shorts in a competition judged by Andy Warhol, Milos Forman and Gore Vidal. All sorts of very prestigious names were involved – a feminist called Betty Dobson as well as Germaine Greer.

• A film that took a long time coming: Tom Berenger and Susan Strasberg in **In Praise Of Older Women**

So I got myself sent down to New York to cover the New York Erotic Film Festival and it made for some very unusual stuff for CBC-radio. It also gave me the idea that maybe I could buy the Canadian rights of the prize-winners and somehow bring them to Canada and get them through censorship. It would have been the first time that material that explicit would be shown in Canada. Those films were so new and so fresh; a very strong artistic cachet and veneer came with them. They would probably find an audience – a young sophisticated audience such as I was very familiar with because I was still in university and I was very active in university and had come out of the left-wing activist movement of the '60s. It would be an audience that would have never seen movies like that and certainly would have never been caught dead watching pornography, but would be very interested in this. I negotiated without knowing anything about distribution. I knew enough to know that you had to buy the rights to something before you could show it. So I made a deal to buy the Canadian rights to the films that won the prizes, but I didn't have any money. When I came back, I attempted to raise some funds which I failed at and finally I put together a few hundred dollars based on which I got the various filmmakers to agree to send me a print of their film on loan for 30 or 60 days while I tried to get it through censorship and tried to raise additional money to pay for the rights.

I found myself making the rounds of Famous Players and the theatre chains with a can of 16mm film under my arm which consisted of a dozen shorts. And there I discovered a whole slew of fascinating things. First of all, I discovered that movie theatres were programmed by central offices that controlled an entire circuit and that they in turn were just about totally inaccessible to somebody off the street. In order to show a movie, you would have to have a distribution company that had ongoing relationships with the theatre circuits, which I didn't have. I also discovered that they didn't play 16mm film in movie theatres and I also discovered that they play shorts spliced together. It became completely impossible to get a movie theatre for what was called the Best of the New York Erotic Film Festival.

My best friend at the time was the president of McGill Student Council. We had this idea that we would show the Best of the New York Erotic Film Festival as part of the McGill Winter Carnival, charge admission and let McGill keep all the profit. This would act as a test to see if there was an audience for the film. So we put up posters all over the campus. I think we had three screenings, all of which were not only sold out but, by the third one, the mob-scene was so phenomenal that tickets sold for two dollars were being scalped for $10 and $15. The Montreal fire-squad was called out because of the crowds. It was an absolute riot. At that point I really knew that we did have something. Both *The Montreal Star* and the *Gazette* came to one of the screenings and the next day there were rave reviews about the New York Erotic Film Festival and a tremendous amount of enthusiasm and interest in both English papers. It was really hailed as a kind of hybrid cultural accomplishment.

Following that I had an offer from a movie theatre – the Vendôme Theatre at Place Victoria. The theatre no longer exists, it was dying and never grossed any money on a film. It was offered to me by a company which had a lease on it. Their interest was that they had heard of the New York Erotic Film Festival through the press and they really couldn't do any worse than they were doing then. Just before that they had rented the theatre out to the Russian Embassy to show Russian movies. So we made a very unusual deal. Normally in the distribution, the theatre splits the box-office with a distributor and the terms are on a sliding scale where the distributor gets a minimum of 25% and sometimes as much as a maximum of 60% or 65% of the box-office, if the box-office is very high. In this case, they proposed something that, had I known anything about the film business, I would not have accepted. The deal was that they keep the first X dollars, the house-expense of the theatre – I forget the numbers – and the rest would belong to me. They were really interested in covering their expenses because they were losing money. And so I agreed. We had to guarantee the first week's rent which we didn't have, but the film opened on a Friday and the money for the rent was only payable on Monday.

So I thought at the time, either the film would make money, in which case the rent would be paid, or, if it didn't, then my entry into the world of film distribution would be very short-lived and I would take up a job which had just been offered to me as restaurant critic of *The Montreal Star*. As it turned out, this New York Erotic Film Festival was a huge success. It played at that theatre for some 20 weeks, grossed something like half-a-million dollars in one theatre and went on to play across Canada. It broke the censorship barriers of the time. It became the first time that the Quebec Censorship Board allowed something like that to get through because of the names associated with it. Because of this ridiculous deal that we had made, which turned out to be totally in our favour, we made a lot of money.

Cinema Canada: *What year was that?*

Robert Lantos: 1973.

Cinema Canada: *That must have been an education, a very rapid education in the film business.*

Robert Lantos: Aside from my desire to make films and my fascination with movies which goes back to when I was a kid and saw two films every day of my life, I have a very strong entrepreneurial instinct. It was quite clear after my first round of teas and martinis that that was not going to be the way I was going to live. I happened to get lucky. I had an idea and ideas were a dime a dozen and I had one very early on that happened to work, and gave me that entrée.

Cinema Canada: *This fascination with film from a very early age goes back to Hungary?*

Robert Lantos: Not to Hungary; I grew up in South America. I left Hungary when I was nine, but in South America my school was downtown, and all the movie theatres were within five blocks of my school.

Cinema Canada: *What sort of things would you go to see?*

Robert Lantos: Westerns – double bills, lots of Westerns; Westerns and war movies.

Cinema Canada: *And this continued when you came to Montreal?*
Robert Lantos: I always went to see every movie that was playing anywhere. Until a few years ago when I ran out of time. Now I see fewer movies than I saw any time in my life, which is kind of puzzling...

Cinema Canada: *Let me ask you about the film course that you took at McGill. There seems to be quite a divergence between the things you were taught and your actual experiences. Do you feel now that you came away with anything from the course?*
Robert Lantos: I'm very happy that I had those couple of years because it's a kind of luxury that will never recur in my life – to analyze and to look at films and at the world from a purely theoretical point of view. It was an intellectual exercise that I liked a great deal. It didn't have direct practical application of any sort. If anything, I think, probably it retarded my ability to make money simply because for a long time, perhaps even now, I find it necessary to analyze things. I find it very difficult to think in terms of black-and-white because of my academic background and training. And yet, in the commercial world, it is very important to see things in black-and-white. Decisions have to be made rather quickly and over-analyzing tends to be counter-productive. My background and training from the university was precisely the opposite – to analyze, to look for shades of meaning and interpretations, and to know there are not only many interpretations but always many points of view. The world of the arts consists of a series of dichotomies that, in turn, through their contradictions, cause a harmony. To think in those terms is not very conducive to a commercial success.

Cinema Canada: *How did you get on with Grierson in that course in that period of time? Did you have much to do with him?*
Robert Lantos: That was only one course over a two-year program in which there were 10 courses. It happened to be the most interesting one because he told great anecdotes. Those anecdotes were my only real glimpses and insights into the real world of film. You can imagine how uncommercial Grierson's world of film was. But that was still by far the only touch of reality in this very academic edifice.

Cinema Canada: *And after the experience of the Erotic Film Festival you now had a very substantial taste of the commercial world of film?*
Robert Lantos: Because I came out of the '60s and early '70s, even the film department and the film courses were very, very politicized at the time. We spent much more time screening and writing papers and watching experimental films than we did the Hollywood productions. (In fact, if you went to see a Hollywood movie you didn't talk about it to people whose intelligence you valued.) But, my hearing about the New York Erotic Film Festival and even being interested in that and thinking that there would be an audience for something like that, really comes out of film studies because a lot of the filmmakers who had films in the New York Erotic Film Festival were filmmakers whose films I had seen and studied in school. And the ad that I saw for it was in *The Village Voice* for whom I had written a story. It all came very much out of the counter-culture. The departure, the big leap from the academic world to the commercial world, came after – when I learned about the business of marketing a movie, about business in general and marketing in general. Also I managed fairly quickly to lose all the money that we made on the New York Erotic Film Festival.

• Valerie Perrine faces a tough moment in **Agency**, a film that never found the right writer

Cinema Canada: *How?*
Robert Lantos: Well, I thought that I was a genius which is always a mistake. So I thought that if by knowing nothing I could have a film that beat James Bond, which is what the New York Erotic Film Festival did in the province of Quebec, then I couldn't go wrong. So I went to the Cannes Film Festival and I bought half-a-dozen movies from Italy and from France and from Brazil, films that I liked personally which did not find an audience. Not only did they not find an audience but I did not know how to distribute them. I didn't have salesmen, bookers, accountants; I didn't have a staff; I didn't have knowledge of the distribution industry, the theatres, the chains, how it all works, how you make the best deals, how you collect the money, how shipping works – all those things. I really found them out one-by-one as I went from one fuck-up to the next and at each fuck-up I learned. That's how I learned about the distribution business.

Cinèma Canada: *Roughly how much money did you lose? Any idea?*
Robert Lantos: Fortunately, I don't know. I know the New York Erotic Film Festival probably made a profit of about $1 million. After all the very bad deals we made. We made one terrific deal at the beginning 'cause I knew nothing and it's a deal I never would have accepted otherwise. Then we had to make a distribution deal and we weren't set-up to distribute a film across Canada. It went across Canada, and encountered tremendous censorship problems in every province other than B.C. Ontario, I think, cut forty minutes, forty minutes, of a two-hour-and-10 minute film.

Cinema Canada: *You lost this money but you had enough to keep the company going?*
Robert Lantos: We had enough to build the company. We had enough to pay my tuition fee – to learn about the film business. Victor Loewy was with me and the two of us learned together. The company was initially called as a joke Derma Communications, for obvious reasons. Then we changed the name to Vivafilm. I learned about the marketplace and how films are advertised, sold and distributed, not only in Canada, but also in New York and L.A., in Cannes and all over Europe. I had absolutely no interest in business particularly. I spent six years in university studying first English literature and then film and communications from a very theoretical point of view. I remember when we first hired bookkeepers, about six months after the New York Erotic Film Festival opened, the people we brought in all came close to a quadruple by-pass coronary because we had absolutely no records. All we had was a bank account. I had no idea that you were supposed to keep books. I was extremely naive. I was very much a product of the rebellious generation of the '60s and the last thing in the world that you were going to worry about or think about was how to run a business. I think it took us about a year, a year-and-a-half to figure out how it all worked. Then we slowly started to build a library and a distribution business.

Cinema Canada: *In terms of the kinds of films you were buying, did you set out to carve a particular niche? Did you plan to carry on from the New York Erotic Film Festival with that kind of film?*
Robert Lantos: First of all, a small independent distributor that nobody has heard of really has no access to most films. We were new and there was no reason why people should trust us with their films, so it was particularly difficult to have access to the prestige films by top European directors. We had to buy what was available. And from what was available I bought films that I particularly liked. For example, I bought a movie by a Brazilian Cinema Novo director. A ridiculous idea, but I liked it a lot. At the same time, we also continued to buy what we thought would be sexy movies which would be intelligently made, sufficiently well made to play outside the so-called grind houses, films that could play in Odeons and Famous Players. Those became harder and harder to come by. Not that many were ever made. There were just fewer and fewer. Eventually we stopped that altogether.

Cinema Canada: *What about getting access to the exhibitors?*
Robert Lantos: Well, that was difficult. It's all a matter of people believing that you really mean to be in the distribution business and you plan to stay. Eventually we gained more and more credibility.

Cinema Canada: *What kind of films did you pick up when the "sexy" films dried up?*
Robert Lantos: We thought we had found an audience here that wanted to see erotic films in a certain context, and when you find an audience, you don't let go of it. Unfortunately there just weren't many films that fit that kind of description. We found over the next couple of years perhaps a half-a-dozen; otherwise they were straight porno movies which I was not interested in distributing and for which I knew that audience would not come out anyway. More and more the energy and the time and the concentration of the business was in importing quality films from France, Italy, Germany, Spain.

Cinema Canada: *There seems to have been a wave of companies with that kind of film. Wasn't that the case with CITY-TV?*
Robert Lantos: As a matter of fact, my very first business deal ever, my every first business sale in my career, was with Moses Znaimer. When I had to make payment for the New York Film Festival I was short some money. I went to see him and he was just starting something called the Baby Blue. I screened the New York Erotic Film Festival for him. He liked it. He didn't buy it all but most of it. He asked me how much money I needed. I very modestly asked him exactly the money I was short to pay for the rights, which happened to be $600. I told him that I had to have it right then-and-there. So on the spot he gave me a cheque for $600 and I gave him the right to run the New York Erotic Film Festival on CITY-TV which he promptly proceeded to do.

Cinema Canada: *Were you developing a sense of what you wanted to do in the film business?*
Robert Lantos: I wanted to make films and so for me all of this was a huge eye-opener. I really did not have a great deal of interest in purchasing movies and then booking them into the theatres and promoting them, which is what distribution is about. So, after I had gone through the major baptisms and learned what I thought were some crucial things about distribution, I spent most of my time thinking about how to put a film together. That took roughly three years.

Cinema Canada: *Which was that?*
Robert Lantos: The first film I produced was *L'Ange et la femme.*

Cinema Canada: *Can you tell me how that came about?*
Robert Lantos: The first thing I did as a producer was buy the rights to *In Praise of Older Women,* the novel by Stephen Vicinczey. That was in 1975.

Cinema Canada: *How much did you pay for the rights?*
Robert Lantos: $50,000. It was a good buy in retrospect, although at the time it seemed like a lot of money.

Cinema Canada: *Was this the company buying it, or you personally?*
Robert Lantos: It was me personally. It wasn't the distribution company, simply because Victor Loewy didn't have any interest in production. The way it came about is that I had read the book when I was very young – when it was first published I was only 16 or 17. I liked it a great deal. I felt some associations with this story about a Hungarian who ends up in Canada and who generically is in love with older women, which I can also identify with. It was a very important book to me when I was growing up. I read the book during adolescence when sexual things are very unclear. This book was a light of hope that all would work out. In 1974 or 1975 I met George Kaczender who had just made a film called *U-Turn* which I liked. In conversation, the book *In Praise of Older Women* came up. I said that I was amazed nobody ever made a movie out of it. He said that a lot of people had tried but Stephen Vizinczey who was a friend of his, was very difficult to deal with. He didn't want a movie made of his book. That's how it began.

Then came a very lengthy kind of courtship period during which I courted Stephen Vizinczey. To do this I became partners with Stephen Roth. Stephen Roth, my attorney, was in private practice in Montreal and had been my attorney since the beginning. He was a very unusual lawyer. I first went to see him to incorporate the company to buy the New York Erotic Film Festival. A friend of mine sent me to him because I said I was looking for a lawyer, but had no money to pay him. He said, "Well, go and see Roth. If you can turn him on, he'll probably do it for free or let you pay him later." I went to see him and I turned him on and he agreed to incorporate us and do all the legal work necessary and to be paid later with a percentage of profits. Through his association with me he had established a taste for the film business. I formed a separate company with him to buy *In Praise of Older Women.*

Cinema Canada: *And that was RSL?*
Robert Lantos: That was RSL. It was a combination of our initials. We then jointly courted Stephen Vizinczey.

Cinema Canada: *What convinced Vizinczey to sell to you?*
Robert Lantos: Eventually, it was a chess game, literally. Everytime we wrote him a letter he wrote a letter back saying the book was not for sale. Then he would end the letter by adding, "How much are you willing to offer me?" I found that this is a quality all writers have in common – as committed as they may be to their work, there's always one thing that fascinates them more than their work – money.

• The first of the bedroom farces: Sylvie Boucher and Gilbert Comtois in **Scandale**

Vizinczey was no exception. And although he was committed not to have his book butchered by some moviemaker, his fascination for money was something else. At least he wanted to know how much he would be offered. That led to a series of letters, phone calls and then a meeting in London. He tried to cancel the meeting but finally we met. It was at a time in England when a lot of bombs were being thrown in restaurants. We met in a restaurant of his choice and he was standing outside when I arrived and he said, "We have to go somewhere else. There's no table." I looked and the place was three-quarters empty. I said, "Look, the place is empty." He said, "No, no. There are no tables in the back." Why did he want to sit in the back? Because if they throw bombs you don't want to be in the front.

Cinema Canada: *Were you negotiating in Hungarian?*
Robert Lantos: No, in English. And it was kind of a tug-of-war because every second sentence was that the book was not for sale, but then he wanted to talk about how much we would pay for it. He showed me some correspondence over the 10 years since the book had first come out. All sorts of very famous producers wrote him with letters of inquiry and interest to buy his book and his answers were rather curt. He convinced me that he was going to sell the book. He and I met twice in two days.

On the third day Stephen Roth arrived. We agreed to meet one more time out of courtesy to me and my partner. We met at his flat in London. He had many chess sets on display. At one point, Stephen, who plays chess quite well, asked Vizinczey if he played chess. Vizinczey said, "Yes, do you?" Stephen said "Yes." Vizinczey said, "How well do you play?" So Stephen quite modestly said, "Well, so – so." Vizinczey said, "Well, I am very good." He got a strange look in his eye, a very tense look, and said to Stephen, "I am very good. Do you want to play?" So they played two or three games. All of which Roth won very quickly. By the end of that Vizinczey's entire behaviour, demeanor and character underwent the most total metamorphosis I have ever seen. He was completely changed. He went from being very aggressive to being a docile lamb. And in the next few minutes we made a deal for the book. Roth drew up a one-page letter by hand and we all signed it.

Cinema Canada: *Were you still at this time involved with Vivafilm? Do you still have some ownership in Vivafilm today?*
Robert Lantos: No, I wasn't involved. However, it wasn't till much later I was bought out by Victor Loewy.

Cinema Canada: *So there is no kind of relationship with Vivafilm?*
Robert Lantos: There is a relationship, but not an ownership relationship. There is a producer-distributor relationship. And we have formed another company together called Vivafilm International which we own jointly. It is a foreign sales company to sell our product, our films, abroad and also to pick up other films and sell them abroad. It's a separate entity. And there there is joint-ownership, but not in the distribution company. I stopped being active in Vivafilm by 1976 and sold my shares in 1978.

Cinema Canada: *While working on* In Praise of Older Women, *you produced a Gilles Carle film.*
Robert Lantos: After buying *In Praise of Older Women,* I discovered it was very difficult to put it together and get it off the ground. During that process I met Carole Laure. She knew that I wanted to be a producer and wanted to make films but never had. *In Praise of Older Women* hadn't yet come together. She introduced Gilles Carle to me. She said that they had an idea for a movie. At the time it wasn't even written down. It was a very, very low-budget movie which would be a romantic fable about an angel and a woman. A love story done with absolutely no money, where everybody down to the electrician and the assistant editor would, instead of a salary, own a piece of the film. The film was to be shot in 10 days on-location in 16mm black-and-white.

I took that one further. I brought in a friend of mine from film-school and who had set up a lab in his basement to process 16mm black-and-white by hand. He had bought some equipment from the '40s and pieced it back together. Ron Hallis was his name and he subsequently went to Mozambique to make movies.

From that home-made lab in their basement, we got the most magnificent black-and-white we could possibly get, much better than any commercial lab. We printed it in sepia, the tones were all hand-done. It was a technique from the '20s. The film was supposed to cost $25,000 and ended up costing about $60,000. It was written by Gilles, directed by Gilles and starred Carole Laure and Lewis Furey. We shot it in 10 days on a farm Carole Laure owns in the Eastern Townships.

It was something that, while we were putting together *In Praise of Older Women,* had come to me via Carole. When they told me what they wanted to do, I saw that it was something that I wanted to do immediately. It was the opportunity I had been looking for. It was something which I could do immediately, as opposed to *In Praise of Older Women* where I still had to raise a million dollars. This was a matter of $25,000. We went to Famous Players who put up $25,000 against the exhibition rights and that was the only cash we had. The script was written in two weeks.

Cinema Canada: *Famous Players put the money up on the basis of a phone-call?*
Robert Lantos: But by that point I knew them and they knew me. How can you go wrong with $25,000 in Quebec, on a Gilles Carle film starring Carole Laure? I didn't tell them that it was only going to cost $25,000, but it didn't really matter.

Cinema Canada: *In terms of the partnership with Stephen, was he behind it as well?*
Robert Lantos: I took it to Stephen because we were partners and asked him if he wanted to do it. If he hadn't, I would have done it on my own, but he did and we did it through RSL. It became RSL's first project. I met Gilles Carle at the beginning of December and we were shooting, I think, by January 5th.

Cinema Canada: *How did it do?*
Robert Lantos: We made money, but we didn't make very much. But you can't lose money at that price. It had an interesting career because when it was first released in Quebec, it was crucified by the critics, absolutely brutally crucified. It was seen as a self-indulgent sell-out by Gilles Carle. Up till then his films had been quite political and dealt with Quebec reality. This was a film that had nothing to do with Quebec, it was a pure fantasy. This was before the PQ was in power and it was a time when this was not about to be forgiven. Film was seen as a political tool in Quebec. A major director like Gilles Carle doing a film with absolutely no political implications was not acceptable. As a result

the box-office was quite shaky. It didn't even recoup its cost in Quebec at the theatres.

But then two things happened. First the film was invited to the Avoriaz Film Festival in the French Alps. It was a film festival for science-fiction and fantasy movies. It won the critics' *grand prix.* And out of there came 20 or 25 absolutely sensational reviews. The film was loved by every French critic. It was compared to Fellini's *8 1/2* and Bergman's *Persona.* I still have the reviews; they are the best reviews any film I ever made got anywhere. It was a critical prodigy and it was picked up by Gaumont for distribution in France. The advance Gaumont paid for the French rights was greater than the cost of making the film. After that it was sold in three or four countries, in Brazil, in Belgium, in Switzerland. It has never played anywhere else. It played really only in the four countries.

The second thing that happened is that it was subtitled in English. We had a screening for the English Canadian press – *Maclean's*, the Toronto *Star* and the *Globe and Mail.* They gave it, if possible, even better reviews than in France. That, in turn, lead to a respectable run in Toronto, in Vancouver, in Winnipeg, in Ottawa and in all the big English Canadian cities.

Cinema Canada: *How did Gilles Carles get involved in this? Was this something he really wanted to do?*

Robert Lantos: It was late 1976 and there was absolutely nothing happening in Quebec. There were no films being made, so the top people were unemployed. Gilles Carles was unemployed; Carole Laure was unemployed; nobody was doing anything; there was no money. So the idea was to make a film somehow without money, or with minimum money, and try to make money on it afterwards. The idea Gilles Carle had had some years earlier but he had never made it into a film. It leant itself to being made with virtually no money: one location, two actors – a minimalist film. It was something he very much wanted to make for 10 years and never had because nobody thought it was commercial. He had proposed the idea in various forms to all the producers over the years and everybody said, "No."

But then two things happened. First the film was invited to the Avoriaz Film Festival in the French Alps. It was a film festival for science fiction and fantasy movies. It won the critics' *grand prix.* And out of there came 20 or 25 absolutely sensational reviews. The film was loved by every French critic. It was compared to Fellini's *8 1/2* and Bergman's *Persona.* I still have the reviews; they are the best reviews any film I ever made got anywhere. It was a critical prodigy and it was picked up by Gaumont for distribution in France. The advance Gaumont paid for the French rights was greater than the cost of making the film. After that it was sold in three or four countries, in Brazil, in Belgium, in Switzerland. It has never played anywhere else. It played really only in the four countries.

The second thing that happened is that it was subtitled in English. We had a screening for the English Canadian press – *Maclean's*, the *Toronto Star* and the *Globe and Mail.* They gave it, if possible, even better reviews than in France. That, in turn, lead to a respectable run in Toronto, in Vancouver, in Winnipeg, in Ottawa and in all the big English Canadian cities.

Cinema Canada: *How did Gilles Carles get involved in this? Was this something he really wanted to-do?*

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Cinema Canada: *So what attracted you?*

Robert Lantos: First of all, I liked it. But frankly that wasn't really the key. The key was the opportunity. I figured out in 10 minutes that I could make this fly. It was an opportunity for me to make a movie. And to do it with people whom I liked and whose work I respected. Not with a first-time director, but with Gilles Carles. Not with an actress out of theatre school, but with Carole Laure. It was an opportunity for me. I always felt that I owed Carole a favour, and *Night Magic* was my favour to her.

Cinema Canada: *At the same time you were trying to structure* In Praise of Older Women, *your first venture into financing a fairly expensive movie.*

Robert Lantos: At the time a million dollars was a lot of money and very difficult to raise.

Cinema Canada: *How did you do it?*

Robert Lantos: Eventually, it was a combination of the CBC, Famous Players and private investors. But the private investors had to be pieced together one at a time – $2,000 here, $5,000 there. And Astral bought the distribution rights up-front.

Cinema Canada: *That took two years to put together?*

Robert Lantos: We got the book in the fall of '75 and we started shooting in '77. It took two years. I later realized that that was not such a long time to put a movie together. At the time it seemed hopeless to me. I couldn't believe that it could be so difficult. I was amazed that a book so good, so obviously commercial, lively, entertaining, funny and charming could take so long. How could

it be so difficult? In hindsight, two years was nothing. *Joshua* took us almost five.

Cinema Canada: *In terms of financial structuring, Stephen put together the deal?*

Robert Lantos: Yes, Stephen's law practice had access to investors. He was the one who brought in all the private financing, which was, I think, about 60% of the budget.

Cinema Canada: *Was this before the revised CCA rules?*

Robert Lantos: It was a tax-shelter, one of the earliest. It wasn't a prospectus, it was privately done based on a one-page circular. There was no bank. It was Stephen Roth going to the people, button-holing them wherever he could find them – in the street, in their offices, at parties and saying, "Let's put $10,000 into this move.. Sign here!" That's how it was done. I got my dentist to put in $10,000 after he finished drilling my teeth.

Cinema Canada: *In terms of the actual film, did you feel pleased with what came out?*

Robert Lantos: Yes then, and even yes now. When I look at it, I still like the film. I regret only that I didn't make the film 10 years later. Because if I could make the film today, I could make a very, very memorable movie, which would also be an absolute blockbuster, at least as good as *Tom Jones*.

It was so early on in my career, I had to make so many mistakes on it, because I knew so little – how to tell a story, everything that goes into making a movie. Also, we didn't have enough money. We shouldn't have made this film for $1 million. As a result, we couldn't go to Europe to shoot the European scenes. We had to cheat them in the dark through the night, in close-ups in Old Montreal, and it didn't look very good. We shot the film in 27 days. It should have been in 55. All sorts of compromises were made, the biggest of all was the script. I would not today put a script like that into production. It was very far from being good enough. Nonetheless, I still like the film. It has a freshness and a charm that works and the film was very successful. At the time, though, I had no idea that it could be made any better.

Cinema Canada: *As you put together* In Praise of Older Women, *were you developing a sense of the kind of producer you wanted to be and what kind of a business you wanted to create?*

Robert Lantos: In some ways the story of the making of the film *In Praise of Older Women* is so good that I want to keep some of it for a day when I write my memoirs. It's an exquisite case-study. Everything that could possibly go wrong with a movie went wrong. After the quest for the rights came a two-year period, developing the script and trying to get the financing mounted. Operating from a position of great inexperience and a lack of track-record, we barked up every tree. I was a rookie producer and a rookie producer gets a lot more rejection than he gets yes's.

After a couple of years making the rounds, finally we had the financing assembled. Finally we had the film cast. The female lead was going to be played by Bibi Andersson. About a week before shooting, a lot of money had been spent and a lot more committed; the crew had been working for five/six weeks. Tom Berenger was already in town, rehearsing. The sets were built and we were in the last throes of pre-production when... in fact, I was in the boardroom of the CFDC signing the final long-form contracts, which was the final step before the full production financing was turned over to us. Until then we had been floating most of the production with our own funds. There were a dozen people in the boardroom. I got a call. It was a Friday afternoon and I got a call. It was from an AD who said, "I think there's a problem because I was just making Bibi Andersson's flight arrangements with her agent and the agent said, 'She's not coming.'" She was due up the next day from New York. But she wasn't in New York, she was in Sicily. I had a choice of going back to the boardroom and finish signing the papers – all the contracts had her name, and having her in the cast was essential for private financing. Without her, the whole thing would have to be reviewed and the investors would have to be re-contacted, some of whom might pull out and I saw the whole thing falling into limbo. It was a very very tight bud-

• Carefree days on **Your Ticket Is No Longer Valid:** Lantos with publicist Lana Iny and screenplay co-writer Leila Basen

get and we couldn't afford to stay idle and put everybody on payroll on hold while it was settled. It was a panic.

I had to tell everybody in the boardroom that I had this call and at that moment all the pens stopped signing and the film went into limbo. I spent the week-end doing two things. First was I had to go back to the production office and tell the union crew that they couldn't get paid on Friday because the funds had been frozen and we had no more money to pay them. Later that night, I stayed in the office for the next 72 hours. Stephen Roth and myself and a couple of other people stayed at the office trying to figure out what to do. People started coming back one at a time. One crewman brought a bottle of Scotch. They all brought little treats.

Cinema Canada: *How did you feel at that point?*

Robert Lantos: I was collapsed. It was two years of really hard work threatened by some capriciousness for which I really didn't know the reason. If we couldn't put this back on by three days, I would go bankrupt. I would lose all the money I had in the world. It was a high *angst* moment in my life. We had very little time to put it back together. We couldn't afford to keep the crew on doing nothing while we were trying to put the film back together. Also, CFDC had many people line up outside the door for the money they had committed to *In Praise of Older Women.* They had to know immediately whether it was going to go or not, so they couldn reallocate the funds if it wasn't.

That week-end we tried to find Bibi Andersson to find out why she was doing this. But she was at the film festival in Taormina, Sicily. Making a phone call to Sicily alone takes about an hour each time. We had no idea where she was. We tried to track her down. Then we tried to wake up a travel-agent friend who had some brochures and out where the main hotels were in Taormina and start calling them, but we couldn't find her. The next day was Saturday. I lived in Montreal next door to the Italian Consulate. I was walking by the Italian Consulate. I had gone home for a few hours and was walking back to the office in a daze and I thought maybe they can help me track her down. So I went to the Italian Embassy on Saturday, knocked on the door... and there was somebody there. It was a lady cultural attaché. In my state of emotional stress, I told her the whole story and she got very involved and got on the phone... eventually tracked down the Taormina police department through some diplomatic officials in Rome. By Sunday, I had the name and number of someone to call in the Taormina police department. I found somebody who spoke Italian and found a phone number for Bibi Andersson by Sunday afternoon. On Sunday night we spoke to her to find out that she really didn't want to do the film, even though she had a signed contract and had been prepaid. She decided that she was afraid of the nudity after she had read the script and agreed to do it. Paradoxically, later she played a lesbian with Maria Schneider in Hollywood. So that came to naught.

At the same time we tried to find her agent who was on holiday. The only one we could talk to was the secretary. The agent was somewhere in Cape Cod. We called hundreds of Cape Cod numbers and never tracked down the agent. The third quest was to try and replace her with somebody who was immediately available, would work for our money and would work with a first-time producer and barely known director on such short notice. On Friday afternoon we made a list and the first name on that list was Karen Black. What happened here is really the best part of the story, certainly something that has never happened to me again and probably never will again in my career.

Her agent turned out to be one of the senior agents of ICM and I called ICM about 5 o'clock on a Friday afternoon, L.A.-time. The man wouldn't take my call. I called back two or three times. I got different stories – he's gone... he's not gone – couldn't get through. Finally, the third time I was pleading with the secretary trying to convey a sense of emergency when a familiar voice comes on the phone in L.A. He says to me in Hungarian, "Up yours." I asked, "Who are you and what are you doing... who are you?" I thought I was waiting to speak to Karen Black's agent. It turned out that it was a friend of mine that I had met at some festivals around the world a number of times. His name was Andy Vajna, now known as the producer of *Rambo.* At the time he was just starting a foreign sales company called Carolco. He happened to be sitting in the office of this agent when my call came and overheard my name over the speaker and picked up the phone. I asked Andy if he was in a position to get a favour from the agent. He said he was. I asked him to get the agent to arrange for Karen Black to expect the script which I would send to her directly to read over the weekend. We packed somebody off to the airport with a script. George Kaczender's brother who lived in L.A. at the time, drove out to the airport, took it off the plane and by late Friday night the script was in Karen Black's hands in L.A.

Meanwhile, we're all gathered in the office Sunday night – Stephen Roth, Kaczender, myself and a couple of the faithful. The phone rings and it's Karen Black. The phone number was on the cover of the script and she says, "I love your script. I want to play this part. I want to make this movie." And she spent the next couple of hours talking to the director and myself about it and made an absolute total commitment to play it. We obviously were very relieved.

That's only the first chapter. The second chapter started Monday morning. I get a call from her agent. He is beside himself because he hadn't found out that Karen had committed to make the film. I told Karen what the dates were and he said, "She can't do the film next week. She's signed and committed to do a picture in Australia which starts to shoot also in a week. She can't possibly do it. You have to wait. And, also, how much money have you got?" All we had was about half of her fee, but I had told her that's what we had and she said that was okay. The Australian picture happened to be an ICM package. They represented the producer, the director and the entire cast. If she pulled out of that they would have the same fate that we had with Bibi Andersson.

But I had my own problems. We had conference calls. Karen said if she had to make a choice she was going to do *In Praise.* The middle of the night I get a call from the Australian producer who is as panicky as I had been the day before. He tells me, "You can't do this. I've got a submarine and I can only get it for two weeks. I can't delay it" and so on. This goes on – three days back and forth. Meanwhile, of course, until it's resolved we're in limbo. Pressure is on from everywhere to pull the plug on the film. Finally Karen says, "Can't you delay somehow, so that I can go and do the Australian and then do *In Praise of Older Women?"* And I said, "We don't have the money to delay." She says, "How much would it cost you to delay for two weeks?" I gave her a ballpark figure, with her agent on the phone. She said, "I know what to do. Don't pay me a salary." The figure I gave would be about the same as her salary. "Then you have enough money to postpone for two weeks and then I can do both films." The agent, who has since become a friend, tried desperately to end the conversation right there. He said, "You didn't hear that... you didn't say that." But I did hear it. That's exactly the deal we made. We postponed the film by two weeks. Karen went to Australia and then did *In Praise.* She got paid ACTRA scale – $150 a day and she got points instead of salary which, as it turned out, she did very well on. Afterwards when the film was made I felt it only fair that Carolco should handle the foreign sales of *In Praise of Older Women.*

Cinema Canada: *How did the film do in the end?*

Robert Lantos: It was very successful. It wasn't a blockbuster. Box-office in Canada was $2 million. In the U.S. it was about $8 million and foreign it was about another $4.5-$5 million. Altogether it was about $16 million box-office. It did well on video later on and TV. It must be one of the most exploited pay TV films on pay-television anywhere. It also got very good notices for the most part. It

was particularly successful in Italy. It was picked up by Embassy for the U.S. and Warner Brothers in the rest of the world.

Cinema Canada: *When you finished with* In Praise of Older Women, *did you have any clearer sense of what you wanted to do as a producer?*
Robert Lantos: I didn't have long-term projects... I had no desire to do more than one picture a year. What I wanted to do was to set up a boutique operation and spend a long time each picture I produced, stay very close with it as I had *In Praise of Older Women.* I was very involved in writing and in casting, from the crew right down to the last electrician and into the budgeting and scheduling and the running of the set.

I was like glue to absolutely every frame of this film and that's how I wanted to continue working. I was not thinking beyond one project at a time. The next project was already settled. It was going to be *Agency* which was a thriller that took place in an advertising agency and dealt with subliminal advertising, a very original concept and it had never been dealt with before. I was fascinated by it and was determined that that would be my next film long before *In Praise of Older Women* was finished.

Cinema Canada: *About* In Praise, *you said that was a very personal choice and a book that had meant a lot to you. How did you go about selecting* Agency?
Robert Lantos: Very different. I must say that I never again, after *In Praise of Older Women,* did a film that I had a long-standing emotional commitment to until *Joshua Then and Now.* Long-standing emotional commitments are not necessarily the best reasons to make a film, in fact often they are the worst. And I didn't do that again until *Joshua.* I was turned on by the concept of *Agency.* I thought it had a very strong commercial potential because it was unique. Between what we set out to do and the end-product, I learned a great deal about what compromising can do to a movie. *Agency* turned out to be the first movie in Canada financed by the prospectus. It was one of the first financed by a brokerage film. It suffered tremendously from artificial pressures imposed upon it. This led to a lot of compromises which in turn led to a film that really wasn't the film I had set out to make. But, to go back to the reasons for the original choice. It wasn't a project that I had a long-standing emotional closeness to, that I could identify with personally. I had no personal relationship with the advertising world and certainly I was not sentimental about it, the way I had been about *In Praise of Older Women.* It was done for different reasons. It was a subject for the international commercial movie market.

Although *In Praise* was personal to me, it certainly is not what you would consider a personal movie. It was a movie that spoke to millions of people and dealt with mainstream experiences although it was quite rooted in a particular culture. It was dealing with love and culture-shock and sex and romance and the comedy of it all. Pretty mainstream, pretty universal. The only decision I reached at that time was that I wanted only to make films whose subject matter I was personally interested in, movies that I would want to see, that were challenging and interesting. I did not want to make formula films. I did not want to make *City on Fire,* to name a film that was being made at the same time. I had no desire to try and do something that was a carbon copy of the film released the previous week by somebody else. In fact, I thought that would be very unchallenging and boring. I was much more interested in taking risks and looking for material that had never been dealt with before. Hence, *Agency.* Hence *Suzanne.* Hence, *Your Ticket is No Longer Valid.*

Cinema Canada: *And yet you didn't achieve in the end what you wanted.*
Robert Lantos: Well, we started off with a highly original premise and along the way ended up compromising to the point where it became a very ordinary movie... not a bad movie, a film that had some very strong points. It's certainly very slick and much more professional and much glossier than *In Praise of Older Women.* Basically what happened is that first of all we never found the right writer.

Then we ran into the evils of the tax-shelter game. It was 1978. *In Praise of Older Women* had just been released and was a huge hit in Canada and was being picked up world-wide for distribution. Financing was knocking on the door for another film. We needed to make another film for other reasons. We took no fees out of *In Praise of Older Women.* We had to make money. Also, it was a golden opportunity for us. In excess of $4 million was available to us to do *Agency,* but there were strings attached.

First the principal photography had to be completed by December 31 which means that we had to start ready or not. If you start before you're ready, you're dead. Nothing you can do could possibly solve the problems. If you can't lick it in the script you'll never lick it on the screen. You can fuck-up a good script but you can't make a good movie out of a bad script. It's impossible. So there was pressure to start.

The second form of pressure came from the brokerage firm raising the money very enthusiastically and very co-operatively. They needed star-names to bring in the investors. They needed the names of the stars that their clients knew. Investors didn't go to the movies much because they weren't very young – the demographics of film investors are somewhere between 35 and 55 which is an audience that watches a lot of television and goes to movies maybe once a year. They needed a star that their investors could recognize. That was the sex appeal the package had to have, even if it was being produced at that time by the hottest producers in town, which we were. It needed the sex-appeal of a star because of so many other packages around and they all had stars. So we had to have a star. The investor could then say, "I put my $10,000 dollars into a Robert Mitchum movie." You have your cocktail party and all the investors get to meet Mitchum or whoever. The pressure was for us to have a name or two, in this case two names.

We did two terrible things. We started with a script that was miles away from being ready and we miscast the film. We went into production with Lee Majors playing the role of a fairly intellectual advertising art director who unravels a complex and devious plot. It was a very unlikely piece of casting which created the wrong expectations for the film. The other problem was we had to have it cast by a certain date, because of the tax-shelter. I learned a lot about the compromises one must and must not make.

Cinema Canada: *Who put together the financial package on this?*
Robert Lantos: It was entirely done as a tax-shelter public offering done by Stephen Roth with our lawyers – Stanley Hartt, now deputy minister of Finance, designed the first public offering in Canada.

Cinema Canada: *Did you have the same kind of involvement in this picure that you had on* In Praise?
Robert Lantos: I intended to, but I got sidetracked. As we got closer and closer, suddenly I found myself having to spend a great deal of time on the financing. I had to have meeting after meeting with stockholders explaining to them how things worked, how their money would be recouped and how the money would be spent. I did dog and pony shows in half-a-dozen cities talking to potential investors and brokers. I spent a great deal of time doing things that had nothing to do with making a film.

Cinema Canada: *Did you line up any pre-sales or distributors?*
Robert Lantos: No. The only thing we did was we made a deal with Carolco to handle world-wide sales outside Canada. Carolco was not a distribution company. They sold to distributors, which is a specialized business that requires staffing and knowledge and expertise and financing of its own. We were not going to go into that and so we had to do it with somebody. We did it with Carolco because they did a good job on *In Praise of Older Women.*

They did a very good job on *Agency.* They went to the film market in Milan when we had just started shooting and sold it to every major country in the world, except the U.S., in a matter of a few days for a very significant number of dollars. There were presales but they were made after we were financed and shooting. They put together a six-minute product reel which they showed to distributors.

Cinema Canada: *What happened in the States?*
Robert Lantos: We had a great deal of trouble getting distribution. Eventually it was picked up by Jensen-Farley, an independent distributor which went belly up subsequently. At the time it was one of the most active independents. They released it in California and in Texas where the box-office was very lukewarm. They then stopped the release. It was sold to pay-TV and came out on Home Video. We made a syndication deal with Viacom.

Abroad, I'm afraid it didn't work anywhere. The distributors lost money. Some of them reneged on their deals after we opened in a couple of territories. The end-product looked like it was going to be a *macho* action picture. Instead it was a film based on an intellectual premise with a cast that didn't measure up to that. It had the sell of a lowbrow action picture and the content, not well executed, of a high-brow psychological thriller. It didn't satisfy anybody.

Cinema Canada: *Who handled it in Canada?*
Robert Lantos: It was released by Ambassador in English and Vivafilm in French.

Cinema Canada: *What happened to the reputation of the "hot-shot" producers after* Agency?
Robert Lantos: Several people said to me, "Welcome to show biz." You have to make a failure to begin to learn. Because *L'Ange et la femme* and, in a much bigger way, the succes of *In Praise* prevented me from learning many things which I then learned on *Agency.* But it took me another film to learn that you don't go into a movie unless you have your distribution in place.

Cinema Canada: *You had by this time started your next project?*
Robert Lantos: We started and finished *Suzanne* and were halfway through shooting *Your Ticket Is No Longer Valid.*

Cinema Canada: *Was there a particular reason for going to a Canadian theme with* Suzanne?
Robert Lantos: I thought there was a story worth telling about the English and the French in Quebec. First of all I wanted it told in English. I felt it should be couched in a popular plot to make it accessible to as wide an audience as possible. An audience may not be interested in English-French conflict in Quebec, would be interested in a moving love story wherever it was set. The cultural-social-political dilemma could give a richness to that story. I wanted to find stories that dealt with the cultural richness we have here in Canada. I thought this most drama-filled conflict hadn't been told well in English at all. The only other attempt had been *Two Solitudes* which was a textbook of mine in high-school. I can't imagine any compulsory book making a good movie. I wanted to do something more contemporary and to do something that was full of passion – not dry.

Cinema Canada: *Did you come to these movies with a sense of visual style or were you content to let the directors take charge of that as long as the story conveyed what you wanted?*
Robert Lantos: In all the movies I had a sense of the style I wanted – a visual sense of how they should look. They all looked the way they should. Obviously, the director had as much say as I did. The look was something we would discuss quite early on. It was clear to me that a Robin Spry film was going to look different from a Carle or Kaczender one. Robin comes from a documentary tradition and there was going to be more of a *cinéma vérité* grottiness to *Suzanne* than *Agency* which I thought would work for that story. That was one reason why I did *Suzanne.* The other reason was I really like Robin Spry's previous work.

Cinema Canada: *Was it difficult arranging the financing for* Suzanne?
Robert Lantos: Now you're getting into the hey day of tax-shelter financing. It was never easy because you had

to work with a prospectus. *Suzanne* was actually quite difficult because I wanted to cast the film with Canadians and no stars. It didn't make sense to tell this kind of story and then ship in actors who had no identification, no knowledge whatsoever of it. Everyone was committed to doing it with Canadians. Normally that was anathema to the stockbrokers but the budget was very low. It was just over a million dollars – this was 1979, and Canada was full of five, six and seven million dollar packages. *Agency* was still in post-production and so the jury was out. The numbers for *In Praise of Older Women* were coming back and were rosier all the time. I was the star of *Suzanne*. It was financed by investors and brokers because I was producing it and I said it would be good.

Cinema Canada: *How did it turn out from your point of view?*

Robert Lantos: That too was a learning experience. But it's a film that I was happy with. It has flaws. Actually every film I ever made has flaws. *Suzanne* had glaring flaws. All of which had to do with the script. Once again the script wasn't ready. We went into production and were rewriting on the set each day. I think on the whole it was a good film and it stands up to time very well. Everytime it plays on CBC people watch it, I get phone calls. They have some very significant numbers on it at CBC everytime it plays. I like the film. There are moments in it that I don't like – heavy-handed, melodramatic. Perhaps I didn't have the experience to catch that and go against it in the shooting. On the whole it's a good movie and it gave rise to a lot of very talented actors who we had never seen before. Winston Rekert, Michael Ironside, Gabriel Arcand. I also met my wife on that movie – Jennifer Dale. The film led to a lot of careers, as did *In Praise of Older Women*.

Cinema Canada: *It sounds as though* Suzanne *has a special place in your heart for different reasons from, say,* In Praise of Older Women.

Robert Lantos: *In Praise* conquered my heart before shooting *Suzanne*. I think it was disgracefully savaged by critics in Toronto when it played at the film festival there, which caused a tremendous set-back in its commercial career. *Suzanne* got terrible reviews at the Toronto film festival for reasons I will never understand. Certainly it was the kind of movie, with all its faults, that everybody was screaming that the Canadian producers were not making. It was not a film that showcased imported has-been American stars. It was not a film about some unnamed American city or where Toronto or Montreal were posing as Philadelphia or San Francisco. It was a film that dealt with a very indigenous, uniquely Canadian theme. It showcased young Canadian talent. It was a film that gave a chance to direct to one of this country's young "turks" who had been committed to a career to make the movies in Canada. It was based on a Canadian novel. It was all the things that most of the tax-shelter films weren't. Why it was savaged with such venom I will never understand.

Much later there were some second reviews published which were quite apologetic and everybody re-reviewed the film. After the Toronto festival we cut some six minutes or five minutes out of it. All of a sudden Toronto papers ran second reviews saying now the film is very good because they drastically re-cut it. But the damage had been done. The results of the reviews of *Suzanne* from the festival were that most of the play-dates which had been set in Canada were immediately cancelled. The exhibitors got nervous; the distributor, Ambassador, also got nervous. Understandably so, because when you open a film in Canada first, what do you have to sell it? You don't have the huge publicity machine that the studios put into place. The only chance a movie has is to rely a great deal on what the Canadian media say about the film.

Even that wouldn't be that important if you were dealing with an exploitation film, an action picture or very sexy movie, something where the people who go to see it don't really care and don't read the reviews anyway. But when you're dealing with a film that is none of those things and it has to appeal to filmgoers on its own qualities and the reviews are unbelievably bad, how are you going to sell that film? The film sat on the shelf for several months after and then eventually it was released in one 100-seat theatre – Cineplex in Ottawa – to see if there was any kind of audience. In Ottawa where nobody had heard of the bad reviews, the reviews were quite favourable and the people came. Subsequently it slowly spread across Canada. Eventually it had a moderately successful, respectable commercial career theatrically. It took such a long time. By that time it was a small movie that was old hat which had no advertising dollars behind it. So it had a mild career.

Cinema Canada: *Did it have any play outside of Canada?*

Robert Lantos: It was released in a small way by Fox Classics in the U.S. where it got unanimously superb reviews. It didn't do significant box-office but it returned a few dollars to us. It was released in, I think, 15 or 16 countries abroad. It was a hit in Hong Kong. It wasn't a hit anywhere else but everywhere it had a respectable, quiet career. It didn't get a single bad review anywhere in the world outside of Toronto and I never understood that.

Cinema Canada: *Did the investors recoup on* Suzanne *eventually?*

Robert Lantos: Each year they get closer and closer, every time it plays somewhere.

Cinema Canada: *Has it gone to video yet?*

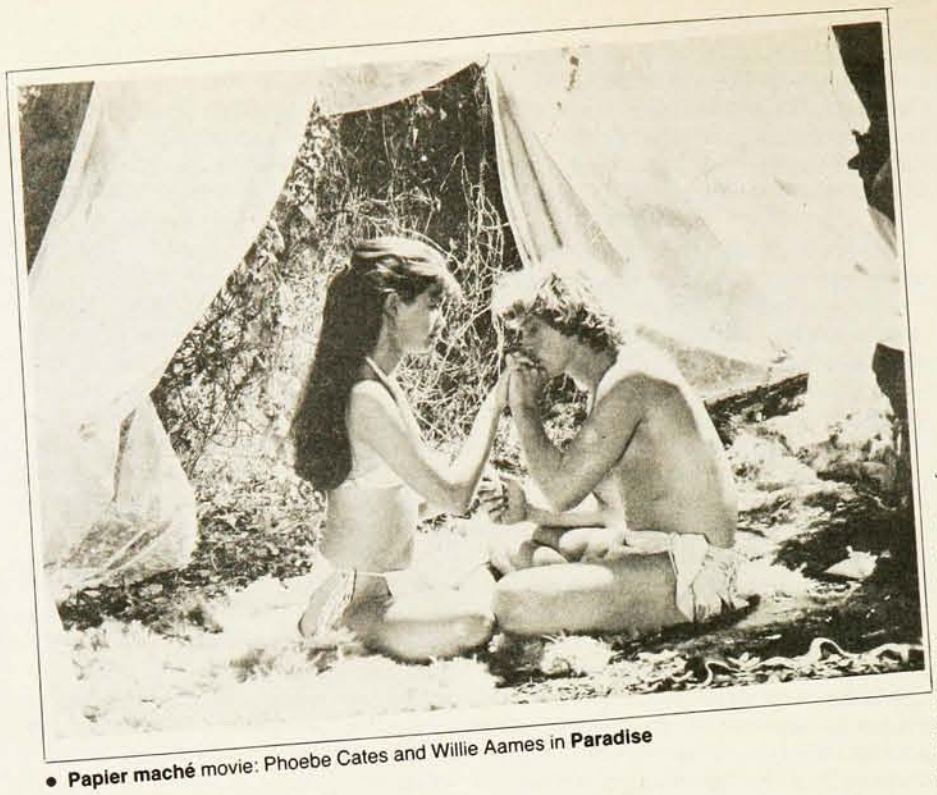
Robert Lantos: It's been out on cassette. I'm not sure what the numbers are. The last time I looked they were very close.

Cinema Canada: *Did that embitter you in any way about making that kind of a film?*

Robert Lantos: Yeah. It did. That and what followed next with *Your Ticket is*

No Longer Valid. Suzanne was a disappointment because of what the Toronto media-mafia decided to do it more than anything else. I never expected it to be a commercially very important movie but I certainly thought it would recoup its loss and be a movie I could be proud of, which I am. It was a disappointment, though not a catastrophe. It was picked up by 20th Century Fox which in itself was quite significant. The disaster was *Your Ticket is No Longer Valid.* That made me re-think my whole *modus operandi* and change my way of doing business quite drastically.

Your Ticket is no Longer Valid was the last time I did a film without presales. To this day I think it is a brilliant idea for a movie. But here is a big lesson. If you're going to make a movie about an incredibly sensitive subject, a very difficult subject – an impotent man who loses his empire – really a film that is *hors categorie* which would make *Suzanne* look like a genre film – with that kind of movie you had better have brilliance everywhere. No compromises creatively at any level whatsoever or you're dead. If you're shooting a *papier maché* movie like *Paradise* you can compromise it to death. You don't need brilliant people to make them work and probably you won't get brilliant people. When you're doing a movie like *Your Ticket is No Longer Valid,* the only thing to compare it to is *Last Tango in Paris* or *Nicholas Roeg's Bad Timing.* Because we were making *Last Tango in Paris* without Bertolucci, without Brando. *A Last Tango* directed by George Kaczender and starring Richard Harris would be questionable.



• **Papier maché** movie: Phoebe Cates and Willie Aames in **Paradise**

Cinema Canada: *What made you think you could tackle it?*

Robert Lantos: Things were happening so fast. We went into that film when *Agency* was just finishing post-production. The lessons of *Agency* were not yet learned. *Suzanne* had just finished shooting. It was happening so fast that really the lessons of previous films had not been digested. We went into it with the same problems as *Agency.* We had to be finished by December 31. Because the budget was $5.5 million, we had to deliver a star that meant something to our investors. In fact, we had two stars. Take a look at who they were: Richard Harris and George Peppard. We didn't have stars, but highly paid actors who once were stars. We had to start way before the script was in shape.

We inherited a script that another producer had developed which turned the novel quite upside down and tried to inject it with a lot of action scenes. We acquired the novel three months before shooting began. We had a month or so to fix up the script. We rushed in with an inexperienced writer, talented, but not up to the difficulty of the material. He didn't solve any of the problems. Still the script was unique in many ways – so good that it could have worked had everything else gone right. Everything else went as wrong as it could possibly go.

By that time the Canadian film industry was looked upon by Hollywood as a way for unemployed ex-stars to make a big buck and not a place where you would send anybody with a career goal. If casting Lee Major in *Agency* was questionable, casting Harris in this part was absurd. But he was the only one who had the name, who was available, who was willing to go. That's how he ended up being cast. He was the right age. Richard Harris, in turn, immediately upon arrival set out systematically to destroy this film. To this day, I don't think he ever read the screenplay until he arrived on location. He took it based on money. He had no idea what it was all about. He read it and hated it immediately. He pulled every conceivable stunt that you have ever read about by the most spoiled stars in the world to undermine the film. He physically smashed objects, attempting to terrorize the crew, successfully terrorizing the director, terrorizing the rest of the cast. He also tried to rewrite the script, not only his lines but everybody else's lines. He refused to shoot anything other than what he had written. This led to non-stop guerrilla warfare between him and me. The victim was the movie.

The rest of the cast tried very much to make it work. Peppard was very good. So was Jeanne Moreau, but it was Harris's film. He was in virtually every scene and he played it as if he were Julius Caesar. The result is a performance that made the film a travesty and when you're making that kind of movie, you've got nothing to fall back on. If you're making a film about a high-rise that collapse or a subway that crashes or a plane that explodes or about a bunch of horny teenagers who go to a bordello to get laid, you have certain basic visceral thrills to fall back on. You can go for a quick one- or two-week release and get a certain type of audience. When you're making a movie that has to be perfect to work and, instead, you have the opposite, you really have nothing. That's unfortunately what happened with *Your Ticket is No Longer Valid* which was a total failure. Investors will never come close to recouping. It really made me stop and rethink what I was doing.

Cinema Canada: *You mentioned earlier that you learned something from* Agency *about not compromising. Here's a project that you recognized form the outset as being very special and yet you fell back into the same traps again.*

Robert Lantos: I hadn't quite digested the lessons of *Agency.* It wasn't out yet. You don't really know what you have until you sit with an audience of 500 people who pay to get in and you watch their reaction. That's when you know. Until then you don't. The tendency, especially for novice producers, is to believe that you have something better than you really have. Everybody wants to believe that. So you don't really know. I didn't really know how badly *Agency* was going to do until I saw it in a theatre with 500 people, and then I knew.

Cinema Canada: *Do you feel you were moving too fast at the time and sometimes just too eagerly to get ahead and create something?*

Robert Lantos: It was a boom climate, you know. There was money flowing. Money was available for all the wrong reasons. If I didn't do these films, that money was going to go to someone else who frankly would have made films, certainly no better, probably worse and certainly a lot less ambitious. These are all ambitious projects. They were being made at a time when films like *Terror Train* and *Death Ship* and *Crunch, City of Fire, My Bloody Valentine, Prom Night,* and *High Point* were being made. There were a good 50 or 60 films that had absolutely no ambition to be anything other than a very pale carbon copy of bad movies made in the States. Ours were ambitious films. They didn't quite work. *Ticket* was a disaster; *Suzanne* worked partially; *Agency* worked partially. They were ambitious. They set out somehow to do something different, something strong. The talent was not available in Canada. There just wasn't the level and depth of talent in Canada to make a film like *Your Ticket* succeed. We just didn't have a Bertolucci; we didn't have a Brando. We didn't have the writers to polish that kind of material. For that matter, I didn't have the experience to deal with the material.

In looking back, I can see three phases in my professional activity. But they're not three phases in the sense that I did in phase one a certain kind of films, and phase two I did something else, and phase three I did something else. Phase two is a total departure from phase one and out of that thesis and antithesis came a kind of synthesis. And the synthesis really is phase three which is not a relapse into phase one, but rather finding a way to succeed and survive in the peculiar context of being an independent producer based in Canada.

For a second I'm skipping to phase three. At first glance it would seem to be quite an eclectic approach to production. At the same as making *Joshua Then and Now,* we also made and are continuing to make *Night Heat.* They are diametric opposites. Right after *Joshua Then and Now,* I made *Separate Vacations* which is in itself a kind of opposite. You cannot only make the films that you want to see playing in the theatre.

The criteria that are more important are projects that make business sense, that have a guaranteed niche in the market place which comes from the involvement of a major distributor from the very beginning, whether it's a feature film, or whether it's for pay television or network. If a project cannot find an end-user before it goes into production, and there are always exceptions, it shouldn't be made. It's too tough to penetrate the mainstream distribution system after the fact.

Cinema Canada: *Is that something that depresses you?*

Robert Lantos: My initial reaction to that reality was that I was determined to challenge it. I was convinced that if I really liked something, sooner or later there would be somebody else who would see the merit of it. Even if that is the case, the reality is the shadow between the dream and the reality itself. Even if your dream is well-conceived, by the time it's executed, the outcome is not what you had intended.

Cinema Canada: *Which is what you have been talking about with* Your Ticket is No Longer Valid.

Robert Lantos: If you can't sell your dream to those that have to buy it, i.e. your distributors, when it's at the dream stage, which is before you've had to make all your compromises, it's going to be tougher to sell the reality, which is often less than the dream, because of a lot of shadows that happen in between. And so penetrating the distribution system is like a litmus test. If you can't pass it, you really shouldn't be producing it, even if somehow you can get the financing for it. Because your odds of pulling if off are so slim. I have to focus the little time that I have and the limited amount of energy that I have to projects which have passed that litmus test and which at least have a guaranteed access to the mass-market. Whether they will succeed on the mass-market is, of course, another question. But you cannot succeed if you have no access.

Cinema Canada: *In terms of that, if you look back at your career as a Canadian producer, what would you say about it? Would you like to point to specific films or would you like to be able to say that you were able to create a company that could survive as a company rather than as a one-shot boutique operation?*

Robert Lantos: Both. I think the most important thing is, if we are able to, and so far we have been and have just taken a very big step, if we're able to function as mainstream producers on the world-production map based in Canada on an ongoing basis, which is something that has never been done successfully, then I have accomplished something important. And not only to myself. It proves a point that is very much in question and has been very much in question everywhere in the world. Is it possible anywhere outside of the United States to run what you would define as a studio? In England, Goldcrest has been doing it with a great degree of success, but I can't think of many others outside of the U.S.

Cinema Canada: *So the model is a studio operation which would have the ability to finance and have the kind of distribution connections for products?*
Robert Lantos: Yes. Exactly. But at the same time it's not enough of a goal for me personally. That is the shell one must have in order then to concentrate my own personal energy, from time-to-time, into projects that I can later look back on as landmarks in my career. The landmarks are kind of like a roof on a high-rise. You must have a basement and then you must have a retaining wall. Then you can more realistically think in terms of putting a roof on the whole thing. The roof in this case stands for making dream-projects that you and you alone believe should be made – *Joshua Then and Now* stands out.

The first five films that we discussed before are all in that genre or rather they're not in any genre at all. They are all completely unique projects that were either conceived of by myself and my associates or they are based on works of literature that were selected by myself with the attitude that I will make it work somehow. To make those kinds of projects you have to have a structure on which they can stand – financially, esthetically, and in terms of personnel, in terms of relationships and distribution contacts. The landmark projects are the ones that benefit the most from the existence of such a structure because they are always more difficult to find distribution interest for. It is always easier to package one such project in the midst of five or eight or twelve easier projects where the demand comes from the distributor.

Take, for example, *Night Heat,* where we had orders for X number of episodes from CBS and CTV. Then we made the episodes. Those are shows that are so totally pre-sold, not only are they pre-sold, but they are made-to-measure. They are tailored for the demands and the slot the distributor has allocated for the show, including the time and the day when it will be broadcast. All that goes into consideration when designing the material, the script, casting and so on. A balanced diet is having enough production which is made for the distribution system. In a sense that is where phase two comes in because – to take specific examples – we could never have made *Joshua Then and Now* if we had not made *Heavenly Bodies* or *Bedroom Eyes* or *Paradise.* And the realization that came out of that is that is that we can continue to make films like *Joshua Then and Now,* but only in the context of a very well thought-out, very solidly-structured production house which does not depend upon a project like *Joshua* to survive financially, to pay a staff, to earn money required to develop other projects, a production house where those basic needs are taken care of by other projects.

Cinema Canada: *In your remembering* Your Ticket is No Longer Valid, *one could see the frustration in you still coming out. The fact that things hadn't worked out the way you wanted – that you hadn't been able to produce a film that you had seen in your head seemed to affect you greatly. At any point did you say to yourself, "The hell with this for now?"*
Robert Lantos: We made a decision dictated by two things. First, by having learned from the experiences and, second, by economic reality. I had every intention of surviving and it was clear that we had to start making, not only serious money, for ourselves and for our financial backers. We had done that on our first couple of films, and had done it less and less on the subsequent films which led to a disaster on *Your Ticket is No Longer Valid.* The sole criteria for selecting a project at that moment became to what degree it could be pre-sold. If they couldn't be pre-sold, no matter how much I liked them, we would not pursue them. If they could be pre-sold, no matter how much I disliked them I would pursue them.

Cinema Canada: *Did you select that particular genre of bedroom farce as your economic life preserver?*
Robert Lantos: Not exactly. What I did was I took a totally dramatic turn. Whereas the selection process prior to that had been I produce what I like, I was now going to produce only that which others within the distribution system liked, regardless of whether I liked it or not.

Cinema Canada: *Were you at that time close to financial failure as a company?*
Robert Lantos: After *Ticket is No Longer Valid* it was very difficult. Let me put it this way. We were not a giant profit-making machine for our investors. I had to come up with a project that was so well-covered by advance distribution commitments that the risk to financial backers would be minimum or nil in order to attract financial backers after having lost so much money on the last film.

We were never facing backruptcy, but we were facing an erosion of confidence. We made a film on which a lot of people lost a great deal of money. That leads to an erosion of confidence. It happened to coincide with the collapse of the tax-shelter in Canada. That did not augur very well.

The adjustment from a position of supreme arrogance. – when if I thought something worked I automatically assumed that it would be good enough – to a position of making my own judgments subservient to others was not easy. It involved a serious re-examining of just how much I knew about what I was doing. I'm glad to report that after a couple of years I came to the conclusion that actually I knew quite a bit, but I was operating from a position of extreme weakness in Canada, outside of the system.

Cinema Canada: *Survival of the company and as a producer and as a force in the Canadian film business seems to be a central concern.*
Robert Lantos: That would be most important. There is a cliché that before you can dream of flying, you have to be able to walk. It was more like growing-up. In the process of growing-up we have to shed our skins in order to put on new skins. We outgrow certain ways of thinking. There is some pain and anguish that goes with that process. That kind of thing doesn't go without a great deal of anguish.

The next film I made was a movie called *Paradise.* The person who wrote and directed it came to see me with Franco Jean Corman. They had this idea of doing a film that was very similar in style and genre to *Blue Lagoon* which had been a tremendous success. I then tested that idea on the head of a distribution company, Avco/Embassy, who was very enthusiastic about it. We made a deal with Avco/Embassy to co-finance and release the film world-wide before there was a screenplay, before there was a treatment, before there was a cast with only an inexperienced first-time director in place. It was based on nothing other than a one-hour conversation and a one-page outline of the idea. What enthused the distribution company most was the title and the concept for a poster for an ad that came out of our first meeting. The film was done backwards. It was designed for the advertising campaign, which is how films and television shows are often made. The film was then developed very quickly – script and the creative element and the financing were all put together very quickly.

Cinema Canada: *Where did you go for the financing?*

Robert Lantos: It was financed with private investors in Canada. The broker who raised the money was Larry Nesis. That was only possible because the risk had been drastically reduced through Embassy's guarantee. The majority of the risk was in fact covered from a minimum guarantee of revenue from Avco/Embassy. That combined with the capital cost created a situation where an investor had no risk. That made it possible to raise the financing. At the point the investors were not so much betting on us, they were buying a deal that made economic sense regardless of who the players were.

Cinema Canada: *What was the budget?*

Robert Lantos: *Paradise* was $4 million. There was a film for which I had absolutely no affinity either to the story or to any of the elements involved. It was so different from all my previous involvements with film. Here, I had absolutely zero emotional attachment. Perhaps in some ways I was a better producer for it. I found it much easier to make strictly production decisions. The film itself was not a box-office smash. It was released when it was supposed to be released, over a thousand prints on the same day. Avco/Embassy, with a huge advertising campaign, reached every country in the world. It was a success in a couple of places. In Italy where it was one of the top five films of the year and we made a lot of money. Although the film was a box-office failure, it grossed world-wide some $15 or $16 million of which more than half was in the United States and yet it was a failure. It proves, even though ultimately the public did not buy it, just because it was in the system, it could make money.

• Carole Laure in **L'Ange et la femme:** the right opportunity

Cinema Canada: *You found a method of pre-selling knowing the kinds of films you wanted to do – package them, satisfy the investors, establish a reasonable financial base for yourself and your company. Yet the reviews of the sort of things you were doing were very uncomplimentary. How did you feel about that?*

Robert Lantos: Did I talk to you about what I think is the bizarre phenomenon of Canadian critics? The reviews in Canada of *Suzanne* were far worse than *Paradise* so I certainly was not going to concern myself very much with what critics have to say. The way they reacted was not consequential to my business plans. We were making very cold and hard decisions and how *The Globe & Mail* or *Cinema Canada* was going to react to what we were making really was not one of the ingredients that went into the decision.

Cinema Canada: *I keep reading comments that Canadian producers in general, and this is not just yourself, are a terrible lot. They only do bad imitations of bad American films. They can't do things properly up here. You get tarred with the same brush. How do you feel about that?*

Robert Lantos: You know, Canadian producers have been castigated to the point of utter boredom in Canada and the most absurd comparison comes always with Australia. As if somehow Australia would be a golden model: they have succeeded where we have failed.

I have a couple of things to say about this. In Australia they don't feel about it that way. If you read interviews that Dusan Makavejev gave to the Canadian Press when he was here to open *The Coca Cola Kid,* a new Australian film, you'll find that he talks about Australian producers as a bunch of tax-shelter merchants who have no concern whatsoever about the films they are producing. He found it a nightmare working in Australia, and if you talk to a lot of Australian directors and a lot of Australian press, you'll get the same reactions.

I think everywhere in the world where you have a new industry born in a gold rush you have a certain pirate mentality. The gold rush, attracts more than the usual number of fastbuck artists and callous individuals who are really not interested in filmmaking but in reaping quick profit. Canada is not unique in that. This same thing happened in Germany and in England.

The degree to which it happened here has been so blown out of proportion that it's absurd. In fact, Canada has been quite successful, if you look at it in terms of the overall picture. No matter how many poor films were made here during the boom years, a few good ones were made too. If you look at the law of averages, you'll find that in Hollywood, where they've had some 80 years' experience and enormous resources, financial and creative and technical which we can never match, the studios make money on maybe one out of every three of four films they produce. Each studio has amazing numbers of unreleased films sitting on their shelves that they had fully financed.

That's the nature of the industry that we're in. For every good film made, that is also financially successful, there are 10-15 films made that don't fit both of those criteria, or more. That's in the U.S. where there is a wealth of experience and talent. In other countries, like France or Italy, the rations worse. The only Italian or French films that get released in North America are the cream of the crop of annual production. For every Antonioni or Fellini or Bertoluccui, there are 30 or 40 or 50 cheap sex films or Italian Westerns or cop movies which are released only in Italy and which you never hear about. But they're made.

Here there are a lot of uninformed people who have access to the press who will point fingers to other film industries and compare the Canadian film industry to them and come to the ridiculous conclusion that somehow we are not as good as they are. It stems, I think, from a national inferiority complex I find it difficult to share as an immigrant. It tends to attempt to look always for what is worse, and when there is a Canadian who is successful, attempts desperately to cut him down to size. Personally I accumulated I think more than my share of enemies while I was in my initial phase of success. They were kind of laying in ambush for me at the first opportunity, so that they could cut away at that success because it was disturbing to them.

Cinema Canada: *Let me bring you back to* Joshua Then and Now. *At what point did you feel ready to undertake a project which you have called unique. Wasn't it a big risk?*

Robert Lantos: Why don't we set the record straight about the whole myth about the disastrous performance of the Canadian film industry which is no more disastrous than the performance of any other film industry in any other part of the world?

Over the last ten years – I won't bother making a complete list now – more Canadian films had world-wide exposure and varying degrees of commercial success and critical recognition outside of their own country than French films, or Italian films or German films, or Australian films. There have been some 40 or 50 Canadian films picked up by major studios for international release. No other country in the world has ever accomplished that except Canada. There are years when every major studio was involved in at least one or two Canadian films, releasing Canadian films, financing Canadian films. A lot of American money has come into Canada to finance Canadian productions because of a recognition. A lot of French money has also come in to financing Canadian productions. I can give you many examples. They range from *Porky's* to our own *In Praise of Older Women,* from *The Grey Fox* and *Ticket to Heaven* to *Terror Train, Father Christmas* or *Joshua Then and Now,* or *Tribute* or *The Changeling* or *Quest For Fire* or *Atlantic City* – a long list of films that accomplished the dream of every producer living outside of the U.S. which is to successfully compete with the gigantic American monster by penetrating its own systems.

Cinema Canada: *But* Joshua Then and Now *is a very Canadian film, isn't it?*

Robert Lantos: I'm not saying that one mustn't, one shouldn't make films which are indigenously Canadian. Quite the contrary. But I could have never produced *Joshua Then and Now* and I don't think anybody else in this country could have, with the possible exception of Kemeny and Héroux, had I not made all those other films. I would not have had either the clout or the know-how or the financial ability.

Cinema Canada: *At what point did you feel you had all those things together and were ready to take the risk?*

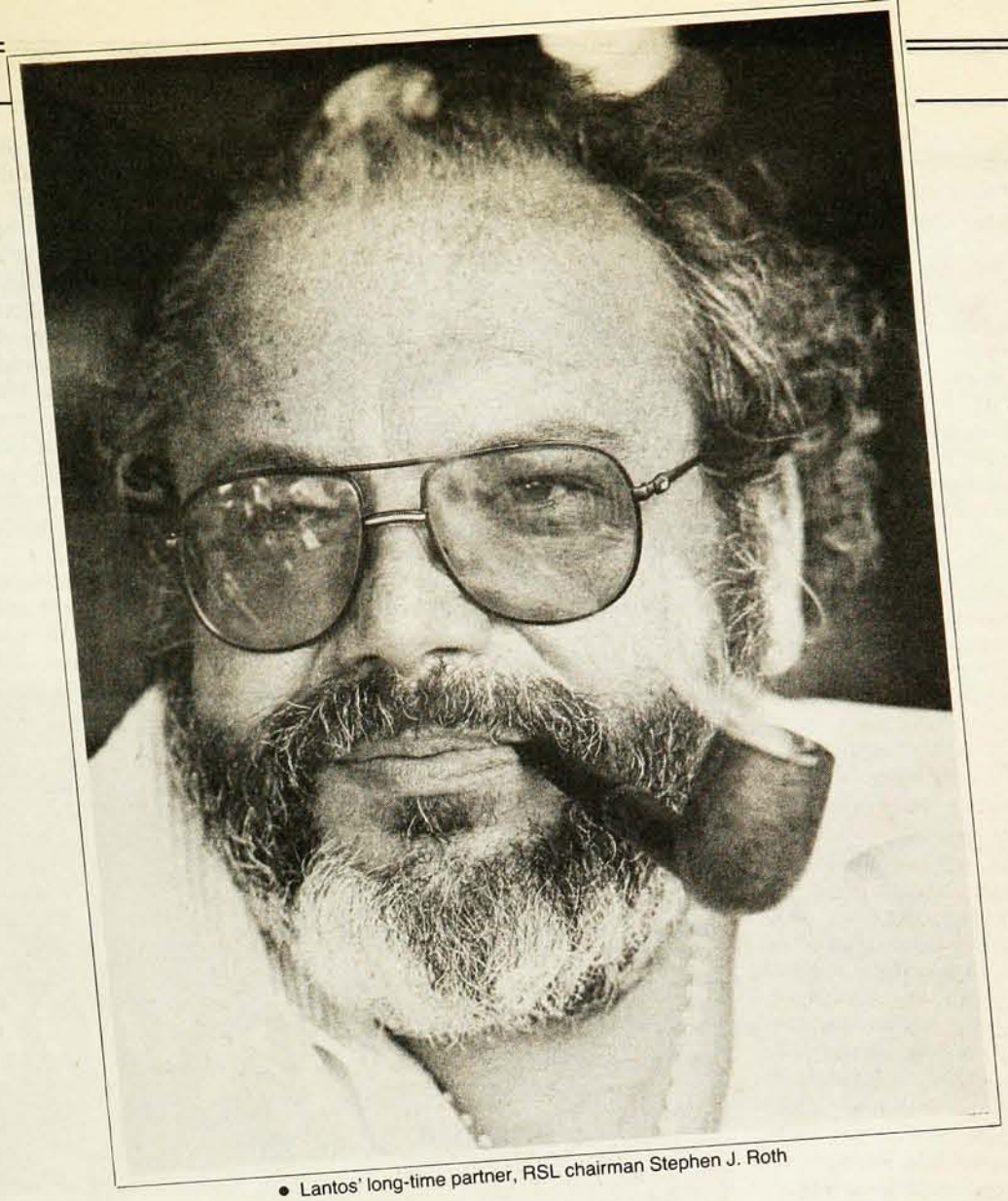
Robert Lantos: It doesn't really happen that way. It was more organic than that. When I read the book sometime in late '79, I liked it a great deal. As soon as we could we acquired the rights. It was something that we very much wanted to do and then after we acquired the rights we started worrying about how the hell we were going to get it made. But there were so many creative hurdles that had to be crossed. These things develop more organically. It's easier to sort them out in retrospect. Most of our activity at this point was geared towards making films that had their market carved out. We felt that we could have one product which was totally different. We laboured long and hard over many years

to get *Joshua Then and Now* made. We fuelled our coffers with all the other films we made during that time. We had a sense that this was going to be long, it was going to be difficult. We didn't realize how long and how difficult. And that was precisely our reasons – for concentrating the rest of our resources on obviously commercial ventures.

Cinema Canada: *Was the financing very difficult to put together?*
Robert Lantos: It was extraordinarily difficult and finally took the development of the Broadcast Fund. Although the CBC had committed to *Joshua Then and Now* the first day we bought the rights, they never had the funds to make the production happen until the Broadcast Fund came along. For the first time the CBC could really become a serious player. That wouldn't have sufficed had we not made a deal with Twentieth Century Fox. And that deal was made after the film had been turned down by every major studio. It was turned down by HBO, it was turned down by the networks, it was turned down in Europe, it was turned down in England and in France. In an industry where everybody is looking for the next $100 million break-out picture – defined as a film that the average 14-year-old will go back and see three or four times – *Joshua Then and Now* obviously didn't rank.

We had a very tough time in selling *Joshua Then and Now.* Ted Kotcheff's involvement was not by itself an automatic ticket to major studio financing. They wanted Kotcheff for *First Blood* part 2 and part 3, or what they judged to be commercial properties. We didn't have Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford to make it easier. Eventually we made a deal with Fox through sheer refusal to accept no. We were turned down by Fox three times until finally a deal was made. It was a deal where Fox only financed about a third of the budget.

The architect of that deal is a guy called Wayne Case. He was running Fox in Canada and he was the person who believed that Fox should be highly active in Canadian production. He was very partisan to *Joshua Then and Now.* He liked the book a great deal and fought very hard with Fox to get it involved. Everytime Fox would pass, Wayne would tell me, "We're going to try again. Don't give up." And he would open some other door in some other way and go back to the studio. By the end I simply had no more hopes for Fox. I had given up and he was the one pushing me to go back and arrange to go through a different executive. Fortunately, executives shuffle so often in Hollywood that if you're with a project for a long time, you re-submit to different generations of executives. You get another chance. We really persisted. Wayne was not in a position to make any commitment for Fox but he could make enough noise at Fox internally. He felt that this was a very important project for Fox to get involved in – not only because of its importance commercially, but also because of its importance to Canada which happens to be their biggest market outside of the U.S. It was thought that if Fox became involved in *Joshua Then and Now,* it would show good will toward Canada. Timing had a lot to do with it as well. Fox had just created a company, Fox Classics. Although it had no money of its own to involve in productions it provided a distribution arm which needed to be fed. The mainstream Fox pictures were not designed for the Classics arm. Suddenly they had a distribution machine that needed high-quality, high-brow movies. The combination of those circumstances led to a good moment in time which we grabbed. If we hadn't, it may not have been there three weeks later. Fox was willing to make a deal on the film with certain limitations.. They were certainly not willing to finance it fully.


• Lantos' long-time partner, RSL chairman Stephen J. Roth

Cinema Canada: *Do you have any comment on the experience of making that film?*
Robert Lantos: The only thing that remains once everything else fades away is that we made a good movie. That's the only reason that we wanted to make that movie. And I think that we achieved the objective.

Cinema Canada: *You made a radical change recently, joining up with Denis Héroux and John Kemeny to form Alliance. Was that something that had been in the works for some time?*
Robert Lantos: I've known Denis and John for a long time. We were negotiating for a long time. The dialogue had been going on. It was not a sudden decision. This move is part of phase three – building the structure. The edifice is now partially built. We have a broad base of production which is financially sound. We make money so that we can continue to operate and develop projects. We also have the opportunity sometimes to make projects that are riskier without risking the whole company or our own lives in so doing. We have created an umbrella organization in which other producers can function and where we can, without actually producing all our films ourselves, provide expertise where it is needed. We're doing that now.

Cinema Canada: *And you're all equal partners in this new venture?*
Robert Lantos: Yes.

Cinema Canada: *Is there going to be a titular president?*
Robert Lantos: Yes. Stephen Roth will be president and chief executive officer and the one most in charge of running corporate affairs. John, Denis and myself are more in charge of specific projects.

We have a mix of projects which I'm not going to get into now because they are long and we don't really want to make big announcements. We'll announce our projects after they get made, but we have a mix of projects that span from low-budget to huge budget, from pay-television to theatrical movies, from movies to mini-series to on-going series, from exploitation oriented to much more difficult and personal films, from films with a very high degree of Canadian content, deeply-rooted in Canadian culture and indigenous events, to others far less so and others that have absolutely nothing to do with Canada.

They range from *The Black Robe* which is a Brian Moore novel about the missionaries and the Indians in Quebec to *Sensulla* a combination of live action/animation about an animator who falls in love with a dream girl he has created, another which is based on a Jack London story of the west, to George Jonas' *Vengeance,* from *Night Heat* to *Force of Arms,* a satire on World War Three, a futuristic satire we are doing for PBS' American Playhouse. It's a very wide range. Some will cost as little as $60,000 and some as much as $15 million.

Cinema Canada: *How do you see the future developing for the industry as a whole and for Alliance within the industry? Do you see Alliance becoming the major Canadian production house?*
Robert Lantos: I'm less interested in that kind of rank than I am in being able to stay in Canada personally. I like Canada a great deal – probably because I'm an immigrant. I have a kind of gratitude to this country. I came here with my family with absolutely nothing and whatever I have, even though I worked for it, Canada's given to me.

I really would like to stay here. I look at Alliance as the only chance I have of staying here. Hopefully there's room for another two or three Alliances that would produce a continuity in production that has never existed. That would give an opportunity for old talent to remain, for talent that has left to come back and for new talent to develop. That has never been.

It has always been a haphazard industry! Alive today, dead tomorrow, or maybe resuscitated the day afterward. We would like to create a continuity of operations, of financing, of creative energy that proves that it's possible to operated successfully in the motion picture, television production business in Canada. It is something that has never been proven before. We intend to prove that it can be done. It won't work if we're the only one. So I hope that there will be one or two other Alliances that will come to be in the next few years.