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ADOLFAS MEKAS (1925–2011)

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Adolfas Mekas—filmmaker, teacher, and co-founder (with his brother Jonas) of the influential magazine *Film Culture*—died on May 31, 2011. *The Brooklyn Rail* asked Mekas’s fellow filmmakers, colleagues, students, and friends to share their thoughts and reminiscences about his life and work.

Adolfas Mekas was an adopted son of Mark Twain. He even brought to cinema a Twain story, “The Double Barrelled Detective Story.” The misguided refusal of the sponsor to release the film in 1965 did considerable harm to the filmmaker’s career. But it led by the circuitous pathways of destiny to his remarkable work as a teacher. He took a job at Bard College to hold himself over for a year or two and stayed on for some four decades. What he came to call “The People’s Film Department” was his theater of hijinks; for he surprised even himself with his enormous didactic gifts, his startling administrative skill, and his unceasing fount of comic invention. His own fractured education and his nearly total disregard for academic decorum made him the ideal professor. Nowhere in the archives of film is there an invented character who could come near the brilliant, lovable, outrageous mischief that consistently turned his classrooms into arenas of magic. He taught generations how to see and act.

—P. Adams Sitney

Adolfas always had a flare for the dramatic. While improvising the role of an ill-tempered father (*Certain Women*) he did a variation where he ripped his shirt off, popping all the buttons, and stomped out. He just hated it when things felt predictable. His office window at Bard overlooked our lovely Preston Theater, which he originally designed. He often sat up there with the lights out and red velvet curtain pulled back, watching films from his private sanctum, sometimes sharing his booze with a guest. For one faculty show, Adolfas made a video in which he leafs through his expurgated FBI file detailing his glories, follies, and various regrets—John Williams stole his theme music (*Hallelujah the Hills*), Roman Polanski beat him out for the cover of *Time* (*Knife in the Water*). It builds to a fantastic, cathartic ending. Addressing the audience, Adolfas shouts “I have lived through it all!” He raises his arm, pointing over our heads shouting, “If you want to see the living proof turn around right now!” Obediently, everyone turned and there sat Adolfas in his window with his glass raised. A sublime performance—just for him and us and that little theater.

—Peggy Ahwesh

I came east to Bard College to study film in the fall of 1982, and Adolfas was so unlike anyone I’d ever come across in Beloit, WI, that it took me years to figure out how to place him, how to speak to him, how to learn from him. He was all heart: he spoke with immediacy and astringency; there was no bullshit, no sugar coating, no intellectual meandering; just a shoot from the hip reaction. I remember editing my very first film on the second floor of the film center while a hapless senior faced a board of professors responding to his film. The 16mm projector turned on and chugged for several minutes, then Adolfas’s voice rang out in its Eastern European staccato: “Shit, shit, shit: this film is shit.” I cringed upstairs, but after a few minutes Adolfas had softened, and murmured encouraging words to the student. I learned to trust Adolfas because he had no investment in anything other than the joy of making work: his puckish, anti-institutional spirit was paramount, and passing trends held no sway with him. There was

no fooling Adolfas, he could feel the heart in a film, and he responded viscerally with unvarnished enthusiasm or vitriol. Near the end of my time at Bard he told me about a former student who'd sent a 16mm film with fishhooks taped to it to the Ann Arbor Film Festival, and when they dutifully tried to prescreen the print it ripped the gate out of their projector. "Brilliant," he said, "pure Dada." Adolfas only cared about the act of creation: nothing else was sacred to him, not the avant-garde, political pieties, or any traditions or institutions. I loved the eternal twinkle in his eye, and the way he encouraged filmmaking as a way of life, not an accumulation of works.

—Mark Street

I remember watching Dovzhenko's *Earth* in 16mm in the tiny screening room in the old film center at Bard. I noticed Adolfas in the back, standing by the projector. On the screen was a beautiful Soviet-style montage of apples in orchards, sunshine, happy people, and more apples. Adolfas, a tear in his eye, and very moved, said loud over the projector clatter, "That! That is Cinema!" Adolfas taught by sharing his epiphanies.

—Jeff Scher

A Memory of Adolfas at Bard. It's hard to believe that there was a period at Bard College several decades ago when we had time to play softball two days a week each spring. It was an occasion for students and faculty to get together outside of class and run around together and have fun. It's important to understand that Bard was not a sports-oriented college, and the whole enterprise of sports was at best a novelty. It's also important to understand that Adolfas had no idea how to play softball. The film department's team was called Saint Tula, who was the adopted patron saint of our department, which was based on a photograph some student had taken on a trip to Italy in the '70s of an Italian saint with what looked like a film reel behind her head. The team was uneven, but colorful and scrappy, consisting of men and women who were—like Adolfas—competitive and crazy. There was another team called E Coli that consisted of a group of gnarly guys with a lot of body hair who wore dresses and no underwear. They were so ugly that nobody wanted to play them. Despite his uncertainty of the nuances of the game, Adolfas was our coach, cheerleader, and "secret weapon." He was always the gentleman, dressed in jacket and tie and looking like someone's uncle—but he was very deceptive. Essentially he would stand quietly behind the backstop and wait for the first pitch to be thrown and then start yelling like a maniac. It was an avalanche of polyglot invective, from his Lithuanian accented "swing batter" to a litany of nerve-rattling phrases and expressions in Swedish, German, and Italian that were utterly incomprehensible. The other teams absolutely hated him and on several occasions threatened him with bodily harm. I can still hear him yelling "Swing batter," followed by a swoosh and angry muttering. The angrier the opposing players would become the happier Adolfas would be. I never remember seeing him so giddy and delighted with himself. We won the intramural championship one year. There's a photograph of our winning team in the college gym with all of us standing around Adolfas, who was holding the Saint Tula banner. It's a memory I cherish.

—Peter Hutton

Adolfas Mekas may have done much through example to reinvigorate Hollywood filmmaking, encouraging more personal and less inhibited expression, but was he really an avant-garde filmmaker as described in his *New York Times* obituary? I saw him as an intellectual import, making New Wave films in the USA. Jonas leaned to Beat, Adolfas—dapper to the end—to Hipster. He was like Cassavetes, whom I met once in the very early '60s and couldn't take my eyes off his polished Italian shoes—which is to say he was the picture of ambition circumventing corporate structures. Underground Film was an expression of anomie; USA was a non-existent bluff and so were its rewards. Hipsters saw the vacuity but wanted to lay claim to the rewards.

It was a long time before I registered with Adolfas, who I felt endured me as one of his brother's zany enthusiasms. Flo's attachment to me may have begun my credibility, as she was clearly one of the rewards. Pola spoke up for me and together they watched *Capitalism: Child Labor* and other works. Genuinely friendly, his manner still conveyed he was someone engaged much more with the realities and

I suppose he was—with scripts and budgets and people and locations, with being a film director. Tellingly, though, his tenure at Bard had favored genuine film-artists—it was no springboard into the industry. A complex fellow was Adolfas, kept erect by his fine clothes so as not to become a puddle of feelings.

—Ken Jacobs

What was striking about Adolfas was the interconnectedness between art and life. *Hallelujah the Hills* made more sense to me when I had met the filmmaker in person. The wit and ebullience, with everyone kept well lubricated with his homemade Limoncello, seemed to all come together in the merging of innocently absurdist art and the drollery of life. There was a certain generosity of spirit around him: this can be seen in the egalitarian-minded christening of “The People’s Film Department” at Bard (listed more soberly on the Bard College website as the Department of Film and Electronic Arts).

With obvious relish he asked if I knew about the bunny suit. Pola cringed at its mention. Adolfas explained that when the spring semester was coming to an end, and the lull between finals and graduation had fallen upon the Bard College campus, he would pull out his furry rabbit costume and stroll around the campus dressed as a giant bunny. Department Chairs, Deans, the College President, and other esteemed members of the academe would suddenly pretend they didn’t know him, quickly darting away at the approach of the furry apparition. Who is there to carry the torch of such madcap drollery in today’s academe?

The occasion of our meeting came after I had sent Adolfas a manuscript, “The Sayings of St. Tula,” (St. Tula being the Patron Saint of the People’s Film Department at Bard) which he assumed at first was a prank being played on him by one of the other faculty at Bard. His basis for his thinking it was a prank was that “Schlemowitz” was clearly a made-up name.

—Joel Schlemowitz

Adolfas Mekas was a colleague of mine for 25 years at Bard College. For most of that time he was chair of the film program, and more than to anyone else, the credit for building it belonged to him. Such was his love of life, film, and teaching, it was impossible not to have a deep affection for him. He left behind several legacies to the American film community. In 1955, along with his brother Jonas, he co-founded *Film Culture*, a journal that played a key role within the US in shaping critical assessments of cinema as a serious art form well before the study of film was deemed respectable by the academy. In addition, Mekas was a charismatic and generous teacher who had a profound effect on his many students, not a small number of whom have led notable careers in the film world. Possibly the most important legacy, however, are Mekas’s films, one of which stands out above the others: *Hallelujah the Hills*, a hilarious and stylistically original comedy that combines anarchic visual gags with a melancholic undertone. Everyone who loves film should see it; in it they will find the enduring spirit of this unforgettable man.

—John Pruitt

“Why filmmaking has to be so difficult technically? Only the devil knows. In Lithuania we had a saying: A woman had no problems in her life at all—everything was beautiful. Then she bought herself a pig.” (2003)

I ask Adolfas what factories he worked in when he arrived in New York. “Jonas and I worked in the steel department making convertible beds, and then I was promoted to the mattress department and I made mattresses, and they made me a foreman. I had four German guys under me. I didn’t speak German or English; I don’t know why they made me the foreman. One day they told me something about the next Saturday, they said to skip it. I asked my guys to come in Saturday, you know on Saturday they get paid overtime. So the boss comes in and says, ‘Didn’t I tell you to skip it?’ But I didn’t know what ‘skip it’ meant! The Germans loved me—they got paid overtime! I worked in a cemetery, in Maspeth, Long Island, taking care of the grass, and I got fired because one day it was raining and I had no rain gear, I was walking around soaked like an idiot, and they said get out of here. Then I got drafted. Can you imagine? I was in the country less than one year. I did not have residency, I did not speak English, and

they drafted me!" I ask, "How did they know you would fight for the country? Are you sure they had the right to draft you?" He says, "I have not looked into it yet. But when I got back it was very good, because I could go to university for free, the television university. I could take out a mortgage and the government will pay my interest. A lot of things I haven't even used yet. When I die Pola can have a flag placed over my coffin, and six pole-bearers can carry it, and Pola too can have this. We've discussed it. I want to be buried in a wooden casket, pine, no brass handles, none of this catholic nonsense, no velvet, I don't want to be burned, I'm not an Indian, I just want to be put in the ground and let rats and worms do their work, I don't mind." Nicole says she would like to be pushed out into the Ganges on a raft and burned, and Adolfas says he has seen that, he respects the tradition, but it's not for him. "You see, when you are 92 going on 97, you start accepting death in a very interesting way. You begin one by one to cut the threads around you, because you don't know when you are going, you free yourself from things you may leave undone, you accept without fear." (2009)

—quotes from conversations with Pip Chodorov

Anthology Film Archives is planning a retrospective devoted to the work of Adolfas Mekas this fall. Visit anthologyfilmarchives.org in late summer for more details.