

Lifetime Achievement Awards: Miloš Forman and Saul Zaentz

By Ron Holloway

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THE FOLLOWING portraits of Miloš Forman and Saul Zaentz celebrate from a personal perspective the extraordinary film accomplishments by this masterful director-producer team on the occasion of Lifetime Achievement Awards given by Film By the Sea Festival in the Dutch seaside resort cities of Vlissingen and Scheveningen. Miloš Forman and Saul Zaentz, invited by festival director Leo Hannewijk and international co-director Steve Klain, were honoured as well by leading personalities of the Netherlands and the European Union. Indeed, this single event scored as one of the festival highlights of the year.

Miloš Forman - Auditions and Adaptations

My first meeting with Miloš Forman took place in April 1968 - a couple hours after I had been thrown out of the *Variety* office on 43rd Street for daring to "sign myself on" as a future correspondent. To get rid of me, Bob Landry, the benevolent desk editor, sent me over to the Chelsea Hotel in Lower Manhattan to interview Miloš Forman.

"Since you liked *Loves of a Blonde* that much," he shouted after me, "find out what he's doing next."

Off I went - and came back to the office with a nifty little story about a nail-clipper. It never saw print.

"Nobody in this place ever heard of a *pince à ongles* - so who the hell cares!" was the rebuff. A rather stiff kick in the butt for a fledgling. But the next day Landry phoned me to promise a job when I got to Europe.

Looking back, I still think *The Nail-Clipper* (1968) is one of Miloš Forman's better films.

That is, if he directed it.

According to San Francisco critic Judy Stone in her *Conversations with International Filmmakers*, Miloš Forman is down in her filmography as the director of that short feature. But in *Cannes Memoires*, the official Cannes festival history tome, Jean-Claude Carrière, the eminent French screenwriter, is given the directorial nod. Most film lexicons don't even list *La pince à ongles* under either name.

All I can add to the enigma is that both were bunked at the Hotel Chelsea when I stopped by for the interview. Jean-Claude Carrière, fresh from working with Luis Buñuel on *Belle de jour* (1967), was about to collaborate with Miloš Forman on *Taking Off* (1971), the Czech filmmaker's first plunge into American culture.

As for *La pince à ongles*, it takes place in a hotel that's just the opposite of the Hotel Chelsea, that hallowed "artists' inn" on 23rd Street that had once offered succour to Mark Twain, Thomas Wolfe, and Tennessee Williams - to say nothing of a whole modern-day generation of would-be poets, writers, and painters.

The Nail-Clipper is an absurd, Kafkaesque tale about an uppity couple checking into a posh hotel, only to have everything mysteriously disappear around them - suitcases, clothes, hotel personnel - until nothing at all is left in the room except the fastidious husband's nail-clipper lying on a Louis Quatorze table! When the short was shown a year later at the Cannes festival, you had the feeling that Miloš and Jean-Claude were heaving a custard in the direction of the Hotel Carlton on the Croisette.

My interview with Forman never really amounted to much. We were interrupted constantly. First, there was a phone call from Jiří Menzel, who had just gotten off the plane from Prague and was wondering aloud what an Oscar winner (*Closely Watched Trains*) on his first trip to the States is supposed to do next. That settled, I walked Carrière for a chat on whether Philippe Noiret might be free for *The Nail-Clipper*.

Put it all together, however, and you did get a whiff of a patented tactical Miloš trademark - that leisurely paced ebb-and-flow in a conversation, the deft juggling of several balls in the air at once, the off-hand banter of a life-long cynic who despised any form of empty-headedness, and those bursts of satirical humour to make

a point about the innate differences between socialism and capitalism. In other words, the inner workings of a Czech *auteur* with a sure eye for human foibles that was to make him a legend in his own time.

A month later, I caught up with Forman at Cannes. But only briefly. The festival had been wiped out by the student rebellion shortly after the screening of his last Czech film, *The Fireman's Ball*. "The students in Prague are tearing down the red flag," he said at his press conference, "but here on the Riviera they're triumphantly raising it over the Palais! The world's gone wacky."

Settling permanently in New York just as the Soviet tanks were rolling into Prague, Forman's next film, *Taking Off* (1971) was inspired by a newspaper article about a teenager running away from home to Manhattan's East Village. A comedy about the American youth movement and changing lifestyles, *Taking Off* leaned heavily on his previous Czech successes for satirical effect: the audition scene in the short documentary *Talent Competition* (1963), the generation gap in *Black Peter* (1964), the girl running off to the city to be with her boyfriend in *Loves of a Blonde* (1965). But Forman has admitted that these films, too, had drawn upon his own experiences as a youth growing up in Czechoslovakia.

"Throughout my creative life as a filmmaker," he once said in an interview, "I have retold the same story over and over again." Well, maybe not the same story, but certainly honed from the same experiences.

Born 1932 in Čáslav (near Prague) to a Jewish father and a Protestant mother, both of whom died in Nazi death camps, Miloš Forman was raised by relatives and spent part of his childhood in a boarding school. His love of theatre and knack for writing poetry facilitated entrance to the Prague Film School (FAMU), from which he graduated in 1955 as a screenwriter. With the advent of the "Khrushchev Thaw," however, Forman had other things in mind - like penning burlesques for the Alhambra and soaking-in media shows at the Laterna Magica - while on the lookout for a chance to direct his own material.

It came with a commission to shoot a 16mm film about a jazz competition at the Semafor Theatre in Prague. Together with FAMU colleague Miroslav Ondříček as his cameraman, he directed two musical shorts that were an immediate hit with the public. When the Barrandov Studio slapped them together to make *Talent Competition*, Miloš Forman and the "Czech New Wave" were off and running. You can draw a straight line from there to *Taking Off*.

Despite a Special Jury Prize at the 1971 Cannes festival, *Taking Off* was a flop at the box office. A couple years later, he was to hit the jackpot with the zestful screen version of the Broadway musical *Hair* (1979) about flower children in the Age of Aquarius. In between these films, he met Saul Zaentz. Together, they made Academy Award history.

Today, Miloš Forman is best known for such provocative large-scale productions as *Valmont* (1989), based on *Les liaisons dangereuses* by Choderlos de Laclos; *The People vs. Larry Flint* (1996) the story of how *Hustler* altered the girlie-magazine market; and *Man on the Moon* (1999), with Jim Carrey as *Saturday Night Live* comedian Andy Kaufman. Currently, Miloš Forman and Jean-Claude Carrière collaborating on an original screenplay set during the Spanish Inquisition.

Saul Zaentz - Fantasy and Films

Pauline Kael, the doyenne of American film critics, was the first to tip her hat in Saul Zaentz's direction when she wrote in the *New Yorker*. "When you hear people in the pop-music business swapping stories, you may think that someone should make a movie and show how it really is, and that's what these moviemakers have done." ("The Riddles of Pop," 24 February 1973)

Payday was the beginning of Saul Zaentz's movie career.

Shot on location in Alabama, with a cast of professionals and locals, it was produced by Frisco-based Fantasy Records (Saul Zaentz and Ralph J. Gleason) for under \$780,000. Daryl Duke, from the National Film Board of Canada, directed - "because he knew the music scene." It was the first venture into independent film production by an adventurous record company with a portfolio that stretched from jazz (Dave Brubeck) and rock (Creedence Clearwater Revival) to beat poetry (Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*) and the routines of an x-rated comic (Lenny Bruce).

As big a splash as *Payday* made on the independent filmmaking scene, it wasn't the film Zaentz and Gleason originally wanted to produce.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest was.

In 1968, when Saul Zaentz, a jazz-concert-tour-promoter, teamed with Ralph J. Gleason, an iconoclastic-pop-culture-columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle, to take over Fantasy Records, they talked about making a movie on the side. But not just any movie. They had their eyes on Ken Kesey's cult novel published in 1962 about a nonconformist rebel committed to an Oregon mental institution. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* mirrored, better than any other novel of the period, the psychedelic drug scene of the 1960s, particularly Kesey's own messianic LSD parties that got him thrown in jail in 1966. It also forecast revolutionary politics of the decade to follow.

The only trouble was that the movie rights to Kesey's novel were owned by Kirk Douglas, who wanted to play McMurphy himself, that nutty outcast locked in an insane asylum. He dropped the idea when a Hollywood studio couldn't be found to back the project. Then, in 1974, Michael Douglas, Kirk's son, phoned Zaentz to say he had now acquired the rights. Would he still be interested?

But who would direct the film?

At this time, Miloš Forman was still licking his wounds after the *Taking Off* box-office flop. To keep afloat, he had signed on with an international team to film the 1972 Munich Olympics. His job in *Visions of Eight* (1973) was the decathlon competition. When Zaentz called to ask if he might be interested in directing *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Forman didn't hesitate. The project fit the sensibilities of a irate Czech director who had suffered under an oppressive communist regime with the scars to prove it. A mordant satire on the dehumanization of society, whether western or eastern, was right up his alley.

Much has been written - and speculated - about the making of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Word has it that Miloš Forman didn't feel comfortable with cameraman Haskell Wexler, who left in the middle of the production to begin work on *Underground* (1976), a documentary about the "Weathermen" revolutionaries, co-directed with Emile de Antonio. Jack Nicholson, it was said, was left on his own to interpret the role of the enigmatic McMurphy, so in the end he just played himself - "punchy, tired, baffled," as Pauline Kael put it.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest swept the top five Academy Awards: Best Picture, Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best Actor, Best Actress - for the first time since Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934). More important, it launched the careers of Saul Zaentz and Miloš Forman as two dynamic individuals on the independent production scene. Upon the film's release, Forman became an American citizen - and accepted an offer from Columbia University to chair its new Film Division, together with Frank Daniel, the former head of the Prague Film School (FAMU). Columbia soon became a mecca for film professionals and aspiring directors.

Zaentz and Forman paired again on *Amadeus* (1984), the screen adaptation of Peter Shaffer's play about Mozart and his nemesis Salieri. It garnered eight Oscars, including Best Picture and Best Director. Filmed in Prague at the Barrandov Studios, the production also heralded Forman's triumphant return to the country of his birth. After he had filmed the rock-musical *Hair* (1979) and E. L. Doctorow's best-seller *Ragtime* (1981), Miloš hit upon the idea of screening *Hair* in Prague. The reception for Forman and his Czech cameraman Miroslav Ondříček was a kind of national celebration. The door opened wide for a "services rendered" contract with the Barrandov Studios for location shooting of the *Amadeus* production.

How much did Saul Zaentz contribute to the success of *Amadeus*?

Plenty. His whole life is music and movies - correction: Fantasy and Films - and when they come together, so much the better.

Born in Passaic, New Jersey, of Russian-Polish parents, Saul Zaentz dropped out of high school, joined the army (1942), attended business college in St. Louis, worked for jazz impresario Norman Granz on his concert tours, then joined Fantasy Records in 1955. By 1967 he owned the company.

"Even though I live in San Rafael and my office is in Berkeley, I consider myself a San Franciscan," he said in an interview.

His office is now the Saul Zaentz Film Center, just a short drive away from Francis Ford Coppola's Zoetrope and George Lucas's Industrial Light & Magic. "Right here in this building we have state-of-the-art recording studios, film editing, and sound mixing facilities." And the SZFC has the Oscars to prove it - well over 20 at last count, not to mention countless Academy Award Nominations.

A voracious reader, Zaentz's credits as producer appropriately include such successful screen adaptations of bestsellers as Peter Weir's *Mosquito Coast* (1986) (Paul Theroux), Philip Kaufman's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1988) (Milan Kundera), Hector Babenco's *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* (1991) (Peter Mathiesser), and Anthony Minghella's *The English Patient* (1996) (Michael Ondaatje).

When Anthony Minghella's *The English Patient* was awarded nine Oscars, including Best Picture, Saul Zaentz was also awarded at the same Academy Awards ceremony the prestigious Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award "for consistently high quality of motion picture production." The New York Times singled him out as "perhaps the last of the great independent producers."

Author Information

Ron HOLLOWAY (1933-2009) was an American critic, film historian, filmmaker and correspondent who adopted Europe as his home in the early fifties and spent much of his life in Berlin. He was an expert on the study of German cinema and against all odds produced, with his wife Dorothea, the journal *German Film*, keeping us up-to-date with the work of directors, producers and writers and the showing of German films around the world.

In 2007, Ron Holloway and his wife were awarded the Berlinale Camera Award. Ron also received the Bundesverdienstkreuz (German Cross of Merit), Polish Rings, Cannes Gold Medaille, the American Cinema Foundation Award, the Diploma for Support of Russian Cinema and an honorary award from the German Film Critics' Association.

Ron was also a valued contributor to *Kinema* for the past fifteen years.