

# LIONEL CHETWYND

## and the Enigmatic

# MR FRY

By Maurie Alioff

When he first heard about the real-life exploits of Varian Fry, Lionel Chetwynd was surprised that the name meant nothing to him, even though the writer, director and producer is a Second World War history buff, who "knows all the campaigns and the stories." The tale sounded like *Casablanca* meets the *Scarlet Pimpernel* meets *Indiana Jones*. In 1940, a rich intellectual left his genteel life in New York City for pro-Nazi Vichy France to run an underground operation that saved the lives of 2,000 people. Fry and his collaborators forged passports and mapped escape routes for Jews who were about to be rounded up by the Gestapo and Marseilles Préfecture de Police. As cover, he pretended to be an innocuous do-gooder openly managing a relief organization for stranded refugees.

In the story's most singular twist, Varian Fry rescued legendary figures like Marc Chagall and Max Ernst, along with many lesser known artists and thinkers. He didn't want to see these "lights of Europe," as he called them, burn out. And they were exactly the right people to clue the world into certain facts about the way Nazi Germany operated. A magazine editor and writer with a literary background, Fry wore impeccably tailored suits, always sporting a carnation in the lapel. His Oscar Wilde wit, and according to some, his sexual ambiguity – maybe bisexuality – fed into the persona he used on the Nazis and their enthusiastic French collaborators. He hoped they would believe that a fop like him wouldn't dream of endangering his toilet kit, let alone his life.

Once Chetwynd started tuning into the story's shape and colours, he got excited about British producer Michael Deakin's plan to shot a movie about Fry's adventures. For one thing, as one of Hollywood's most prolific writers, the British-born, Montreal-raised Chetwynd tended towards scripts about real people who never give up on their visions and ideals – whatever their vulnerabilities – for better or for worse. His subjects have included Anwar Sadat, Kissinger and Nixon, survivalist Randy Weaver, P.T. Barnum and Moses. Not only was the Varian Fry story a natural for Chetwynd, it needed to be told to a wide audience. There are "various theories," he says, explaining how such an intriguing and courageous figure could be so unknown. Until recently, Fry, who died in 1967, was ignored because he might have been gay or because

# Varian's



Montreal gives a credible performance as Marseilles, circa 1940.

his opposition to fascism dovetailed into an espousal of communism. There is no question that when he returned to the United States, the FBI's suspicious badgering obstructed his attempts to pursue a government career.

Chetwynd believes that the likeliest explanation for Fry's obscurity, "was that his enemy was Vichy France. Nobody talked about Vichy after the war because they embraced the myth that all Frenchmen were Gaullists, gallant heroes in the resistance. Here was a story that made it very clear how dedicated the French were to rounding up Jews and turning them over." In a typically gleeful display of political incorrectness, Chetwynd adds, "The French hatred of the Jews makes you think they were Nazis, except they had very poor concentration spans."

As for inevitable comparisons between Fry and Oskar Schindler, Chetwynd points out that Schindler "was a war profiteer and exploiter of slave labour. I'm not making light of him, but this is a little different. Fry left the comfort of upper-class New York and travelled to Marseilles, a dangerous city in 1940, at a time when nobody believed the British were going to win the war. That was an incredibly heroic thing to do."

As soon as Chetwynd committed to a picture about the forgotten hero, a long development process began. The first major turning point was a successful pitch to Showtime's head, Jerry Offsay. "I gotta do this," Chetwynd recalls telling Showtime, "and they commissioned the script." To be preceded by a treatment? "I don't do treatments or windows," Chetwynd laughs. Financed by the network, Chetwynd took off for England where he and Michael Deakin met with Donald Carrol, a wealthy American whose fascination with Fry drove him to collect reams of material on the man. On the same trip, they checked out Marseilles and, disappointed by the city's present-day look, discussed filming the movie elsewhere.

For various reasons, including the usual economic ones, the possible locations narrowed down to Montreal. Lit and dressed properly, the Old City's beautifully preserved European architecture and twisting, narrow streets could stand in for Marseilles. Chetwynd's one-time home, Montreal was also the city where he made his directorial debut, *Two Solitudes* (1978), an adaptation of Hugh MacLennan's novel. Moreover, the screenplay that kick-started his writing career was his Oscar-nominated adaptation of Mordecai Richler's quintessentially Montreal story, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1974).

# War



Writer/director Lionel Chetwynd

The whole deal was beginning to look pleasantly fated, but the relatively big-budgeted project still had to confront a serious casting dilemma. To be green-lighted, *Varian's War* needed a star who could pull off the very delicate balancing act of rendering a period character nobody has ever quite fathomed. The hurdle was overcome when a Showtime executive attending the 1999 Toronto International Film Festival found himself sitting next to William Hurt. "William agreed to read the script," Chetwynd recalls, "and he was very taken with it." Attracted to the subject because of the passion he saw in the writing, Hurt entered into negotiations and eventually signed on.

Once it was confirmed that the picture would play Montreal for Marseilles, and that Chetwynd would direct his own script, it didn't take long to slot in Kevin Tierney as the film's Canadian producer. During his years at Rock Demers' Les Productions La Fête, Tierney had developed what he calls a "healthy relationship" with Showtime, specifically production head Mike Rauch. Moreover, Chetwynd had already collaborated with him on *P.T. Barnum*, a miniseries for A&E. For Tierney, *Varian's War* was the producer's crucial first project since quitting La Fête and setting up on his own.

In the final stages of deal-making, Tierney set up an official Canada-U.K. co-production between his company, Ardglasson Productions, and Michael Deakin's Gryphon Films. Tierney acquired Canadian rights, which he sold to Alliance Atlantis, while Deakin took the United Kingdom. In the United States, Showtime had already sold the picture's non-U.S. and non-U.K. world rights to Hallmark Entertainment. Meanwhile, none other than Barbra Streisand became an executive producer through her company, Barwood Films. Chetwynd says that Barwood's CEO, Cis Corman, made valuable suggestions throughout the development stage and when the movie was completed, Streisand called him with her reactions to the director's cut. Another executive producer credit went to Edward Wessex of Britain's Ardent Films and the royal family. When the Prince briefly toured the Montreal sets, some of the crew members inquired about his identity. Tierney quips that he showed them a \$20 bill and said, "C'est sa mère."

The various principals became more and more captivated by *Varian's War* because in Chetwynd's script Fry was neither a macho action figure nor a bloodless goody goody. "There's the romantic notion of going off on a crusade," Tierney explains. "But there's another side to him. He's getting an opportunity to shed his old skin, to create a new person. He's a dandy who lived in buttoned-down New York; in Marseilles, he becomes more flamboyant. This dark world had an attraction for him. He went to help, but he was also attracted by the danger."

For the moviemakers involved, recreating 1940s Vichy France in Canada was one of the project's biggest and most exhilarating challenges. Despite a shoot that occurred during one of the coldest, rainiest summers in recent memory, Montreal gives a credible performance as Marseilles, and in one sequence,

1930s Berlin. Chetwynd, art director Raymond Dupuis and cinematographer Daniel Jobin pieced together an intricately detailed *mise en scène* of swanky hotel rooms and imposing public buildings, villas, brothels, bistros and Arab souks. "You just can't say enough about Raymond, Daniel and the rest of the crew," says the director. "These people are not yet jaded."

The film's pungent atmosphere is further enhanced by Neil Smolar's classic film score, and as for the cast, William Hurt plays off a lively mix of British, Canadian and American actors: Julia Ormond, Lynn Redgrave, Alan Arkin, Rémy Girard, Christopher Heyerdahl, Maury Chaykin, Matt Craven and Chetwynd's wife, Gloria Carlin. Chetwynd has a gift for writing historical figures as lived-in human beings, and *Varian's War* is no exception. On the page and through Hurt's interpretation of Fry, he comes across as an uncertain, off-kilter hero, seemingly insecure about meeting the demands of the adventure he chose for himself. He says in an early scene: "I may turn out to be nothing but a weakling when push comes to shove."

At the same time, we get a myriad of other impressions. Fry can be arrogant, vain and theatrical. He arrives in Marseilles wearing a raincoat like a cape and brandishing a walking stick, but when push does come to shove, his faltering turns abruptly into confident gamesmanship. As Chetwynd's picture develops, Fry finesses tricky situations involving anti-Semitic U.S. officials, a suspicious French cop (Girard), not to mention the victims themselves, some of whom naively believe that even if the Germans win the war, life in freedom-loving France will return to normal.

Early in the movie, Fry meets his off-beat romantic interest, Miriam Davenport, a real-life activist who died in 1999. Julia Ormond plays Davenport as a quintessentially brassy, tough-talking 1940s heroine who wants "to screw the Germans and their Vichy French whores." The story signals Fry's sexual ambivalence as it tracks the eccentric relationship between the two. Tension kicks in the moment they meet when, puffing a cigarette, Miriam plants herself on Fry's rumpled, solitary hotel room bed. He is taken aback, even irritated by what he calls her "aggressive sexual candour." Other situations, some of which turn comic, play on the subtext. When Fry wanders into a gay bar, there's a suspended moment before he figures out what's going on, and then he withdraws emotionally.

For Chetwynd, William Hurt "gives an amazing performance, complex and complicated, not unlike Peter O'Toole's rendering of Lawrence." He adds, "It would be very pretentious for me to suggest that I was reaching for a character created by

# Fry ran an underground operation out of Marseilles that saved the lives of 2,000 Jews.

**Julia Ormand as Miriam Davenport and William Hurt as Varian Fry.**



Peter O'Toole in the hands of Robert Bolt and David Lean. But as a reference point, yes. The film has moments of extraordinary complexity presented with unbelievable simplicity. And that is what Bolt and Lean and O'Toole collaborated on."

In many ways, the trajectory of Lionel Chetwynd's life and career is almost as loopy as Varian Fry's. After a troubled early adolescence and a stint in the Canadian army's Black Watch Regiment, he attended Sir George Williams University, won a scholarship to McGill law school, and somehow managed to become the first person to study at Oxford's Trinity College without graduating from high school. In Montreal, a job in the entertainment branch of Expo 67 led to a position with the distribution arm of Columbia Pictures in London, England. It was there that Chetwynd got serious about writing and started his adaptation of *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, a movie that, in retrospect, represents a turning point in Canadian film history.

During their London stint, Chetwynd and his wife Gloria Carlin (she lends a warm, earthy presence to *Varian's War* as Marc Chagall's wife) had two sons, Michael and Josh, both of whom are now journalists. An actress since her teens, Carlin's career has encompassed theatre, hit television shows like *General Hospital* and the movies, including her husband's. She says, "I know how he writes, I know the tempo and cadence, so I feel incredibly fortunate." Carlin feels "acting is a calling," an opportunity "to lose my egocentric self and be wholly present in the moment." Recently, she finished writing a teleplay for a miniseries called *Miraculous Journey*. It tells the story of Dr. Helen Schuman, a clinical psychologist whose mysterious visions led to the teachings known as "A Course in Miracles" that has followers around the world.

Unlike the Canadians who work in Hollywood and then hold their noses when they talk about the U.S., Chetwynd is boisterously unapologetic about his strong feelings for his adopted country. While proud of the Canadian and British passports he still holds, he is not merely a fan of the United States. Once a liberal leftist, he is today a Hollywood political rarity. In a city where out-of-the-closet Republicans are rarer than snow tires,

Chetwynd morphed into a Reagan conservative who wrote speeches for the former president and recently supported "Dubya" Bush with more than just his vote.

Chetwynd points out that in "Kansas City, I'd probably be a moderate Democrat. On abortion, sexual orientation, I don't care much. In general, I'm pro-choice." But while he's a "social liberal," when it comes to socio-economic matters and issues involving the role of government in people's lives, Chetwynd is firmly on the right; an activist who co-founded a con-

servative discussion group called the Wednesday Morning Club. Talking to Chetwynd, you get the impression his turn rightward was, in part, a reaction to the oppressive sanctimoniousness he sees on the left. "That petty-minded, total conviction in one's correctness, to the point where anyone who disagrees with you is evil. I associated that with the right wing when I was growing up, and that was why I was left-leaning." Moreover, for Chetwynd, many Hollywood liberals don't donate anything more than conscience money to their cause. The attitude is something like, "I'm gonna screw the guy over here, but I'm gonna give at the office."

Naturally, Chetwynd has paid a price for his rambunctious violations of Hollywood political orthodoxy. David E. Kelley, the writer/producer of *Ally McBeal* and *The Practice*, once said, "If they created a lifetime achievement award for Lionel Chetwynd, it would be a Lifetime Pariah Award." Chetwynd has been insulted and given the Nazi salute. He was told by a top studio executive that "because I'm a conservative, I therefore cannot write caring characters. It's the assumptions that are made about you. That's what's horrible." Lately, however, the screws have begun to loosen. After Chetwynd confronted "a major actress, a very intelligent woman" about a particular issue, she told him that he'd given her a lot of food for thought. And he replied, "I want to believe I've persuaded you of one thing: that it is possible to vote for Governor Bush and still be a good human being." When it comes to Chetwynd's work, Kevin Tierney says that "like Paddy Chayefsky, his scripts are socially committed. He has the same passions, the same concerns as most leftists I know. He's a working-class boy and he's got working-class values."

Currently, Chetwynd is producing a PBS documentary about the writer/producer Carl Foreman (*Champion*, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, *High Noon*), the legendary Hollywood screenwriter who was blacklisted during the anti-communist witch hunt of the 1950s. In a more Republican vein, he completed an A&E script about Dwight Eisenhower and the 72 hours before D-Day. Reverent about his passions, irreverent when the occasion arises, Chetwynd often directs his sardonic wit at himself. "I get by on my relentless charm," he says, laughing. ●