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TAKE ONE

Remembering D.W. Griffith



Joe

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I recall visiting Joe Medjuck in LA in 1981, soon after he had moved there from Toronto, for the premiere of *Stripes*. I was standing out in the backyard of the house, noting the glorious view below of LA, and I remember Medjuck shaking his head saying, "I wonder if I should have left Toronto." A Canadian case of the intellectual lost and estranged in Hollywood? Would Joe Medjuck, ex-University of Toronto film professor and a founding editor of the original *Take One*, become an F. Scott Fitzgerald-like victim of the cruel studio system?

Not quite. Instead, Medjuck endured, found comfort, and undeniable success. As Ivan Reitman's producer, Medjuck's name is

PEARY: You're being interviewed in part to tell us about the first incarnation of *Take One*, published and edited by Peter Lebensold. How did you get involved?

MEDJUCK: Somewhere in a file in Toronto I have a letter Peter sent me about *Take One*. I think it's from the fall of 1965. Peter and I had gone to McGill together and had been active in the McGill Film Society. We showed films cheaply, many that hadn't been seen before in Montreal. That's where I learned the history of films. Peter, Adam Symansky, and John Roston decided to start a film magazine in Montreal and, since I was going to graduate school at the University of Toronto, they wanted me to be the

more interested in Canadian cinema than, for instance, someone from Hungary, or England, or the States. However, we were just not very English-Canadian nationalist; and we definitely were affected by *Take One* being located in Montreal. In the beginning we published some of our articles in French.

PEARY: Was there a leftist bent to the early *Take One*?

MEDJUCK: Certainly neither Peter and I were ever wild-eyed Communists, but what we published reflected the times, the late 1960s and early 1970s.

PEARY: What impressed me about early *Take One* was its eclectic populism. There

Medjuck

The Interview

By Gerald Peary

high in the credits for some of the box-office marvels of the 1980s and 1990s, including *Ghostbusters*, *Beethoven* (and *Beethoven's 2nd*), *Twins*, and last year's *Dave*. Also, Medjuck bought a house, in a modest LA neighbourhood, and two children have come along.

Yet, the intellectual is still there, in Medjuck's passionate love of jazz, Eastern European novels, and the obscure movies of Chantal Ackerman and Marguerite Duras. Even better, the friendliness: Medjuck is legendary for his kindness to old pals coming to LA. There's always time for a personal tour of the studio or a visit to his house. This interview was conducted in the summer of 1993 at Medjuck's LA home.

PEARY: This is the first time you've been interviewed. Is there anyone you emulate as an interviewee?

MEDJUCK: I've learned some interview techniques by watching Arnold Schwarzenegger. He's very focussed. Most people get carried away by their own egos, just wanting to talk. Arnold actually thinks about what he's saying, what its impact will be. He knows to whom he is talking. He's not being manipulative. He just keeps in mind why he's being interviewed.

Toronto correspondent. Peter and his partners had a falling out over the next year, and I became a *Take One* minor partner. The first issues were, I think, graphically quite interesting. It was the age of offset, of underground magazines, and printing was cheaper than it had ever been. We were doing two-colour graphics in the beginning, printing on a kind of high-class newsprint. We had some very interesting artists: Vittorio and Terry Mosher (better known now as Aislin) did covers for us.

PEARY: *Take One* cost only 25 cents.

MEDJUCK: At the beginning. We were always reluctant to raise the price, yet whenever we raised it, we found circulation went up. We definitely had not reached a price resistance, but we did have store owners complain that some customers thought the title *Take One* meant a free magazine.

PEARY: Was there a desire to push the virtues of Canadian cinema?

MEDJUCK: No, and we were criticized for this. Though our first cover was of Norman McLaren, we didn't see *Take One* as pushing Canadian cinema but pushing good cinema. People of our generation, just out of college, were very interested in films in general, and in French and American culture. Since we were in Canada, we were certainly

were informal, fun pieces about maverick Hollywood directors, along with very serious articles on intellectual European cinema.

MEDJUCK: I don't remember ever formulating a *politique*, but we did seem to have our favourite filmmakers: Jean-Luc Godard, Roger Corman, Alfred Hitchcock and Michael Snow. To a large extent this reflected the interests of the writers we attracted. I remember the first letter we got from Michael Goodwin. Mike lived in San Francisco and was a film critic for *Rolling Stone*. He sent us an article on Andy Warhol which *Rolling Stone* wouldn't publish. We said, "This guy can really write, and we're interested in Andy Warhol." We used to run special Godard issues, but he was very popular then. We always wanted to discover people. If an article was well written and made a film or director sound interesting, we printed it. Critics discovering film directors was a relatively new thing in North America. I remember Jon Landau writing a piece on Don Siegel for *Rolling Stone* and saying, "where else will you read stuff like this?" I remember tearing out several articles in *Take One* and sending them to Landau saying, "Hey, this is a magazine that does it."

PEARY: What was your contribution to the



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editorial side of *Take One*?

MEDJUCK: I started some columns like “Overlooked and Underrated” because I had a thing about films which were ignored by critics. I think I wrote one of the first reviews in North America of a Leone film. I rarely wrote articles. I did interviews. My favourite is the one with Michael Snow. The first interview I did was with Warren Beatty at the Montreal Film Festival in 1967, before the screening of *Bonnie and Clyde*. The only film of his I liked was *Lilith*, which he didn’t like, so the interview wasn’t a great experience. Last year I met Beatty several times on a film project. That happens every so often. I find myself meeting or working with someone who we wrote about in *Take One*. Also a lot of people who wrote for us now work in film or television: Jonathan Demme, Kay Armatage, Phyllis Platt, Jay Cocks, etc. Recently I was working with a writer named Lem Dobbs, who had written *Kafka* among other things. One day, he came into the office with an old issue in which I’d interviewed Sam Peckinpah. He asked me to autograph it. *Take One* lasted 14 years, until 1980. Times had changed. We were making an attempt to be more popular and have a larger readership. I think in some ways that if Peter and I had our druthers, we’d have become *Premiere*.

PEARY: I recall a sexy *Take One* cover of Ivan Reitman’s 1973 *Cannibal Girls*. I understand that you and Ivan met much earlier.

MEDJUCK: John Hofsess, who wrote for us, said he’d just seen this student film, and we should review it in the magazine. I had a projector in my house, and Ivan came over with *Orientation*, starring Danny Goldberg. We projected it, and I thought it was really good. It was about a guy going through orientation with a beanie on, who sees another guy making a movie and decides that’s the way to meet girls. The kid makes a movie, and gets the girl. Ivan blew it up to 35mm and sold it to 20th Century Fox, which showed it all over Canada with the Dustin Hoffman movie, *John and Mary*. I was about four years older than Ivan and Danny, and already in graduate school, which seemed a lot older. But I was very impressed with them, guys who actually made movies. So we got very friendly—Ivan, Danny, Peter and I—and we started a film distribution company called New Cinema of Canada. We got New Line films from New York, including John Waters films, *No Vietnamese Ever Called Me Nigger*, and Godard’s *Sympathy For the Devil*. But Ivan really wanted to make films, not be in the distribution business, so he eventually dropped out. But we stayed friends. He went to Montreal and worked as a partner for Cinepix, eventually producing David Cronenberg’s

Shivers and *Rabid*. Meanwhile, he made *Cannibal Girls*, and went to Cannes and sold it to AIP head, Sam Arkoff.

PEARY: In the late 1970s, Reitman was known also as a theatrical producer, for Doug Henning’s *The Magic Show*, in Toronto and New York, and for *The National Lampoon Show* on Broadway.

MEDJUCK: What Ivan really wanted to do was a show based on the *Lampoon’s* high school yearbook that eventually became *Animal House*. Ivan worked several years getting the script right—in one of the incarnations it was *Charles Manson in High School*—and he hired director John Landis.

PEARY: What did the success of *Animal House* mean for his career?

MEDJUCK: Ivan discovered that producers don’t get much respect in Hollywood. So, if he wanted respect, he’d have to start directing again. I remember going to France in 1978 for the summer and returning to Toronto to find that everyone I knew was working on a film which Ivan had concocted and was directing—*Meatballs*.

PEARY: After that, Reitman moved his operations to Hollywood for *Stripes*, *Ghostbusters*, etc. Danny Goldberg, who co-wrote *Meatballs* and *Stripes*, went with him. Then you joined them in 1980, the same year the original *Take One* folded.

MEDJUCK: I remember a meeting in the Courtyard Cafe at the Windsor Arms Hotel in Toronto. I was with Danny, and I asked him, “Is it a good idea? What’s it like down there?” I’d never been to LA. Danny said, “You don’t understand. Ivan is smarter than most people there. He is really good at this.”

PEARY: And he genuinely likes popular movies, which made it comfortable in Hollywood.

MEDJUCK: When I first met Ivan, he saw every new movie. He was very interested in William Castle and Roger Corman, and I remember running into him at all-night horror shows. And he really liked comedies.

PEARY: Reitman seems to have an extraordinary sense about which comedies will be genuinely popular.

MEDJUCK: He thinks that if he makes a movie that he likes, and it’s good, people will go see it. You know, when we were doing *Ghostbusters*, everyone thought we were nuts. It was very expensive with special effects, and everyone kept comparing it to 1942, the Spielberg movie. It’s only after its success that people said, “Hey, it had Bill Murray and Dan Aykroyd, how could it flop?” The studio didn’t want to make *Dave* with Kevin Kline. They didn’t want to make it for what it was going to cost, and they didn’t want to release it when it was released. But Ivan had read the script and

said, "This is what I want to do. I will make it work. Kevin Kline will be great, and people will go see it." I remember a couple of years ago having a big fight about a picture with a studio. The guys from the studio said, "We think you're wrong, but it's on your head," in a very grudging way allowing us to do it. I was ready to get angry. But Ivan remained calm. "That's why we paid all this money," he said. Certainly with Ivan, the buck stops with him.

PEARY: Do you ever have disagreements?

MEDJUCK: I make my opinion known and make sure everyone involved understands my point of view. But I have a lot of respect for the people I work with, and if they all disagree with me I tend to back down. For better or for worse, we're usually in sync.

PEARY: Is there an "auteurist" theme to Ivan Reitman productions?

MEDJUCK: We often make "gang comedies," and we are a gang. We work together and hang out together all the time. Besides Ivan, there's Danny, one of Ivan's oldest friends, who runs the television division, and Michael Chinich, a casting director who is our new director of development. He works with me on scripts. Sheldon Kahn, who edited *Ghostbusters* and *Beethoven*, is on staff. Mike Gross, who was art director of the *National Lampoon*, often shares producing credit with me. He is very visually oriented. I tend to work on scripts and casting, and Mike tends to work with art directors and cameramen. He designed the posters for *Twins* and *Ghostbusters*, and he often does second unit. Universal is building a six million dollar building for us, Northern Lights Entertainment offices. Right now, we're in separate cottages, which is lovely

but a bit disconcerting. We're so used to being together.

PEARY: Considering your art house *Take One* days, do you ever get tired making upbeat, mainstream Hollywood movies?

MEDJUCK: I'm not very interested in pessimistic movies personally. I think they're counter-productive. I find a lot of things have changed in my attitude, but I can't tell whether it has to do with the business, or being older, or having children, or living in Los Angeles, or in the States instead of Canada. All of these things have affected me. I mean, I am still interested in filmmakers like Jane Campion, but those aren't the films I know how to make. On the other hand, I really like the *Fugitive* and I don't think I know how to do that either ●

Gerald Peary teaches and writes about Canadian film in Boston.

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