

A very English film based on *Theatre*, a short story by W. Somerset Maugham, has been realised in Hungary

An Anglo-Hungarian Affair



DP Lajos Koltai on the set of *Being Julia*

PHOTO: ALEX DUKAY

Described in its Cannes press release, as "a delicious tale of amorous folly and revenge", **Being Julia** is the work of Hungarian director-cinematographer duo, Istvan Szabo and Lajos Koltai. DP Lajos Koltai believes there is more than entertainment to the film, "Everybody says it's a comedy but actually I don't think it is. It's a very important film because it's about getting over a certain age – running out of time. And we are both a little bit over this certain age, so we just had to do it."

The pair, whose working relationship goes back over 24 years, now rarely film without each other. They work "the traditional Hungarian way" – Koltai lights and operates, while Szabo disavows video assist in favour of getting up close and

personal and concentrating on the actors. Koltai says, "Istvan knows I really see through the camera. He is not sitting at the video – he is with me and he sees so many things all around."

Koltai has chosen to make the style warm, elegant and simple. Warm because, "we are dealing with human beings and they are nice people and we want to like them"; elegant because, "of the period which is 1938 in London and everything around this lady is very elegant" and simple because, "the images and dialogue are strong and you don't need to complicate this."

Koltai bases his lighting style on light from 'real' sources. Working with designer Luciana Arrighi, he had the lights built into the sets so, "It never looks artificial because it is coming from the real source. I let real life give me the source and then I just add to nature." In the big scenes shot in a theatre in Budapest, he worked with the theatre gaffer and theatre lights and supplemented the lighting on the audience.

For stock, Koltai used his tried and tested combination of 5279 for interiors and 5274 for exteriors, "I used this for **The Emperor's Club** – I love this combination."

Koltai has strong feelings about keeping very close to lead Annette Bening who plays Julia and who appears in almost every scene. He shot most of the film with a Cooke 18-100mm T3.0 zoom lens and created a special lamp for her for extreme close-ups; "It was just bulbs and white paper. We carried it everywhere just for her."

More than 85% of the film is interiors, a mix of locations and studio. Koltai laughs as he remembers being a new boy in the industry 35 years ago, "I hated the studio because it was so artificial and I always wanted to go to the real location and real life. Now I have learned I can use the stage like the original location. If you have a good set and great designer, you can do everything." With a 54-day shoot and a lot of dialogue, the interior-heavy plot enabled the production to stay within its tight schedule.

The last two weeks of the shoot were spent in the UK; in London for locations around the theatres and on Jersey for seaside exteriors. Koltai explains, "Everything before was close, close, close – I don't think it's claustrophobic – but we went outside just to have some breath in the movie. There we tried to make it very wide, wide, wide, to see the environment – to get a feeling of the air." ■

Bottom Right:
Jeremy Irons (left) and
Istvan Szabo
Below: Annette Bening
as Julia

