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Cyrano

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Scanderbeg
Warrior King of Albania

**The Death of
Michael Smith**

Mindfield Pictures
Success in the City

Sept.-Oct. 2007
Vol. XII No. 5 [67]

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VOLUME XII, NO. 5 [67] • SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2007



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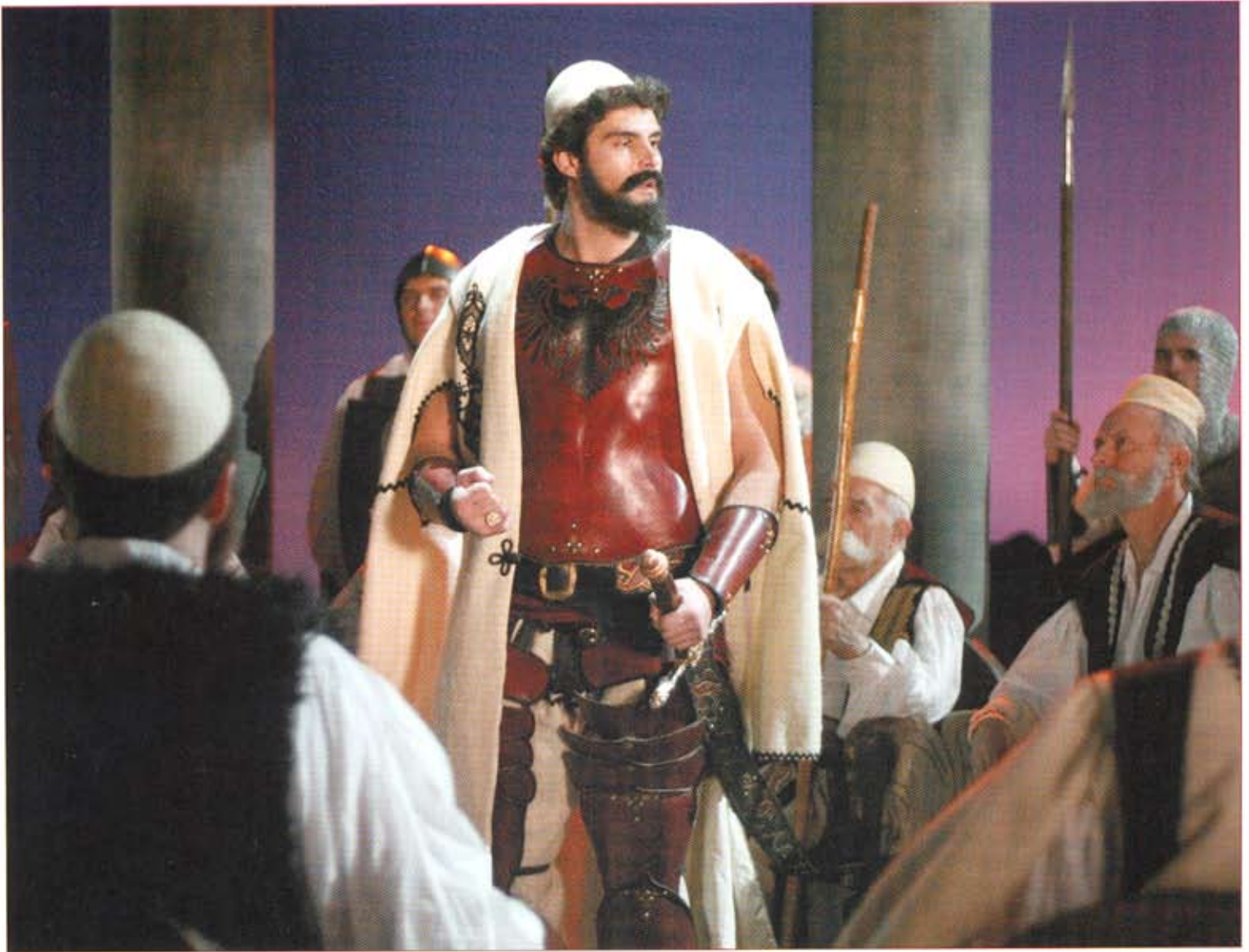
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Gjergj Kastrioti Scanderbeg

BY GEORGE ROBERTSON

The
Warrior King
of
ALBANIA



PHOTOS BY KIM SIMMS

When the average American thinks of the mountainous regions of eastern Europe, chances are the first image that may come to mind is of a dark spooky castle, shrouded in fog, inhabited by a blood-thirsty monster known as Count Dracula. Author Bram Stoker's Dracula is a fictional character loosely based on the real life exploits of a Romanian noble known as Vlad the Impaler, whose fearsome reputation grew out of his annoying habit of impaling hundreds of his victims on long sharpened stakes. When Vlad wasn't busy sticking it to his victims he also found time to wage war against the Ottoman Turks who were invading his country. Unfortunately, Vlad eventually ended up impaled by the Turks himself.

During the same time period, another lesser-known but much more successful 15th century warrior king also fought the Ottoman Turks to impede their advancement across Europe, protect his beloved homeland, the Catholic religion, and pre-



Above: A meeting of Christian nobles at Lezha, in Albania, was shot at the Combermere Stage.

Right: Iliriana Sinishtaj plays Scanderbeg's wife, Donica.

Opposite page: Anton Gojcaj portrays King Scanderbeg.

vent the Muslim conquerors from achieving domination in eastern Europe. His name was Gjergj Kastrioti, later known as Scanderbeg.

The son of a king, as a child Kastrioti was taken hostage by the Ottomans and raised in their courts. His father and family told him never to forget where he was from or his religion. When Scanderbeg grew to adulthood he planned a rebellion, created alliances with the Pope and the King of Naples, and along with 300 men fought the Ottoman Turks to a standstill for 25 years.

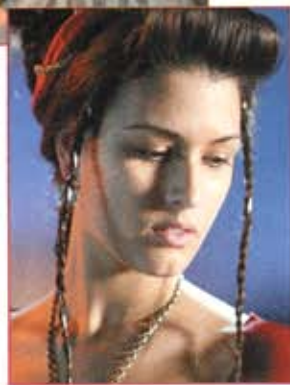
His bravery and fighting skills prevented what was at the time the world's most powerful empire from taking over much of eastern Europe.

Although King Scanderbeg is a well-known folk hero in his home country and most of Europe, little is known about his amazing exploits by Americans. Recognizing this fact, producers Nik Gjonaj and Nua Gjelaj set out to rectify the situation by creating and producing a documentary film on the life and times of this forgotten great king. "Scanderbeg was a great historical hero, but somehow his memory was slipped under the rug and he was largely forgotten in many parts of the world. That's why we produced this documentary: to try and tell his story to as many people as we can and let them know about his exploits, how important he was to western civilization, and the impact he had on our modern age," commented Nik Gjonaj.

The result of their efforts is the documentary *Gjergj Kastrioti Scanderbeg, Warrior King of Albania*, which was recently completed by Nik and Nua's Illyria Entertainment Group. The film enjoyed a memorable premiere this past July at the Macomb County Cultural Center, attended by over 1,200 history and independent cinema buffs.

Avid filmmaker/historian Nik Gjonaj and fine artist/historian Nua Gjelaj met when Nik purchased a portrait of Scanderbeg, painted by Nua, who had offered it for sale on E-bay. "I got the painting for a bid of 100 dollars, which I thought was a ridiculously low price for such a fine piece of art, so I decided to meet with Nua and find out more about him and his work. We got to talking

and decided that telling Scanderbeg's story was too good an opportunity to pass up." This led to a partnership and a year of stringent research and pre-production planning - followed by an arduous fund raising process. The final program had a total budget of approximately \$400,000 - which sounds like a lot of money, but really isn't for a 90-minute documentary.



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At one point, when finances became tight, executive producer Tringa Gojcaj came on board with financial aid at a critical time to keep the project rolling. Various fundraisers and help from the Catholic Church and the Albanian community also helped to keep the dream alive. "This was a proj-

You have to entertain as well as educate," stated Nua with a smile.

With Nik directing and Nua acting as writer/historian, a local crew headed by DP Spike Simms was assembled. Other crew members included gaffer Mike Anderson,

ditional footage was lensed on the stone staircase and stone pillared basement of St. Hugo's Catholic Church in Pontiac - and at locations all around the Detroit area that could be made to resemble 15th century Albania.

The camping and battle simulations were shot at a rented camping loop at Holly Recreation State Park. The two-day/one-night shoot took place in October on the last weekend of the season when many of the leaves had fallen and nobody was around. "The leaves covered the roads and there was no sign of modern human activity. We had plenty of power available, easy access for cars and production trucks, and we could shoot in all directions. It was a perfect spot for our production," commented Spike. "We probably had 20-30 or more period costumed extras, mostly non-actor Albanian friends of the producers, who were very hyped-up about their heritage. They performed with a sparkle



The Scanderbeg crew.

ect that required some sacrifice from the crew, the actors, and everyone involved. I personally had to refinance my house two times, but Nua and I believed so strongly in the project that we felt it must be completed no matter the cost," said Nik with conviction.

Co-producers Gjonaj and Gjelaj worked for about two years developing the film, eventually shooting interviews, scenery, and historic locations in Albania, Austria, at the Vatican, and several cities in England. "After the research was finished, we went to Europe ... two and a half weeks, five countries, nine airports, 12 cities ... this was a grueling but fun experience," commented Gjelja. "We shot the interviews, castles and whatever else we could find that remained from that era on mini DV using a Panasonic DVX100A with Nik behind the camera." Upon completing the interviews the pair developed a script so historical reenactments could be taped in Michigan. "I would generally write something and then Nik and I would go over it and make modifications. As a historian it's always good to have someone else work with you so the program is not too detailed and will be suitable for a general audience.

with help from Brad Irvin, Brad Knopf, Mike Connor, and video tech/sound man Jessie Cecchini.

"My good friend Pat Barrie was the art director/prop master who fashioned a period tent from scratch as a base for Scanderbeg's camp. Pat also created a sarcophagus out of foam complete with a sculpture of Scanderbeg," noted Simms. "We used it when we shot at Combermere Stage, and it looked just terrific on camera. Pat and I have done reenactments, renaissance festivals, and historical films in the past so Pat had a lot of props he could provide for the shoot. Nik and Nua also commissioned and purchased other props to add to the authenticity of the scenes."

As with the interviews, all of the scenes in this program were shot on a Panasonic DVX100A (shooting took place before any of the HDV cameras were available) which was the highest quality DV camera they could get their hands on. Besides the scenes at Combermere Stage in Troy, ad-



Co-producers Nua Gjelaj and Nik Gjonaj watch the action on screen.

in their eyes which came through clearly on camera. Their energy really inspired everyone on the crew to go the extra mile for them."

He continued, "A lot of people want to make independent programs like this one but they're either not well enough prepared, too controlling, or can't offer up enough information to let the crews do what they know how to do. Nik and Nua brought a perfect blend of knowing what they wanted, being organized, and allowing enough of the creative process to fall into their crew's hands to enable an outstanding production and I commend them for that."

With the interviews and reenactments completed, the next step was to select the right person and post house to finish the program. Nik and Nua settled on veteran editor Nick Hrycyk, who is now with Digital Image Studios in Farmington Hills. "The producers were a great bunch of guys to work with," said Hrycyk. "This was their first documentary so they were neophytes, so to speak. We had to bring them along and teach them some things, but we had a hell of a product when we were done with it."

Hrycyk worked off and on (more on than off) for approximately two years to edit this ambitious 96-minute documentary. "By the time the producers came to me they had over 40 hours of interviews in the can," he said. "One of the more unusual aspects of this project in post was that three of the reenactments and a number of interviews were all done in the Albanian language - which led to some out-of-the-ordinary moments working with them in the edit suite. However, about 96% of the final program is in English. The three Albanian reenactment scenes were voiced-over in English and the Albanian language interviews had subtitles added. So you don't have to speak Albanian to understand and enjoy this terrific documentary," he said with a smile.

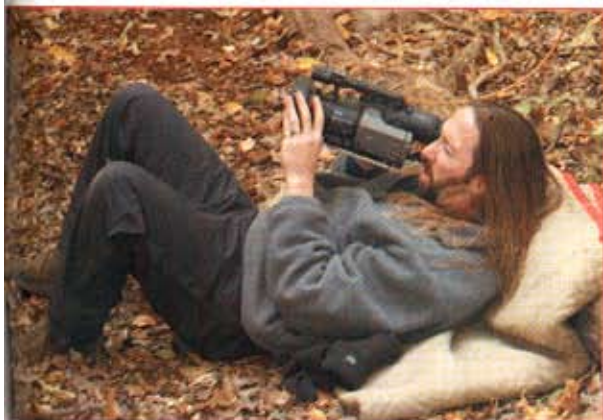
This project took over four years to reach completion because of the huge amount of research and materials the producers had to engage in and gather to tell their story. "By the time we completed the program I had over a terabyte of stor-

ing to Digital Image Studios, and in effect brought the program with him. Digital has now put together an exquisite web site for the program which can be accessed at www.IlyriaEntertainment.com.

"A project like this actually takes you back in time," noted Nik Gjonaj. We saw statues of Scanderbeg in Rome and Belgium and many other places. He was designated an "Athlete of Christ" by the Church for defending Christianity from Muslim domination, and learning more about him was a great spiritual experience. For instance, we were in a museum in Vienna and they had the actual helmet worn by Scanderbeg. Seeing this personal artifact really brought us much closer to this man and it was a very poignant moment for Nua and myself."

Nik and Nua worked the better part of five years to plan, finance and complete the documentary, which attests to the passion they had for telling Scanderbeg's story. "This story just snowballed from an initial meeting into research, fund raising, production, post production, and finally - we hope - world-wide distribution," said Nua. "Like all artists I'm my own worst critic. I sometimes think, 'With another \$30,000 or so we could have done an even better job.' But we went into battle with the armor we had - not the armor we wanted. All in all, we're both very pleased with the results. The audience at the premiere was very receptive - and that's what really counts!" said Nua emphatically.

Nua and Nik are planning to take the program on the festival circuit and are currently in negotiations for a distribution deal. They feel this story could be eventually made into a feature film in the vein of *Braveheart* and other epic adventures and are working on a script toward that purpose. Their company, Ilyria Entertainment Group, also has several other projects in the pipeline. Stay tuned. 🐾



DP Spike Simms shoots coverage of a battle scene.

age with all of the graphics files, original scenes, audio files, music and interviews on my Avid system," laughed Nick. "That was a lot of material to go through." Nick started on this project when he led his own company - Shadowbox Post - before com-

Being of Scots ancestry, George Robertson is very much in tune with the whole Braveheart, horseback riding, sword-fighting and repelling-the-invaders thing. Contact him at 248-634-2421.

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