

# Dance and prose are the same for me

## An interview with Endre Hules

*At the end of our article published in Penna Magazine in June we mentioned that we were planning to interview Endre Hules, the writer/director of the movie "The Maiden Danced to Death" as well as its cinematographer, Vilmos Zsigmond. Although this was not possible at the end of May, we managed to meet Endre Hules in June.*



**YK:** *I am glad you could take time from your busy schedule to meet me. You are directing "The Maiden Danced to Death" which you wrote and also play one of the main characters in. This must require a lot of energy.*

**EH:** It's true, but shooting a film always requires a lot of energy. It is one of the most exhausting jobs: shooting twelve, sixteen or eighteen hours a day. For me, keeping up with the schedule isn't the hardest thing – it is to divide my mind into two distinct sections, those of an actor and the director. When I'm watching a scene we have just finished, I not only have to observe my own acting but those of my colleagues as well. I have to make sure the lights, the tempo and all the details are in place. I need to pay attention to everything. But when I'm in front of the camera, I have to stop being a director. Can't be phased by my colleagues possibly doing something different than I would like them to do - even making mistakes or improvising. I must react to the circumstances as an actor, a character in an imaginary world, responding instinctively to what I encounter. And of course, I must prepare to both roles separately during the short periods of time between the shooting

days. I have to prepare shot lists for the next day, and I have to learn my lines as an actor. The two require fundamentally different ways of thinking that are almost impossible to reconcile. That's why I will think twice before I undertake acting / directing again (laughing). Now, in the midst of it, I'm no longer surprised why so few of my colleagues direct and act simultaneously, in the same production.

**YK:** *Steve's life is a bit similar to yours. You were also forced to continue your career in the West during the Regime.*

**EH:** You can only write about the things you know. Yes, I also left Hungary. I would like to think of it as moving away. If someone moves to Budapest from a small town, it means a complete change too. In my case it also required a change of languages. What I am interested in, whether as Steve or as a director, is this complete change in somebody's life, and also to see if there is a way back. There is always a certain suspicion towards those who return. When somebody returns to a small village from a big city, he will return changed. It's true to those returning from another country and it was even more extreme during the Communist Regime. I am fascinated by whether these suspicions and differences can be reconciled. Can the people who had left co-operate harmoniously with the ones who had stayed behind, in a way that is rewarding for both. My story meets Steve's in that we are both immigrants, but there the similarities pretty much end. Steve is not interested in reconciliation, he doesn't even think about it. He represents a type I don't agree with at all. Those, who have accepted that they are outcasts forever. I have met a lot of people abroad who built up a world in their minds where there were no compromises. Who feel that those who stayed in Hungary had somehow sold out to the Communist System. Of course the ones in Hungary felt that they had no choice but to survive here and it's easy to condemn others' compromises, when you are not the one who'd have to pay the price. Steve doesn't forget and doesn't forgive, and this is unacceptable, even if he happens to be right. This is where my life and principles don't meet Steve's and, even though many elements of the movie are taken

from my life or the experiences of people I know, this is not an autobiographical film. In fact, to be honest, there is a lot of my life experience in the other brother, Gyula, as well, and had my life taken a different turn, I could have become someone like him. Every character has a little bit from me.

**YK:** *This reminds me of the „Torn from the Flag” documentary, which you wrote and directed, as well. Unfortunately, it hasn’t been released in Hungary yet.*

**EH:** Unfortunately not, although the film is good, and this is not just my opinion. “Torn” has won many festival awards, including a First Prize and an audience award ahead of narrative films. I was aware that a lot of films would be made for the anniversary of the 1956 Uprising, so I wanted to make my film more comprehensive. I began before 1956, with the Yalta Conference of 1945, where it was decided that Hungary would belong to the Soviet Union’s the sphere of interest.



**Shooting „Torn from the Flag” in Budapest**

The Cold War started, which determined the history of Hungary. And I didn’t stop with the events of 1956 but watched the consequences – the Kádár Era and the collapse of the Iron Curtain - to see what role the events of 1956 played in this entire process. We asked Hungarian participants of the Uprising, of course, but also Soviet soldiers, Hungarian Secret Police agents, Khrushchev’s biographer, Eisenhower’s biographer, UN experts as well as Hungarian politicians among others (former Prime Minister) Gyula Horn, (former President) Árpád Göncz, (former Minister of Propaganda) János Berecz and (former Minister of State) Imre Pozsgai, who was the first person to declare that what happened in 1956 was a popular uprising and not a “counter-revolution”. Noted historians analyze the role of the UN and the Suez Crisis. The film has no narration, it does not suggest any opinion or ideology, we simply present the historical events in

news footage and interviews, and leave the audience to judge for themselves.

**YK:** *Did you interview Americans as well?*

**EH:** Yes, of course. We spoke to Henry Kissinger, the biographer of Eisenhower and many other American historians as well. Henry Kissinger had an interesting observation about the Cold War - he surmised that the whole thing was a gigantic misunderstanding; the parties simply could not communicate. In case of '56, for example, the Americans assumed that the Soviets were weary of American intervention in Hungary, which would prompt them to invade preemptively and crush the fledgling government. In order to calm them down and avoid a Soviet invasion, the Americans publicly declared that they had no intention to get involved in Hungary. The Soviets interpreted this as an open invitation - and marched in. These details are quite illuminating. We made the film based on more than a hundred hours of interviews and eighty hours of archival footage.

**YK:** *Have you worked with any movie stars in Hollywood?*

**EH:** Yes, quite a few, beginning with the cast of Apollo 13; Tom Hanks, Kevin Bacon and Bill Paxton, for more about two months. I worked with Tom Hanks again in Angels and Demons. I met with Brad Pitt in the movie Se7en, and later again on the set of “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button”, where my daughter, Katta, played Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett’s daughter. I also had the pleasure to play with Burt Reynolds, where I was one of the leads and he did a cameo. He did not like that at all (he says laughing). Yes, I have met a lot of movie stars.



**„Apollo 13”- Endre Hules and Tom Hanks**

**YK:** *Is it possible to form friendships with other actors during filming?*

**EH:** Of course it is, and it does happen often. It may be good and bad. It is very pleasant to work with friends but

as a director one has to be careful. You must be sure you really choose the best person for the job. During casting in the US, actors are also judged by how pleasant they are people. It is important because during a long shoot, people must live together for several months or, in case of a series, for several years. Human relationships transpire into the interactions on the set and ultimately make their way onto the screen, whether we like it or not. If I want the viewer to be enchanted by the main character, then he/she has to enchant me too. Our Canadian editor knows our lead, Bea Melkvi, only from the footage we shot. Yet he has fallen madly in love with her. He said, "I don't understand a word, but I believe everything she says". It is the best possible reaction.

**YK:** *Returning to the new production, why did you choose Vilmos Zsigmond as the Director of Photography for this film? Is it because you have already known him?*

**EH:** I have known Vilmos for about twenty years. I first met him when he screened a film entitled "The Long Shadow", his first and only directing effort. Later, he became an executive producer of "Torn from the Flag," where László Kovács, his good friend, was the cinematographer.



Vilmos Zsigmond

They helped tremendously by getting us access to archival material (a lot of which they had shot themselves), arranged to get a free camera from Panavision, and they relentlessly promoted the film. This cooperation made it possible for me to call and ask him to work with me on "Maiden". Why him? My goodness! When you have a chance to call the best cinematographer in the world, you have to grab it (he says happily).

**YK:** *How did you choose your main characters, Bea Melkvi for Mari and Zsolt László for Gyula?*

**EH:** We cast for a long time and have seen a lot of

people. Besides good actors, I was also looking for actors who can believably play professional dancers. Bea has to dance quite a lot and her professional dance training gave her an edge – she is wonderful (he says keenly). When I look at her, I can believe that she is the leading dancer of the troupe. Zsolt is not a Dancer but he is in excellent physical condition. They have to be close to the character, too, of course and have the emotional depth and flexibility necessary for the story. I feel that both fit their roles perfectly, I am impressed every time I watch them (he says honestly). I must also mention Emőke Zsigmond, who plays Gabi, the youngest member of the company. I was looking for a teenage girl on the verge of womanhood, innocent, beautiful, a brilliant dancer and also a great actress. This is quite a tall order and I was anxious that we wouldn't find anyone to fit the bill. We have seen several hundred girls before we found Emőke at the Új Színház Stúdió, and she is a perfect match.



Emőke Zsigmond and Zsolt László

**YK:** *You are shooting the dances now with the Honvéd Dance Theatre.*

**EH:** I had watched all the more important Hungarian folk dance ensembles. I had found what I was looking for in a group then called the Budapest Dance Ensemble, managed by Zoltán Zsuráfszky. They perform dances from the entire the Carpathian Basin. It was the closest to what I imagined the film's dances would be. I am not interested in "pure" dance. Their dance evokes a strong emotional response in the audience, which is very important for me. The way I see it, the dance is the subconscious of the film. What you can't say in words, you can express in dance. The scenes are also dances in prose. Dance and prose form a unity for me. We have been working on this project for the past three years. We have settled into their studio to shoot the dances here.



Bea Melkvi and the Honvéd Dance Theatre

**YK:** Are you using any new technology during the shoot?

**HE:** Shooting dance sequences well requires a lot of footage, which our budget would not have allowed for had we used film stock; so we decided to use digital technology. It gives us more freedom and better chances to catch unexpected moments. We can shoot a scene many more times until it reaches its best potential. During the Canadian shoot we were working on flashbacks of Steve's past, when Deborah Unger ("The Game"), who played Steve's ex-wife, Lynn, announced that she would like to have a chance to dance in one of them. It was our last day and everybody was exhausted, but when an actor insists on something, I always assume that it is with good reason. Vilmos agreed to shoot one more sequence in the same set and lighting as we did before. Deborah and I began to waltz in front of the fireplace. But Deborah was wearing very high-heeled shoes, and she toppled over the second step we took. It was quite a hoot (he says laughing). But she did not fall out of her character. Vilmos was shouting, "Don't stop! Keep rolling!" We went on with the scene, laughing, hugging; I tried to catch her and we fell onto the bed. It became a scene full of life and humor; a lot truer than the "romantic night" we originally composed. If we had not had the chance to say, "OK, if she wants it so much, let's do it, we don't have to worry about cost", we would not have had this scene.

**YK:** So will this scene be in the movie?

**EH:** Yes, it will.

**YK:** We are looking forward to seeing it!

**Yvette Kulik**

**Megjelent! Kapható a Sub Rosa!**

**Bíró Szabolcs könyve a templomos lovagok világába kalauzol, megfelelően adagolt izgalommal és romantikával fűszerezve ezt az utazást. Aki regényes fordulatokat keres, vagy be kíván lesni a középkor titkaiba, nem fog csalódni e regényben. És az sem, aki örömét leli a hangulatos prágai utcákon való sétákban...**

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