

# No Subtitles Necessary

# Laszlo and Vilmos

No one asks James Chressanthis, ASC what *No Subtitles Necessary: Laszlo and Vilmos* is about when they hear or read the title of his documentary.

“Laszlo Kovacs, ASC and Vilmos Zsigmond, ASC have become legends in their own time,” he says. “They have made an indelible impression on the global art form, and created iconic images that have shaped our culture.

Through their example and their teaching, they have selflessly shared their knowledge inspiring generations of young filmmakers to pursue their dreams.”

Chressanthis conceived the idea, produced and directed *No Subtitles Necessary: Laszlo and Vilmos*. However he doesn't claim to be an auteur. Chressanthis lauds the support he received from various companies and colleagues in the industry who share his admiration for Kovacs and Zsigmond both as artists and human beings.

The long-form documentary focuses on the lives and careers of Kovacs and Zsigmond who met at a Budapest film school, survived the revolt, and then arrived with only their dreams in the United States as political refugees in February 1957. They were pursuing what seemed like the impossible.

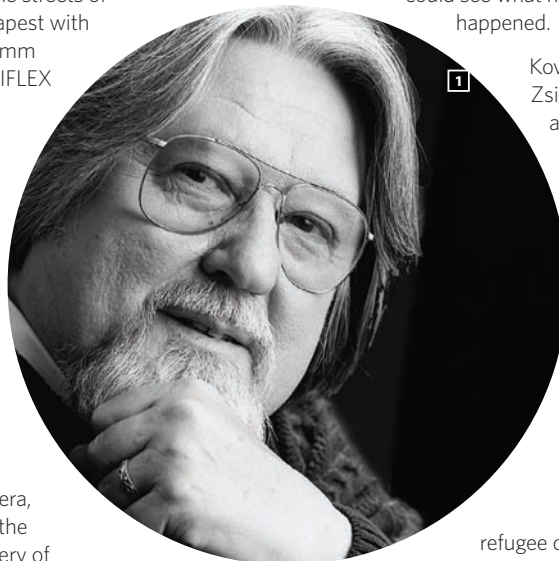
Excerpts from around 50 hours of conversations with Kovacs, Zsigmond and some 70 individuals who worked with them and whose lives they touched are weaved into the fabric of the story. A short list includes Karen Black, Peter Bogdanovich, Sandra Bullock, Richard Donner, Dennis Hopper, Tatum O'Neal, Bob Rafelson, Barbra Streisand, John Williams, Peter Fonda, Jon Voight, Irwin Winkler, Haskell Wexler, ASC, Owen Roizman, ASC, and Leonard Maltin.

Kovacs and Zsigmond were born and raised in Hungary during the Nazi and then the Russian occupations of their native land.

They both studied at The Academy of Drama and Film in Budapest, where their mentor was cinematographer-teacher György Illés. During the uprising against the communist regime, they documented fighting on the streets of Budapest with a 35mm ARRIFLEX

country before the Russian invaders arrested them. They subsequently made a perilous trek on foot through a forest carrying thousands of feet of film across the border into Austria so people in the free world could see what had happened.

Kovacs and Zsigmond made their way to Los Angeles to help another Hungarian refugee make a short film. They subsequently worked at odd jobs, and shot 16mm industrial movies, documentaries and films for students. By the early 1960s, Zsigmond and Kovacs were working on ultra-low budget independent films with titles like *The Sadist* and *Hells Angels on Wheels*



Kovacs and Zsigmond arrived at a

**“Their brotherhood, how they struggled and triumphed, is the heart of the story.”**

camera, and the bravery of civilians who were fighting Russian tanks and soldiers in October 1956.

“The Russians considered the camera a weapon,” says Kovacs.

Zsigmond adds, “We could have been shot, we were a bit more brave than we should have been.”

After the Russian army brutally crushed the revolt, Illés urged Kovacs and Zsigmond to leave the

refugee camp at Fort Kilmer, New Jersey, in February 1957. A Lutheran priest helped Zsigmond find a job at a still photography lab in Evanston, Illinois. Kovacs was sponsored by a passport photographer who put him to work tapping maple syrup out of trees in upstate New York. The odds against them becoming iconic Hollywood cinematographers were staggering, but they never gave up.

Kovacs eventually lensed such classics as *Easy Rider*, *That Cold Day in the Park*, *Five Easy Pieces*, *The King of Marvin Gardens*, *Paper Moon*, *Shampoo*, *New York, New York*, *Ghostbusters*, *Frances* and *Mask*. Zsigmond earned an Oscar™ for *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, and other nominations for *The Deer Hunter*, *The River* and *The Black Dahlia*. He also earned an Emmy for *Stalin*. Some of his other memorable films include *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, *The Rose* and *Deliverance*.

# Imos

Film historian/critic Leonard Maltin has dubbed them as critical to “The American New Wave.”

Chressanthis launched his ambitious endeavor during the 50th anniversary of Kovacs and Zsigmond arriving in the U.S. while he was shooting and occasionally directing episodes of the hit CBS TV series *Ghost Whisperer*. That timing proved to be important, because he was able to film compelling interviews with Kovacs sharing his memories, insights and thoughts before he died on July 22, 2007.

“Vilmos and Laszlo created visual poetry with moving images which are a reflection of their dreams,” Chressanthis says. “They were closer than brothers, and were always there for each other. Laszlo told directors, ‘You should work with Vilmos. He’s better than I am.’ Vilmos sang the praises of Kovacs as the ideal cinematographer for their pictures. Seeing this side of human nature gives me hope for the future.”

Chressanthis was a student at AFI in 1984 when Kovacs conducted a seminar following a screening of *Paper Moon*. Two years later, he interned with Zsigmond during the production of *The Witches of Eastwick*. Chressanthis says that memories of those two experiences were the sparks which ignited his passion for this project.

“I have watched nearly all of their early films,” he says. “The lighting by Vilmos in *My Soul Runs Naked*, a.k.a *Rat Fink*, is stunning. The same is true of Laszlo’s work. In his early biker movies you see the development of his lyrical camera, the quality that Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper wanted for *Easy Rider*, which captured the spirit of the nation. Laszlo and Vilmos were breaking new ground in their own ways while they were helping each other.”

“I found both of them to be very modest while talking about their bravery when they were filming the Hungarian revolution and their escape across the border into Austria,” he says. “Their decision to make that dramatic leap into the unknown can’t be underestimated. It was a great leap of faith to start their lives over in a new country. You can’t overestimate how difficult it was for them to be immigrants who didn’t speak the language to overcome the adversity they faced to realize their dreams.”

“Their brotherhood, how they struggled and triumphed, is the heart of the story. When asked if he had one wish what would it be, Vilmos looked at the camera and said, ‘All my dreams came true.’ How many people can say that? It is also the story of man’s mortality. We lost Laszlo while our film was in production. I am grateful that we portrayed his immense spirit on film before he died.”

Some 75 percent of the interviews and conversations were produced in Super 16mm format with KODAK VISION2 film, and Aaton and ARRIFLEX cameras telecined to the HDcamSR format. “Many of the commentaries were quite emotional. Their story is a testament to the power of two lives,” Chressanthis says. “I felt the

need for an organic film look, augmented with artful lighting that was right for the emotional flow of the story.”

Additional content was recorded with digital HD cameras, and a Super 8mm camera loaded with PRO 8mm packaged VISION2 stocks to record behind-the-scenes shots documenting the interviews. The multiple formats are being integrated during digital intermediate (DI) timing along with hundreds of still images, stock footage and memorable clips from some of the classic films that Kovacs and Zsigmond photographed.

*No Subtitles Necessary: Laszlo and Vilmos* is a general interest film aimed at theatrical and television audiences, followed by DVD and internet distribution. The value of this documentary to film schools and cinema history is

unquestionable. It will be unveiled on the film festival circuit this spring and summer.

Chressanthis lauds Kodak, Mole-Richardson, LaserPacific, ARRI and Panavision and Union Editorial as companies that provided both practical support and encouragement, along with individuals who volunteered their time and services. Those names and other details are available on [www.laszloandvilmos.com](http://www.laszloandvilmos.com).

1 DP Laszlo Kovacs, ASC. Photo by Douglas Kirkland.  
2 DP Vilmos Zsigmond, ASC prepares for an on-camera interview for the documentary *No Subtitles Necessary: Laszlo and Vilmos*, shot by DP James Chressanthis, ASC.



2