

## Jacques Madvo: Biographical Sketch by Alexandra Jokinen

Jacques Madvo was Armenian<sup>1</sup>. He was born in 1924 (in what today is considered Turkey, but was then part of Armenia) into the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide (1915-1921) and Turkish-Armenian War (1920). His mother died giving birth to him and, shortly after that, his father was killed, leaving Madvo orphaned at a very young age. After his father's death, he went to live with his aunt (his father's sister) in Beirut, Lebanon. There, he grew up believing his aunt was his mother and that her two daughters (his cousins), were his sisters. His aunt then died when he was 12 years old.

In his early 20s, Madvo studied medicine at the *Sorbonne* in Paris, France. His education was interrupted, however, when he became ill and was sent to The Black Forest, a mountainous region in southwest Germany bordering France, for recovery. There, he discovered a passion for the arts. Inspired by the beauty of The Black Forest, Madvo began taking pictures of the landscape with his camera.

When he returned to Paris, he did not continue studying medicine. Instead, he enrolled at *Le Conservatoire National de Musique de Paris* and studied Opera and Opera Staging from 1950 to 1953. Throughout his years there, he founded the *Groupe Lyrique et Choreographique de l'Université de Paris* and staged Christoph Willibald's *Orfeo ed Euridice*, an opera-ballet based on the Greek myth of Orpheus, at the Sorbonne amphitheatre.

Following his education in Opera and Opera staging, Madvo decided to study filmmaking at *L'Institut des hautes études cinématographiques* (IDHEC) also in Paris, from 1953 to 1956. There, he received training in Movie Direction, Production and Editing. He directed his first film, *La Petite Fille Aux Allumettes* (*The Little Match Girl*), a film based on the short story by Danish poet and author Hans Christian Andersen.

At this time, Madvo met his first wife, Jacqueline, who was from France. The couple married and two children, Denis and Bruno. After graduating l'ICHEC, Madvo got a job as Director in Movie Production with the United Nations (UNRWA) in Beirut. He worked there from 1956 to 1960, before taking a one-year paid absence to attend a refresher course in movie production and direction of photography, again, in Paris. With the training, he obtained a diploma offered by the French Government.

In that year, Madvo directed and photographed four documentary films, *Fontaines de Paris*, *Vitraux de Paris*, *Paris: le Passé et le Présent*, and *London at Christmas*. He returned to the United Nations in 1962 as Director and Cameraman.

Between 1965 and 1968, Madvo was engaged as a Consultant in Cinematography for Arabian American Oil Co. (or Aramco), a state-owned oil company of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia where he produced an average of one documentary film per week for the Aramco TV Station. During this time, he lived and worked in Saudi Arabia. Then, in 1968, he directed and produced two documentary films for the Ministry of Information in Lebanon.

The following year was productive for Madvo. For the first half of 1969, he worked as Cinematographer for Walt Disney Productions on the film *A Boy from Bahrain*, a two-hour feature about "the adventures of a young lad who is lost at sea and falls into the hands of smugglers making off with stolen treasure."<sup>2</sup> Later that year, he directed, photographed and produced *Liban Pays de Soleil*, a film for the Ministry of Tourism in Lebanon. He also founded his own production company, World Film Productions, and started working again as a Director and Cameraman on a contract basis for the United Nations.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise referenced, the details of Madvo's life were gathered from Madvo's resume, as well as interviews conducted with Madvo's son, Denis, and widow, Hermine. The conversations took place in March of 2015.

<sup>2</sup> "Boy from Bahrain," *Awali Magazine*, October 1969, p. 12.

In 1971, Madvo directed, photographed and produced *Dispersés Par le Vent (Blown by the Wind)*, a compilation of still images documenting Palestinian children seeking refuge in Lebanon. It was officially selected for the Venice Film Festival, and won awards at the Leipzig Film Festival, as well as in Czechoslovakia and Tunis.

In that same year, Madvo's wife died in a tragic car accident. After her death, Madvo and his sons came to Canada to be with family. Before permanently settling, he returned to Beirut to organize the *Festival International du Film de l'Ensemble Francophone (FIFEF)* in 1973. He officially transferred his company, World Film Productions, to Toronto in 1974.

From 1974 to 1983, Madvo directed and coproduced 19 half-hour documentaries about various countries for the television series *Countries and People (Pays et Peuples)* in both official languages for the Ontario Educational Communications Authority (now TVOntario) under producer Leopold Lacroix. The series deals with the geography, history, sociology, ethnography, and economy as well as with the traditions, customs, and cultures of various countries in the world, among them: Kuwait, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Iran, Israel, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Morocco, Greece, Yugoslavia, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Brazil, Venezuela, Mexico, and Vatican City. The countries of China, Japan, Vietnam, and Thailand were filmed for the series but these documentaries were never completed. In addition, Madvo produced a short five-minute film called *Lebanon at War*, which documents civil war in Lebanon between Christians and Muslims.

Outside of working with TVO, Madvo made two independent documentary films about Canada, *Vivre en Paix (Living in Peace; 1974)* and *Canada (1977)*. *Vivre en Paix* is a compilation film (similar to *Dispersés Par le Vent*) made up of still photographs of Canadian children and pictures they painted. *Canada* is a more traditional documentary that explores the country, highlighting tourist attractions in each of the nation's provinces.

In 1979, Madvo met his second wife, Hermine, who was Romanian and had immigrated to Canada in 1953. They travelled together, capturing images around the world for his *Countries and Peoples* films, as well as for pleasure. His unfinished documentary, *The Danube*, documents subsequent summers spent together travelling down the Danube River. The idea was to go from one end to the other, from the Black Forest to the Black Sea. They made it as far as Budapest.

In 1983, after leaving TVO due to a change in management, Madvo directed, photographed, and edited a half-hour documentary film, *800 Years of Arab Presence in Spain*, financed by R. H. Sanbar Group, a British-based group of companies with a primary emphasis on international real estate development. He then began researching and filming for his feature *Orpheus and Eurydice*, which he produced with a grant from the Canadian Council for the Arts and completed in 1984. This was Madvo's first and only feature, based on the stage production he put on as a student at Le Conservatoire National de Musique de Paris. Part of the film was shot in High Park in Toronto, and the rest was constructed with assorted footage he had captured around the world.<sup>3</sup>

Besides the above-mentioned productions, Madvo shot home movies. These films document everyday life and take place in domestic settings in Lebanon and, later, Toronto, as well as on trips abroad. Unlike most amateur filmmakers, Madvo edited his home movies to be watched by extended audiences. The last film Madvo worked on before his death, *La Mer*, he considered to be his masterpiece. It consists of shots of the sea, captured over several years, set to the music of Claude Debussy's orchestral composition, *La Mer*. The film was in the last stages of post-production when he stopped working on it, and it was never finished.

Madvo died in 2014. Surviving family remembers him as a vibrant, strong-willed man and passionate filmmaker dedicated to his craft.

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<sup>3</sup> Madvo always had a vision to turn Gluck's play into a film. While travelling the world, Madvo would carry two 16mm Bolex cameras: one for filming his *Countries and People* series and one to shoot footage for his future film, *Orpheus and Eurydice*. These images were mostly of art and architecture. There is one scene in *Orpheus and Eurydice* of a sculpture lamenting in Paris, for example, that he uses to tell the story of Eurydice dying.