



It's a Balkan blockbuster that's gonna do for Bulgaria what *Crocodile Dundee* did for us. So who better to put it together than a couple of producers from Down Under? The ones with the mate called Mel.

A far, far fetta

YOU'VE PROBABLY NEVER HEARD of fetta schinitzel, but it was on the menu every day from the Black Sea to the Orpheus Mountains as we crossed

Bulgaria in the name of a film we weren't even sure we wanted to make.

Bulgaria, is, of course, world famous for its fetta. The only other things we knew about the place were that its Olympic weightlifters were very short and unusually strong, that its choirs had perfected a vocal technique called throat singing which resembles the sound of ululating goats, and that there was a Bulgarian dissident who got poked with a poisoned umbrella in London some time late in the Cold War.

Bulgarian films are not as well known as the fetta – maybe because most of them aren't noticeably Bulgarian. American (and European) filmmakers love the place as an inexpensive location where they can score empty landscape and cheap extras. Yugoslavian director Emir Kusturica shot *Black Cat*, *White Cat* and *Underground* there; Régis Wargnier filmed *East/West* there, with Catherine Deneuve.

On our first morning in Sofia, the capital, Jean-Claude Van Damme and crew appear in

our lobby, filming a scene from one of eight action movies the Americans are shooting in Bulgaria. Harvey Keitel and Mira Sorvino are down the road shooting an American thriller.

There are spaghetti westerns, so why not fetta films? It could be the start of a whole new genre ... That's the challenge we accept when we agree to visit the country in the depths of winter after a phone call from a man from Virginia, USA.

Stan Coolidge (not his real name) is a high-flying horse trader who sells thoroughbreds to Kerry Packer, Ted Turner, a few oil sheikhs and, we later discover, some nice Italians in Chicago. He's found us through an appropriately byzantine route that involves the brother of a colleague of ours in the film business, Robert Gibson. Remember that name – it will become important later.

Coolidge has become the agent for a film script about an episode in Bulgarian history that he believes could “do for Bulgaria what *Crocodile Dundee* did for Australia” and, what's more, there's \$US50 million in the Bank of America for whoever wants to produce the film. Oh, and the entire Bulgarian army is on standby to act as extras.



Well, okay, it is intriguing, but also highly suspicious. Is this one of those scams which require you to send a cheque for \$150 to register your interest in some phoney investment? And, why us? Why not go straight to Hollywood? “The producers of *Rain Man* are interested, but they can't take a meeting in Bulgaria till next year,” says Coolidge. “But I've talked about it with my neighbour in Virginia, Robert Duvall, and he's real keen ... Why don't you just go out there for a week and meet the screenwriter and the people who want to finance this project – you'll be their guests, you can look at locations, and I'll be there, too ...”

Here is the story of the film. It's the 13th century. The crusades are raging through Europe like bushfires. French religious heretics from the town of Albi, known as Albigensians, are under siege from the papal forces of the Inquisition. Only a miracle can save them. Their leaders decide to send three emissaries to Bulgaria to find the greatest relic of all heretics: the Secret Book of the Bogomils. Only the book can unite the Albigensian forces and allow them to rise up and defeat the crusaders. Bogomils? Are they making this up? After asking around, it transpires that Bogomil is



where the word “bugger” comes from. This is not encouraging.

We ask for a copy of the script. It does not arrive for six weeks. Meanwhile, we do a little research on Bulgaria. According to the Lonely Planet guide, resorts on the Black Sea are “abominable” and the country as a whole is “chaotic”. The paragraph devoted to culture includes the fact the Bulgarians invented the Cyrillic alphabet, which was, naturally, appropriated by the Russians. Anything else worth taking had been grabbed by the Turks during the Ottoman Empire.

Playwright Andrew Bovell tells us about his experience visiting Bulgaria a few years ago as part of an exchange program with a small theatre company in Sofia. The troupe had rented an apartment for Bovell and his family, paying for it in advance. “But when we were about to leave for the airport on our last day, the landlord, with whom we got on quite well, appeared at the door with two heavyies brandishing axes. He told us we couldn’t leave until we paid more money. This was in front of our two children. Frantic calls were made. We were held captive all day until someone from the theatre came with a bag of cash.”

When the script arrives, it is epic: 200 pages of blood and fire, it’s a cross between *The Name of the Rose* and *Life of Brian*, without the jokes. The plot also features a virgin who keeps lapsing, but miraculously returns to her untouched state, and Bogomils tortured and killed in the most imaginative ways. There are definitely parts for Heath, Russell and Cate.

Despite major misgivings, curiosity gets the better of us. We fly in to Sofia a day ahead of Stan Coolidge. It’s a 25-hour journey from Sydney via Vienna and the plane lands at dusk in freezing fog. A trio of men are waiting for us. The older man with silvery hair is the scriptwriter, Anton Dontchev, a Bulgarian novelist, who hands us a getbeka and greets us in Russian. The others are Adrian Georgio, a balding apparatchik from the Ministry of Agriculture who happens to be Dontchev’s nephew and will act as our interpreter, and Sashko Velichkov, head of a major film production company. They bundle us into a taxi.

In 1903, traveller Arthur Symonds commented that “Sofia lies between two civilisations and is a kind of rag heap for the refuse of both. The main street is the most horrible street in Europe.” Our hotel, the Balkan Sheraton,

Empty landscape and cheap extras: in central Sofia, the forbidding former Party House, once communist headquarters, dominates the yellow-paved square, while some are getting rich in the newly privatised Bulgaria, others remain desperately poor.

backs onto that street. At the hotel, our airport trio join up with a man in leather pants and a ponytail. Any suspicions about this film’s possible links with the underworld are instantly put to rest. No self-respecting member of the mob would look so, well, obvious. “Nikolai Banev,” he says, adding the flourish of a rather courtly bow and some hand kissing, but he speaks no English. Stan Coolidge has told us Banev is the head of a major industrial consortium which may be interested in investing in the film. “He’s one of the richest men in the country, worth billions ... the Kerry Packer of Bulgaria,” boasted Coolidge. Banev introduces his girlfriend, Yevgenia, who looks exactly like a young Diana Ross and is wearing a style of dress best described as tight.

Until a few years ago, Banev was a taxi driver, doing currency deals with passengers in the privacy of his car, away from the watchful eyes of the communists. When the regime collapsed, he started buying factories and property across the country. Dontchev appears genuinely fond of him and they trade jokes like father and son.

Two other men hover close to our group. They are dressed in heavy black overcoats

and are built like Bulgarian weightlifters. "Bodyguards," whispers Georgio. Later, we see that they carry Russian revolvers.

Banev, we are about to discover, is in permanent flight from an invisible enemy. He knows only one way to travel, and it is at anti-terrorist speed. "The Russian mafia were after him for a while," explains Georgio reassuringly. Heading out of Sofia, Banev's 4WD with tinted windows weaves through traffic at 150 km/h. The speed increases as we hit the outskirts of the city and start to climb into the Rila Mountains.

Our destination is a "typical" Bulgarian restaurant with a folkloric floor show which makes it impossible to converse, or ask any of the essential questions like, "Why us?" or, "Where does the \$50 million come from?"

Instead, we are presented with a pyramid of shaved fetta, tomato and cucumber. There is a heated discussion about the superiority of the local cheese over its Greek rival. Banev explains that one of his factories produces fetta and that we may visit it later in the week. It's uncertain how this fits in with the film fact-finding mission, but since no-one will give us an itinerary, a map, or any idea of how the week will unfold, we simply surrender to the vodka toasts while a panto cow skips in front of our table and dancers in embroidered costumes and elaborate aprons dance on tiptoe like *Riverdance* on cocaine. The bagpipes are deafening and play us into the merciful oblivion of jet lag.

NEXT MORNING, WE'RE DRIVEN TO A SHABBY building on the edge of a freeway. The place looks so unsavory we wonder if we are about to be kidnapped and held to ransom.

Interfilm, the company offering to provide the film's technical support, is on the sixth floor, where the warmth of Sashko Velichkov's greeting makes up for the dilapidated surroundings. We are here to see a video of Bulgarian locations, an impressive mix of castles, mountain monasteries, forests, waterfalls and rugged coastline. Velichkov promises an excellent number of sunny days per year – 280, in fact, though today is not one of them – and crews that appear to work for nothing, by Australian standards. There are no restrictions or quotas on how many Australian personnel we might import for the film, no penalties for using Australian actors.

But by the end of three hours of intense discussion, the status of the \$50 million is more unclear than ever. Discussions are hampered by the disconcerting Bulgarian tradition of nodding to mean "no" and shaking the head to mean "yes". We're never sure whether they have adopted our usage or are sticking to theirs.

Lunch is more shaved fetta cheese, but this time at an exclusive Russian restaurant that used to be popular with the commissars of the old regime. Here we meet Atanas Ginev, a silver-haired former ambassador who is now the country's representative to the EU. Ginev lists his favourite films: *Stagecoach*, *High Noon* and *Gone with the Wind*, and adds that, "The bank is very excited to hear that Mel Gibson is interested in this film."

We are too stunned to ask where he heard such a thing and, anyway, it's time to get to the airport. Stan Coolridge is due to arrive.

Coolridge is wearing one of those knobbly Coogi sweaters – so *that's* who buys them. His

luggage is as big as a horsebox and his energy is boundless. He's like Willy Loman on speed, spruiking the charms of Bulgaria ("Isn't the food great?"), boasting about recent deals from Dubai to Denver. But we're grateful for his company, simply because he speaks English.

Banev arrives to sweep us off in his bullet-proof Mercedes to a hunting lodge in the Rhodope Mountains. He drives on the winding roads at between 220 and 240 km/h, always talking on one of three mobiles, and stopping only to buy us some drinking yogurt at a service station. As Bulgaria flashes by in a blur, we try not to think of Princess Diana.

The car pulls up at a starkly charmless building in biting night air. The interior decor resembles the communist version of a set for Ang Lee's *The Ice Storm* – all swirling wallpaper patterns and carpet in various shades of brown. The curtains are fading nylon net; the beds, presumably also period pieces, sag like hammocks in the unheated rooms. We are deeply miserable, perplexed as to the purpose of this stopover, and frustrated that there is still no hint of a schedule for the week. Anton



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Dontchev looks miserable, but promises that tomorrow he will take us away on our own to visit an important local monastery that could serve as a film location.

The driver for this trip is Scarface, whose name turns out to be Nicky. His injury, he says, is a scratch from the paw of an angry lion, touting as part of a circus for which Nicky was the driver. Perhaps lions don't like travelling at 240 km/h either. As part of his contract with Banev, Nicky explains, he must never let the distance between his boss and his own car exceed 300 metres. But this morning, even when Banev is not there, he seems unable to slow down.

The monastery belongs in another world. Batchkovo was built by Georgian monks in 1083 and is the second largest monastery in the country. There are only 10 monks here now, all pint-sized and bearded. One greets us at the gate, babbling like an excited child in very bad Russian. From his gestures, it appears he's telling us that in the middle of winter, the snow reaches up to his waist.

We progress across uneven cobbles to admire the exquisite frescoes on the wall, the sacred icon in the central chapel and a remarkable



refectory hall under a vaulted ceiling painted a deep blue with scenes pertaining to the life of Christ. For the monks, it would have been dinner and a show every night.

Soon we're back on the road, rushing with ungodly haste to meet Banev and his gang at a winery he owns. The drive takes us past abandoned factories, deserted villages, dilapidated Stalinist blocks of flats falling deeper into disrepair. The car narrowly misses a couple of horse-drawn carts, some geese and



Hollywood in the Balkans: (clockwise from top): taxi driver-turned-billionaire Nikolai Banev (at rear) and interpreter Adrian Georgio settle in for a late-night jam session; distinguished Bulgarian writer Anton Dontchev; the 900-year-old Batchkovo monastery – a possible film location.

a man carrying a large bundle of branches on his back, who looks as if he's stepped out of a Brueghel painting.

At dusk, at the end of a long muddy road, we pull up at massive security gates patrolled by men in commando fatigues. Upstairs, Banev, Coolridge, Georgio and a lot of men in suits are tasting cabernets and merlots. They are all served too chilled, but Coolridge is enthusing about his plan to import them into the United States, whispering to us that Banev wants only \$US1 a litre. Managing to corner Coolridge in between sips and slurps, we ask why discussion of the film appears to have stalled.

"Maybe it's because you guys asked for half a million dollars up-front."

Disbelief. We've done no such thing.

Coolridge claims this has put the other side off negotiating with us. We begin to suspect that Georgio is not translating correctly. Coolridge promises to sort things out, but it's hard to know who to trust.

For the next three days we crisscross the country at high speed, in perpetual getaway mode. We visit a selection of Banev's favourite factories (although we never reach the one that makes fetta), eating in workers' canteens while

he and Coolidge plot joint global domination. The film is almost never mentioned.

Anton Donchev's own frustration mounts, and eventually he succeeds in borrowing Nicky and a Merc for another day on our own, this time driving us to an impressive hilltop citadel with Bogomil associations and to a peaceful reed-lined river near the Black Sea where he has set a crucial scene involving a pirate ship. We get glimpses of the potential of his story and, increasingly, of the author's significance to Bulgarians.

Wherever we go he is recognised, and everyone we meet, even in Baney's factories, seems to have read him. With a disconcerting combination of pride and modesty, he tells us that he sells more books in Bulgaria than Stephen King – around two million copies, to be precise. Then he mentions, in passing, that he was a contender for the Nobel prize 25 years ago; that he was a good friend of Fellini's; that David Lean was interested in filming one of his earlier Bogomil sagas, with either Laurence Olivier, Charlton Heston or Omar Sharif. When we ask a factory manager, who is clearly overcome at meeting him, exactly what he represents for the nation, he shrugs and replies simply, "Our soul."

FOR THE FINAL DAYS OF OUR TRIP WE ARE BY the sea. As we follow the rugged coastline, Donchev relates that it was from cliffs near here that 40 young girls, fearful of being raped by Turkish invaders, tied their long plaits together and jumped to their deaths. Now these windy drops belong to Baney, as do the beaches below. Most of the hotels we have

stayed in this week belong to Baney. They range from seriously deluxe resorts to a primitive dump in the mountains where the bathroom has a tap but no basin.

On our last night together, Baney is in high spirits. It's his name day. We are to have stuffed carp for dinner, a traditional dish, and one that is mercifully fetta-free. Coolidge is in a good mood too, distributing gifts (piggy banks in the

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shape of a stallion's head) and excited about our suggestion of a computer game as an adjunct to the film. Later in the evening, Giorgio, whom we have been avoiding for days, takes us aside: "So, you think Mel Gibson will do this film?"

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Mel's involvement as if it were a possibility.

"He is your colleague Robert Gibson's brother, no?"

Well, actually, no, he's not.

"Then, cousin?"

No, we never said that either, looking to Coolidge for an explanation. He's the only possible source of this fabrication. His

irrepressible I-can-fix-it enthusiasm seems to have overflowed into persuading the Bank of America's Bulgarian branch that all Gibsons in Australia are related. Right now, of course, he has disappeared, perhaps to the bathroom. We

have visions of being held to ransom until Mel agrees to sign up for the role of chief Bogomil.

As it turns out, negotiations for the film grind to a halt over our insistence that Donchev's script needs a major rewrite, which no-one is willing to pay for. We learn from snippets of conversation that previous attempts to get the project up with producers from France have faltered over the same issue. Our attempt to explain, as tactfully as possible, that neither Mel nor any other major star will consider a script in this state, falls on deaf ears. Even Coolidge seems stumped by this impasse. Now our only priority is to be allowed to leave the country without being threatened by axemen.

We never saw the valley where roses are grown to produce the intoxicating Atar that once made Bulgaria a perfumer's paradise. There must be a beautiful Bulgaria, but we missed it, travelling at warp velocity. On the way to the airport, Donchev takes us to a trash and treasure market in Sofia where we notice a large quantity of Nazi memorabilia for sale, reminding us of Bulgaria's alliance with the Germans during World War II. Today mementos and trophies from that time are being sold by people desperate for food.

At the airport we are handed farewell bottles of cherry brandy and a cowbell with an embroidered handle. Our gifts to them include boomerangs, caps and chocolate replicas of the Sydney Opera House.

We are sad to be leaving Donchev, but we can't wait to share our new feta recipes with friends. As for Mel, if he really wants to play the Bogomil equivalent of Braveheart, well, good luck to the bugger. ■



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