



Lone wolf Zsigmond Gordon (Krisztián Kolovratnik) walks the streets of Budapest at night

BUDAPEST NOIR (2018)

Budapest, 1936: a locomotive belching dense plumes of steam pulls slowly into Keleti train station, transporting the body of Hungarian Prime Minister Gyula Gömbös, who—after being inspired by a trip to Germany—had intended to install himself as a fascist dictator in his own country. Among the throng of mourners are dozens of soldiers who reverently offload the coffin. There to report on the event is Zsigmond Gordon (Krisztián Kolovratnik), a crime beat reporter who has seen his share of death. “There are many different means, but the end is always the same,” he laments in voiceover. He is a sullen, unrepentant cynic who smokes cigarettes—often—like he’s mad at them. Leaving the depot, he has a chance meeting in a café with an alluring woman who sticks him with her tab. When he next encounters her, she’s dead—murdered in a dicey part of town, a Jewish prayer her sole possession. When he soon uncovers the victim’s photo in an unexpected place, he reasons that learning her identity could move her death from a brief back-page paragraph to front-page news.

With the city virtually shut down and the police pressed into service guarding the funeral procession, Gordon conducts his investigation with impunity. Displaying a shamus’ eye for detail and a set of stealthy fingers, he sifts through clues to the victim’s identity. When her body goes missing from the morgue, he snags an autopsy report, then a pilfered love letter from a rabbi’s son, both deepening the mystery. Once he uncovers a servant’s license from a humble dressmaker, Gordon begins to narrow his focus.

Budapest resonates as a supporting character in the film, and Elemér Ragályi’s cinematography captures the old-world elegance of Buda and the oppressive squalor of Pest as though they’re frozen in time. Director Éva Gárdos is also a veteran editor, and her skills in the cutting room serve her well behind the lens. Her camera placement, supple tracking, and compositional sense indicate she’s a keen pictorial stylist, and the pacing and seamless transition shots advance the narrative with brisk resolve. The art direction is superb, and there are a number of exquisite set pieces throughout: a photographer’s studio populated with mannequins bearing silent witness to his sordid trade, a sports club featuring a boxing ring amidst a lavishly appointed cocktail lounge; an upscale brothel, aptly named *Les Fleurs du Mal*, catering to high-level politicians. In addition to Kolovratnik, the casting is uniformly fine. Gordon’s independently minded love interest, Krisztina, is played by Réka Tenki—Hungary’s most talented, in-demand young actress. She brings depth and emotional nuance to what was essentially a one-dimensional character in the novel. As Fanny, the object of Gordon’s obsession, Franciska Töröcsik incandescens in only a few brief moments. Zsolt Anger is solid as Gellért, the circumspect police commissioner, and Janos Kulka as Mr. Szöllösy delicately offsets his character’s vanity with a veneer of fastidiousness. Adél Kováts as Mrs. Szöllösy provides a galvanizing display of conflicted emotions.

Although set in 1936, the film is strikingly contemporaneous. Hungary was about to enter the darkest period in its recent his-



Zsigmond Gordon (Krisztián Kolovratnik) exudes a shop-worn cynicism

tory and placed within the broader historical context—a shifting alignment of powers within Hungary and the rising tide of Nazism just across the border—*Budapest Noir* is imbued with a substrate

of moral opacity, redolent with political peril. Mr. Szöllösy, a successful business entrepreneur desperately trying to curry favor in a rapidly changing political landscape—while keeping his family history a secret—unintentionally sets unforeseen wheels in motion and becomes the architect of his own demise. Complexities such as these elevate this from brooding film noir elegy to the dimensions of Shakespearian tragedy. The book hews closely to the well-worn tropes of a conventional crime thriller which requires retribution for the killer. The film, however, shifts the focus by exploring a tangle of complicity and indemnity that rises all the way to the government’s upper echelons.

Ultimately, Gordon—once fired from a newspaper for printing a lie—decides to exact his own form of moral justice with a simple stroke of his pen. He may have solved the case, but his cynicism proves to be little more than a survival mechanism and his pitch-perfect final pronouncement (a sly nod to *Chinatown*) indicates the steely reserve needed to face the storm troopers gathering next door.

—Brian Light

Éva Gárdos INTERVIEW

Interviewed by Brian Light for NOIR CITY

NOIR CITY: I’ve read the book and viewed the film, and I think this is one of the rare cases where the film is better than the book, considerably better!

Éva Gárdos: I’m glad you said that because that was the only criticism—strong criticism I got in Hungary. Some people preferred the book and they didn’t like the changes I made from the book which I thought it really needed ... badly.

NC: How did the book first come to your attention?

EG: People knew I was Hungarian and someone said to me arbitrarily, “Do you know there’s a book called *Budapest Noir*?” I read the book and submitted it for development to The Hungarian Film Fund. The author, Vilmos Kondor, writes under a pseudonym so the first task was to find him.

NC: What was it about the book that inspired you?

EG: I wanted to make a film where Budapest was a real character—not Budapest substituting for Paris or Berlin, but Budapest as Budapest. I also liked the subtext that people don’t want to see what’s happening. I think that’s very relevant to today, in Hungary and the United States and elsewhere in the world. Plus, as a female director, I wanted to get away from doing a “personal” movie and do a good genre film.

NC: What were the challenges in adapting a popular book?

EG: Obviously, a book is different from a film; a film has to have some drama. I worked with screenwriter András Szekér—via Skype mainly since he was in Budapest and I was mostly in L.A. We spent two years fleshing out the characters and the events that build the drama. We became very close, and I was saddened when he died suddenly last October. I wanted the film to appeal to younger audiences as well, so we changed the relationship between Krisztina and Gordon from where she was much more in service to Gordon, doing what he asked her, etc. We created a situation where they clearly have



July 21, 2018: Éva Gárdos, in conversation with FNF founder/president Eddie Muller, at the *Budapest Noir* screening during the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival

a history—when she shows up unexpectedly at his door—without having to show it all. You know they love each other, but they ultimately can’t be together. She’s sort of his Achilles’ heel. It’s good for him to have moments of weakness.

NC: In the book, Krisztina is simply the girlfriend, and it’s just a routine relationship.

EG: Exactly! That’s right. You’ve read the book.

NC: In the book, Krisztina designs Penguin book covers. In the film, she’s a more independent-minded character—a photo-journalist devoted to documenting the realities of Nazi detention camps.

EG: In the book, she sort of *knows* more about what’s happening in Germany than Gordon is aware of, and I thought making her a photographer would be really interesting. We based her character on Gerda Taro (Robert Capa’s colleague and longtime companion).



Hungarian location shooting: Director Éva Gárdos and DP Elemér Ragályi setting up a scene inside an authentic period tram

Another change we made was with Fanny and her father, Szöllösy. We felt we had to introduce him much earlier than in the book, and we wanted Gordon and him to have a connection, so Gordon had more at stake. In the book, it seemed Szöllösy was more concerned about his business interests than his daughter's welfare, and we wanted to avoid the cliché of portraying him as a money-grubbing Jewish businessman. We also felt Gordon had to *meet* the girl whose death becomes his obsession . . . so did the audience. She had to make an impression, and our actress, Franciska Töröcsik, certainly does that.

NC: Tell me about her—the actress who played Fanny.

EG: Franciska has starred in several movies, and is far more recognizable than the two leads. When she came in to do a short test video, she conveyed so much emotion she sent shivers down my spine. I said, “I know it’s a small part, and you’re really well known, but if you’re interested in doing it . . .” and she said, “Well, the movie’s really all about me so why not?”

NC: She didn’t mind only having four minutes of screen time?

EG: No—she even came and did publicity with us!

NC: I understand Krisztián Kolovratnik, the actor who plays Gordon, is mainly a stage actor?

EG: Krisztián had been contracted to a top Budapest theater, but

then he stopped acting seven years ago because of family issues. He has a production company and is also a photographer. DP Elemér Ragályi, who shot *An American Rhapsody*¹, and I met him quite accidentally in a café, and Elemér said he was a great young actor. We had looked at a lot of actors in Budapest, but nobody seemed quite right. People had told us there was no such type . . .

“I wanted to make a film where Budapest was a real character—not Budapest substituting for Paris or Berlin, but Budapest as Budapest”
— Éva Gárdos

NC: Like an American equivalent . . .

EG: Well, yeah—he’s kind of an American equivalent. He’s a guy who can box, he’s a musician, and he’s very cool. So, we sent him the script. He came in to do some screen tests and he was perfect. We also tested different girls for the role of Krisztina, but hadn’t decided on anyone. I had seen Réka Tenki in a play and my casting director and good friend Helga Mandel, with whom I worked closely for several months, also knew Réka. When she came in to audition, she did a scene with Krisztián on the tram and in response to his line: “Let’s pretend we’re married,” she unexpectedly smacked him across the face. That

was the “spark” we didn’t get from the other actresses.

NC: How does your experience as an editor shape how you direct a film?

EG: I think it’s fairly easy for me to visualize how things are going to look. I’m very familiar with post-production and we spent a lot of

¹ Gárdos’ first feature, released in 2001.



Camera placement for an overhead shot on *Budapest Noir's* set in Hungary



Krisztina Eckhardt (Réka Tenki) photographs the crime scene

time in the editing room. The composer, Attila Pacsay, and I worked on the music, which won an award in Los Angeles for Best Foreign Film Score. I had a great production designer, Pater Sparrow, and a very experienced cinematographer in Elemér Ragályi.

NC: Since Ragályi's career dates back to the late 1960s, how did your professional paths cross?

EG: We first met in the late '80s on a Brian Gibson documentary about Simon Wiesenthal.

NC: *Murderers Among Us: The Simon Wiesenthal Story* (1989).

EG: Yes, he was the DP and I was the editor, and we both won ACE (CinemaEditor) awards for that. He was also the DP on *An American Rhapsody* (2001).

NC: *Budapest Noir* was shot in Budapest; *An American Rhapsody* was shot in Hungary and America, and you've edited movies in both countries, as well. How would you compare the two experiences?

EG: That's an interesting question! There were many years between the two films and things had changed a lot in Hungary due partly to the Film Fund now being run by Andy Vajna. Ridley Scott has made three films there. I had a terrific producer, Ildikó Kemény, who really knows how to get things done. When I worked here, we just worked in the San Fernando valley with a low budget and a small crew. In Hungary, the artistry was great, and we were able to get really good people because we had a good script . . . it's not always about the money. I haven't really worked here in the U.S. enough to be able to compare, but the people were good. *Budapest Noir* was made with an all-Hungarian crew; we only spoke Hungarian, and it was great to work there.

NC: This film and *Rhapsody* are set approximately twenty years apart—mid-1930s and mid-1950s, respectively. The period costumes and set designs are superb. What kind of research did you do to get the look so right?

EG: I like to look at a lot of photographs, and in both films I had great costume designers, Beatrix Aruna Pasztor on *American Rhapsody* and Andrea Flesch on *Budapest Noir*. They were both involved in the whole look of the actors—hair, makeup, etc. I try to avoid doing things that are very typical of the period. We don't have to be *that* strict.

NC: How did you scout locations? You capture parts of the city that looked almost frozen in time. Was it difficult to get permits?

EG: Budapest has lots of great locations, but due to our small budget we couldn't always shut down streets and hold up traffic. The bridge scene near the end was important to me so we did get to have it for a day.

NC: . . . where Inspector Gellért pulls up and hops out of the police car.

EG: Yes—I liked the location, so I really pushed for that, and a lot of scenes were shot in alleys and doorways. We also built a lot of sets for a movie this size. One of the best sets was the photography studio with all the mannequins—that was completely (production designer) Pater Sparrow's idea. He also built the sports club. András Szekér and I came up with the idea of having a club where there was boxing. There were a lot of nightclubs in that era, but we integrated the two. I don't know if that really existed, but it gave Gordon and Szöllösy a reason to be acquainted. They both like bourbon and boxing.

NC: And it's certainly the type of venue that would attract high-level politicians, as well.

EG: Exactly. And another great set was the Bauhaus-inspired house. That was the hardest fight I had because I had looked at lots of beautiful villas all over Budapest, but I felt they were so typical and had been in so many movies. I did research on what the architecture was like in the thirties, and discovered that there were a lot of Bauhaus homes in Budapest during this period. Then, the Christmas before we started shooting, my son and I went to the Bauhaus museum in Berlin and I was struck by what a huge figure László Moholy-Nagy was in the Bauhaus movement. I felt, if we wanted to show Budapest, we had to show that part of the great city, too. We looked at a bunch of houses, but they had all been renovated, so we decided to build it. It was a huge job for the art department.

NC: The austerity of the interior suits Szöllösy's personality.

EG: I had also been worried about that big scene because there's so much dialogue, but it turned out to be great. There's a lot to see and the actors and the camera could really move, so that turned out very well.

NC: After this scene, the book has a final act concerning the murderer, but you chose to focus on the father/daughter relationship.

EG: I thought it was tragic that he wants to protect his daughter because he knows what's coming politically, and he reveals he's Jewish and he converted probably after the first World War. In my family, I only found out I was Jewish six years ago, and so many people in Hungary had that experience. The screenwriter András Szekér had the same experience.

NC: The actress who plays the wife/mother, Adél Kováts, has only two scenes in the movie and she's galvanizing.

EG: Adél was great. András Szekér and I struggled with her part in that scene . . . to get it real. I wanted her to react as a mother. That was one scene that we rehearsed for most of the day before we shot anything because we knew we had to get it right.

NC: What about those period trams and subway cars? Are they still active in Budapest?

EG: Well, the Metro is still there. I wanted to use the Metro and the Tram because it's difficult to fit a camera in those old cars, plus there were not a lot of cars on the streets back then. There is a museum of old trams, trains, and metro cars and they brought them to the location in the middle of the night. It was the same with the train at Keleti Station in the beginning when the coffin arrives, and at the end when Krisztina leaves, which we had to do very quickly so they could get the train out and reopen the station. It was extremely cold, and difficult, but Krisztián and Réka knew exactly how to play it.

NC: Did the issue of Jewish identity during that politically unstable period enrich the story and was that an important aspect for you?

EG: It was very important and we wanted to integrate it into the film without making it totally didactic. And we fought very hard for the last sentence in the film where Gordon just kind of pushes it away and the man replies, "I have a newsstand and I have only one arm, and that's okay, but lately I am Jewish and that's too much of a good thing."

NC: Even though he may have lost his arm fighting for his country, he's now being marginalized.

EG: Exactly, and suddenly he's Jewish . . . I liked that aspect of the film—the political statement which I thought was important.

NC: And Gordon's final pronouncement?

EG: After all he has been through—over the course of just a few days—all he wants to do is go back to the café, have another bourbon and coffee and a pack of cigarettes . . . it's a survival mechanism. I suppose that's the cynicism of noir. András Szekér and I really liked that—we fought quite a few people to keep that ending.

NC: Is film noir a genre that you have an affinity for? Any particular film that may have informed your approach to filming *Budapest Noir*?

EG: Well, I know about film noir by going to noir festivals in San Francisco and L.A., and watching TCM. One of my favorites is *In a Lonely Place*, but right from the beginning we didn't want to make a replica. I wanted it to be more of a neo-noir like *Chinatown* or *L.A. Confidential*, where the city itself is also a character.

NC: Do you read a lot of this type of crime fiction?

EG: I've read Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett . . . particularly Hammett.



Four minutes of screen time: Fanny (Franciska Töröcsik) sets her sights on Gordon and leaves an indelible impression



Mr. Szöllösy (Janos Kulka) struggles to comprehend what he sees before him

NC: Speaking of Hammett, there is a scene in the book where Gordon pumps Red Margo for information that is lifted almost verbatim from a similar scene in *Red Harvest*.

EG: Well, I have been nothing but polite about Kondor, but when I started to get all these comments about how much better the book was, it took all my restraint to not say . . .

NC: . . . to not call him out?

EG: Perhaps I should have, I don't know.

NC: What was the author's reaction to the film?

EG: His objection was the Krisztina and Gordon relationship. He felt that he wanted that part of Gordon's life not to have conflict. I think their relationship with all the complications is true to life. Because of this, we see Gordon in a more raw, emotional way. Kondor didn't like that we "invented" a fancy club that had boxing because it wasn't real. But it could have been, and I like to show things that haven't been seen before.

He failed to comment on important changes that made the film work—Gordon's meeting the girl who became his obsession, and revealing the "killer" earlier. There are elements that we dramatized about the killer—"showing" rather than "telling."

NC: The book was a bestseller, so there's an audience in Hungary for crime fiction. How has the movie been received there?

EG: It opened in October and it's still going strong which is great considering all the American films that open every week. We did quite a few Q & As in different towns and people really responded to them. There had not previously been this type of movie and people were really interested in seeing it.

NC: Do you have any other projects lined up?

EG: I have a script I developed, *Cindy in Iraq*, which is about U.S. contractors working in Iraq. It's a great story, but for a long time everybody was afraid of it. I also have a lovely memoir, *More was Lost*, by Eleanor Perenyi about a young American's love affair with a Hungarian baron before and during World War II. I'm also very interested in directing some of the great shows on Netflix, Amazon, Hulu, etc. The word in Hollywood is that it's the year of the woman!

Budapest Noir—Scheduled (subject to change) for release in early 2019 by Menemsha Films, Neil A. Friedman.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

An American Rhapsody released by Paramount Classic in 2001. Éva Gárdos wrote and directed this autobiographical tale about her family's escape from Stalin-occupied Hungary in the early 1950s to start a new life in America. The film won the Hollywood Discovery Award for Best Feature and earned two honors at the Nantucket Film Festival—Audience Award for Best Feature and Bubbling Under Award for a promising first-time director. In addition, the Young Artist Awards cited the film for Best Ensemble in a Feature Film.

Krisztián Kolovratnik is an actor and director. Prior to *Budapest Noir*, he took a seven-year break from acting to form his own production company. He is also a photographer, a musician, and he has a vegan restaurant in Budapest.

Réka Tenki's film roles include István Szabó's *The Door* (2012) and the 2017 Oscar entry for Best Foreign Film, Ildikó Enyedi's *On Body and Soul*. She was voted one of the "10 Europeans to Watch" in 2017 by *Variety*, and in 2018 she was among those chosen for *The Shooting Star* award at the Berlin International Film Festival. ■