

SPECIAL FEATURE: EASTERN BLOCKBUSTER – ROBIN HESSMANN PLAYS RUSSIAN ROULETTE

Part I 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 explores over the next three issues of *Imagine News*, working in the film industry in the Eastern Block, focusing on three New England locals, Robin Hessman, Keith Stone and Jacqui Masson, all of whom have had significant experiences making the Eastern Blockbuster.

Robin Hessman. “If you can make a film in Russia, you can do it anywhere”, declares Robin Hessman, Massachusetts-born filmmaker and television producer recently returned to Boston from eight years on location in Russia. Robin went to Russia on an independent study student program to study Russian language while attending Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island in January of 1991, remaining until 1999. Intending to go on to London to study Shakespeare, the Persian Gulf War interrupted her plans, and Robin remained in Leningrad to assistant direct an American horror feature film starring **Robert Englund** (Freddy Krueger in NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET, URBAN LEAGUE) at Lenfilms Studio. Not surprisingly, she was the only American hired in Russia for the film, although key production and acting roles were filled by Americans.

During this period, Robin set out to make her own independent film short using a borrowed 16-millimeter camera. The only facility in Leningrad, however, available to develop the film was the government run Leningrad State Television Radio Agency. No American had ever had access to this agency, and Robin, intimating strong connections to Harvard University (a college they'd actually heard of over in Russia, Brown being just a color), she signed a contract for developing and printing. Ultimately Robin's first ten minute short, intended as a calling card for Brown's exclusive film program, was confiscated by the KGB during the military coop against Gorbachev (sound like a great plot for a feature in itself?). Robin's day-in-the-life-of-story was just another day in cutting room copy once the Russians got hold of it, never to be found or restored.

Brown decided to relent on its strict policies for entry, and Robin, using photographs from Russia, secured herself one of the twelve spaces in the film program for her Sophomore year beginning in 1992. After a year back in the States, Robin headed back to Russia on a grant from Brown to attend the prestigious Russian State Institute of Cinematography (the UCLA of Russia) in Moscow, most noted for film graduates such as director **Sergei Eisenstein** (SEEDS OF FREEDOM) and to make another longer 30-minute film short using a grant of 35 mm film from Kodak. Filmmaking conditions were like working in the 1930's, cutting with scissors and working with a flatbed that didn't rewind. Robin describes the experience as requiring her to “learn to be creative and flexible and think on your feet. Things are a lot less convenient. [It] makes you more inventive [and] firmly believe that there is always a way around obstacles in your path...”

Her efforts were rewarded on completion of the film for which she won the student Academy Award and more than 40 international prizes, including the London and San Francisco Film Festivals, the N.E. Film & Video New Directors award and appearing at the Museum of Modern Art's (MOMA) new film series. Ultimately Robin graduated summa cum laude from Brown's program, attended almost entirely in Russia, with a Bachelor of Arts and a Masters Degree in film. Following completion of her graduate degree, from 1995 until her departure in 1999, Robin was hired by Russia's Children's Television Workshop in Moscow to executive produce *Ulitsa Sezam*, Russian Sesame Street, developing more than 50% original production with new original Muppets. The ultimate choice for Robin, she has described this job as having “Combined [my] love of children's entertainment with my love of film with Russia.”

Robin returned to Boston in 1999 to be nearer to her family and to become reacquainted with the American film community. Currently she is developing a new, children's TV show with co-Executive producer and creative partner Natasha Lance Rogoff directed towards 6-11 year olds.

The subject is still top secret and under wraps (ensuring the KGB will be unable to get its covert hands on it). Robin is also just wrapped up production at WGBH for a one-hour national special expected to air this fall. Her suggestion to young filmmakers thinking about going to a foreign country to make movies: "Do it...[It's an] invaluable experience as a human being to widen your life's experience and language skills," and no doubt the calling card that will spiral Robin Hessman's career into an enviable one by any industry standard.

Next Month, *Imagine News* takes on making an action film in Romania with veteran set designer, and Conway, Massachusetts-born Jacqui Masson, currently residing in L.A. Look for the Eastern Block Buster, special feature, right here in your favorite New England film magazine, *Imagine News*.

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