

OBITUARY

Martin Lavut: Eccentric filmmaker made people open up

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Martin Lavut.

The house in Toronto's Cabbagetown neighbourhood is more akin to an eclectic art gallery than the family home it very much is. Decorated with photography, pop art, folk art, sculpture, paintings, posters and drawings, the house where Martin and Karen Lavut raised their family and lived for almost 40 years almost begs description. Karen Lavut calls it "an extension of his [Martin's] mind."

Martin Lavut died at home on Jan. 26 from a neurodegenerative disease. He was 81. Through his distinguished and diverse career, Mr. Lavut was an award-winning film director of dramas and documentaries, an actor, comic, voice-over performer, writer and advertising man. Montreal-based film producer Arnie Gelbart said Mr. Lavut was "an outsized Canadian personality who created a significant body of work that will be remembered for its pertinence and its skill."

Martin Lavut was born in Montreal on Dec. 18, 1934. His businessman father, Louis, was part of a Jewish family from Odessa that immigrated to Canada following the Kishinev pogroms of 1903 and 1905. His mother, Belle, came from Kingston, Ont. Though Mr. Lavut was not religious, his background was vital to his identity, his work and his humour. A former girlfriend and subsequent friend of the Lavut family, the now-retired psychotherapist Suki Falkner, said, "His Jewishness was very important to him. It was the context of his childhood. He was always aware of the dangers in any authoritarianism." Mr. Lavut's study has several shelves devoted to the history of the Second World War and the Holocaust.

Martin attended primary and secondary school in Montreal. As a young man, he belonged to a circle of Montreal artists that included the pioneering filmmaker Arthur Lipsett and poet and musician Leonard Cohen. After training as an actor at the Pasadena Playhouse in California and working as a comic in St. Louis and Chicago, Mr. Lavut settled in Toronto in the early 1960s, working as a generator of ideas with the Toronto office of Walter J. Thompson advertising. He became a frequent contributor to CBC, first as an actor and then as a prolific director. His friend, the acclaimed New York-based artist Anton Van Dalen, who worked at the CBC in the 1960s, said Mr. Lavut thrived in a network that was then "a haven for ideas and ambitions" and for people such as Mr. Lavut who were determined to make television that did not look like the American commercial variety.

Mr. Lavut made impressive and varied contributions to the CBC for a quarter of a century. As he moved away from acting, he produced a tremendous amount of documentary

programming, beginning with a 1965 profile of Leni Riefenstahl, Adolf Hitler's favourite filmmaker. Films such as *Orillia*, *Our Town* featured regular people recounting their impressions and ideas often without the interference of narration. Mr. Gelbart said Mr. Lavut "was doing Errol Morris films before Errol Morris did." Cinematographer Rudi Kovanic, who often worked with Mr. Lavut, praised his "completely unique interviewing style. He was very disarming. ... He wasn't threatening. He would smile gently, ask very personal questions and just listen. There would be long silences and then people would open up and say the most amazing things."

Mr. Lavut also contributed to series such as *The Nature of Things* and *Adrienne Clarkson Presents*. He directed drama for series such as *For The Record* and *Sidestreet*. He directed a historical drama about the early Canadian feminist Emily Murphy. He did children's TV with *Fraggle Rock*. He returned to acting for an episode of Louis Del Grande's zany detective series *Seeing Things*. He also wrote *Jenny*, an American drama starring Marlo Thomas and Alan Alda.

In the 1980s, Mr. Lavut directed a string of successful CBC movies of the week including *War Brides*, which won the Anik Award as best CBC TV drama; *Charlie Grant's War*, starring R.H. Thomson, about a Canadian rescuing Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe; and *The Marriage Bed*, starring Linda Griffiths, which won the Gemini Award for best direction in 1987. Actors were devoted to him despite his idiosyncratic style. In a Michael Amo documentary about Mr. Lavut, Ms. Griffiths said, "There's a terrible syndrome of normal that happens to creative types here and he has quite consciously fought that." While praising Mr. Lavut's directorial style, Mr. Thomson acknowledged his, "tangential, rather non-linear way of doing things."

Mr. Lavut's luck in drama began to fade with *Palais Royale* (1988), an ill-fated project starring Kim Cattrall that did not meet his creative aspirations. Mr. Gelbart said the project "set him back." Cinematographer Rudi Kovonic said, "He was eccentric and difficult in some respects. He needed someone to organize him. That became a difficulty for him in the drama world as budgets tightened."

In his final films, Mr. Lavut returned successfully to documentary. *Remembering Arthur* (2006) is a profoundly intimate and sometimes disturbing biographical contemplation of filmmaker Arthur Lipsett, Mr. Lavut's friend, whose mental illness led to his suicide in 1986. The film is an astonishingly frank depiction of Mr. Lipsett's decline. Karen Lavut said,

"Madness didn't make him [Martin] uncomfortable." Toronto media producer Chris Lowry, who apprenticed as a director with Mr. Lavut and subsequently befriended him, said, "Arthur's descent affected the people who knew him deeply. It changed them for life. Remembering Arthur is like an exorcism and an homage dealing with unresolved feelings and channelling them into a story."

Mr. Lavut's final film was *Disfarmer: A Portrait of America* (2010) about Michael Disfarmer, the Arkansas photographer whose deceptively simple and totally arresting portraits have become collectors' items throughout the world. The Lavut home features several Disfarmer prints and the film project drew together several threads of Mr. Lavut's own career as a collector and documentarian. Mr. Lowry said the documentary's subject and its director shared an interest in portraying, "ordinary people represented without judgment, with compassion, respect and fellowship, recognizing the entire spectrum of humanity."

In addition to his professional pursuits, Martin Lavut was an inveterate walker, cyclist and collector of books, art, watches, clocks and other diverse objects. Among his curiosities was a fascination with Disney characters, particularly Mickey Mouse, which appears in various representations throughout the house and on a pendant that Mr. Lavut frequently wore. His widow, Karen, described his sense of style as, "a cross between Groucho Marx and Mickey Mouse." Dennis Mohr who produced Mr. Lavut's final films called him, "an intellectual, and at the same time a complete goofball."

A father and grandfather, Mr. Lavut was devoted to his family. Ms. Falkner said that despite all his eccentricity, Mr. Lavut, "was quite a stable, healthy and reliable person." Among the art and artifacts in his Cabbagetown home, one finds Martin Lavut's accomplished and intricately detailed drawings, some of which feature a furtive Mickey Mouse. Mr. Lavut made drawing his primary art form in his final years. In 2012, his eldest daughter, Kate, a Montreal-based fiction and comic writer, published *Beware of The Blind Man*, a collection of his drawings. The family is hoping to mount an exhibition of his art. Similarly, his film colleagues hope to see retrospectives of his prodigious cinematic output.

Martin Lavut leaves his widow, Karen Lavut; daughters, Kate Lavut and Marinda Solari; and grandchildren, Simone and Maelle.