

Film Feature: HollywoodChicago.com Remembers the Films of Director John G. Avildsen

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on June 23, 2017 - 9:29am

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CHICAGO – His films were more popular than his name, but director John G. Avildsen did put his mark on the last 30 years of 20th Century movies. Avildsen died last week at the age of 81. He is known best for the Oscar Best Picture-winning “Rocky” (1976), but also did the controversial “Joe” (1970), “Save the Tiger” (1973, Best Actor Oscar for Jack Lemmon), John Belushi’s last film “Neighbors” (1981), “The Karate Kid” (1984), “Lean on Me” (1989) and “8 Seconds” (1994). Patrick McDonald, Spike Walters and Jon Espino of HollywoodChicago.com offer three essays on their Avildsen favorites.



Director John G. Avildsen on the Set of ‘Rocky’ with Sylvester Stallone

Photo credit: United Artists

John G. Avildsen was born in the Chicago suburb of Oak Park, Illinois, and graduated from New York University. He started as an assistant director for Arthur Penn and Otto Preminger, before breaking out on his own in the low budget “Joe,” featuring Peter Boyle, in 1970. He scored his biggest success with “Rocky” in 1976 – winning the Oscar for Best Director – and revisited the franchise later with “Rocky V” (1990). He also directed both sequels to “Karate Kid” with “Part II” (1986) and “Part III” (1989). At his peak, he was the original director for “Serpico” (1973) and “Saturday Night Fever” (1977), but was let go from both films. His final film as director was “Inferno” (1999), featuring Jean-Claude Van Damme. Avildsen passed away in Los Angeles on June 16th, 2017, of complications due to pancreatic cancer. He was 81 years old.

Patrick McDonald, Spike Walters and Jon Lennon Espino of HollywoodChicago.com pay tribute to the director who was nicknamed “King of the Underdogs,” with the following film essays.



ROCKY (1976) by Patrick McDonald



ROCKY

Rocky

Photo credit: MGM Home Entertainment

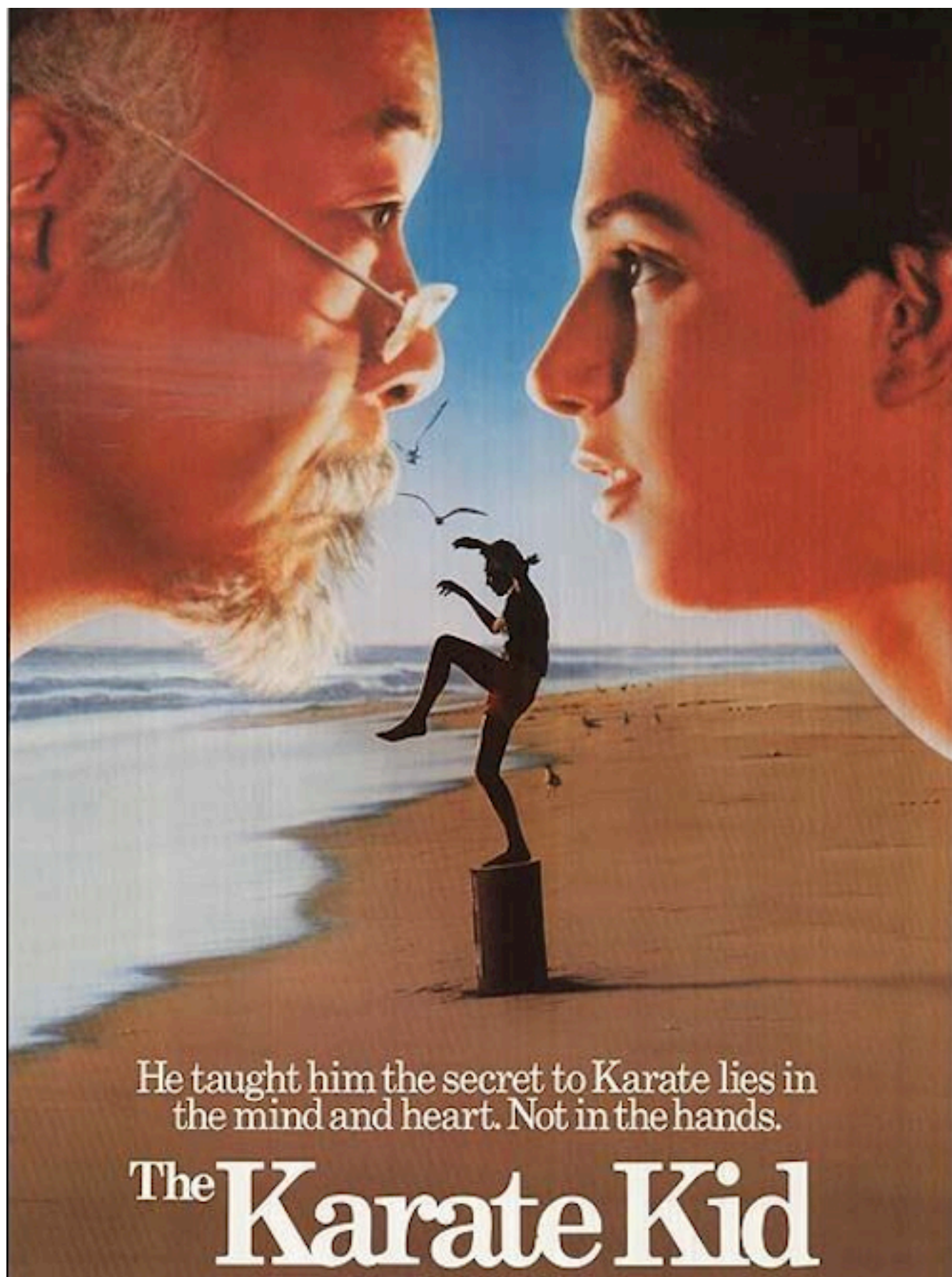
“Rocky” is a miracle of a film, considering both its eventual prize (Oscar Best Picture) and the way it made it to the screen the first place. A broke actor named Sylvester Stallone writes a desired boxing movie script that has one caveat... he must portray the title character. As a gambit, he proposes a budget of only one million dollars, and the film gets the green light. For all of the notion of Stallone as Rocky’s prime creator, it is actually director John Avildsen who delivered the on-screen goods – the famous running scene, the freeze frame on the top of Philadelphia’s “Rocky Steps,” boxing sequences that had never been seen before and the third use of the (just invented) Steadicam by a major motion picture.

Avildsen loved to tell the stories of having Stallone write additional dialogue because the budget was so tight they couldn’t afford to match Rocky’s boxing shorts with the on-set posters or send back his too-big ring entrance robe. And remember the classic song “Gonna Fly Now”? It was Avildsen who brought in composer Bill Conti from his previous directorial effort of the Burt Reynolds film, “W.W. and the Dixie Dancekings.” The underdog of underdog films was delivered to a Bicentennial audience, and the little-movie-that-could took home Oscars for Best Picture, Director and Editing, in addition to being the highest grossing film of 1976. No wonder Avildsen became the “Ka-Ching of the Underdogs.”

GONNA FLY NOW: The portrayal of the character of Rocky by Stallone was never better in this film, with SIX sequels now in the culture. Director Ryan Coogler of the latest Rocky adventure, the excellent “Creed,” seemed to use the John Avildsen template in approaching the sequencing of that story.



THE KARATE KID (1984) by Spike Walters



The Karate Kid

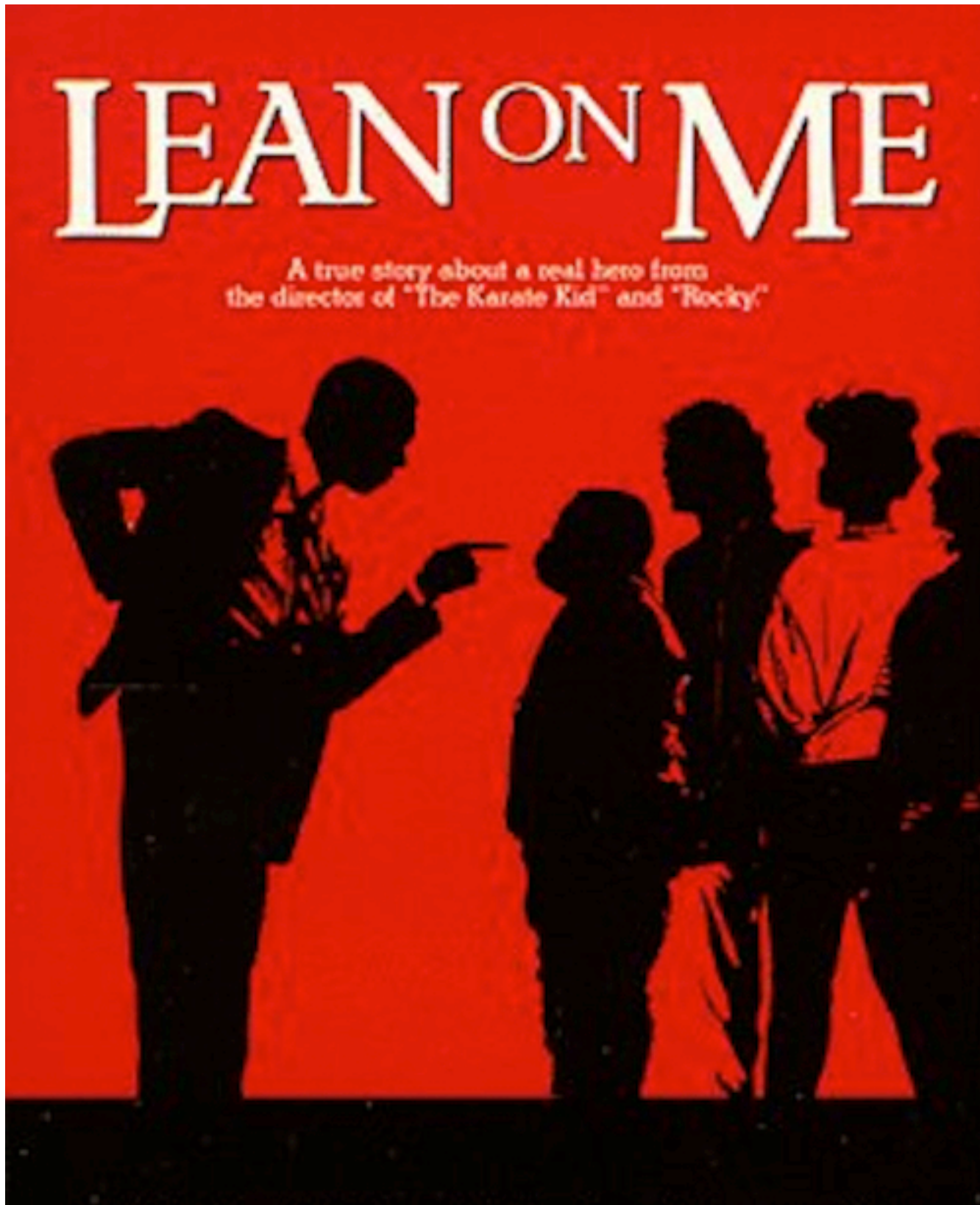
Photo credit: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment

John G Avildson was a bit of a journeyman... his Oscar notwithstanding. He wasn't one of those visionaries who develop a signature style, but his subtle gift was making a formula work. And they don't come much more formulaic than 1984's underdog/odd couple buddy movie "The Karate Kid." Yet Avildson knew how to inject heart into this story of the undersized "Kid" and his quiet but powerful teacher. As the listless remake and some of its later sequels show, this is not nearly as easy as Avildson makes it look here – this is the 1980's classic that scored Pat Morita an Oscar nomination and holds up relatively well today. It's not exactly groundbreaking but director Avildson knew how to make the most of it.

GONNA FLY NOW: You'd expect the man who directed the original "Rocky" to find the right beats in the inevitable training montage, but Kid Daniel's "crane kick" training – which predictably but winningly leads to a triumph at the end – still delivers the goods.



LEAN ON ME (1989) by Jon Lennon Espino



Lean on Me

Photo credit: Warner Home Video

High school sometimes get a bad rap as a physical hell on Earth. John G. Avildsen's "Lean On Me" does nothing to make anyone think otherwise. Avildsen, like many of his films, has fun with this one. He shows us an exaggerated look at a public school system after minorities have taken over the neighborhood. The director has long had a fascination with creating hero stories, and in this one, he gives us a breakout performance by Morgan Freeman... his performance and approach to the character is everything! This movie lives on the over-the-top action of Freeman, breathing a fun air into the entire film as he does things that may be extremely illegal in real life, but are completely entertaining within the scope of the film. Avildsen knows exactly how to set a scene, which you know right away after the opening montage that is essentially a music video. His films often have an after school special feel, but "Lean On Me" shows just how well it works even when school is still in session.

GONNA FLY NOW: The opening credits where we are taken on a tour of the school while Guns-N-Roses' "Welcome to the Jungle" is playing. He hilariously frames and choreographs the fighting to simulate feral animals in the jungle.

John G. Avildsen, 1935-2017



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