On Location in Seventies London: Gavrik Losey interviewed by Paul Newland

Gavrik Losey was born in New York in 1938. His father was Joseph Losey. He grew up in Hollywood during the late 1940s, where he witnessed first-hand the effects of the McCarthy witch hunts which forced his father to flee the United States in 1951 to avoid testifying before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Losey eventually followed his father to England in 1956. He enrolled at the University College London, and entered the British film industry as a full-time professional in 1959.

Before moving in to film production, Losey gained practical experience of the creative side of the industry while training as a film editor, cameraman, and assistant director. He was a camera assistant on *Tom Jones* (Tony Richardson, 1963) and *Girl with Green Eyes* (Desmond Davis, 1964), and worked as a news cameraman for the first series of Granada Television's *World in Action*. He was asked to become an assistant director on *Modesty Blaise* (Joseph Losey, 1966) and *Dare I Deep, Dare I Mourn* (Ted Kotcheff, 1966).

Losey then moved into production management. He was to work on more than twenty films in this capacity, including Peter Yates's *Robbery* (1967), Joseph McGrath's *30 is a Dangerous Age*, *Cynthia* (1968), and Lindsay Anderson's *If...*(1968). During this period he was also approached to work on the television film *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967) by the Beatles. In 1968 Losey became an in-house production supervisor for Woodfall Films, where his projects included *Hamlet* (1969), *Laughter in the Dark* (1969), and *Ned Kelly* (1970), all directed by Tony Richardson.

Losey remained busy during the early 1970s. He worked on two films for director Michael Tuchner – *Villain* (1971), as assistant producer, and *Fear is the Key* (1972), as associate producer. He joined David Puttnam and Sandy Lieberson at Goodtimes Films as an associate producer/producer, working on *Melody* (Waris Hussein, 1971), *The Pied Piper* (Jacques Demy, 1971), *That'll Be the Day* (Claude Whatham, 1973), *Stardust* (Michael Apted, 1974), and *Flame* (Richard Loncraine, 1975).

Losey produced some of his best work as a freelance producer during the 1970s. Stuart Cooper's *Little Malcolm* (1974) was the winner of a Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival. Losey was installed on J. Lee Thompson's *The Greek Tycoon* (1978) as production consultant. He helped to produce *Agatha* (1979), another Michael Apted film starring Dustin Hoffman and Vanessa Redgrave. He remains especially proud of his work on Franco Rosso's *Babylon* (1980). Working with Stuart Cooper he also completed the first Anglo-Canadian co-production treaty film *The Disappearance* (David Hemmings, 1977), starring Donald Sutherland.

During the 1980s Losey became the Deputy Managing Director (Production) for the Legion multi-media group, which made films, records and TV commercials. At Legion he produced the Charles Gormley feature film *Living Apart Together* (1982) and a two-hour documentary for the BBC, *The Foreign Legion*. Between 1989 and 1991 he worked on the production of the television film *A Child From the South* (Sergio Rezende, 1991), which was shot towards the end of the civil war in Mozambique.

Since the late 1990s Losey has acted as a freelance production adviser on projects for Paramount and Warner Bros. More recently he has also been employed as a freelance lecturer, delivering industry seminars on budgeting and scheduling for HTV and teaching in a variety of educational settings, including the London Film School, Bath Media College and the University of Bristol. Gavrik has donated his archive to the Bill Douglas Centre at the University of Exeter. He became an Honorary Fellow of the University of Exeter in 2003.

PN: I would like to begin by talking about *Villain* (Michael Tuchner, 1971), a very interesting film in terms of location shooting. Can you tell me about your memories of what happened on location and, indeed, which locations were chosen and why?

GL: The decision to shoot *Villain* entirely on location was based on problems related to cost. There is a point at which, if you are going to be on a film set, or in a location, is it cheaper to build it in the studio, where you don't have the transport costs but you have the studio costs, or you don't have the catering costs because everyone gets their own lunch, but you do have the restricted time spaces - the union requirements for the studio, and the overheads - lighting and certain things like that - and the costs of actually building the sets and decorating. So you sit down and in the usual way of things there is a decision about whether it is actually better to do the locations and then to go into the studio to build the sets or whether it is better to use real locations.

One of the things that problematized location shooting was actually the BBC, who were very arrogant. They never cleaned up after themselves, and they made location shooting much more difficult. People had initially been very receptive and loved the idea. Then people began to realise that there was money in it, and there was a hell of a lot of aggravation that went with it. In *Villain*, the robberies, the chases, all those things – one went to the local police station; one saw the sergeant; one told the sergeant. It was a bit lackadaisical. The duty officer would turn up.

PN: So working on a film like *Villain* in the early seventies you didn't have to approach a body to get permission to film

GL: No. You didn't need shooting permits. You never needed them in England. I mean you needed shooting permits in France and other places because it was a sort of left-over from the war – a security thing. But you never needed a governmental shooting permit. You just went and shot. You had a location manager and you did it yourself and you chatted up the local residents and you threw five pound notes about. That changed. It became a commercial business. Now you are looking at £1,000 a day to let somebody's property. In those days you would be happy to have twenty five quid in the hand. Now if you give them £1,000 a day they have got to sign for it. It goes on a tax bill. On the other hand now it's much more professional. You can have a policeman – you buy an off-duty cop and pay his off-duty hourly rate. The Film Office[1] will help you set all that stuff up. Now, before that it was all ad-hoc. You would go to see the duty sergeant. If the bung was good enough you got a lot of help. Very often you would put fifty quid across the desk to buy the boys a drink which, without wishing to say the police were corrupt, went into somebody's pocket – but, lo and behold, you know, a lot of assistance came your way. Now you get it professionally. It's a much better system.

PN: What other problems did you face shooting on location in London for *Villain*?

GL: *Villain* was actually interestingly enough very straight forward. The initial preparation work which I wasn't involved with - because I was doing *Fear is the Key* (Michael Tuchner, 1972) for the same company[2] - had been very well set out, and the whole thing had been organised and laid out, so it worked extremely well. I think it also worked extremely well because it was done more in the suburbs. Not much of it was done in central London.

PN: Can you remember where you filmed parts of *Villain*?

GL: Well the bank is actually in Twickenham. The Westminster Bank in Twickenham town centre – we used the exterior there, and the interior was an abandoned bank which we hired.

PN: There is a very interesting scene where Burton's gang chases a car into some kind of new business park or industrial area - a very interesting location – by a big Clark Eaton factory.

GL: That was out in Bracknell. There were also lots of shots by railway arches. In the seventies there were a vast amount of abandoned areas – brownfield sites I think they would call them now – the end of *Melody* is shot in abandoned railway yards at Waterloo. *Villain* uses a series of railway arches which I think are in Lambeth, and areas around Clapham.

PN: The final sequence - in which Vic (Richard Burton) shoots Joss Acland - that looks like it was filmed under railway arches in Battersea.

GL: I think so, yes.

Look, the pressure is immense. Shooting a film, on the production side and on the acting side, is a minimum twelve to fourteen hours a day. On the production side it is seven days a week because if you work five you prepare on the sixth day, and on the seventh day you pick up on the mistakes that you've made in the week before and in the advance. So most production teams work seven days a week. Now the big advantage of being in the studios was that at Friday at five o'clock they locked the doors, and there was very little you could do. When you are on location things are shifting all the time. The woman who owns the house's mother has just died. What do you do? You haven't got a location until Monday. Everybody gets turned out of bed to go and find an alternative. On the Sunday afternoon the director is dragged out of bed to approve the place so that the prop department can get in much earlier than they had planned it to re-dress the damn set because they're in the wrong place. Those kinds of working-on-your-feet constant changes are exciting and interesting and gave a dynamic to filmmaking that the studio doesn't have. The studio is much more rigid and formulated.

PN: *Robbery* (Peter Yates, 1967) was filmed in the centre of London without permissions, was it not?

GL: Without permissions, but with a very basic kind of clearance. You couldn't do what we did on *Robbery* today, except with a very large police presence and a lot of people knowing what you were doing.

PN: The car chase is extraordinary. It looks very dangerous.

GL: It was very dangerous!

PN: Was it fully planned?

GL: Totally planned. Every single inch of that thing was planned and plotted.

PN: Were streets closed for filming?

GL: Streets were closed off by the police. We had quite a good police presence. But in the areas we were shooting in there wasn't an overall film bureau that assisted us. The police presence didn't come from the Met, but was local.

PN: That car chase is of course a precursor to the famous Steve McQueen chase in Peter Yates's *Bullitt*

GL: The car chase *got* Peter Yates *Bullitt*.

PN: According to the cross plot in your file, the chase scenes were filmed in Marble Arch and elsewhere across west London. You also shot footage in Hatton Garden, London Airport, Battersea Park (Jacko's garage), and on Carnaby Street.

GL: And we filmed in Northumberland Avenue, around Trafalgar Square and in the Strand. We filmed around Notting Hill Gate, around Little Venice. We filmed in Roehampton. The end of the chase is in Roehampton – the new tower blocks were just by the edge of Wimbledon Common there. The beginning of the chase and the gassing takes place in Northumberland Avenue, where the diamond car crashes.

The scene in *Robbery* where you see one of the cars shooting down the road and you'll see a figure appear from roughly the camera position and run across the road and grab a little old lady and have some kind of a tussle with this little old lady, and the police car and the Jaguar go by, and that is actually me rushing across the road because the little old lady is deaf and not paying any attention, to stop her from crossing the road. She tells me that she's crossed this road on this day every day at this time, and she's not going to stop for any film unit. We would have had sort of a pressed little old lady if somebody hadn't rushed across her – being me – and stopped her (laughs). Those were the kind of things that you did encounter - that people have fixed routines.

The other thing that was interesting about both *Villain* and *Robbery* was that we had to get location clearance; that the owners recognised that the property was being shown as the property belonging to somebody who was a criminal. Now, the litigious end of that was beginning to evolve when we reached *Villain*. I mean the owners of property would suddenly welcome you in and turn nasty. They would realise there was money behind it. The insurance companies wanted the most elaborate clearances. The clearances on *Villain* and *Robbery* were about six pages. Nobody could actually get out of saying they didn't know what was being used and what for.

PN: Moving through the seventies, did you detect any differences in the ways in which you were treated when filming on location in London? It became more difficult for you, did it not?

GL: The whole attitude towards everything changed. In practical production terms, to begin with everybody is very helpful. Then they begin to realise you are actually breaking the law, working on the fringes of the law, and it isn't a good thing. Now, that changed gradually. Then the London Film Commission arrived in the early nineties. It then became more professional. The ground shifted. London realised – like New York had done - with *Fame* etc – films could be made there. Before, there were a lot of cowboys out there, and I was one of them, in the sense that there was no structure, no way of doing it, and the business was to get the job done, so you moved things around; you manipulated; you bought people; you did bits, to make things happen. If you had some kind of integrity you cleaned up after yourself and you made sure nobody got hurt, and you made sure you were properly insured. Then people like the Film Producer's Association tried to establish a professional way of actually going about making films in London. In a way it's now less interesting because it's much more restricted. You now get all the police cover you want if you pay for it, in almost any place you want, provided that it works within the whole. The result is you are much more restricted by Health and

Safety, by all the things that go with it, reasonably or unreasonably. Through until the eighties you could do what you want.

PN: Perhaps we could now talk a bit about your experiences filming *Laughter in the Dark* (Tony Richardson, 1969) in London?

GL: *Laughter in the Dark* was a disaster. Tony Richardson wanted to use Nicol Williamson to play the leading part. United Artists said they would back it if it starred Burton. And Burton said he would do it. So we started to make the film with Anna Karina and Burton and a number of other quite good actors. I set up to close Bond Street on a Sunday completely – this is before Sunday opening – so it wasn't that big a problem – so that we could take a real Goya painting and put it in the window of Wildenstein galleries. We had already filmed the picture at auction at Sotheby's. And the auctioneer had actually given the actor's name. He had been slipped £500 and when it came to the final bid he said 'sold to Mr…' So we had the cut. We had the auctioneer in Sotheby's actually auctioning this picture to Richard Burton.

PN: According to files now in your archive, *Laughter in the Dark* had sequences shot in the Mayflower Coffee Bar, Hogarth Place, Earl's Court; Shepherd's Market; a flat in Prince Albert Court, northwest London; Farringdon House; Crockford's casino in Carlton House Terrace; the National Portrait Gallery; offices in the Courtauld Institute of Art; and, of course, as you say, Sotheby's in New Bond Street. This filming took place in the summer of 1968. You received letters of complaint from the Royal Borough of

Kensington and Chelsea regarding filming in Addison Road – your trucks caused a certain amount of disruption! But you did receive a letter from the Ministry of Public Building and Works saying that they had no problem with you filming in and around Hyde Park and St James's Park in June '68.

So then you went to work with Puttnam and Goodtimes. You filmed *Melody* in London, too?

GL: David (Puttnam) called me up one day and said 'I'd like to meet you. I want to make a film. I don't know anything about it' so he came up to the Roundhouse where I was doing *Hamlet* with Tony Richardson, and he took me across the road to the café where we ate egg and chips.

PN: You remember what you had for lunch!

GL: That was it. He bought me egg and chips and a cup of bad tea in a greasy spoon on Camden High Road, and said 'I've got the money, I've got the people, I've got the script, and I don't know what to do'. And I said to him 'all the hard work is done. The rest is easy. All you have to do is make it, and there are plenty of people like me who can do it' and he said 'well, do you want to do it?' and I said 'yes I'd love to do it'. So when I finished *Hamlet* I went to work for Goodtimes setting up *Melody*. *Melody* had one interesting aspect to it. A month before we were going to shoot in Lambeth, the construction manager rang me up and said 'there is an abandoned school which is the St Paul's School, which is empty in Olympia'. And we just upped and moved the entire production into a ready-made school building. And that was perfect. And after it worked extremely well because most of it was done in a confined area. We were able to control it. It was called Collett Gardens, near Hammersmith and Olympia. It worked really well. And then we went out to Waterloo and did some stuff in the grounds and things like that. That would have been a lot harder production if that particular thing hadn't turned up. And we moved in there, and it all worked extremely well.

PN: How about *Babylon*? That's a terrific London film. What was it like working on location in the late 1970s?

GL: *Babylon* was fairly restricted. I mean, we didn't have to have Piccadilly Circus. We didn't have to have Northumberland Avenue. We didn't have a huge car chase that we had to deal with. We had a duty cop with us throughout all the external shooting. The interesting thing about the particular moment we were making *Babylon* was that there was a lot of money being pushed into trying to regenerate that whole area. Therefore there was a tremendous amount of community support, which enabled us not to be restricted. A lot of what you have to do, if people don't interfere with it, you just get on with it and it gets done and it's over.

Babylon is, in a cultural sense, a creative sense, an attempt to tell it as it was; to actually show onscreen with language, with lighting, with text, with locations, an actual segment of society which had a separate life; enjoys a separate life; fundamentally didn't interfere with the rest of society until the rest of society started to interfere with it. The making of it was absolutely horrendously great fun – it was awful and yet absolutely amazing. The crew was hand picked because they were going into a community which was completely alien to all the people who worked on the film. The black community totally accepted us. I think that that's largely because Franco (Rosso) and Martin (Stellman) had a relationship with the black community where they were trusted. Therefore they were allowed to be to be a part of it in a way that other people might not.

PN: What was the response of the community to what you were doing?

GL: I think the black community understood from Franco and Martin that the people who were involved in making this film were genuine people – they weren't there to actually send up the blacks or to create a problem with this section or that section of the community. Except for the actors, who are named on the screen - of which there are probably twenty - all the crowds and the ancillary people, all the people around it are real. It's all real location, all shot in the real place.

PN: South London

GL: Yes, south London. We took over the second floor of the Methodist Mission in Deptford High Street. They were very please to have us because we were paying them rent and they were very broke. We used this as our production base. And then there were various black community projects that were going on which enabled us to draw on potential actors and bit part players and people like that. The band Aswad came complete.

Brinsley Ford was a child actor. It was very tight budget. It was held very close to the budget.

PN: The budget was approximately £350,000.

GL: That's right. I don't think under modern Health and Safety laws we would have been able to do what we did because we were working in halls without licenses and all sorts of things like that, but that was just the nature of filmmaking then. Now, you know, you have to have all kinds of things. It wasn't that we were uninsured or we did anything illegal. But now, rightly or wrongly, that kind of filmmaking is not really practical because of the constraints that are added by the new legislation. Shooting in the real community, that real community is poor, that real community lives in that condition. Deptford is a deprived area – it certainly was then – I don't know what it's like now - so you just wouldn't have gotten away with it. We shot in the West End without permissions. The whole ability to do this kind of filming of almost reportage photography of shooting in the West End, to a large extent was down to Chris's (Menges) ability to just light with a single handlight, and to give it a quality which looks very real. He built a whole range of lights for the garage where they store their equipment with incandescent fluorescent tubes to give it a cold light effect. His contribution was really extraordinary. Franco handled the actors extremely well. A guy called Tom Schwalm cut it, but largely under Franco's direction. And I think Franco shot it within his own idea of editing, so there wasn't a lot of choice within it. I mean, that's the old fashioned way. You can't mess it about if you haven't got the material (laughs).

We were incredibly lucky with the weather. We were very lucky with almost everything. Overall it was actually a very, very good shoot.

PN: How well planned was the shoot? Was it always important for you to have everything pre-arranged?

GL: In the structuring of the film, obviously you break it down and you schedule it as best you can within the confines of continuity, within the confines of money available, within the confines of locations and things like that. And you then budget to that requirement. If you get serious changes it can throw the whole thing out. Also when you are working in the street you have the advantage of being slightly flexible. If you are working to a studio situation and you have to go out and come in, it is much more difficult because you are a compact unit which is mobile. So if the weather changes you always try and get weather cover so that you have somewhere to go. You know, if the light goes… It's a fixed moveable feast. But luckily in this particular production there wasn't any real need for that.

PN: Was it all shot on location?

GL: There was no studio shoot at all. We did dress and convert - the pool hall scene is done in a disused shop. The location guy got the permission. We went in, dressed it. It was convenient not to move. We had an exterior and an interior.

PN: Was it was still much cheaper than using a studio, dressing this shop?

GL: Yes, within the confines, if you can do it. I mean, there is a point where, if you can rid yourself of your tail…look, in the studio you don't need transport, you don't pay for meals, you don't carry a whole range of things which you would carry on location. So you don't have a whole range of costs. But you have the studio costs. So there's a balance. It used to be that you had three days work on a set, which was a simple set or a location, it was almost cheaper to build it. But it was only cheaper to build it if you can divest yourself of your tail. If you can get rid of the trucks, if you can get rid of the catering, if you can get rid of all that stuff, then you are not spending that money. But if you stick in a studio shot in a location shot, then it is a matter of cost. I mean, a simple dirty old room which has a pool table in it – it's cheaper to do it on location and build it. Also, you could put your sets near to your locations, so if the weather changed you could go inside – what is called 'weather cover'. You would set up your schedule on a weekly basis, with potential weather cover days set at the end of the week, so if on Monday it rains you call Friday's work. And on the call sheet you will 'stand by' the actors for Friday as well as calling the actors for Monday – so you can shift it. And if on Tuesday it rains you go to Friday's work – and so it goes – and if you get to the end of the week, you may move your weather cover into the next week and keep shooting while the weather holds. It's a mental trick. Those big crowd scenes, the toasting scenes, took an enormous amount of time, because you are dealing with a huge crowd of very relaxed, very stoned people. They don't want no aggro; they are here to hear the music; they are nice people. But they are not easy to move around. They are not like professional crowds. Overall the crowd was really good, too. They responded well to it. Mikey Dread was an important pillar of the community in the Rasta community, and the Rasta community gave the production the OK. So we have several scenes in Rasta churches where Blue (Brinsley Forde) walks in – he has sort of lost his way in life – and walks in to a Rasta service. All that is real people doing the real thing. In those respects, visually it is quite amazing.

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[1] The London Film Commission (LFC) became Film London along with the London Film Video and Development Agency (LFVDA). Film London was founded in March 2003 under the aegis of the UK Film Council and the London Development Agency. Sandy Lieberson was appointed Chairman of the Board. See www.filmlondon.org

[2] Kastner – Ladd – Kanter Productions. While financed by Nat Cohen at Anglo-EMI, *Fear is the Key*, starring Barry Newman and Suzy Kendall, was shot mostly on location in the southern United States. But the large house which features in the film was shot in Surrey.