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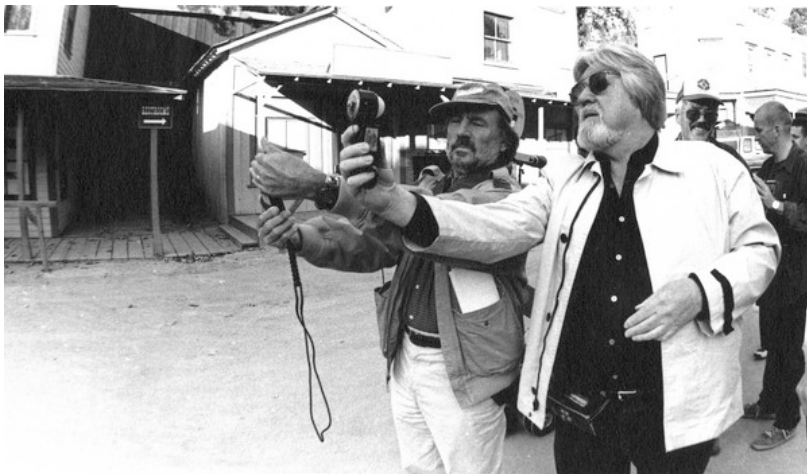
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FILM

László Kovács, Vilmos Zsigmond: Fade in on a friendship

Professional and personal bonds are the focus of 'Independent Lens' documentary on the Hungarian cinematographers.



Zsigmond, left, and Kovacs met while studying cinema in Hungary. (Tamas Mack / Majar Productions)

By Michael Goldman

November 15, 2009

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It's a tale of friendship and survival that has become legend in Hollywood.

Two young Hungarians meet while studying cinema in [Budapest](#) and become swept up in the abortive Hungarian Revolution of 1956, risking their lives to film scenes of violent Soviet repression.

After a harrowing journey secreting the footage out of the country so it can be seen by the rest of the world, they end up

in Los Angeles, where they toil anonymously in B-level biker films, wandering into Roger Corman's orbit. Soon after, both men flash to prominence filming several classic movies, playing important roles in the New Hollywood movement of the late '60s and '70s.

The real-life story of cinematographers László Kovács and Vilmos Zsigmond is captured in the [documentary](#) "No Subtitles Necessary: László and Vilmos." Directed by James Chressanthis, it has entertained audiences at several film festivals including Cannes and will make its broadcast television

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debut for Southern California audiences on Thursday on KCET as part of the PBS "Independent Lens" series.

It was Corman, the prolific and imaginative B-movie impresario, who essentially introduced the young Hungarians to Hollywood, which at the time was going through as dramatic a cultural shift as the industry had ever experienced. Their interpretive, free-form and frequently experimental methods with lighting, angles and camera placement was particularly refreshing to the new generation of filmmakers and tonally in sync with the counterculture vibe of the era.

The gregarious Kovács, who died in 2007, shot "Easy Rider" for Dennis Hopper and then "Five Easy Pieces" for Bob Rafelson in 1970. Zsigmond, quieter and more serious than his friend, followed with "McCabe & Mrs. Miller" for Robert Altman in 1971 and "Deliverance" for John Boorman in 1972. After that, the men became the go-to shooters for Hollywood's next generation of filmmakers, collaborating with Steven Spielberg, Peter Bogdanovich, Brian De Palma, Norman Jewison, Mark Rydell and many others.

Yet for all their success behind the camera, the friends never wanted to step in front of it until near the end of Kovács' life in 2006. That's when Chressanthis, cinematographer and a director on CBS' "Ghost Whisperer," moved from the periphery of their lives to the foreground.

A quarter-century earlier, Chressanthis had met Kovács at an AFI seminar. A year later, as an AFI student, he won an internship assisting Zsigmond on "The Witches of Eastwick." "Jim was a bright fellow, I liked him, and he was very helpful," Zsigmond recalls. "Eventually, [director George Miller] and I ended up deciding he could do a little second-unit work."

Gesture for a friend

Chressanthis' contribution to the film was a time-lapse shot of a bowl of rotting fruit, and today, he says that little sequence "was like my master's thesis," launching his career as a cinematographer, cementing a friendship with Zsigmond and putting him on a path that eventually led to "No Subtitles Necessary."

In 2006, at another AFI event, Chressanthis realized Kovács was extremely ill. At the urging of friends, he decided to ask the men if he could document their connected journey. Zsigmond had resisted earlier efforts but relented when Chressanthis approached.

He was pleased to see the project undertaken by a fellow cinematographer with an artistic understanding of their work and was also eager to help make the world aware of the accomplishments of his friend László, who Zsigmond feels never received the accolades he deserved. (Zsigmond has been nominated for four Oscars and won for 1977's "Close Encounters of the Third Kind," but Kovács never received an Oscar nomination.)

"I had turned down this idea previously," Zsigmond says. "I wasn't interested in a movie about me, and I'm not comfortable in front of the camera. But by the time this idea came up, László was very ill, and I was proud of our relationship and how we helped each other. That doesn't happen often in film circles. So I basically decided to do it for László. He was such a great cinematographer, and why he wasn't rewarded more is incredible. I thought I could help him by doing this movie and making sure people in the future remember his work."

Thus, Kovács sat for several interviews even as his strength waned (his last interview was just two weeks before his death), and the still-active Zsigmond made time despite a hectic schedule on location in North Carolina shooting Dan Pritzker's upcoming jazz film, "Bolden!"

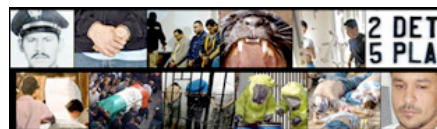
Archival footage

Still, getting the film together was challenging in the run-up to Cannes 2008. Producer Zachary Kranzler says "everyone gave their hearts to the project -- it was a true independent film." In that spirit, several industry vendors donated film stock, equipment, and facilities. Still without finishing funds, Chressanthis and producer David Kaminsky asked editor Elisa Bonora to cut the film while they hunted for post-production cash. Bonora ended up helping to make those funds appear by calling on personal contacts to bring three additional producers into the mix, adding a co-producer credit to her editor's title.

The documentarians also spent great effort picking through 200 hours of footage to locate archival material, including shots that were originally aired by Walter Cronkite on CBS showing the Soviet crackdown in Budapest -- footage Cronkite helped the filmmakers license from BBC Worldwide

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shortly before his death.

"[The archival footage] was all chaos and confusion of war -- very grim," Chressanthis explains. "But I think you can see in how [the two men] shot violence in their films that they were impacted by what they saw in the streets of Budapest. When László laid a camera on the side of the road for the death sequence at the end of 'Easy Rider,' with it being so vivid and violent, you wonder, how did he sense that and capture that? The vivid nature of their cinematography, where does it come from?"

As much as "No Subtitles Necessary" documents the professional successes of these cinematographers, it's mainly about their profound friendship and devotion to each other. Near the end of the documentary, Audrey Kovács illustrates that point, insisting that while she lost her husband in 2007, she isn't in fact his only widow.

"Frankly, I think that László had one widow, and it's Vilmos," she sighs. "I think they were as close as two men could ever be."

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