

Welcome to TimesPeople
Get Started

TimesPeople Lets You Share and Discover the Best of N'

Recommend

HOME PAGE TODAY'S PAPER VIDEO MOST POPULAR TIMES TOPICS

Get Home Delivery Log In Register Now

The New York Times

Television

Search All NYTimes.com



WORLD U.S. N.Y. / REGION BUSINESS TECHNOLOGY SCIENCE HEALTH SPORTS OPINION ARTS STYLE TRAVEL JOBS REAL ESTATE AUTOS

Search TV Shows, Movies and People

More in Television »

Go

What's On This Week | Media Decoder | TV Listings

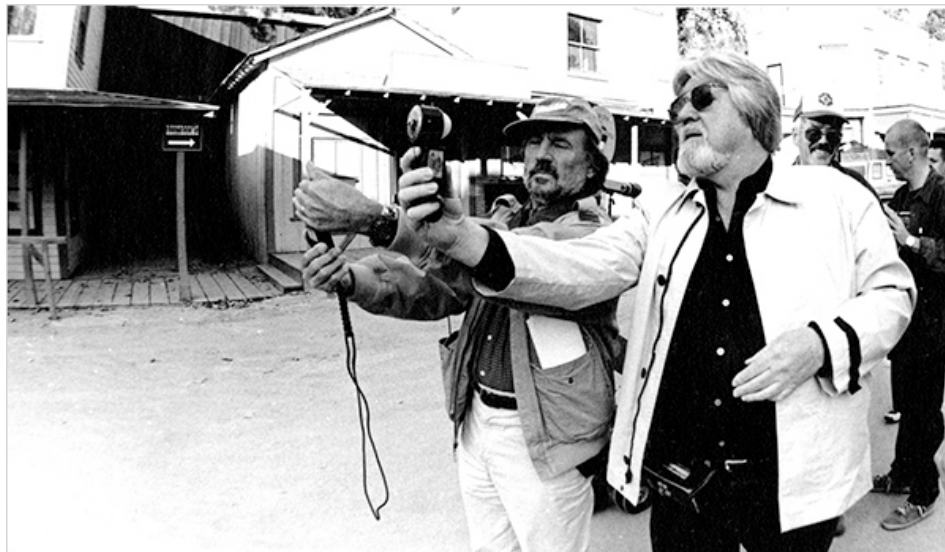
You are Paying Too Much for Auto Insurance

www.insurancecomplete.com

Advertise on NYTimes.com

TELEVISION

Filming a Friendship, Founded on Film



Tamas Mack/ITVS

Vilmos Zsigmond, left, and Laszlo Kovacs last year during the production of the documentary about them.

By MATT ZOLLER SEITZ
Published: November 13, 2009

VILMOS ZSIGMOND and [Laszlo Kovacs](#), whose cinematography would help change the look of American movies in the late 1960s and 1970s, first met in 1953 on a Budapest street corner near the Academy of Drama and Film, where both men were enrolled as cinematography students. Three years afterward — on Nov. 11, 1956, a week after Soviet troops poured into the city to crush the Hungarian uprising — they ran into each other again on the same corner.

Related

- Video: 'No Subtitles Necessary'
- Filmographies: Vilmos Zsigmond | Laszlo Kovacs

“The Russian tanks were going up and down the street,” recalled Mr. Zsigmond, 79, in a recent phone interview to promote the documentary “No Subtitles Necessary: Laszlo & Vilmos,” an account of their long friendship that will be broadcast

SIGN IN TO RECOMMEND

TWITTER

SIGN IN TO E-MAIL

PRINT

REPRINTS

SHARE

ARTICLE TOOLS SPONSORED BY



Next Article in Arts (14 of 28) »

Books Update E-Mail



Sign up for the latest book reviews, sent every Friday.

Sign Up

See Sample | Privacy Policy

SONY

The Sony® Cyber-shot® camera with Exmor R technology.

Learn More

MOST POPULAR

E-MAILED BLOGGED SEARCHED

- Astoria Journal: Love for a Dog That's No Bark and All Yodel
- Small-Business Guide: How to Market Your Business With Facebook
- Turtles Are Casualties of Warming in Costa Rica
- Forty Years' War: Medicines to Deter Some Cancers Are Not Taken
- Gail Collins: Once Again, Into the Apocalypse
- The Caribbean Issue: Sailing the Caribbean, the Frugal Way
- Well: Phys Ed: The Best Exercises for Healthy Bones
- Your Money: Financial Decisions to Make as You Divorce
- Selling Lessons Online Raises Cash and Questions
- Breckenridge Journal: Marijuana Moves Into the

Blog

ArtsBeat

The latest on the arts, coverage of live events, critical reviews, multimedia extravaganzas and much more. [Join the discussion.](#)

[More Arts News](#)



[Enlarge This Image](#)



Image from the film smuggled out of Hungary in 1956 by Vilmos Zsigmond and Laszlo Kovacs, subjects of a documentary.

Nov. 17 on “Independent Lens” on [PBS](#). “I said, ‘Laszlo, you know the Arriflex camera, you have it up in the film school in college.’ He said, ‘Yes, that’s where I have it.’ He knew what we were about to do.”

Mr. Kovacs got the camera and some 35-millimeter film stock. The two men roamed Budapest, surreptitiously recording over an hour’s worth of film of the crackdown, then smuggled the undeveloped negatives out of the country via rail to Vienna, jumping off the train 10 miles from the Austrian border and finishing the journey on foot. Their imagery joined the collective record of that grim period, appearing in newsreels, TV reports and documentaries throughout the next half-century.

After the revolution the men moved to Hollywood, paid their dues shooting low-budget horror, action and biker films, then graduated to higher-profile assignments, eventually collaborating with some of the most influential directors of the 1970s, including [Robert Altman](#) and [Steven Spielberg](#). Their association lasted until 2007, when Mr. Kovacs died of pancreatic cancer.

Mr. Kovacs, whose filmography included “Easy Rider,” “Five Easy Pieces” and “Frances,” had a style simpler and more forceful than Mr. Zsigmond’s, whose work on movies like “McCabe and Mrs. Miller,” “Deliverance” and “Close Encounters of the Third Kind” (for which he won an Academy Award), was more lush and impressionistic. But their artistry came from a similar, shared place. “The whole story, you could write a book about it,” Mr. Zsigmond said, laughing.

The director of “No Subtitles Necessary,” the cinematographer James Chressanthis, who studied under both men in the 1980s, thought so too.

“The story about them during the revolution” were widespread in Hollywood, he said. “But you always heard different pieces of it, different versions of it. Beyond the fact that they were great cinematographers, there was this whole back story that hadn’t been definitively told.”

During the 1986 production of “The Witches of Eastwick” — which Mr. Zsigmond photographed, with Mr. Chressanthis serving as his assistant — Mr. Kovacs stopped by for a visit. “When I saw them together, I realized that this was a remarkable story that people needed to hear,” Mr. Chressanthis said. “But 20 years intervened.”

The one-two punch of Altman’s death in 2006 and the onset of health problems for Mr. Kovacs ultimately spurred Mr. Chressanthis and his co-producers to bring the two men together again — this time in front of a camera — and have them tell their tale.

The result is a movie about a friendship between men who shared certain unusual, difficult experiences, and how those experiences shaped their art.

Mr. Zsigmond described his and Mr. Kovacs’s feel for light and shadow — which they developed together on earlier, low-budget efforts, productions on which one man often served as the other’s assistant — as “poetic realism.”

“It came out of being a couple of guys who had to leave Hungary in a hurry so they didn’t get killed,” he said. “It came out of coming to America and shooting all these

[Open in a Ski Town](#)

[Go to Complete List »](#)



Home Get 50% off home delivery of **The New York Times**.
The New York Times [Subscribe Today ▶](#)

Ads by Google

[what's this?](#)

[Online Executive MBA](#)

Earn your Executive MBA Online at the Saunders College of Business.
[EmbaOnline.RIT.Edu](#)

[Reverse Loan Calculator](#)

Try Our Free Calculator Today, Find Out How Much You Qualify For Now!
[www.ReverseMortgageAdviser.com](#)

[Peninsula Real Pricing](#)

Buy now and take advantage of new reduced pricing at Peninsula Real!
[www.PeninsulaReal.com](#)

movies that were all very low-budget — we called them ‘no-budget movies’ — with very small crews and very small lights. Laszlo and I figured out pretty quick that if you shoot something at the right time of day, it’s going to look gorgeous without any additional light, and that if you do need additional light, you try to make the light look real, not ‘lit.’ I hate movies where the light looks phony.”

Mr. Kovacs’s battlefield-tested resourcefulness and affection for his adopted country’s landscapes informed the look of [Dennis Hopper](#)’s 1969 counterculture smash “Easy Rider.” The film was distinguished by trippy lens flares, mournful firelight and tight close-ups of motorcycle riders and their machines, which Mr. Kovacs captured while being towed in the back of a sandbag-stuffed trailer. The whole feature was shot with a camera on loan from Mr. Zsigmond.

Even after the men had risen to the upper echelons of their industry, they continued to act and think like low-budget filmmakers. The documentary’s anecdotes include an account of how Mr. Zsigmond “flashed,” or briefly exposed, the negative of Altman’s “McCabe and Mrs. Miller” to create that movie’s decayed-boozy visuals, and how Mr. Kovacs, while shooting [Bob Rafelson](#)’s “Five Easy Pieces,” constructed a much-needed camera brace out of a termite-riddled branch he’d found in the woods near the set.

One can see traces of the men’s idiosyncratic personalities showing up more vividly in Jerry Schatzberg’s 1973 feature “Scarecrow,” a road film about the deep friendship between hobos played by [Al Pacino](#) and [Gene Hackman](#). Mr. Zsigmond says the film’s warm light and embracing widescreen images of American landscapes were inspired by his early years with Mr. Kovacs, when they were adrift in a beautiful but forbidding new land.

“When we came to America, we had to stay together just to survive,” Mr. Zsigmond said. “It was like being brothers, that’s what it was.”

[Sign in to Recommend](#)

A version of this article appeared in print on November 15, 2009, on page AR23 of the New York edition.

[Next Article in Arts \(14 of 28\) »](#)

SIGN IN TO E-MAIL

PRINT

REPRINTS



The finest journalism in L.A.? The New York Times, as low as \$3.70 a week.

Ads by Google

[what's this?](#)

[Keslow Camera](#)

Keslow Camera Specializes in ARRI 16/35mm & RED Camera Rentals
www.KeslowCamera.com

[Find Film Schools](#)

The Complete Directory of Film Schools
FilmSchools.com

[Shop WGBH](#)

Find all your favorite public television programs on DVD & VHS
www.SHOP.WGBH.org

Past Coverage

- [Battleground: Female Soldiers in the Line of Fire \(November 5, 2008\)](#)
- [A Women's Mariachi Band Sings Its Way Across Traditional Male Turf \(April 1, 2008\)](#)
- [TELEVISION REVIEW; In Doctor's War, Battles Are Fought in Maternity Ward \(February 13, 2007\)](#)
- [TELEVISION REVIEW; Outsize Talent Who Took The A Train To Anonymity \(February 6, 2007\)](#)

Related Searches

- Television [Get E-Mail Alerts](#)
- Kovacs, Laszlo [Get E-Mail Alerts](#)
- Public Broadcasting Service [Get E-Mail Alerts](#)

INSIDE NYTIMES.COM



OPINION »



[Room for Debate: The Record on Terror Trials](#)

TELEVISION »



[Late-Night Revolution? In Taste, Perhaps](#)

OPINION »

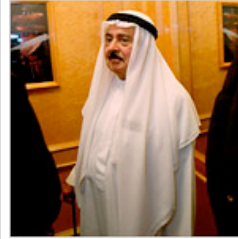
Editorial: Respect for Rape Victims
 Legislation to end the stubborn scandal of untested rape kits should move forward in the Senate.

REAL ESTATE »



[Bidding Wars Resume](#)

WORLD »



[An Arms Dealer Returns, Now Selling an Image](#)

U.S. »



[Marijuana Moves Into the Open in a Ski Town](#)