



VILMOS ZSIGMOND, ASC

Director of Photography

Vilmos Zsigmond, ASC, was born and raised in Szeged. He was barely in his teens when World War II ended, and the Russian government and army established a communist regime, which cut off all contact with the Western world. Zsigmond developed a keen interest in still photography when he was 17 years old while reading "Artistic Photography" a book filled with beautiful black-and-white photographs taken by Eugene Dulovits.

Communist authorities initially denied him the privilege of continuing his education, because his parents were "bourgeois". Instead, Zsigmond was put to work in a rope factory. He saved money to purchase a camera and became a self-taught still photographer.

Zsigmond organized a photo club at the factory where he taught his fellow workers how to take pictures, develop film, make prints and enlarge them. He was rewarded by being allowed to study cinematography at the Academy for Theater and Film Art in Budapest. The idea was that he would come back to the factory and teach his fellows how to make industrial movies. On October 23, 1956, a year after Zsigmond graduated from the Academy, there was a spontaneous public revolution against the communist regime. Zsigmond and Laszlo Kovacs ASC, who was still a student, borrowed a motion picture camera from the film department and recorded thousands of feet of 35 mm black-and-white film documenting the heroic fight of students and civilians against Russian tanks and soldiers on the streets of Budapest.

After the rebellion was crushed, Zsigmond and Kovacs carried the film out of the country during a perilous journey across the border into Austria. They wanted the world to see the true story of the events. In February 1957, Zsigmond and Kovacs migrated to the United States as political refugees with a dream of becoming cinematographers in Hollywood. They didn't speak a word of English, and had no connections in the film industry. Zsigmond supported himself by working at odd jobs and spending weekends and evenings shooting 16 mm educational and student films.

He found a niche in the TV commercial industry, and also began shooting educational films, documentaries and low-budget features aimed at drive-in theaters during the mid-late 1960s. In 1971, Robert Altman asked Zsigmond to shoot *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*. That was his entry into mainstream Hollywood.

Zsigmond has compiled some 80 narrative film credits during his storied career. When he earned an Oscar® for innovative cinematography on *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* in 1977, he dedicated that award to his mentors at the film school in Hungary during a memorable acceptance speech that was seen on television by millions of people around the world. Next year he received another Academy Award nomination and a prestigious BAFTA award for *The Deer Hunter*. Other nominations: *The River* in 1984 and *The Black Dahlia* in 2006. Zsigmond also won an Emmy Award for the television film *Stalin* in 1992 and another nomination for *The Mists of Avalon* in 2001.

There have been many other tributes, including Lifetime Achievement Awards from the CamerImage International Festival of the Art of Cinematography in 1997 and the American Society of Cinematographers in 1999. His body of work includes many other now classic films, including *Hired Hand*, *Deliverance*, *The Long Goodbye*, *The Sugarland Express*, *Cinderella Liberty*, *The Rose*, *Heaven's Gate*, *The Witches of Eastwick*, *Sliver*, *Melinda and Melinda*, *Cassandra's Dream*, *You Will Meet A Tall Dark Stranger* and the much anticipated *Louis and Bolden*, a cinematic tribute to a pioneer in the early history of American jazz music with Director, Dan Pritzker.

In 2005, Zsigmond and Kovacs were among the first four recipients of The Legends Award from the Hungarian Society of Cinematographers. The award is a tribute to cinematographers whose lives and films are inspirations to other filmmakers. Zsigmond returns to Hungary regularly to his alma mater in Budapest where he mentors film students from around the world in master classes. He and Kovacs helped to create the concept for the semi-annual summer master class in 1994.

This year marks the 54th anniversary of his arrival in the United States in search of a dream. Vilmos Zsigmond has become a legend in his own time.

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(Augmented by Patty Mack)