

A Composer's Experience With Phillip Borsos

BY Michael Conway Baker

I first met Phillip Borsos in 1979 when he was finishing his third NFB short, *Nails*. I had been recommended by filmmaker Jack Darcus who knew that Phillip was looking for "a powerful score." Phillip called me and arranged to come by to listen to recordings of my music. When he heard the first movement of my Concerto for Piano and Orchestra he practically went ballistic. "That's it," he said. "That's what I want!" The problem was the NFB would pay only enough for five musicians. My Concerto employed over 40. Turning on what I was to soon appreciate as the "Borsos charm," he persuaded me to pitch the Film Board for more money for the music. Figuring I'd never get 40, I asked for 26. "We'll give you 19," said the head guy. I realized I had quite a task on my hands; I had to try and make the 19 sound like 40. Perhaps I managed too well because when the music was heard at an initial screening I heard the remark, "Kind of gilding the lily, don't you think?" I was crushed. When I left I thought I had failed, but Phillip put his arm around me and said, "Don't listen to them. They don't know anything."

I went back to my teaching, my wife and my kids and figured my film composing career was over. Imagine my surprise when, months later, I heard my score had been nominated for a Genie! Then, later, even more surprising, that I had won! I guess my film composing career wasn't over after all. (The Film Board sent a huge bouquet of flowers to my school with a note that said, "Congratulations, great score." Phillip's comment at the screening rang in my ears.) Phillip believed so much in what he had achieved with *Nails* that he entered the film, over the objections of the Film Board, into the Documentary Short Subject category



Phillip Borsos

ry of the Academy Awards. The film competed with over 300 entries and was one of five to be nominated. Phillip's credibility shot up and he immediately set to work on a feature based on the life of the American "gentleman bandit," Bill Miner. The movie was *The Grey Fox* and forever established Phillip as a major filmmaker in Canada.

However, the making of *The Grey Fox* was torturous. Phillip had little or no money, but he did have awesome powers of persuasion. He convinced John Hunter to write a wonderful script but failed to convince the money powers to let him direct. They said he would have to find a well-known director for the film. Finally, after many months, Phillip did

find a Swedish director (whose name escapes me) he admired and who was interested in the project. But he wanted to meet Phillip, screen his three shorts, and then decide. Phillip, knowing I was keen to pitch the National Ballet on the idea of a film set to *Washington Square*, a full-length ballet I had been commissioned to write, said he would pitch the National Ballet if I could get him to Toronto. Of course, in the Borsos tradition, this all grew like Topsy and expanded into a plan to get him to Europe to meet with the Swedish director.

I rationalized the trip on the notion that a film of the ballet would more than reimburse me for my investment. I also felt I could make a record deal if I recorded with a major symphony orchestra such as the London Symphony. I managed to scrape up \$5,000 seed money (my annual teacher's salary was just over this amount) and signed an agreement with Mercury Pictures, Phillip's company. I also convinced a friend, who was a ballet enthusiast, to invest another \$2,500 into what we called the *Washington Square Ballet*

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Project. Phillip spent two days in Toronto trying to convince the National Ballet to let him do a television film of *Washington Square*. No dice! They had just been "burned" by another filmmaker who had wanted them to do Stravinsky's *Firebird* ballet. That project had fallen through and left the National Ballet with a lot of bills. At the end of the two days, I knew my project was dead, but if Phillip could succeed with the Swedish director, he would be able to do *The Grey Fox* and, of course, I was first in line to do the score.

So, off we went to Europe—Phillip to Paris to meet the Swedish director, and me to London to talk to the London Symphony about recording my ballet score. (I still had my delusions about a record deal.) We subsequently met up in Paris where Phillip was nervously waiting for his appointment with the director, the only person he felt could direct *The Grey Fox* the way he would do it. He came back from his meeting absolutely euphoric. The director not only liked his films but he said that Phillip was the one person who had the vision and the skill to direct *The Grey Fox*. With a letter confirming the director's opinion in hand, we returned to Canada and *The Grey Fox* got made. I'll never forget seeing Phillip at the party he gave just before he set out to the first location. We went for a walk where he confessed, "I have no idea what to do." Now it was my turn to be reassuring. "You have a great script, a wonderful crew, fabulous actors and Frank Tidy, one of the world's great cinematographers. You'll be just fine." And he was.

Writing the music for *The Grey Fox* was wonderful and perilous. Phillip loved *The Chieftains* and chose some cuts from one of their recordings to place in the film. My job was to come up with Celtic-like music that would work around these cuts. Fortunately, I have some Celtic blood in my background and found I could come up with ideas that complemented *The Chieftains* music. I think Phillip's choice of Irish music for the story of Bill Miner was brilliant, but it made my task harder. It's one thing to use cuts of music from an existing recording and quite another to tailor-make music to fit all the nuances of the drama.

One harrowing situation involved Richard Farnsworth, who played Miner, singing "Sweet Betsy from Pike," unaccompanied, in the bathtub. A single verse would have been fine, but the song covered a long montage that went on for quite a while. I felt that some harmonic underscore to the song would help a lot. (Normally, in films, songs are

recorded first, then played back during a take with the actor miming the singing. This was the reverse and, consequently, extremely difficult.) A pianist was hired, but when he realized he would have to improvise an accompaniment to singing that was rhythmically all over the map, he said he wouldn't touch it with a "10-foot pole." So I had to do it. I began at 2:00 a.m. and must have done 15 takes in my efforts to fit the accompaniment to the singing. Our soundman kept a score card of each phrase and gave me a grade for each take. My early efforts earned me pretty low marks, but, gradually, I managed perfect or near perfect takes. When I see this part of the film I remember the sweat, but feel the result makes the whole scene work so much better. (Ask anybody about this scene and I would bet no one but another composer would be able to say there was piano accompaniment to the singing.) Phillip stayed with us the whole time and offered continual support and encouragement, no matter that it was 3:00 a.m. His dedication, enthusiasm and patience for the often grinding process was what endeared him to many who worked with him.

At other times he could be quite perverse. I learned, the hard way, not to express my pleasure over a music cue. If he felt I liked something he would cut it without a qualm. He did this with his editors who, like me, learned not to let on that they liked a particular bit of work. Phillip, like so many filmmakers, wanted complete control and, even to the detriment of their films, would not allow the notion of someone else making a decision. It takes a pretty mature artist to realize that not all their decisions are necessarily

the best. The upside of this attitude is that artists, like Phillip, often produce pieces of art that reflect a unique vision.

My last project with Phil Borsos was the Disney film, *One Magic Christmas*. Because one of the producers at Disney felt Phillip should hire a "pops" composer with a profile, Phillip engaged a composer from Quebec with a pop track record. Unfortunately, this composer's music was too light for the film's

rather dark story plot. Because this composer refused to write anything until he had a "frozen" cut, Bruce Nyznik, the soundman on the film, had the job of purchasing all this composer's recordings and laying in music that might work. He said he never found anything appropriate and expressed the opinion that a more suitable composer should be found. That's when I got the call.



One Magic Christmas



The first thing I was asked to do was to fly to Los Angeles to see a Disney marketing version of the film. The picked audience consisted mostly of friends and family. Their reaction was around the 50 per cent "satisfactory" level. Needless to say, neither Disney nor Phillip were very pleased. Sitting in

the theatre I realized soon enough that the music score was just not supporting the dramatic needs of the film. The Disney marketing procedure was new to me and I felt very valuable. I then flew to Toronto, where all the post-production was being done on the understanding my involvement

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would be three weeks. I ended up staying there for three months. My first meeting with Phillip did not bode well. He was in one of his notorious "Hungarian" moods. His experience with the previous composer had been very frustrating and he just wasn't ready to explain, all over again, what he wanted.

However, after many hours of discussion, I think he realized I understood what he wanted the music to do. At any rate, he gradually became more encouraging about the music I was coming up with. Because Disney was paying for the score—Phillip's company was paying for everything else—he was determined to spend as much money as possible. From the very beginning he would go on about making the music "big." "I want it big—big!" he would yell. I came to realize he wanted as big an orchestra as possible, so I suggested we use twice the usual number of strings, while also adding a lot of "extra stuff." He liked that idea very much. Of course, this meant a lot more work for me, but I was determined to make him happy.

Making Phil Borsos happy was, for many, an insurmountable task—especially when he was in one of his black moods.

Nevertheless, I went to work with a vengeance. The first time Phillip heard some of the music I had written was a very tense time for me. The acid test was, of course, how the music worked with the picture. Phillip would slouch, gloomily, in his chair in the mixing theatre, almost daring the music to do what he wanted it to do. I didn't sit next to him for fear my nerves would get the better of me. Fortunately, both Bruce Nyznik, the soundman, and Paul Massy, a brilliant English recording and mixing engineer, thought the music was wonderful. At one point, both gave me a surreptitious thumbs up. Later, Bruce told me that Phillip leaned over and whispered in his ear, "This is pretty good, isn't it." It was almost as if he was afraid to express this opinion to me.

Another major challenge was to make the music, in Phillip's well-used word, "big." The music was to make up for the lack of certain special effects. (The money had run out.) One particular sequence involved mundane shots of Christmas lights going off. The lights going off were to signify "magic" done by the angel, played by Harry Dean Stanton. I did absolutely everything possible to make the music "big," as demanded. Having worked everything out to the split second, I felt I had really done the job. Imagine my dismay when the recorded music was first put up against the picture sequence and nothing synchronized. What had I done wrong? Phillip was furious and, looking for some explanation, I asked the editor if he had changed anything. "Not a thing," he practically yelled at me. "You're absolutely certain you didn't change *anything*," I asked desperately. "The only thing I did was to balance the reels," he responded. "And what is that," I asked. "Oh, I just took a few frames out here and there," came the response.

The light dawned on both Phillip and me. Of course my music wouldn't sync with the picture. Now I was mad. I really lost my cool and started berating the editor. Phillip grabbed my arm and hauled me out of the editing room to the area where the sound crew was working. He proceeded to yell at me in front of the whole crew. "You are *never* to say stuff like that to my editor!" The crew stood in disbelief. I was so mad, I stormed out and was ready to quit. Outside, in the freezing Toronto winter, I literally cooled off. Phillip, afraid I had finally had enough, came out after me and, with all the famous Borsos charm, sincerely apologized. If someone apologizes to me, I'm ready to forgive and forget. We went back to the editing room. Phillip asked the editor where the missing frames were. "On the floor," he mumbled. "Well, pick them up and put them back. Then we'll see if the music syncs with the picture." We waited outside while the editor, on his knees, found each single frame in question and laboriously spliced them back into the film. Finally, we were ushered in to see/hear the result. Much to my enormous relief, all the music was in sync. Still, I felt resentful to be the scapegoat for someone else's mistake.

After this incident, Phillip seemed friendlier, although he would still have his black moods. He never seemed satisfied with the picture and kept recutting. I would finish recording only to be sent yet another cut so drastically changed I would have to write more music for replaced scenes. By the time I left we were up to cut "L"—12 different versions of the film! The last day of the final mix I received a call from the production office to be on hand for a conference call from Hollywood. Disney wanted to talk to me about the score. I was told I was not to

convey any "problems" to the two presidents. To me this indicated a fair amount of concern, and needless to say I was pretty nervous. Arriving at the office I became even more nervous when I was told that Michael Eisner and Jeffrey Katzenberg were going to give me a rating of the music cues on a scale of one to 10. To say there was tension in the air would be an understatement.

However, both Eisner and Katzenberg were very complimentary. My score was never rated below a nine, and I got a 10 on at least half the music cues. We were all—including Phillip—amazed and delighted. After the call, I was congratulated along with lots of pats on the back. At this point I felt I had really written my best film music and this has been confirmed over the years. Along with *Nails* and *The Grey Fox*, *One Magic Christmas* has become a classic, and I may well be biased, but I feel these three films represent Phillip's best work.

Generally speaking, I think Phil Borsos's great talent was in stimulating, probing, irritating, exciting and frustrating those who worked for him into doing their best work. I never did another film with Phillip, but I consider myself fortunate in having had the opportunity to work with this talented, complex and often haunted Canadian filmmaker.



The Grey Fox