

PRESS CLIP



VAGABOND

Issue 06, March, 2007

by Lucy Cooper;
photography by Dragomir Ushev and Top
Form Studio

TRADE ROUTES

Jim Loftus trades the campaign bus for the director's chair

Loftus, a member of Clinton's White House staff, political advisor on the Kerry campaign, reporter and friend of the late Hunter S Thompson, a tireless talker with an absurdist sense of humour, an infamous foul-mouth, and a healthy "spiritual revulsion" toward George Bush, had no experience in feature film making, but a hell of a lot of political credentials on his side.

The back-stabbing movie business promised to be a holiday after the political circus – "it really knocks years off your life. Four cities a day for 11 months. If you're still standing at the end of it, whether you've won or not, it's something of a miracle," says Loftus of life on the campaign trail. Besides, it would have to be easier to make a film about "the ill-tempered band of wandering rabble", as Hunter S Thompson described those in the world of international political consultancy, than to actually have to work among them.

And it was. "When you compare running a campaign with making a movie, running a campaign is much more chaotic and harder to control, making a movie is just the opposite," Loftus discovered.

Making the Movie

Loftus had his first encounter with Bulgaria in 2003 when he came to work on a campaign for Bulgaria's centre-right SDS party, or the Union of Democratic Forces. He teamed up with the Top Form Studio production company to make 31 TV ads. "The running joke was always: 'And then we're gonna make a movie...but we need a script.' So, one day I said, 'Ok, I'll write the script.' And here we are, it's very strange."

Here's how it happened.

"I left here in July 2005 to roam around Europe with a friend of mine for a month in a beat-up old Volvo I have in Holland. She's this crazy biker chick and she wanted to bring her bike – 'Greeaat, why wouldn't

you want to bring your \$10,000 racing bike?!' – I didn't care where I went, I just wanted to get off the campaign trail and get drunk."

And so began Trade Routes. A political thriller laced with espionage, and a shot of Eastern European intrigue on the side.

"During the month, I was telling her a story. At the end of it she said, 'Great story, go and write it.' I was like, 'Awh, I don't know...' but then I just said, 'Ok, I'm going to do it.' So, from 17 September I barricaded myself into a cabin in the woods in Holland and didn't come out until I had a first draft."

To the eternal annoyance of friends of his in Hollywood in the "movie biz", one year later, by 17 September 2006, they had a rough cut of the movie – "and that is unheard of."

The story came loosely from an unpublished novel Loftus had been working on, reworked and set here in Bulgaria. "Now it's really about this place in the present day."

And it's one of the rare films to be shot in Bulgaria which is actually about Bulgaria. It's also unusual for having a cast of British and Bulgarian actors with dialogue in both languages and subtitles.

"A lot of films come to Bulgaria because it can be a background for someplace else, like Los Angeles in the 1930s for example. But one of the priorities of the movie was also to make sure that, visually, Sofia, and Bulgaria in general, are represented," says Trade Routes' US producer Ian Marquardt, also a veteran of the US political circuit and a first-time movie maker, who came from a campaign in Ukraine to work with Loftus on the movie.

"I always thought it would be great if we had 50,000,000 dollars, we could film this in LA and make it look like Bulgaria! I love the absurd image of that," Loftus adds mischievously. The action takes place against the backdrop of an imagined prime ministerial campaign. Gregory Marinov (Georgi Zlatarev, The Grey Zone, Spartacus) is the prime minister's chief advisor. In a country which since the fall of Communism in 1989 has not re-elected any government for a second term, he is faced with the challenge of successfully staging a tough re-election campaign. The outcome of this will determine

TRADE ROUTES

whether the country remains in the control of the centre-right, or falls into the hands of the outmoded Socialists – "the failure from the past" – or the shadowy and sinister neo-fascists.

Marinov's path is intertwined with the destinies of the other main characters – a former secret service agent, played by Kosta Tsonev Bulgaria's answer to Laurence Olivier; a wide-eyed new CIA recruit; a cynical CIA veteran, and a smart-talking US political consultant. "There will be people trying to match characters to real life individuals and that's an interesting parlour game, but at the end of the day it represents a reality that's here now," says Loftus. But he admits that the political consultant character is a bit of self-parody. "He's a bit of a rogue element. It's partly self-parody, partly homage to my dead friend Hunter S Thompson."

Loftus read Thompson's *On the Campaign Trail* at the age of 14. "It put me on the road to politics in a weird way," he says. Later, after he had started on his own career in politics, Loftus and Thompson became friends. "Still, if somebody said to me right now: you could either have a conversation with Teodor Dostoyevski or Hunter S Thompson, I would have to flip a coin!"

"The beautiful thing about that book (*On the Campaign Trail*) is that it's Hunter at his most powerfully analytical about a serious thing," says Loftus. "There's a lot of funny and strange Hunter stuff in it, but it's a very serious book about politics, about what happens out there and about how this process, as absurd as it is, relates to history. It was more than just 'there are free drinks on the road!' – there are real ideas actually getting knocked around out there."

And *Trade Routes* knocks around a few ideas of its own. It explores the insidious role of the US intelligence services in global politics, the cynicism of the "Democracy Business" and the human costs involved in the exchanges between nations. It also touches on issues that are particularly Bulgarian, like the intrigue surrounding the Communist Secret Services secret dossiers, and questions surrounding the effectiveness of democracy.

Secret Files and Conspiracy Theories

The topic of the secret files is inescapable in Bulgaria. If you come from a country

PRESS CLIP

TRADE ROUTES

that doesn't have these kind of skeletons lurking in the closet – and threatening to pop out at any moment – it is difficult to grasp just what a compelling hold it has over the psyche of the nation. "It was interesting to me, the idea your past is somehow semipermanent, that it can be existing somewhere and you can't get at it, and you have reasons to want to get at it and make it disappear," says Loftus.

Though Trade Routes isn't really an espionage story – "it's more a political thriller and a sad human tale" – it would be not only unrealistic, but pretty much impossible to make a political movie about Bulgaria and not to include the elusive, all-pervasive files. "Anybody we talk to about someone who's famous, wealthy or successful, it always comes back to the past – did they, didn't they?" says Marquardt.

"This idea of files, files, files – it's the flotsam from the Cold War, so it's very much an element of the story in the movie. This former state security guy's file is still there, he didn't pay to get it out in 1990. Our guy is a Bulgarian archetypal figure in a way," explains Loftus. "It comes back to Bulgarian state security, these dark figures. To me it's fascinating. I don't know if it's true, half true, or total nonsense."

But he doesn't believe that the files should be opened.

"No, it's a witch hunt. Even if it's true, leave it and move on."

Democracy – "Are we doing it right?"

For Loftus, who has worked on campaigns across the globe, from the States to Colombia to Indonesia, Bulgaria is particularly interesting politically because of the questions it raises about the limits of democracy.

"To me this is a critical question. The expectations here for democracy in 1990 were so incredible. The system that they had been under for 50 years then was revealed to these guys as this total piece of shit, crazy, wrong, ash-heap of history type thing, and therefore democracy must be the exact opposite of that, right? Everybody's motivated by doing good and cares about the country and so on. Then 17 years later, the reality is that there hasn't been a government re-elected, not one in all that time," he says.

"People say to you very self-consciously, 'what do you think of democracy here, it's different isn't it?' and what they mean is 'we're not doing it right are we?' Which is very naive and wonderful and beautiful and human. And you're like 'that's shit, what do you mean it's not right?' 'Well, why is it not translating, why does it work in America and not here?'"

The Loftus index for judging whether a democracy is working is: "when 98 percent of people in this country believe that all politicians are assholes, that's the sign of a functioning democracy."

Lack of delivery on economic growth and the low average monthly salary – about 300 leva a month – are, he believes, the big reasons why politicians are given "one shot and they're out."

In the movie, the Socialist party represents the country's past failures. "I don't think the Socialists are the future of Bulgaria," says Loftus. "But that's just a personal opinion. I'm a centrist and think parties in the centre right of this country are a good choice, but somebody's going to have to deliver. When economic prosperity happens in Bulgaria, and it sure as hell hasn't happened yet, it will be a good, stabilising thing."

Demagogues and Cynics

The other opposition party in the movie is a shady, sinister bunch of neo-fascists. Sound familiar? Yes, Loftus admits there is an element of Ataka, Bulgaria's ultra-nationalist far right party, in the film. "I did, apologies to Ataka, lay it on thick in the movie, in a more menacing way, I turned it up a bit," he says. "To me they're much more menacing in the film than they are in real life."

In reality, he believes that there is an "astounding" level of cynicism behind Ataka. "As an outsider, on one level it's almost fun to watch because I'm detached. But in the part of my heart that's attached to Bulgaria and the future of the country, I'm like, come on!"

Rather than being focused on the future of Bulgaria, they are just playing a game, Loftus believes. "On some level it's serving a purpose, underscoring the absurdity of it all. People like Ataka, or any party, can do their stupid little dance and I think all these guys do that. For all the maturing nature of the Bulgarian

body politic, their political leaders are childish I hate to say. In the movie one of the characters looks at the polls and says the Bulgarian voters are like children, all they want to do is taste the next candy. That's the condescending point of view of an insider political consultant. I think the truth in Bulgaria is just the opposite: political leaders here across the spectrum are self-serving and childish. They're all infighting."

So, what of the future? "There has to be a generation of political leaders here that has yet to emerge, who are going to be a little more focused. There are serious challenges and they need serious political leaders who aren't angels to come to the fore and deal with them. Brain Drain, the shrinking population, it's a big deal. Europe is going to transform this place," he says and then adds, "I'm an interested observer. It's not my country. So you have foreigners coming here shooting their mouths off about politics in Bulgaria. My opinion is they're in pretty good shape."

A Strange Kind of Sheen

And the European transformation is already starting.

"San Francisco in the mid 1960s, was a very special time and place to be a part of," wrote Hunter S Thompson in Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas (1972). "...We were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave. So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look west, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high-water mark – that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back."

Bulgaria's high-water mark may still be way off over the horizon, but with the right kind of eyes the changing of the tide is already visible.

"Bulgaria's already getting this strange kind of sheen on it, in a very quiet way. It's what I saw when I looked at Seattle in 1989. It was the 'coming place'," says Loftus. "That's happening here on some level. It is the coming place. It is a dumb luck thing that we happen to be making a movie about this place at this time, and it might just catch an element of that."

You can see for yourself: Trade Routes premieres at the Sofia International Film Festival this month

VAGABOND

Issue 06, March, 2007

by Lucy Cooper;
photography by Dragomir Ushev and Top
Form Studio