

## C O N T R I B U T O R O F N O T E

## ALEXANDER VESELY

### A Filmmaker Documenting Psychotherapy

#### Introduction

The Erickson Foundation is working with filmmaker and director, Alexander Vesely of Vienna, Austria to produce a documentary about Milton H. Erickson. "Wizard of the Desert" will offer a broad audience a look at the personal and professional side of Dr. Erickson.

This interview between Vesely and Roxanna Erickson Klein takes place in October of this year. Both Klein and Vesely would like to thank Mary Cimiluca, CEO, at Noetic Films, Inc. for her ongoing support and business acumen, which has helped bring this important project to fruition.

**Roxanna Erickson Klein (REK):** Hi Alex. I would like to take this opportunity to ask you to share with our readers your background in filmmaking.

**Alexander Vesely (AV):** It's a pleasure to speak with you, and thank you for giving me this opportunity to talk about my favorite subject -- film.

**REK:** Let's begin with our mutual endeavor, the making of "Wizard of the Desert." Can you tell us about this project and why you have taken an interest in it?

**AV:** My passion has always been filmmaking. I recognize the tremendous impact that a film can have on an individual's life. A long time ago, I received a note from the great Steven Spielberg who wrote: "Film is so powerful, use it wisely and enjoy it." Those words have remained with me and still guide me. Film can convey complex concepts by translating them into experiences that guide us through different emotional states. It encourages learning in a profound way.

I have formally studied psychotherapy. My interest in human motivation and the way the mind works, together with my passion for filmmaking gave me direction; even my master's degree thesis was on "cinema therapy." As I learned about and com-



pared different schools of psychotherapy, the journey of exploration led me to an interest in the work of Milton Erickson. The Erickson Foundation has been central in helping me and others learn about his remarkable therapeutic approaches.

For approximately two years I have collaborated with the Foundation on "Wizard of the Desert." I have filmed dozens of interviews with professionals from around the world; the stories they told will illustrate the profound impact Dr. Erickson's work has had on their diverse professional practices.

**REK:** It's true that my father's words and messages have had a lasting impact on so many lives. I've seen a number of those interviews and I have also been interviewed for this film. You are quite skilled in drawing stories out of people.

**AV:** Thank you. While I encourage people to talk about their memories and the relationship they had with Dr. Erickson, I also want to illustrate it without changing or altering the emotional content that they bring to the interview. I seek to capture the impact that Dr. Erickson had on the individual who is telling his story.

**REK:** It must be a delicate balance -- encouraging people to tell their story, yet not leading them in one direction or another. You seem to have a special talent there too. Tell us how your training in psychotherapy has fit with your work as a filmmaker.

**AV:** In order to gain a deeper understanding and to improve my directing skills, I formally studied psychotherapy at the University of Vi-

enna. I explored the connection among film, narration, and therapy in my master's degree thesis. I think my appreciation of psychotherapy has improved my work as a director, especially in working with actors. I gained many valuable insights which have impacted and changed the way I approach filmmaking. Engaging emotions in a way that can lead to insight is an important element of psychotherapy. It is similar to generating an atmosphere that captures an audience.

Looking at different schools of therapy and their parallels to the cinematic experience, the work of Milton Erickson immediately stood out. His groundbreaking ideas as well as his personal life's story are so remarkable that I wanted to see his story on screen.

**REK:** How did you get started in the art of directing films?

**AV:** Enthusiasm for film and the visual arts has always been part of me. I began to make films as a child. In fact, I got my first camera at age seven and I have directed, produced, and written many short films, commercials, and documentaries. The opportunity just happened by circumstance, but once I embraced it, things began to fall into place in a way that helped me to recognize my own talents.

My work has now begun to be recognized in Hollywood and I have been offered several important film projects. I am beginning the process of applying for a U.S. work visa. In addition, one of my short films, "Codigo Capital," produced and directed in Argentina, was an official selection at the Latino Film Festival in Berlin. "Viktor & I, An Alexander Vesely Film" won the Diamond Award from the California Film Awards along with three other prestigious recognitions. I was most humbled and honored by these recognitions.

**REK:** I have seen "Viktor & I" and agree that the recognition is well earned.

That film helped us see that you have the ability to tell our story about Dr. Erickson in an interesting, compelling, yet accurate way.

**AV:** I went through a vast amount of archival material for "Viktor & I," as well as the footage I had shot myself. A lot of it was great material and the biggest challenge was to decide

which stories to set aside. Luckily, in the process of putting all the material together, the story began to tell itself, to find cohesion and meaning. It began to show the humanity of this great thinker. I am pleased with the outcome. Professionals worldwide had been asking for a more cohesive understanding of the work of Dr. Viktor Frankl, while an even broader group of people were clamoring to know more about the person.

**REK:** As I understand it, the approach to "Wizard of the Desert" will be similar to the one used to show the work of Viktor Frankl.

**AV:** It is difficult to capture the essence of a man and his work by simply looking at volumes of text. Film is the medium of our time and an ideal way to remind the world of great men and their work. While researching Dr. Erickson's work, I came to think of him as a great American hero. Once I began to work on this documentary, interviewing many former patients, students, colleagues, family, and friends, I became even more intrigued by his character. He was a gifted man who overcame great physical challenges to become an enlightened healer. He had the ability to move patients toward wellness by utilizing their own words and simple, everyday activities. His techniques have been studied by thousands, yet no one can fully explain how he so powerfully did what he did. The stories about him are vital to preserve.

**REK:** Many of these stories were at risk of being lost without the work you have done. Overall, what do you think is the most difficult aspect of the film?

**AV:** This work is challenging in that it had not begun until decades after Dr. Erickson's death. This has offered some advantage, in that mature professionals are able to look back and recognize ways in which Dr. Erickson influenced them. However, it also was a serious disadvantage, in that some resources have gone to the four winds, so to speak.

**REK:** In the event that other material or opportunities become available, will you still work with us to add to the film?

**AV:** I am always committed to assure that the work is as complete as

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possible. If the opportunity arises for shooting additional material, I will be happy to work with the Foundation to integrate it into the film so that it, too, will be preserved.

**REK:** I was hoping you would say that. My own archival work tells me that you never know what resources might be discovered, and so the work is never complete.

**AV:** You are so right. I once wrote that producing a documentary is a bit like a treasure hunt -- you find pearls around every corner. My tendency as a director is to continue to add footage, but at some point, you must cut the research and finish the film.

**REK:** Well Alex, I want to let you know that your contribution to the Foundation Archives is substantial. I have found working with you to be a rare privilege.

**AV:** Thank you very much. It is a pleasure working with you too.