THE TALENTED MR. SHEYBAL

Posted on May 30, 2020 by Keghart

Category: Opinions

By **Jirair Tutunjian**, Toronto, 30 May 2020

It's almost unheard of that a 60-second cameo would lead to an international career featuring forty-five movies, and countless television, radio and theatre roles. Yet that's what happened to a relatively unknown Polish actor who had recently immigrated to Britain.

The cameo didn't even have a single line. The actor was in his forties. He had sinister eyes. He did nothing heroic. He had no Beretta or blonde in his lap. What he had were talent and presence.

In the brief scene, he played a villainous Eastern European chess grandmaster that, after toying with his Canadian antagonist, put a quick end to the match with an arrogant and contemptuous look. It was the dramatic first scene of "From Russia with Love" (1963), arguably the best James Bond movie.

But despite the impression he had made around the world, people couldn't remember his name.

Sheybal… Vladek Sheybal. That was his name. People in the London entertainment scene knew Sheybal had been brilliant in "Kanal", directed a few years earlier by Andrzej Wajda, the famed Polish director. To this day, reference books identity him as a Polish actor.

But despite his name, Vladek Sheybal was not Polish.

"I don't have a drop of Polish blood. I am mostly Armenian, and a bit of Scotch , a little bit of Austrian," wrote Sheybal in his memoirs ("The Eyes and the Voice"). He was born near Lodz, Poland in 1923 and grew up in that country.

During the Second World War, he joined the partisans and was twice arrested and sent to German concentration camps--escaping both times.

After the war, he attended drama school in Warsaw where he later taught acting. He also became well-known in Poland as a brilliant actor.

"I do have the strong looks of an Armenian, and rather penetrating eyes," said Sheybal who was born into a multilingual family where everyone spoke Armenian, Polish, and German.

He said his grandmothers were Armenian and that most of his blood was Armenian. The last name of one of his grandmothers was Zadourian. His father was a professor at the Fine Arts Academy in Warsaw.

The family was proud of a great uncle who was the archbishop at the Armenian Cathedral of Lviv, Ukraine. When Sheybal was seven, the archbishop baptized him in the cathedral, although the boy had already been baptized at an Armenian Catholic church. Sheybal said the archbishop had baptized him as Armenian.

He was deeply impressed by Lviv's Armenian Cathedral which was decorated in gold and crystal candelabra. They gave the ceremony an eastern flavor, he said more than fifty years later.

He was also impressed by the church's songs. They sounded as if hundreds of harmonicas were playing at the same time, he said. "It was deeply penetrating and moving… it was the same kind of beautiful songs that I heard years later in Jerusalem sung by an Armenian choir," he recalled.

The biggest Armenian influence was his Aunt Wanda who told him fascinating stories about Armenian culture and language. She told the boy that the Armenian language was the oldest in the world. She taught him Armenian and tried to teach how to write in Armenian. The alphabet is beautiful like no other writing in the world. It has its own movements, its dances, and songs, explained Sheybal.

He speculated that it was the writing which produced the metallic tone in Armenian religious singing. Although he loved the Armenian language, he didn't learn to write or read because "it is too difficult."

Many decades after the aunt's tutorials, Sheybal's knowledge of Armenian history was sketchy. He thought Armenians never had a country and lived mostly in Russia ("Eryvan, where some of my family live, and I helped them a lot during an earthquake") Ukraine, Persia or Turkey.

Sheybal had an idyllic childhood. He remembered many vacations with his extended family on their estates near the Romanian border. They were wealthy and had big country houses, with servants, parks and endless sumptuous lunches. His aunts were covered in diamond and emerald jewelry.

He was frightened by the strong Eastern looks of his kin. He said Armenians have equine nose**s**. He meant aquiline. Armenians also have large, dark and emerald green eyes, according him.

A turning point in Sheybal's career was starring in "Kanal" (1957). A few years later, while he was doing menial work in England, he accidentally met two university students who had seen the movie the previous evening and had recognized him. They introduced him to the celebrated Prof. Neville Coghill who offered him entry to Oxford University where he studied and taught drama before launching his acting and directorial career.

Another turning point in his life was meeting a young Scottish actor who was often unemployed but was destined to become a superstar. Sheybal was directing Australian actress Diane Cilento in a London theatre when he met Cilento's boyfriend. His name was Sean Connery, an unemployed actor who was forever contacting agents and casting directors. The three of them met frequently to talk about their careers and drink. Sheybal had no doubt Connery would become a star. He offered to introduce Connery to casting directors, but the future James Bond had already contacted the same people.

A few years later, Sheybal was offered the role of the villainous chess champion In "From Russia with Love." Unimpressed by the screenplay and his cameo role, he rejected the offer. But soon after he changed his mind when an angry Connery phoned and insisted that he accept the role. Connery said the role would give him an international film status. Connery was particularly angry because he had

suggested to producers Saltzman and Broccoli to hire Sheybal for the role of chess grandmaster Kronsteen. Sheybal phoned his agent and accepted the role.

In the next thirty years, Sheybal appeared in forty-five movies, including "Women in Love," "Billion Dollar Man," "The Boy Friend," "Casino Royale," and "The Last Valley." He directed plays and appeared in such TV shows as "Danger Man," "The Saint," and "The Baron." He portrayed Frederich Nietzsche and Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the first president of Pakistan. He appeared in films in Germany, France, and Italy and acted with Marcello Mastroianni, Michael Caine, Roger Moore, Omar Sharif…and with Connery in "The Wind and the Lion" where he played (as unlikely as it sounds) Connery's brother.

Another actor who had a great impact on his career was Bette Davis who gave him hard-earned Hollywood advice. She told Sheybal: "Honey, you have no chance whatsoever. You are ugly—everything is against you. I think that you should start playing threatening things and everybody will remember you." When Sheybal asked how he would play a heavy, Davis advised that he narrow his eyes, lower his voice, and make long pauses.

Sheybal did and became an all-purpose villain in demand everywhere.

The villainous roles made Sheybal financially secure and offered the opportunity to pursue his other interests: theatre directing, composing, screenwriting, painting, and singing.

Vladek Sheybal died of an aortic aneurism in 1992. He was sixty-nine. He was buried in London.

Comments

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I thought Vladek Sheybal was brilliant, with Glenda Jackson, in “Women in Love”. Also tv drama “Deep Blue Swa” based on Terence Rattigan’s play. He once said it was his best work. He also said that he was a citizen of the World, not just Polish or British, which I thought was wonderful