

SPECIAL FEATURE: EASTERN BLOCKBUSTER – CONWAY GAL MAKES GOOD AS SET DESIGNER ON FEATURE SHOOT IN ROMANIA
Part III of a Three Part Series

By Vinca Liane Jarrett

In the last decade the United States has watched the cold war end, tumbling walls and cultural dividers, and a new era of free market trade begin with Russia and other Eastern European strongholds of the Iron Sickle Nation such as Romania and East Germany. Today, these countries, once cut off from free artistic expression or access to distribution outside their own nation, are the epicenter of feature film and television production and distribution. This article is the final segment of *Imagine News'* Three Part Series, working in the film industry in the Eastern Block.

Jacqui Masson, a production designer originally from Conway, Massachusetts who studied film and television production at Fitchburg State College and interned at Cinemagraphics in Boston, returned in Spring, 2000 from three months in Romania where she shot the James Bond-ese action adventure feature film, *The Elite*, directed by Terry Cunningham (*The Chaos Factor*, *The Stray*) and starring Jürgen Prochnow (*The English Patient*, *Airforce One*), as well as a host of model-turned-actors including Jason Lewis (*Next Stop Wonderland*), the Brewer Twins (Keith and Derek) and Maxine Bond (no relation). The film's exciting plot centers around 5 elite counter-terrorists, secretly supported by the U.S. government, who must stop the world's most evil bad guys from blowing up a computer convention on the Mediterranean Coast. Making the film may have been more complex than the movie's plot.

The shoot lasted five and a half weeks with several months of prep work conducted by Jacqui and her all-Romanian crew. There are 2 primary studios in Romania, Castel, used for decades to shoot features in Eastern Europe, and the lesser-known Buftea, which is generally only used for its sound stage to shoot local episodic television. With no experience in the feature or locations business, *The Elite's* producer's chose Buftea, not specifically to aggravate its crew, but to save as much money as possible on its \$3,000,000 costs (about half of that for actors), making the shoot a major challenge for all involved.

No stranger to working abroad, having designed the sets for Zalman King's surf-feature *In Gods Hand*, shot primarily in Indonesia, Jacqui was prepared for issues involving language barriers ("you learn to gesticulate and wave your hands around a lot") and inferior tools and technology. "The biggest difference of all is the lack of specific technology. Their computer and graphics are up to snuff with Americans..." However, the physical construction abilities of the crew were lacking due to a shortage of quality tools and basic skills for feature film production. Always inventing new ways to build things on a shoe string budget (why else would anyone go to Romania from Hollywood?), Jacqui had to build the inside of a private jet plane and a 25 foot missile and its silo, as well as hundreds of small props and elaborate sets.

The upside to the shoot were the locations, all dressed to look like major Western European scenery, including the picturesque town of Brashov located in the Carpathian Mountains of Transylvania (Dracula lurking beneath the shadows at night, no doubt), and on battleships on the Black Sea provided by the Romanian Government (what else are they going to use their ships for, anyway?). Jacqui even got to fly in a helicopter for the shoot, provided by the Romanian Navy. Highways are not well developed in most of Romania and traveling from Bucharest, where she resided at the lovely Hilton, to the different location shoots was a major constraint on the production, taking several hours to go only 80 miles on one lane dirt roads. Back in L.A., Jacqui worked on final shoots for the film during the fall of 2000, and the film, which had its premier in February 2001, is expected to be in distribution sometime later this year.

With more than twenty-five feature films under her belt, including *The Jon Benet Ramsey Story* for Showtime, Stephen King's *Lawnmower Man* (as set decorator), and for PM Entertainment, *Extramarital* (Tracey Lord and Jeff Fahey) and *The Stray* (Michael Madsen), and independent features such as *Wind River* (Karen Allen), and hundreds of music videos (Madonna, Billy Joel and Michael Jackson as set decorator) and commercials (McDonalds, Hershey, Levi's, Budweiser), Jacqui speaks fondly of her earlier days working in Boston on her first features, including the 1987 teen flic, *Hiding Out* (Jon Cryer, Anabeth Gish) and the 1989 fantasy film *Warlock* (Julian Sands, Richard E. Grant) both filmed in Massachusetts. Remembering

her three exhausting, albeit exciting, months in Romania Jacqui Masson says wistfully, "I have production designed and decorated more than 30 productions on location throughout the world, and would like to hone this back in to bringing my expertise to working on films in Massachusetts and N.E. and using my home state as a base camp some day."

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