

The magnificent ego of Stephen Vizinczey

BY ROBERT FULFORD

ON A WET SATURDAY afternoon in October, Stephen and Gloria Vizinczey sat beside the fire in their living room and talked happily about the sudden success of Stephen's first novel, *In Praise Of Older Women*. This was in Rosedale, the leafiest and most pleasant part of Toronto, and the apartment was filled with the richly satisfying air of prosperity. We ate Danish pastries and drank coffee. As they talked, answering my questions, Stephen and Gloria several times giggled with delight, like little children. And for good reason: Stephen Vizinczey is now that rare thing in Canadian literature, an overnight success.

Last August he was an eccentric, would-be novelist with a thick accent and a crazy plan to publish his own book. Since then he has won the praise of the country's best critics, has sold out his first Canadian edition of 5,000 copies, and has leased the American rights for a \$40,000 cash advance. He has had nibbles from London and Hollywood, and his future in general gleams with promise. Last August he couldn't have got onto the CBC television network by any means short of bribing a producer, but in October, when he appeared on *This Hour Has Seven Days*, the CBC's advertisements used his name to attract attention to the most popular public affairs show in the country. Perhaps never before in Canada has so much happened so quickly to a writer.

Stephen's success fits a classic North American pattern — the eager immigrant, hardened by bitter experience in Europe, arrives on the Canadian scene, sizes it up, and then proves he has more energy, imagination and sheer success-hunger than any native.

Stephen is a short, wiry, nervous man, 32 years old. He chain-smokes through a filter-holder he seems always to be refilling. When he talks to you he moves in close, gesturing intensely: most North Americans, in his presence, feel the need to achieve a more comfortable social distance by hiding behind a desk or a coffee table. Stephen's accent is richest, thickest Budapest. He has been in Canada since 1957 but his tongue continues to resist the English language. When he refers, for instance, to Bob Weaver, the literary critic, the name comes out: *Boh Vee-vaire*. His syntax, too, is a constant reminder of Middle Europe. "He would

never have done it if I wouldn't have told it to him" is the kind of sentence that may tumble out.

Gloria Vizinczey is a pretty red-head, charming and athletic and highly intelligent. She married Stephen two years ago. Her first husband, the actor Donald Harron, is the father of her two girls, Martha, who is 14, and Mary, 12. The girls live with the Vizinczeys and this winter the four of them are in southern Italy, spending some of Stephen's royalties while he works on another book. Just before they left Canada, Stephen made a purchase which perfectly symbolized his new, careless affluence: he bought a white convertible Mercedes-Benz, with black leather upholstery, for \$7,858.50, including the charge for delivering it to their hotel in Naples.

"You must really *want* something," Stephen said as he thought back over what had happened. "Most of the people in this country are half-hearted about what they want. I'm not."

When he was 11 years old, in Hungary, Stephen planned to be a writer and dreamed of the day statues of him would be erected beside those of Shakespeare, Goethe and Shaw. "Ever since I was a kid I have wanted to write a masterpiece — and a hit. Now I think I've done it."

He seems never to have doubted it would happen, but Gloria is surprised. "All along," she said, "I thought he was out of his mind." She was carried along in this enterprise by Stephen's drive. "Everyone else thought he was crazy, too. My friends at the CBC (she was a radio producer) were sort of sympathetic when they heard what he was doing. Poor girl, with that crazy husband. They didn't say so, but I could feel it."

"This country," Stephen said at one point, "is full of brilliant people who are thought to be slightly nuts by the people around them." He was talking about someone else, but the remark applies to him in the months before his book appeared. He knew he ran the risk of becoming a joke among the people he worked with at the CBC. His novel, based on his own sex life, was outrageously self-revealing. If the critics sneered and the public refused to buy, the experience would be a personal as well as a professional defeat. After all, people who pay for the printing of their own books are usually senile ministers with sermons they want to see immortalized, or eccentric lady poets. They almost always come to grief, paying out thousands of dollars to unscrupulous publishers who live off the vanity of amateur authors. Stephen accepted the danger of falling into this class when he set himself up

in business as his own publisher.

"But my wanting to be a success was more important than fear," he said. And Gloria added, "Stephen has no false pride — he's really not afraid of looking silly, as I am and most people are."

But he has pride in his literary talent. Since his first poem was published, when he was 12, he has regarded himself as a writer of magnificent promise. When he was 16, he came to the notice of George Lukacs, the Hungarian intellectual who is universally considered the greatest literary critic in the Communist world. Lukacs published Stephen's adolescent poetry in his Budapest magazine, *Forum*, and Stephen began to feel he was well on the way to having his statue erected in the park.

A year later, after he took a special test, Stephen skipped two years of secondary school and entered the University of Budapest. From there he moved to the College for Theatre and Film Arts. He graduated in 1956, part of a restless and brilliant generation of Hungarian intellectuals and artists.

In Stephen's career two distinct types of revolution come together. In Europe, perhaps the most important revolution since 1945 was the shaking of total Soviet power in eastern Europe; Stephen, as a Hungarian rebel, was in the front line of that revolution. In North America in recent years there has been a revolution in taste — how we speak to each other in public, and what we say, have both changed radically. Again, Stephen has landed in the front lines by writing a book that — as a Sherbrooke newspaper reviewer put it — "has torn the last of the veils from the subject of sex."

Stephen has been a rebel since he reached adulthood. Long before the revolution, he and his friends were convinced that not only was the Hungarian government rotten; the whole idea of Communism was dead wrong. Stephen was later to describe the Communist world as "an internment camp that includes half the globe." In Budapest he and other good students were paid a comfortable subsidy to attend university and were encouraged to develop their talents, so long as they refrained from plays or poems the regime disliked. But all around them the young people saw a poverty-stricken society held together by fear.

"I knew, for instance," he wrote in an article on Hungary published in the United States in 1958, "more than one student whose parents were burdened with such weighty crop requisitions (or quotas) that they were required to deliver more wheat to the State than their land would grow.

Often, such a student's whole scholarship did not suffice to make up the difference. We were constantly forced to take up collections among ourselves to save someone's parents from arrest. Thus, we could not help but feel that the money we received so effortlessly was being sweated out of others."

In 1950 he ran into censorship for the first time. A Budapest radio station broadcast a long poem he wrote. It was scheduled for publication in a young people's literary monthly. The manuscript was already at the printer when word came through that party officials had ordered it banned. It dealt with an unhappy adolescent love affair and Stephen was informed that this was bourgeois sentimentality. "Unhappiness is not a Socialist feeling," the director of the magazine explained though he was the same man who had accepted the poem enthusiastically a few weeks earlier.

In 1955 a play Stephen wrote in university, *The Last Word*, was banned. It concerned a journalist driven to suicide by the bureaucrats above him. It won two prizes, was praised in print by a critic who read it in manuscript, and was scheduled for professional production. Rehearsals were held, but 10 days before opening night the cultural commissars directing the Budapest theatres banned it, because of "dangerous implications." His second play, *Mama*, about a family driven apart by oppressive social conditions, was taped for broadcast on a Budapest radio station, then dropped for the same reasons. (In translation it reads remarkably well: it resembles the work of the Angry Young Men of Britain in the 1950s, though it was written before they appeared.)

By now, the spring of 1956, Stephen was considered politically unreliable. *Mama* was finally broadcast, heavily censored, on Oct. 4, 1956, when, as Stephen recalls, "Men were beginning to make their own decisions."

"I took part in the revolt," Stephen was later to write, "because I hoped that we were not fighting in vain and that Hungary would be free." He was a founding member of one of the literary clubs that started the revolution, and he fought in the streets. When the Soviet tanks arrived in Budapest, he fled. He was briefly captured by Soviet soldiers, then released with the connivance of some Hungarian policemen. He made his way to Austria, lived in Italy for some months, and then set out for the new world. In 1957 he arrived in Montreal.

"I had read so many bad things about North America in the Communist press that I naturally assumed it was paradise." In his first year in

Montreal he discovered it was something less than that — he lived on \$500. Later he found work with the National Film Board and in 1961 he founded a magazine called *Exchange*. It lasted only three issues but impressed a great many readers: Hugh MacLennan, for instance, called it one of the best magazines he had ever read. Three years ago Stephen moved to Toronto and went to work for CBC Radio. Two years ago he began writing *In Praise Of Older Women*.

About this time I ran into him in a corridor at the CBC. "I really have something," he told me. "You know that everyone always advises writers, 'Write about what you know.' Well, I'm writing a book about sex."

In Praise Of Older Women purports to be the memoirs of one Andras Vajda, a Hungarian intellectual who fights in the revolution and then moves to Canada. The central point is that when inexperienced boys and girls learn about sex together, their mutual bungling can lead to tragedy or at least humiliation. Therefore, a young man should learn about life from older women. But this is only a framework for an eloquent and engrossing account of the narrator's life in the bedrooms of Europe and Canada. Northrop Frye, of the University of Toronto, the most distinguished of Canadian literary critics, provided the best brief description: "The book is written with great lucidity and charm, and packs an astonishing number of overtones into its somewhat single-minded pursuit of its theme."

Frye endorsed the book on the jacket, illustrating Stephen's ability to attract the patronage of distinguished writers. Lukacs discovered him in Hungary; during his brief stay in Italy he was greatly helped by the important novelist Ignazio Silone, and when he became a Canadian his citizenship sponsors were Hugh MacLennan and F. R. Scott, the two elder statesmen of the English-speaking Montreal literary community.

When Stephen finished the first few chapters of *In Praise Of Older Women*, he showed them to a Toronto book publisher. The publisher, pleased, offered him a princely advance of \$250. "That's when I began to wonder about book publishers," Stephen said later. "That kind of money was no good to me. I wanted to earn a living out of writing and it seemed to me that having your book published by one of the regular Canadian firms wasn't the way to make money."

So he set up the Contemporary Canada Press, his one-book publishing firm. He got together \$4,000 of his own and Gloria's /continued on page 27

STEPHEN VIZINCZEY

continued from page 15/ money and borrowed another \$3,000 from the bank. Gloria typed his manuscript and edited his English. "She's a great editor," Stephen said later. "When Brigid Brophy (a British critic) happened to praise the punctuation in the book, I was so pleased, because that was all Gloria's."

As he began the hard work of one-man publishing, Stephen began to demonstrate a special talent for getting others to help him. A Toronto freelance writer arranged some of his publicity, without payment. George Feyer, the cartoonist, designed a dust jacket, also as a gift (it wasn't right for the book and Stephen, summoning his courage, rejected it). An employee of Coles bookstores, Jack Jensen, took the photograph which finally appeared on the jacket (unable to get an older woman who would agree to being called one, he posed a 22-year-old and made her *look* older).

But Stephen and Gloria did the bulk of the work themselves. He designed the typography and produced a book that looks better than many designed by professional art directors. Two separate printing houses read the manuscript and turned it down on the grounds that its content might hurt their reputations. A third accepted it — for a price of \$4,400 for 5,000 copies — but begged Stephen to keep the firm's identity secret. As the publishing date drew near the printers casually mentioned that the book might be a week or so late — a common occurrence in book printing. Stephen made the printers' lives miserable, phoning them constantly and threatening legal suits, till they delivered on the precise date originally named.

Stephen brought the same furious intensity to the serene world of Canadian book-selling. He personally visited every bookstore in Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal. "I used to make jokes about salesmen," he said after it was all over, "but not any more. I think it's the most difficult and humiliating job on this continent." But Stephen, selling his own work, turned out to be a persuasive salesman and soon there were displays of the book everywhere. When it was not displayed, Stephen complained loudly. "Where's my book?" he would shout at the bookseller. "Where are you hiding it? Didn't you see the paper? It's a best seller. Display it." When one store refused to give him a prominent display, he coldly withdrew all copies.

He and Gloria kept the 5,000 copies in their basement, made out invoices and packaged the books for sending elsewhere in the country. Stephen made every delivery in Toronto and kept in close touch with sales. At one point last summer he could tell you exactly how many copies had been sold in each store in the city.

Ian Ballantine, the head of Ballantine Books in New York, was in Toronto the week the book appeared. He bought a copy, read it on the plane trip home, and phoned Stephen as soon as he reached New York. He wanted to buy the American rights for an advance of \$3,000, and Stephen went to New York to see him. He took along

several copies and sent one of them to the most famous of American publishers, Bennett Cerf at Random House. With it, he enclosed a note saying that Cerf could have the book if he would offer "much better than the standard deal." Cerf, who had heard of the book from Pierre Berton, one of its early supporters, offered Stephen a \$15,000 advance. Stephen said he would take it, then wavered, then spoke to Ballantine again. Ballantine finally realized that what Stephen wanted was some real money, *now*; he offered \$40,000 and the contract was signed.

In Canada, meanwhile, the book was getting mixed reviews. David Legate, a Montreal critic, said it was tedious. James Bannerman in Maclean's, hated it, and Richard J. Needham in the Toronto Globe and Mail said it had "a yawn in every sentence." But Kildare Dobbs in Saturday Night said he loved it and reported that he had passed it on to his 16-year-old son, for educational purposes. P. W. Lee of the Calgary Albertan wrote: "What might have been pornography emerges as life." The Winnipeg papers were enthusiastic. The Kingston Whig-Standard suggested that Vizinczey might be starting a new tradition of graceful writing in Canada and the Vancouver Sun reviewer called it "one of the most diverting books I've read in ages." In the end the favorable reviews outnumbered the unfavorable.

Soon Stephen found himself in the peculiar role Canadian broadcasting thrusts on new celebrities — he was expected to fight for his publicity. When he appeared on *This Hour Has Seven Days*, a panel of women deplored him and his book. One said, "The book isn't written in a loving tone," and the program's producers introduced the film of the interview in a gratuitously insulting way. On the Pierre Berton Show he was attacked by Nancy Phillips and Gladys Taylor, lady columnists for the Toronto Telegram. On Toronto's CFTO-TV, he appeared in a show called Answering Service and battled fiercely with Michael Landon, the actor who plays Little Joe on Bonanza. Little Joe, who hadn't read the book, accused Stephen of writing dirty literature in order to make money and Stephen said stupid actors should keep their opinions to themselves. He appeared on Assignment, The Observer and any other show that would give him a minute or two of airtime. Suddenly, he was everywhere — in bookstores, in the papers, on radio and TV. Working with a passion previously unknown in Canadian publishing, he completely surrounded his audience. And then he escaped to Italy, still breathing hard.

On the wall of the bathroom in the Vizinczeys' Toronto apartment there's a Victorian colored print of a schoolgirl carrying a laurel wreath. The caption reads, "Prizes are the reward of labor. It is not sufficient to carry off the prize, but we should merit it." The picture is there as a joke, obviously, since Stephen and Gloria aren't the sort of people who take 19th-century maxims seriously. Nevertheless, that little slogan has come to have a certain reality in their lives.



PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN DEVISSER