



“You see,  
I’m a sneaky person.

You think that you know what my objectives are, or others think they do. If I’d said, 20 years ago, the reason I want to build a successful company is because I want to make food for the soul, I would never have found any backers. Consequently, I would not have made any films. So in order for me to attain my objective, I had to keep it a secret. Now I don’t. ”

Photo by: Debra Thier



By Cynthia Amsden

# Robert Lantos

THE SINGULAR PRINCE OF  
SERENDIP

This is it. The Lantos of RSL Films and *In Praise of Older Women*, the Lantos of Alliance Communications, of Alliance Atlantis; all the incarnations of Lantos have existed for one specific objective. To feed his inner self. To tell stories. Stories that have some resonance with the inner mogul. And the entrée on the menu now is *Sunshine*, the epic drama about the Sonnenschein (Sunshine) family in Hungary, spanning three generations, two world wars and one revolution. Against this historical tapestry is the evolution of a family, their loves, their loyalties and their personal betrayals which ultimately bring them back to the question of identity. Identity is an elemental part of the mix.

Robert Lantos, a sovereign figure in the hinterland that is the Canadian film industry, normally seen suited, tied, slicked to a corporate sheen, is sitting in Primi Ristorante in Forest Hill Village, sporting a white T-shirt and haute khakis, urbanely tousled. He continues to convey the leonine authority which has been his trademark in the past, but he appears sleeker than earlier reports, less content to preside, more inclined to pace the edges of the territory he claims as his own.

This territory, the domestic film industry, is both wonderful and ripe for commentary. One big arthouse venue. *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* summed it up in the words of director, Atom Cronenberg (yes, you read it correctly), "We released the movie to the theatres and not one person paid to see it. That is the mark of Canadian cinema." Into this, Lantos will launch, *Sunshine*, an ambitious, elaborate cinematic triptych directed by Istvan Szabo (of *Mephisto* fame) and cowritten by Szabo and American screenwriter/playwright, Israel Horovitz (*Author! Author!*, *The Indian Wants the Bronx*). It stars Ralph Fiennes (*Schindler's List*, *The English Patient*) in a triple role of Ignatz, Adam and Ivan, as well as Jennifer Ehle, Rachel Weisz, William Hurt and Canadians Molly Parker, Deborah Kara Unger and John Neville. The casting smacks of the Cronenberg formula with its cleverly prudent balance of foreign and domestic talent.

The founder and former CEO of Alliance Communications appears comfortable in his new skin, having shed the administrative layer (or rather, passed on that mantle to Michael MacMillan), and formed Serendipity Point Films. He has returned to his inner child which, in his understanding, is his inner storyteller. "When I was an infant, my mother used to work at home in Hungary. In order to keep me quiet [one can easily imagine the precocious orator], she used to tell me stories all day while she was sewing dresses. One day, when I was two years old, I asked her to tell me another and she was too tired. I said, 'well, then, I'll tell you one,' and I began to recite back all the stories she had ever told me. And I've been telling stories ever since."



Not one for earnest bilge, this is the man who stood up at the 1991 Genie Awards to accept the award for Outstanding Contribution to the Business of Filmmaking from Air Canada and then backhanded the airline by asking, "How much longer until we can finally see the best Canadian films on the maple-leaf airline instead of imported sequels and unreleased turkeys?" This is also the man who recently accepted an award at Ryerson Polytechnical University and then said, *a la* Susan Sarandon, Canadian TV broadcasters were "nothing but toll collectors between Canadians and their access to popular American shows." It is, therefore, a *volte-face* approach that he now embraces the ironic delicacy of the narrative form. "Storytelling is a very clever way of telling the truth. It's virtually impossible, I think, to tell the truth if you are speaking factually because you are involving other people's lives. You have to leave things out. But in fiction, you can tell the whole truth," Lantos expounds. Who said you can't teach an old Tyrannosaurus rex new tricks?

Not that this alpha male has suddenly transformed into *un homme du peuple*. If anything, his need to connect on a hush-puppies-and-chitlins level might make him a certifiable *homme pour le peuple*. *Sunshine* allows Lantos to tell an intimate story. Certainly it is Szabo's story, keenly autobiographic in plot, character, substance and even location; but it overlaps with enough of Lantos's life and provides enough cathartic relief that he feels comfortable identifying himself with the content. "*Sunshine* matters a great deal to me. It encapsulates the ordeals that Hungarian Jews, including my family went through. It's a film that, at its centre, is about assimilation, compromise, dealing with your own devils and being true to who you are. These are issues I had to deal with when I was young." Rolling these private battles out onto the big screen is an acceptable way for the lion of Canadian cinema to work through his personal history, because it's not bloody likely we will ever see him playing emotional seppuku in a whimpering Barbara Walters venue.

In 1996, when Miramax's *The English Patient* cleaned up at the Oscars, there was a whiney hue and cry from the mainstream press: why can't Canada have such a hit? *Sunshine* clearly falls into the epic category, and there is an option here to think of it as a kind of knee-jerk stoop-and-fetch to the gauntlet thrown down by the *Maclean's* article. An erroneous response in Lantos's view. "Ralph Fiennes is the obvious connection and the only connection." There is substance to prove his claim. Lantos first met Szabo in 1992 which was when Lantos first persuaded the director to rethink the original plan to make *Sunshine* as a feature film. "Initially Szabo wanted to do it as a film, but he didn't think he'd ever find the financing. So he thought he'd have a better chance to get it made if he did it the way Bergman did *Scenes From a Marriage*, developed as a mini-series for television. I convinced him to change directions, but I didn't have to do much convincing because Istvan is not a television director and a feature film is what he wanted to make."



Epic-lust is not something Lantos engages in although he admits that *The English Patient* should have been a Canadian film. There were attempts made on the part of Rhombus Media to secure the project as such, although Lantos wasn't aware of them. Saul Zaentz bought the rights to the book and produced a beautiful film. I get irritated by lots of things, but not by that." Still, even if *The English Patient* had been made by a Canadian, it would not have been the first or the last epic, which Lantos defines as "a large canvas, costly and ambitious" especially since Canada has, in fact, produced several, such as Robin Phillips's *The Wars* (1983) Phillip Borsos's *Bethune: The Making of a Hero* (1989) Bruce Beresford's *Black Robe* (1991) and, of course, most recently François Girard's *The Red Violin*. *Sunshine* is also not the most expensive domestic effort, with *eXistenZ* and *Shadow of the Wolf* coming in at \$31 million and *Johnny Mnemonic* at \$32 million. *Sunshine* rings up at a sensible \$25 million, partially due to Fiennes working for less than his usual fee.

So, if not epic-lust, is there Oscar-lust? And is Oscar recognition what it takes to claim you have made a hit film? "Sure, I think it matters to everybody who makes films. I think if you're a Canadian making films, it matters more. It matters more because of the very nature of the Canadian inferiority complex. Canadians never truly believe they're good at something unless recognition comes from America." And it matters on a personal level as well. The two Academy nominations for Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter* (on which Lantos served as executive producer) amazed and elated him, but "The Lantos" cannot survive on nominations alone, nor would he sit still for a Susan Lucci string of almost runs. "I would rather not speculate about this and set up unrealistic expectations. I'm not in denial. If I won one, I would show and pick it up. And I wouldn't talk about Air Canada." Somewhere in the fuzzy logic that is the subtext of filmmaking, there must be a fine difference between needing an Oscar to verify success and just wanting an Oscar; however, it is something that cannot be defined by anyone here or down in Hollywood, for that matter. Academy Award recognition is simply a right of passage.

The passage has been a quarter-of-a-century long. "When I first started in the mid-1970s," Lantos recalls, "there was a nucleus of talented French-Canadian filmmakers who had made their mark in the world with films that had unique style, subject matter and point of view. But they couldn't really find an audience outside Quebec. "On the other hand, English-Canadian filmmaking—and saying this will probably get me into a lot of trouble—had very few noteworthy achievements. English Canada wasn't really on filmdom's map. Suddenly in the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was a tremendous upswing in Canadian film production. But most of the films, including some of mine, disappeared without a trace. Even box-office hits like *Porky's* didn't do anything for the prosperity of Canadian cinema. Although I am not sure about how exactly *Porky's*, which



"Storytelling is a very clever way of

telling the truth. It's virtually

impossible, I think, to tell the truth if

you are speaking factually because

you are involving other people's lives.

You have to leave things out. But in

fiction you can tell the whole truth."

Far left: Ralph Fiennes.

Below: Rachel Weisz, left, and Molly Parker in Istvan Szabo's *Sunshine*.



# "I was lucky. *In Praise of Older Women* was luck. Or maybe cleverness. But it turned out

was shot in Florida, about the rites of puberty of Florida teenagers, became a Canadian film. Perhaps that's the point. English-Canadian films up to that juncture did not have a real identity. What changed by the mid-1980s is that a new generation of filmmakers did not let success turn into a one-way ticket out of the country. In the past, our top talent invariably took off for Los Angeles, London or New York at the first opportunity. Once abroad, they made American and British movies. The reversal of the talent exodus has been key to establishing a core group of filmmakers who have created a body of work with a distinct point of view and identity. We have come a long way in 20 years. Proof of our progress can be found in the highest temples of cinema such as the Cannes Film Festival where our films have—as of late—been regularly invited and honoured with awards. Prior to 1985, when *Joshua Then and Now* was in competition, only one English-Canadian feature had been invited. Since then I have been to Cannes with six Canadian films in competition." Lantos punctuates the end of his statement by lifting his chin, turning his head imperceptibly to the left. There is pride in the gesture, pride and a dare to challenge his claim.

The efforts of many have contributed to this change in the topography of this cinematic map, and at some point a Lantos version of six degrees of separation could be constructed. Synergy aside, he can lay claim to have authored

four firsts: Alliance's *Night Heat* was the first dramatic television series to break into American TV; Alliance's *Due South* was the first Canadian series to break the U.S. prime-time barrier; while *The Sweet Hereafter* was not the first Canadian dramatic feature film to generate an Oscar nomination, it was, however, the first Canadian feature to win the Jury Grand Prix, the second-highest award offered at Cannes; and *Crash* (on which Lantos also served as executive producer) was the first, and so far only, to garner a Special Jury Prize for Audacity at Cannes.

The ticket for continued development and success? The same as what the industry has needed all along—money. "And lots of it. The sum total of what all Canadian films cost to make in a year is less than a single average Hollywood movie. The average Hollywood movie today costs about \$50 million, which is \$75 million Canadian. All Canadian films combined in any given year don't cost that much." Ah, the joys of filthy lucre. "Money is a necessity. It's a vital tool. To go from point

A to point B, you need a road. Money paves that road. But money, for its own sake, has never been my objective. If it was, I'd still be chairman and CEO of Alliance. And I would be continuing to build it, making the company bigger and more profitable." You can take Lantos out of Alliance, but can you take Alliance out of Lantos? "Very successfully," he answers without even a wink to the deliciousness of the second meaning sitting there.

In overly simplified terms, he started out with Vivafilm in 1972 producing films only to discover he was dealing with an inferior distribution system. So Lantos took it upon himself to correct that problem. Doubtlessly, there was a certain enjoyment in the correction process, given that he appears to be hard-wired for the expansion of limits. That accomplished, it was safe to return to the original plan—producing films. "That's in the ballpark," he says, "There

William Hurt



are more shades of grey to this. I began very young. Through university, my dream was to make films. I took film courses, but they certainly don't tell you how to get a movie made. I eventually sort of figured it out. Initially, I was lucky. *In Praise of Older Women* was luck. Or maybe sneaky. But it turned out to be a significant commercial hit, which opened a lot of doors. After that came several failures. The failures taught me the most important lesson."

And the lessons? "I learned many during the tax-shelter years, 1978-80. It was very difficult to make a good movie in Canada then. I made films by compromise. Decisions were dictated by whatever it took to get the financing, choice of cast, shooting when the script wasn't ready, shooting in locations which made no sense, and working with writers and directors because of their passports instead of their vision. I learned it is absolutely out of the question to make a good film through compromise. On the other hand, I also learned that in order to build a business, one has to have an ongoing, steady stream of product, and that, ironically, can only be achieved through compromise. Hence, I came to the realization that to actually make the films that I like I needed some leverage, a structure. The films that inspired me could not be made in a vacuum, on a stand-alone basis. To make the films without compromise I needed to build a business that was being fed by other activities. I made two little discoveries. Neither particularly original. One—television. Two—distribution. And I built a company based on film and

to be a significant commercial hit, which opened a lot of doors. After that came several

failures. The **failures** taught me the most important lesson.”



Molly Parker with Ralph Fiennes: “*Sunshine* matters a great deal to me. It encapsulates the ordeals that Hungarian Jews, including my family, went through.” Robert Lantos

television distribution, first in Canada, and then worldwide. And huge amounts of television production. And in the midst of that, I slipped in, from time to time, a movie or two. And to the best of my ability, I shielded the films from compromise. But everything else was about constant compromise. And in business, it always is. For example, when producing television the task is to satisfy the customer, the broadcaster. That’s all about compromise. Film is different. For the films that interest me, the customer is the soul. And to have any chance to satisfy that particular customer, you have to be free of compromise.”

The departure from Alliance Atlantis put Michael MacMillan at the head of the pack. MacMillan is the Martha Stewart to Lantos’s Louis B. Mayer. Fresh *facie*; same ol’ *ganglia*. “He can run Alliance Atlantis perfectly well. It’s what he wants to do. He wants to build, as I did, a large corporation. I had a secret agenda. I wanted to build a large corporation so I could sell it someday so that I could make food for the soul. If he has a secret agenda, I’m not privy to it.” Serendipity Point’s arrangement with Alliance, to the extent that Lantos will discuss it, is not the five-picture deal that has been touted on the street, although the end result could fit that bill. “It’s a \$100-million financing facility for me to use on films that I decide to make. They finance. They can turn around and sell them off, bring in partners, do whatever they choose to recoup their investment. It’s entirely up to them. They receive the worldwide revenues, and in return, they control worldwide distribution rights outside of the U.S. The U.S. we control jointly. That’s the deal. In addition to that, they also pay for some of my development costs and some of my overhead.”

The films lined up for this four-year arrangement are: *15 Moments*, currently in postproduction, directed by Denis Arcand and starring Dan Ackroyd; *No Other Life*, directed by

Costa-Gavras; a project with Roman Polanski; an adaptation of Mordecai Richler’s *Barney’s Version*, with the screenplay written by Richler; *The Statement*, based on a novel by the late Brian Moore, *Sex and Sunsets*, novel and screenplay by Tim Sandlin; and in a gesture of arch redress, Ondaatje’s book, *In the Skin of a Lion*. It would also be fair to expect new projects with Lantos’s stable of preferred directors such as Cronenberg and Egoyan. *Felicia’s Journey*, which is coproduced by Lantos, is not a Serendipity project, rather coming under the production mantle of Mel Gibson’s Icon Productions.

The creativity of producing film is a far cry from the corporate shock theatre that has provided Lantos with “some pleasure out of the adrenaline flow.” The learning process continues, the hard way, the only way he knows how. “For me, it’s the only way. I really learned by stumbling.” Will he go off into that good night of filmmaking? “I do hope to achieve a modicum of peace and quiet in the full course of time.” That, and a big podium finish. And it’s possible that he will, packing his Member of the Order of Canada which he received on April 15, 1999 for his “entrepreneurial spirit which has enhanced the visibility and viability of Canadian film and television productions both nationally and internationally.” Serendipity Point Films, complete with its improbably capricious butterfly logo, is named as such because it is a name he has long wanted to use. Drawn from Horace Walpole’s *The Three Princes of Serendip*, “serendipity” stems from the facility of the three heroes to make, by virtue of accident and sagacity, happy and unexpected discoveries. Now, it is finally the right time in his life to make it his own. Fellow Canadian James Cameron might be king of the world, but Robert Lantos is the singular prince of serendip. •