

SESSION FOUR



North of the Border: *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*

Feature film, 1974

Screenplay: Mordecai Richler

Adaptation: Lionel Chetwynd

Director: Ted Kotcheff

Duddy: Richard Dreyfuss

Max: Jack Warden

Uncle Benjy: Joseph Wiseman

Lennie: Allan Rosenthal

Zeyda: Zvee Scooler

Yvette: Micheline Lanctôt

Virgil: Randy Quaid

Farber: Joe Silver

Friar: Denholm Elliott

Dingleman: Henry Ramer

Length: 121 minutes

This film detours to show some other North Americans – “real Canadians” and “real Jews.”

The film, set in Montreal and based on Mordecai Richler’s 1959 novel, presented North American audiences with depictions of Jewish men that were uncomfortably familiar to many Jews on both sides of the border.

Duddy Kravitz, played unforgettably by Richard Dreyfuss, lives in a crowded urban immigrant neighborhood. He sees around him two kinds of men: those who hustle, become successful, and are respected because of their success regardless of how they achieved it; and those who miss out, who struggle and are regarded as “losers” regardless of their human virtues. To the young man, the lessons are plain. Respect, as well as success, comes only to those who take risks, plunge ahead, and have the financial skills and intestinal fortitude to follow their own visions.

Like many other American Jewish films, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* has several early pivotal scenes in a Jewish resort, where Duddy is subjected to the brusque aggressiveness of wealthy Jews. Rather than resenting their behavior, he regards them as role models and decides that some day he will be one of them and have possessions and power like them. He wants to be a “somebody.”

Dreyfuss’s Duddy is a complicated character, with more capacity for goodness than he believes himself to have or allows himself to pursue. Driven toward gaining wealth, he pushes himself to be callous enough to achieve that goal. With the intensity of a man with a dream to fulfill, Duddy waits tables, drives a taxi, deals in pinball machines, and sets up a company to make films about weddings and Bar Mitzvahs. The aim of his success, he

believes, will be to earn his father's love and respect and provide his grandfather with a better life. His grandfather loves to plant things in the earth; Duddy plans to acquire for him a beautiful, bucolic setting near a lake, where he can plant in peace and joy.

Tense, manic, giggling, baby-faced Duddy is an unexpected charmer, scratching his chest compulsively but winning vulnerable people over with his irresistible warmth. He gains the love of Yvette, a French Canadian woman with a solid moral sense, who has been working as a chambermaid but has accounting and other business skills, and he wins the undying loyalty of Virgil, a young epileptic. Neither of them is Jewish, and it is probably not coincidental that, despite his genuine affection for them, Duddy exploits them repeatedly.

The neighborhood where Duddy grew up is inhabited largely by Jews. With one or two notable exceptions, they are not unrelievedly evil persons, but, except for his lovable grandfather, they are severely flawed human beings. In contrast with the morally crippled Jews of Duddy's world, the two blond gentiles stand out as financially poor but morally pure.

In Depth: What Price Success

The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz is a dazzling, picaresque film about an inexperienced young man coming of age, acquiring knowledge about and making his way in the world. Like many twentieth-century versions of the earlier "young man from the provinces" plot, this young man comes from an urban ghetto of poor immigrants struggling to find a better life. The successes of newly rich former ghetto dwellers glitter before them, inspiring envy and ambition. Duddy and the members of the community in which he grew up are outsiders to Canadian society because they are poor, Jewish, and from other countries. The younger generation craves access to the mainstream, where they envision wealth and its accoutrements. Duddy wants to take the fast track, and he's willing to do whatever it takes to get there.

Duddy among Men

Duddy has a wide spectrum of male role models: his pious

Zeyde: *A man without land is nothing. Remember that.*

Irwin: *Look at him. He's got three more tables than anyone else in the dining room and he never stops. It's cretinous. It's little money grubbers like Kravitz who cause antisemitism, you know.*

and loving *zeyde* (grandfather), the only man in the family who likes and understands Duddy; his studious brother Lenny, the favored son, who is being sent to medical school through the energies of his father and the gifts of his uncle; his wealthy uncle Benjy, a rigid, repressed factory owner who disdains Duddy but is devoted to his father and to Lenny; and his father, Max, who drives a taxi, gambles, and pimps in order to raise money for Lenny but thinks Duddy will never amount to much. In addition, the men in the family speak often of Jerry Dingleman, the “boy wonder,” whose wealth and power are the subject of awe in the ghetto. Later, Duddy meets a cigar-smoking scrap-metal magnate, Mr. Farber, a straight-shooter who, like his grandfather, takes a genuine liking to the jumpy, impulsive, profoundly insecure young man.

Each of the young Kravitz brothers absorbs the lesson of who gets ahead in a different way. Lenny is full of scorn for his family and for Jews in general, and speaks of and to them with open derision. He sees medical school as his ticket into gentile society. Duddy, on the other hand, admires the entrepreneurship of successful Jews and takes them to heart as a map for his own life. With boundless energy, he dreams and schemes.

A Special Bond

Zvee Scooler, frequently seen in films in the role of Old World rabbi (as in *Fiddler on the Roof*) or the wise old Jew, is very appealing as Duddy's *zeyde*. The grandfather tries to provide a moral compass for Duddy. He tells Duddy that his Uncle Benjy, with all his money, is a nonentity, and his father Max is beneath contempt. Then the grandfather switches gears without Duddy realizing it and talks about the importance of a man owning his own piece of land. “Zeyde, if I got lots of land, would I be somebody then?” Duddy asks, with more sincerity than even his grandfather realizes. “Oh, Duddy, you conniver,” he says in Yiddish, affectionately pinching his grandson's cheek. Duddy absorbs the wrong lesson. He yearns for land and being “somebody,” rather than for the integrity and moral fortitude that are his grandfather's real strengths.

The grandfather's words mean the world to Duddy, because the old man's little gifts and caresses are the

only affection that Duddy, orphaned of his mother at six years old, receives in his rough-and-tumble, all-male environment.

Money Makes the World Go Round

Duddy is repeatedly humiliated by the wealthy, snobbish Jewish medical students working alongside him at the summer resort. Their contempt for him as an inferior lower-class Jew adds fuel to the fire of his ambition. But, as is typical of Duddy, he understands their contempt as based purely on money; he does not comprehend that their contempt is based partially on his lower-class attitudes and manners.

It is easier for Duddy to understand Mr. Farber, a guest at the resort, who operates with a moral compass very similar to his own: Do what you need to do and pay what you need to pay to win; be loyal only to your family and the very few friends you really care about. “I’m a real comer,” Duddy says about himself, and that is what he would truly like to be. Duddy, however, lacks Farber’s steady hand and practicality, his patience, his humanizing common sense.

But Farber has his dirty secrets. He explains that life confronts every successful man with “accidents” – tragedies that occur sometimes when one takes a risk at someone else’s expense. A successful man should never take the punishment for causing these tragedies, Farber suggests, but should instead outwit fate with “payments under the table, lies. You don’t build a big house and send your wife to Florida in the winter from driving a cab.” Farber admits to Duddy that he once outwitted such an “accident” by maneuvering the legal system so his partner would go to prison instead of him. Farber justifies his actions by equating all of the “white men” – the non-Jews – with Nazis and other persecutors of the Jews.

Permeating *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* is the theme of antisemitism, an antisemitism that is closely tied to perceived Jewish avarice. Yvette tells Duddy in one breath that the farmers will not sell land to him because he is a Jew, and with the next breath is mortally offended because (like a Jew) he tries to pay her for her kindness. Non-Jewish hatred for putative Jewish fondness for money

Duddy (to Max): *Why are you always afraid that I'm going to embarrass you?*

is the air that Duddy and the other Jews breathe. At one point, a drunken filmmaker speaks derisively of the “crass commercialism” of Bar Mitzvahs he has seen, and makes a Bar Mitzvah film that connects ritual circumcision and the Bar Mitzvah initiation rite of having a young man read from the Torah with masked African tribal dancers and ritual scarification. Later, too drunk to make a another film, he castigates himself, “Shame on me. I’ve sold my soul to the Hebrews.”

For many years, the semilegal and at times illegal activities of Jews “on the make” was a favorite subject of American Jewish novelists and filmmakers. Jerome Weidman wrote an extensive series of plays and novels on the subject, beginning with *I Can Get It for You Wholesale*. A 1950s film, *The Trouble with Harry*, portrayed a rather unsuccessful Jewish racketeer trying to cope with his lower-middle-class family. Philip Roth created a series of minor characters, such as *Goodbye, Columbus*’s plumbing magnate, Mr. Patimkin, who could have been Mr. Farber’s brother. More recently, films such as *Once Upon a Time in America*, *Billy Bathgate*, and *Bugsy* have explored Jewish involvement in the mafia. On some television episodes of popular series such as *Civil Wars* and *L.A. Law*, Jewish men who are brilliant financial successes as Hollywood producers or high-powered lawyers are shown to be crudely manipulative, avaricious, brilliant in business, yet callously disregarding human feelings and finer sensibilities.

The Real Duddy

Duddy truly loves his family and remains loyal and dedicated to them. He retrieves his self-hating brother Lenny from his miserable isolation and tries to get him reinstated into medical school after he is thrown out for performing an abortion on the girlfriend of one of his non-Jewish friends.

But Duddy is neither bad enough nor good enough to escape his morally impoverished surroundings. He lacks the steel necessary to become a semicriminal kingpin like Jerry Dingleman, or the devotion to business that has made a success of his Uncle Benjy. He cannot look the other way and take money from a man who has treated

Farber: *Listen, it's war, Duddy. It's war, and the white man has all the guns.*

him and his father with contempt. He cannot become the business partner of a drug dealer, a man evil to the very core. At the same time, Duddy lacks the virtuous strength, the moral steel and luminous vision of his grandfather. He lacks even the decency to lift himself up and make a life with the nurturing and stunningly wholesome Yvette. On his deathbed, Uncle Benjy sneers at Duddy: “You are a born *pusherke*, a little Jew boy on the make.”

Duddy Kravitz ends almost where he began, as an upgraded small-time hustler. He had imagined himself an apprentice to entrepreneurial brilliance. He has, however, only been an apprentice to his father and St. Urbain Street. He betrays the film’s “good” characters – Yvette and Virgil and his grandfather – but at last he wins his father’s respect.

Still, Duddy can’t easily be dismissed. He’s smart and he’s young. Perhaps he’s learned something from all that’s gone on.

While you watch, consider:

- ◆ How does Duddy’s sense about business relate to that of Mirele Efros?
- ◆ Notice the particularly Canadian flavor of the urban life portrayed. How does it compare to urban areas in the United States?
- ◆ How does Duddy relate to his Jewish identity?
- ◆ What lessons does Duddy learn over the course of time spanned by the film?

Lenny: *All right, I'm an antisemite. I prefer the company of gentiles.*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ◆ Duddy seems to be more independent, but is his connection to his father – and his desire for his father’s love and approval – different from that of Tevye’s daughters to Tevye, Yossele to Mirele Efros, Jack Robin to his parents?
- ◆ What does Duddy’s *zeyde* represent to him? As Duddy moves away from his grandfather’s world, what is lost? Is it possible to retrieve those things once lost?
- ◆ Is Duddy trying to escape his “Jewishness” or the sense of being an outsider in society? Is it possible to become an “insider” without giving up one’s Jewish identity and Jewish values?
- ◆ Duddy and his family are recognizably Jewish characters, and his no-holds-barred pursuit of economic success has parallels in other fictional and film portrayals of American Jewish characters. Is there something inherently Jewish about his quest? Or is it the attitude of an ambitious immigrant, which might be shared by immigrants from other backgrounds?
- ◆ Duddy demonstrates loyalty and affection for his family but irresponsibility, or worse, in his business dealings. How would you characterize his values?
- ◆ How are identity and social/financial status related in the Jewish community? Are poor Jews invisible in our time?
- ◆ Could the film be set in contemporary times?

SUGGESTIONS FOR READING AND VIEWING

Max: *My boy . . . From the time of his birth, you knew he was slated for fame and fortune.*

Books and stories

- ◆ Doctorow, E.L. *Billy Bathgate*. New York: Random House, 1989.
- ◆ Richler, Mordecai. *St. Urbain's Horseman*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971.
- ◆ Weidman, Jerome. *The Center of the Action*. New York: Random House, 1969.

Films

- The Apprenticeship of Mordecai Richler* (1986)
- Bugsy* (1991)
- Goodbye, Columbus* (1969)
- Lies My Father Told Me* (1975)
- Once Upon a Time in America* (1984)