



Klaudia Kovacs' *Torn from the Flag* features footage of the 1956 Hungarian uprising, shot by then-students Laszlo Kovacs and Vilmos Zsigmond.

Cinematic UPRISING

Laszlo Kovacs' final film, *Torn from the Flag*, could be his finest achievement
by Brian O'Hare

IT IS A FITTING TRIBUTE TO the career of legendary cinematographer Laszlo Kovacs that his final film is *Torn from the Flag*, director Klaudia Kovacs' vivid and intensely personal documentary of the doomed 1956 Hungarian uprising against their Communist Soviet occupiers.

Torn from the Flag, which premiered at the 2007 AFI FEST, gets much of its punch from the amazing black-and-white footage shot by then Budapest film students Kovacs (*Easy Rider*, *Five Easy Pieces*, *Shampoo*) and the equally legendary Vilmos Zsigmond (*McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*), as they risked their lives to record the David and Goliath struggle between the outmanned and outgunned Hungarians and the mighty Soviet Union.

Kovacs and Zsigmond managed to smuggle the raw footage out of the country and to the West, where it is being seen for the first time in *Torn from the Flag*. For most Hungarians, the story of the ultimately unsuccessful uprising against the Soviets remains their finest hour, their "diamond moment" as director Kovacs (who is of no relation to the late, great cinematographer) describes it. So it was with equal parts grit and audacity that Kovacs embarked upon her first feature film, stubbornly moving forward through nine-and-a-half years of fundraising, receiving donations as small as one dollar in an attempt at repaying a deeply felt debt to her past.

Kovacs weaves a tale of everyday heroism, shot with ordinary folks trying to maintain their humanity and dignity in the face of an oppressive system they can no longer tolerate. It's fascinating, as well as moving, to watch as Hungarians from various strata of society are chosen by fate to shed their roles as laborers, printers and even Hungarian Communist Party officials to man the barricades as freedom fighters against the Soviet tanks and ultimately assume their position as cultural touchstones and mythic heroes. But for a

story that could easily lend itself to cheap patriotism and empty flag-waving, *Torn from the Flag* manages to be incredibly even-handed in its portrayal of the revolution as a historical event.

There are no true villains in the film. Amazingly, director Kovacs manages to track down a former Soviet tank commander who rolled into Budapest as part of the force dispatched by Khrushchev to put down the uprising, as well as an agent from the Hungarian Secret Police, the AVO, who later became a fervent anti-AVO activist. Their interviews add a startling complexity to what could have been a simplistic portrayal of the events. Ultimately though, *Torn from the Flag* is a film about redemption and identity. Redemption in that individuals and the stands they take matter; the uprising in Budapest was ultimately the first crack in the wall of the Soviet empire that eventually collapsed 33 years later.

Having been raised under a Communist system that idealized the proletariat and demonized indi-

vidual expression, native Hungarian Klaudia Kovacs realized that in some ways she didn't know what it meant to be a "Hungarian." Driven by this question, and her own sense of cultural dislocation after several years in America, Kovacs discovers in the revolution of 1956 a universally human desire to be free that transcends mere national identity. *Torn from the Flag* was Laszlo Kovacs' final film before his death this past July and is, on many levels, the crowning achievement of his 50 years behind the camera, which when interwoven with director Kovacs' vision, leaves a fitting eulogy for the life of a great artist committed to freedom of expression and the dynamic way he told stories. **MM**



A tale of two Kovacs: DP Laszlo confers with director Klaudia.

MM's 15th Year! Our Biggest Issue Yet!

MOVIE MAKER

THE ART AND BUSINESS OF MAKING MOVIES

Can Filmmakers Save the Planet?

These 25 are making a difference

Black Hollywood: Still Doing the Shuffle?

The Naked Truth: Part II

Jack Black
Paul Giamatti
Ellen Page
George Romero
Gus Van Sant
Michael Haneke
Ed Burns
Haskell Wexler
Diablo Cody
Jason Reitman
David Gordon Green
Callie Khouri

Charlize Theron

Oscar-winning actor-producer continues to prove she's more than just the sexiest woman alive in *Sleepwalking* and *Battle in Seattle*

LOCATIONS EDITION:
Top 10 U.S. Cities for Filmmakers to Live 2008

Issue No. 73, Volume 15
www.moviemaker.com \$5.95



FRENCH CRIME MOVIES SLEEPWALKING IN THE WOODS