JOHN G. AVILDSEN
Biography

John G. Avildsen has directed everything from off-beat cult films like “CRY UNCLE!” to “ROCKY”, “THE KARATE KID” and “THE KARATE KID, PART II”—three of the most popular movies ever made. The first of three in a series, “THE KARATE KID” grossed more than $100 million dollars. In fact, according to an article in the February 26-March 3, 1996 issue of Variety, “ROCKY” ($117,235,247) and “THE KARATE KID, PART II” ($115,103,979) are among the all-time highest grossing films in U.S. box office history.

Born in Oak Park, Illinois, Avildsen moved to New York with his family when he was ten. He attended New York University at night, while working at an advertising agency. In 1961, after two years of military service as a chaplain’s assistant, Avildsen met up with his former ad agency boss, who was starting production on a film, “THE GREENWICH VILLAGE STORY”, and hired Avildsen as his Assistant Director.

Over the next few years, Avildsen took on various film production assignments on such films as “BLACK LIKE ME” (1964, Assistant to the Director) “MICKEY ONE” (1965, Production Manager), Otto Preminger’s “HURRY SUNDOWN” (1967, 2nd Unit Director) and “OUT OF IT”, starring Jon Voight (1969, Associate Producer and Director of Photography). While supplementing his income making industrial films for such clients as IBM and Clairol, Avildsen produced, photographed and edited several theatrical shorts including, “SMILES” and “LIGHT—SOUND—DIFFUSED”.

After answering a newspaper ad (“Wanted, Film Director”) Avildsen directed and photographed his first feature, a $15,000 movie, “TURN ON TO LOVE” (1967). This was followed the next year by the comedy “GUESS WHAT WE LEARNED IN SCHOOL TODAY?” which he also co-scripted, photographed and edited. His next picture, the controversial “JOE”, became the biggest grossing independent film of 1970 and launched the careers of Peter Boyle, who played the film’s title role, and Susan Sarandon in her first movie.

It is noteworthy that Avildsen’s filmmaking background has led him to continue to function on many projects as cameraman and film editor, as well as director. Additionally, on all his features until ‘SAVE THE TIGER”, he served as his own
Director of Photography. Avildsen’s next film after “JOE” was “SWEET DREAMS” (1971). The Director then followed “SWEET DREAMS” with the quirky private-eye spoof “CRY UNCLE!” (1971) and “THE STOOLIE” with Jackie Mason (1972).

Avildsen received wide acclaim for “SAVE THE TIGER” (1972). This starred Jack Lemmon, who won an Academy Award for his performance as a soul searching garment manufacturer, driven to desperate measures in an attempt to save himself from financial ruin.


Avildsen had turned down Sylvester Stallone—the then unknown actor—for parts in previous films twice before. Then he read Stallone’s script “ROCKY” and agreed to direct the picture. Avildsen won the 1976 Oscar for Best Director. The film also won Oscars for Best Picture and Best Editor.

“SLOW DANCING IN THE BIG CITY” (1978) was Avildsen’s next film and was followed by “THE FORMULA” (1980) starring George C. Scott, Marlon Brando and Marthe Keller. In 1981 he directed “NEIGHBORS”, an off-beat comedy starring John Belushi, Dan Aykroyd and Cathy Moriarty. Then came “A NIGHT IN HEAVEN” (1983) that starred Leslie Ann Warren and Christopher Atkins. He next directed a documentary about Roger Baldwin, the founder of the ACLU, called “TRAVELING HOPEFULLY”, which won an Academy Award nomination for Best Documentary.

Avildsen had one of his greatest successes with “THE KARATE KID” (1984) starring Ralph Macchio and Pat Morita and introduced Elizabeth Shue. This was followed by “HAPPY NEW YEAR” (1986) with Peter Falk and Charles Durning. He then directed “THE KARATE KID PART II” (1985) followed by “FOR KEEPS” starring Molly Ringwald. His “THE KARATE KID PART III” opened June, 1989. Next came “LEAN ON ME” (the true story about high school principal Joe Clark) with Morgan Freeman, Beverly Todd and Robert Guillaume, which Avildsen directed, edited and served as Executive Producer on. “LEAN ON ME” also won the IMAGE AWARD for Best Picture from the NAACP. Next, Avildsen directed and photographed a memorial tribute documentary on Abbey Hoffman.


In addition to his many accomplishments as a director, John G. Avildsen served two terms as President of IATSE’s New York based Cinematographer’s Union.
Local 644. He was also a professor of Graduate Filmmaking at Columbia University in New York.

John is currently developing a feature film based on the life of boxing legend John L. Sullivan.