



On Top of the Volcano

From: *The Times [London]* 1983

By: Melinda Camber Porter

It is twilight in the plaza of this tiny Mexican town, 35 miles from Cuernavaca. The Day of the Dead that uniquely Mexican holiday which is part Lenten Carnival, part Halloween, is drawing to a close. A raggle-taggle band of slightly off-key musicians is leading the annual procession of skeletons, ghosts and red-cloaked devils bearing flaming torches through the narrow streets and into the square.

Four nightmarish monks wearing skull masks and wide straw wigs, a small black coffin borne on their shoulders, lurch behind the tin-toned trumpeters. As the procession reaches the center of the square a small boy in a skeleton mask pops out jack-in-the-box style and begins conducting the band while children dance alongside in time to the music.

Enter, from another corner of the square, Albert Finney dressed in a baggy thirties-style suit and shoes worn without socks. His bearing is exaggeratedly erect: shoulders back, chest thrust forward, gait just a mite unsteady. He is followed by a mangy street dog.

Finney stops, briefly addresses the dog and then ambles over to the vine hung façade of the Hotel Bella Vista, which he enters in the company of a group of elegantly dressed gentleman in wing collars, and ladies and bias-cut gowns and marcelled hairdos. A banner slung across the street proclaims: "*Gran Baile Noviembre 1938: a Beneficio de la Cruz Roja.*"

Aficionados of Malcolm Lowry's powerful novel *Under the Volcano* will recognize the figure of the former British Consul Geoffrey Firman, holding himself painfully together will permanently soaked in alcohol, maintaining, with the greatest difficulty, the illusion that his life is not all anger pain sadness and waste.

Here in Yauhtepec a team including the director John Huston, the veteran cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa and actors Albert Finney, Jacqueline Bisset and Anthony Andrews are recreating the story, set in Mexico in the late thirties, while the world outside was falling apart.

Long admired for its blend of rich symbolism, humanitarianism, humor and profound melancholy, it has defeated many a filmmaker since its publication in 1974. Only a partial list of those who've tried and failed to make it work for the screen would include the directors Luis Bunuel, Jules Dassin and Joseph Losey; and the authors Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Ronald



Harewood. Richard Burton, Jack Nicholson and the late Robert Shaw are among the actors who wanted to play the consul.

The plaza in Yautepec, with its Ferris Wheel and carnival rides – imported for the film, to the delight of the town's children, who can ride them for free – and elegant hotel façade, hastily constructed across the front of a broken-down hostelry, seemed so much an illusion that the people who have created it still cannot quite believe that they are here.

John Huston, gnarled grand old man of the American cinema, sits in a white golf cart from which he rarely stirs, his eyes focused keenly on the tiny video screen which monitors the images recorded by the camera. At 77 he was a shadow of a figure once so imposing: his legs are elongated and thinned out like a stork's, his chest is hollow, his belly droops. But the eyes still have wit and intelligence, and age has enforced a calm sobriety.

His assistant barks orders to the cast and crew. Around Huston are no fewer than three producers (one Irish, two German) and an intense young screenwriter whose eyes dart from Huston's to the video screen, to the set and back, soaking up the experience of his first assignment.

One of the producers, a lean bearded man dressed all in white, is called Wieland Schulz-Keil. He is the reason that they are here. A writer and philosopher, he read Lowry's book at 18 and four years ago hired a lawyer to begin the complex business of acquiring the rights.

"I got them in February last and paid \$350,000 for them," he says. "But because of a complicated system instituted by the agent for Lowry's widow, each purchaser has to pay the full price for the rights every time they changed hands, rather than just option money."

Schulz-Keil took the rights to Huston, who has already by his own count seen some 150 different script versions of the book over the years.

Huston brought in a young Irish executive producer, Michael Fitzgerald, with whom he had made the prize-winning *Wiseblood*, from Flannery O'Connor's short story, in 1979. Sitting on the mock veranda of the mock Hotel Bella Vista, Fitzgerald – son of the poet and classical translator Robert Fitzgerald – washed the dust out of his throat with an *agua minerale* and explained: "John and I had been working on another film, which fell apart just as Weiland came to us with *Volcano*. It was ideal Huston material. Nobody knows Mexico and Mexican culture like John. He's been here since the twenties."

Schulz-Keil went off to find the money. With Huston's reputation, a renowned novel and a tight



budget – some \$4M – it should have been easy. It was not. Everyone turned him down flat.

“No one would back Huston,” Schulz-Keil recalls. “I was told he was too old, he’d had too many flops. I couldn’t believe it. Here was one of the legends and we couldn’t raise a nickel on his name.”

For Schulz-Keil the irony reached its heights at the American Film Institute’s grandiose tribute to Huston in Hollywood. “All the moguls who had been turning me down were up there singing his praises. It was quite disgusting. By the end of the evening I was so angry I actually physically attacked a couple of the film executive as they left the hotel.”

But the evening was not a complete waste. The new head of the Mexican Film Commission, Alberto Isaac, was a guest. The name Huston still means something in Mexico and Isaac committed \$1.5M of his government’s money. Universal Classics came up with another \$1M and Schulz-Keil rounded up the rest. Only the script remained to be complete.

In 1979 Guy Gallo was a young undergraduate at Harvard at when he read *Under the Volcano*. “I picked up the New York Times Magazine survey of the favorite books of well-known writers. *Under the Volcano* was on everybody’s list. I did two critical papers on it and later as a graduate student at Yale Drama school wrote a screenplay of it, just as an exercise.”

Fitzgerald, whose father had taught Gallo at Harvard, called him on a different project and asked for some samples of his writing. Gallo mentioned the Lowry script and sent it for inspection. Fitzgerald handed it to Huston, with the result that the veteran director and the novice script writer spent four months in Puerto Vallarta chiseling away at five or six rewrites, each version sparer and more economical than the last.

Eventually there was a finished product. “I had read Lowry’s letter to his agent after he and his wife died did a screenplay for *Tender Is the Night*,” Gallo says. “He wrote: ‘I’ve left out enough for a Puccini opera.’ In that case, I’ve left out enough for two.”

The Moguls who ran from it obviously feared a slow, ponderous atmosphere piece. Those fears, Fitzgerald says, were groundless. “It may be melancholy, but it moves at a very fast pace. It doesn’t brood along. To some extent it’s a love story. There are many, many elements that should be recognizable even to the monsters who control Hollywood.”

There is no mistaking the attentive air which envelops the set. “A number of people here have wanted to do this for a decade or more,” Gallo explains. Like the rest of the team, he appears to be completely immersed in every minute detail of the picture, leading the film’s star Albert



Finney to remark, somewhat cynically, "There do seem to be rather a lot of people on the bridge for such an intimate film, don't there?"

For Finney this may be a chance to show that he really belongs up there in the Olivier/Richardson/Guinness first division. "Albert wanted to work with John again, but on the real Huston movie," says Fitzgerald. "Annie was just showbiz. John thinks it's the best performance he's ever had anything to do with." Anthony Andrews, Finney's co-star, agrees: "If Albert gets this even half right it'll put him back at the top of the pile."

For Andrews this is a first big-screen American film with a "name" director. His acting triumphs on television – *Brideshead Revisited*, *Danger UXB* and *The Scarlet Pimpernel* – have given him an enviable reputation. Now all he needs is the clout to get major movie roles.

For Jacqueline Bisset, playing the consul's long-suffering wife, it is a chance to redeem herself after a series of expensive and exploitative flops, to prove that underneath the beauty and flip intelligence of this international star there really is an actress.

The fate of them all, however, hangs on Huston. Will *Volcano* the film mark a return to the greatness of yore? The third member of the production triumvirate, Moritz Borman says: "We're not making *ET* here. We're all waiting for something great. That's why there's such an air of concentration and excitement. We know this could be another *Sierra Madre* another *African Queen*."

© 2016 Melinda Camber Porter Archive

Ref: The Times (London), 1983

