

“There is nothing to be afraid of; if we are not afraid, we are free.”

KELEMEN'S CINEMATIC WORLD

Linda Olte: What would you like to tell us about your experiences in Latvia? What was the first impulse for coming here and starting to do something? Why Latvia?

Fred Kelemen: I first visited Riga in 1996 to present my film “Fate” (“Verhängnis”) at the Arsenal Film Festival. I came back in 2000 with my film “Nightfall” (“Abendland”). The director of the Goethe Institute Riga, Mrs Sabine Belz, had organized a special screening of the film at the institute for students of the Latvian Culture Academy. After the screening the students and I talked about the film and they told me about their studies. I understood that their education was mainly theoretical with not much practical work. After talking to two professors of the LCA we agreed to hold a practical workshop with the students which would give them the possibility to develop their own scripts and shoot their own films. It was my intention to give them an idea, a taste of what film can be like, what cinematographical thinking means and how beautiful it is to believe in your own creative forces, to use them, to fight for your own vision and to produce a work of art. I wrote a concept for the workshop and Mrs Belz supported the idea and succeeded in organizing the necessary money which was donated by the Allianz Kulturstiftung in Germany. With part of the money I bought a professional Digi Beta Camera and professional sound equipment which was missing at the LCA, with the rest of the money the films were made. After two months from September to November 2002 11 films had been shot and edited and were presented at the Goethe Institute Riga and later in December at the Riga cinema. The students asked me to hold a second workshop because they wanted our collaboration and their practical education to continue. The personal and artistic experience I had had with the students was so positive that I agreed immediately. It took more than a year to organize the necessary money for a second workshop and it was finally successful thanks to the head of the Goethe Institute Berlin, Mrs Ulrike Hofmann-Steinmetz and her colleagues. Money from different German and Latvian organizations like the Bundeskulturstiftung, Robert Bosch Stiftung, Allianz Kulturstiftung, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, the Goethe Institute, the Culture Capital Fond (KKF) and Rigas Doms had been given to allow a new workshop to take place and to buy a new editing computer with software for the LCA. A new part of the concept was to integrate five students from Germany into the project to create a collaboration between Latvian and German students. In April 2004 the three month workshop started and finished with the production of 16 films between 15 and 90 minutes in length. A two day presentation of the works was made in Riga at the Riga cinema in September 2004 and in Berlin at the Arsenal cinema in January 2005. Many of the films have also been presented at film festivals in Cottbus, Germany and Tallinn, Estonia. Annett Schütze's film “Moskatchka” has just received a Special Mention at the film festival in Nyon, Switzerland.

L. O.: How did the idea for your film „Krisana” develop?

F. K.: The scene which stood at the beginning of my reflections was the scene which is the second one in the film now. Starting from this situation the flow of the events was developed and the characters and the universe of the film built up. The atmosphere of the city, the things I experienced during my stays at Riga since 1996, the people I met - all this influenced the way the film is now. For some years I had wanted to shoot a film in Riga. I had written a script (“Iron City”) and Laima Freimane wanted to produce it. But so far we haven't started. After talking to her about “Krisana” we decided to produce this film and found a possibility to finance the shooting. Baiba Lagzina, a student who did not want to shoot her own film but needed to do some camera work to get her diploma, was the film's camera operator. I started meeting actors and talking to them to find the right cast. It didn't take long to decide, because the actors I met were very convincing. Later they all gave a very good performance in the film. Egons Dombrovskis as the main actor has a wonderful presence which fills audiences with enthusiasm in different countries like Germany, the Netherlands, Italy and Argentina where the film has been presented up to now. His colleague Vigo Roga, who played the part of the detective, and Nikolaj Korobov also convinced the audiences with their extraordinary performances. I am very grateful to all the actors who participated in the film who are the wonderful: Aija Dzerve, Egons

Dombrovskis, Vigo Roga, Nikolaj Korobov and Gundars Silakaktins and Andris Keiss, who I have known since 2002. I am also grateful that the young Rihards Gailiss participated in the film. Back in Berlin I edited the film, did the sound mix etc. which was possible because of the financial support of two film foundations in Germany. In February 2005 the 35mm print was ready and the film had its world premiere at the Rotterdam International Film Festival, Netherlands followed by the presentation of the film at the Berlin International Film Festival and others. Until February next year the film will be screened several times every month in different countries all over the world. In Italy the film received the International Critics Award for the best film (FIPRESCI) and other awards.

L. O.: Of course every actor, place, time etc is what makes the film like it is. What do you think would have been the main difference if you had worked on the film in Berlin and not in Riga?

F. K.: I would not have shot the film in Berlin. Even though the content of the film is universal and the events shown in the film could happen anywhere, its specific appearance, let's say its "face" was given to the film by the city and the actors I worked with there.

L. O.: Do you think Latvians relate to the film in a different way to Germans?

F. K.: Of course a Latvian audience will have a different relation to the film to foreigners. But this is normal. Germans have a different relation to German films to audiences from other countries, Russians have a different relation to Russian films etc. Very often audiences from foreign countries have a more "objective" relation which results from the distance they have and it often gives them a view of it which does more justice to the film and enables them to appreciate it more. Audiences often have a more negative view of films from their own countries.

L. O.: How do you see the perspective of the Latvian film industry as an outsider?

F. K.: This question is not easy to answer. There is not really a Latvian "film industry". To boost the production of films in Latvia it would perhaps be necessary to make more co-productions with other countries.

Not to produce big, expensive mainstream films but to produce films which are authentic, which are personal expressions of directors as authors and which are specific and talk about the very real presence of our time and the conditions of our lives with all its problems, hopes and visions those we have lost and those we have not yet made real. Films which are different from the unspecific mainstream productions and whose strength lies in their diversity and variety. To achieve this, it would be very important to enable the new generation of film makers to shoot their first films and to give them the chance to continue. They need all the possible support because they are the creators of a new epoch of film art. They are the future of cinema and they should be treated well.

L. O.: What do you think are the things and themes people want to see in film now? Which themes is society concerned about?

F. K.: Certainly people always want to be entertained. But the question is what is entertaining? It can be very entertaining to read a novel by Fjodor M. Dostojevskij or to watch a film from Andreij Tarkovkij, to listen to music from Bach, Bartók or Vasks. It can be an adventure to confront your mind with something not so easy. We just have to have the interest and the courage and the curiosity to think, to be really touched and to enter a mental world which is different from the common mainstream products which are easy to consume but just as easily forgotten after a few hours and boring after a while. I think what an open audience will always appreciate are films about human beings and the conditions they live in, films which honestly try to get a glimpse of the secret of our existence and which take us on a journey to our innermost life.

L. O.: What does it mean to be a director?

F. K.: First of all, he is not the arsehole who just shouts „action” on the set. To be a director means

having a vision. This demands a responsibility from him, a consciousness of what it means to make a film. Because film art is not an art like for example painting where you are alone at your easel, but one where you work together with people. You have to be confident about your vision, about what you want to say. You have to convince others why they should stand in the wind or cold for example. You can't do this work alone. And only then when you have a vision and a strong confidence about what you are doing, can you escape from the others' doubts. You have to feel a deep love for this art, otherwise you will not have the strength to continue. Film art is hard. Not only because of the amount of people involved, the technical equipment, the money etc. You can only continue if you have a deep love for film art and also for the people you are working with. And you also have to love those to whom you want to say something through the film. Film is a language. You have to have something you want to say. And you have to be aware of how you want to say it. You have to go for it.

L. O.: Stanislavski said that a director is someone who can see, who can notice.

F. K.: A film director does not work from nine to five, film is part of his life, it is a way of living. Because you have to research, to observe permanently and not to turn away and close your eyes. Yes, you have to look deeper, to see what is behind. But directors of course are not special people. Some of them misunderstand their positions. Some become directors and behave like arseholes, like dictators. In fact being a film director should actually be understood as a very humble profession you have to look into the world and try to see hidden things. To try to come closer to the secret of life, you need a very humble attitude. Otherwise you will destroy what you are trying to find.

L. O.: You have worked also in theatre. Does film attract you more than theatre?

F. K.: Theatre is something very different to film, but I must say that I like both. I like to work with the camera that is what I miss in theatre. When I was working in theatre, I always used video projections; I never made a pure theatre play because it did not interest me. For the audience pure theatre is like watching a wide angle shot which lasts for example two hours. For me the camera is part of the language, it is also a protagonist. The camera paints the film. For me the camera is a very important tool with which I can say what I want. I believe in the magic of the moving image.

L. O.: How do you write your scripts?

F. K.: Every writing of a script has its beginning, maybe it is a feeling, maybe a theme, an image, some music. At first I try to follow this first impulse very intuitively. Then I try to get to know more about the film here you have to start working because you really have to think. I write every day, every hour, every moment. I always have a little notebook with me where I write down everything. Sometimes I write a scene not knowing where exactly it will be in the film, I collect scenes, ideas, images, sentences everything that comes into my mind. And pretty soon I know my characters. And when I have enough of these sketches I usually sit in a bar and put everything in order. I write by hand at first. Then I rewrite it on the computer at home, and of course many things change again, I get new ideas. So I am not in any way a bureaucrat who sits from... till... at his desk and writes.

L. O.: Have your films changed your life?

F. K.: Of course. If I didn't make films, I would have a different life. If I was a paediatrician, I would have a different life. I wanted to be a paediatrician since I was 4 years old; this was my dream till I was 17. That's a long time. But slowly it started to change I started to write little stories, poems, started to paint, I was interested in music I would say that art took me over.

L. O.: But I meant did film as such, as an idea, a theme, change you.

F. K.: No, I think my life changes my films, because I am developing. And I believe that I am also

growing spiritually. My films are changing with my spiritual progress. This film I am doing now I could not have made it 10 years ago, because I have changed. My thinking changes. There are periods when a film follows me I create a film, and there are periods when I follow the film I travel with the film to festivals. Then I follow the film like a dog following his master.

L. O.: What is your favourite place in Riga?

F. K.: Very difficult question. Today I saw a very nice place a little backyard on Dzirnava street. I like this backyard a lot. This is my favourite place today. Very empty. Maybe a little depressive, melancholic, but I like it a lot. Because it expresses something, there were feelings. But actually my favourite place is the sky over Riga at night the light of the sky creates a very special atmosphere. Yesterday I was walking through the city and I got the idea that this would be a perfect time for a new film festival, a "White Nights Film Festival" in Riga; because the summer after the film festival in Cannes is pretty empty concerning the festivals' schedule. I don't know if anybody would be ready to organize it here, but I think that it would fit the city very well.

L. O.: Your favourite place in Berlin?

F. K.: Now, I think, my favourite place in Berlin is my bedroom. I am so rarely at home, so I like my bedroom a lot.

L. O.: Where do you think your strength ends and the divine starts?

F. K.: This is a very complicated subject. What is divine for one person, is not for another. This is something you can't prove. You either believe or you don't.

L. O.: Do you believe?

F. K.: Yes, but I don't believe that suddenly everything stops and the divine starts to act. If I get an idea in my mind, I can't tell where it comes from. I am sure that a human being is a medium energies go through you. If you are openhearted, if you don't manipulate, don't try to prove your own strengths but just say what you want to say, then you are like an electricity power station which generates electricity.

Somebody who creates something is close to this mystery of creation. This is what you feel you touch the secret. We live in a universe, in a non-stop movement, things appear and disappear this is constant creation. I think that the process of creation didn't end millions of years ago, it is still going on. If we take a look in the Bible 6 creation days (which are not the days we humans know) - , but it does not happen once, it repeats again and again. Creation is a permanent process.

L. O.: What makes you happy?

F. K.: Many things. Of course not for ever because immortal happiness does not exist. But there are things that make me happy secular work makes me happy, creating, working with people. I like to spend the limited time given to us together with good people, good company makes me happy.

L. O.: What are you afraid of?

F. K.: It is hard to answer. It changes. I would say that generally I am not afraid of death, because it is a fact. But of course there are moments when I am afraid of death. I cannot answer unequivocally. It changes depending on how strong I am. But in general we should not be afraid. If we go deep into what fear is, we find out that there is no reason to be afraid. What should I be afraid of? Of somebody else? No, why? Of myself? Of death? There is no a reason to be afraid of death because we cannot change it. Fear paralyses us. I think we should not be afraid at all. Because when we are not afraid, we are free. This is a very important condition for freedom not to be afraid.

L. O.: There is a lot of walking in your films. Do you like walking?

F. K.: Yes, I like walking a lot. And we spend a lot of time walking. We are moving all the time; we travel from home to work, from work to home etc. Walking is also an expression of the human being. For instance, there are angels in the Bible and they never walk, they are static they show up behind a tree, they stand. But people are walking, because we are always searching. In some sense we are refugees, strangers in this world, because we are always looking for a place to stay, to be at peace. Somehow we have lost our place here. I think that walking expresses the sense of existing. We are always on the way. Which is also good, because being on the way also means searching. And growing.

L. O.: Why have we lost our place?

F. K.: It seems we have alienated ourselves from our nature, we are far away from our inner truth. Maybe that is why we are not at peace. And as long as we are not at peace with ourselves, we will not be at peace with the world around us. We are not at peace with people around us, with the whole of society. All society's conflicts. This is very visible now we live in unpeace. But there can not be peace, if we individually are not at peace. Possibly we are not united with our inner nature, we are alienated, we are our own enemies.

L. O.: Do you think there is a way back?

F. K.: Yes, there is. Maybe we have to go back. To Paradise. We have to close this circle somehow. Not in a conservative or an aggressive way. To go back means to go forward. Maybe the future is somewhere else than where we think. The future does not consist of material progress, economic growth and the possession of material things. This is no future. It is a dead end. I think the future is a way back forward towards human questions. Back to our hearts, to our nature. It does not mean that we have to live in the jungle I mean it in spiritual way. Back to our spiritual life. If we take for example a religion we maybe all know the Christian religion many people think that they know what Christianity is, that they are Christians, but actually it is not like that. I think that there are many deeper hidden things. There is a simple sentence in the Bible: Love your neighbour like yourself. This is a very deep and difficult demand. But I think that it could be a guideline for the future, because it means a lot. First of all you have to love yourself, which is very hard. Loving yourself means accepting yourself. Accepting yourself with all your shortcomings, dirt. And forgiving yourself. If you know your hellish, darkest parts, if you accept them, you can pass on. And this is the only way that you will be able to accept others and not to judge them. This is the moment when love starts. Love your neighbor like yourself. On the same level. Do not do anything to him that you would not want him to do to you. A very simple idea, but a very deep thought behind it. It is not easy to fulfill. But if we practised this, the whole world would be different. I think that many Christians all over the world are actually not Christians, because they can not fulfill even this one sentence of Jesus. I think that this one sentence could be part of a way back forward.

L. O.: You like long shots.

F. K.: Indeed.

L. O.: Why?

F. K.: This is complicated to explain, because it is connected with the question of timing, with rhythm. Time is a big phenomenon for us. What is time? Why does it exist? Maybe because we have a limited life? If we lived eternally, we would perhaps not count, not measure time. But we grow, get old and die. Time is the sculptor of our lives. It creates our lives, faces, biographies. Film art is also an art of time. The image we see on the screen moves time is happening, time is passing in a shot. I am interested in what time is doing in a shot, in an image. What the actors are doing in time. I like to observe how time creates an image, how emotion moves in time. Thoughts need time to develop. Anything we do needs time. Long shots can show the development of

thoughts, of emotions. I like shots where in the end there is a different emotion than there was at the beginning. In one shot an emotion can be transformed or even change into its opposite. I use a lot of these long shots because it is a possibility to observe life at the moment it is being created. Not only to give an information, but to give something more beyond. Then something else can happen. Then life can happen. Life has been sculptured. I also believe that in a long shot time is transformed from physical time into metaphysical time and we can enter another space. Maybe we can touch the secret of our being. If we are not focusing only on what happens on the surface we might be able to start thinking about ourselves. This is a process in which our view changes. We are not only watching the screen, the screen is watching us. This is a special moment when everything changes and we look into our lives. I am interested in films which confront us. Cinema should be a place which gives you time, not a place which takes it away from you. In our everyday existence too much time is taken away from us.

L. O.: Are you not afraid that soon there will be nobody who will want to see your films?

F.K.: Well, I believe that there will be an audience, even more. Because many people are tired of the rush, of fast films which give nothing than entertainment first and a headache or emptiness afterwards. I am sure that there will be an interest in a different kind of cinema. When I was in Buenos Aires presenting my film, the shows were sold out, and mostly young people were in the audience. They could associate this time, this rhythm with themselves. It is something very different to what you can see in TV or in a mainstream cinema. It was evidence that there is an audience, especially among young people. They are looking for something different. I am sure. Let's hope.

Linda Olte held this interview with Fred Kelemen
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