

Actors, Guns, & Money

Through determination, fresh paint, and enough pyrotechnics to simulate Armageddon, Lloyd Simandl has taken an abandoned potato bunker and created a B-movie assembly line.

by DAVID SPERANZA

Steven Spielberg once said the movie that most inspired him to become a film director was *Lawrence of Arabia*. Lloyd Simandl, a moviemaker who has turned a profit with more consistency than Spielberg, claims no such lofty inspiration. "I was kicked out of the music conservatory when I was 15," says the Czech-born producer. "It was something to do."

It's something the 45-year-old Simandl does exceedingly well, despite what people may say about the actual quality of his movies. Those movies come with titles like *Chained Heat II*, *Cracker Jack*, *Empire of Ash*, and *Dangerous Prey*—movies that most people will never see outside of a video store. And yet if anyone (other than Spielberg) can be said to have his finger on what makes a successful picture, Simandl is the man: of the 14 feature films his company has released since 1984, all but one have made money.

And while he admires such direc-



Lloyd Simandl's *Cracker Jack*, available at video stores everywhere.

tors as Stanley Kubrick, Sam Peckinpah, and fellow countryman Miloš Forman, he shuns any attempts at art in his own work. "I'm just trying to do business," he says.

That business, until now based in Vancouver and Los Angeles, recently established its production headquarters in a small town sixty kilometers south of Prague, in the agricultural community of Milín. It is here that Simandl's Czech company, North American Pictures, has been building modern sound

stages rivaling any in the West, while simultaneously shooting its latest action film, an *Aliens*-inspired thriller starring Vincent Spano. As John Coates, the film's special effects supervisor, puts it: "The paint was drying when we got here for the first day of shooting."

If Simandl has his way, he will be making movies here for at least the next seven years, boosting a flagging Czech film industry and saving himself half a million dollars per film in the process.

Like many Czechs, Luboš Simandl left his home country in 1968, just after the Soviets were expressing their opinion of the Prague Spring. He made his way to Canada and re-christened himself Lloyd Simandl. He spent his early days working in a shoe factory, studying medical sciences, ultimately becoming the head of hematology at the British Columbia Institute of Technology. In 1979, while still at the institute, he made his first attempt at moviemaking—an erotic thriller he describes today as a cross between *The Story of O* and *Basic Instinct*.

"I mortgaged myself and a few of my friends to make it," he says. And while it wasn't a bad picture, its distribution was handled badly and he lost "just about everything." He vowed then never to make another movie until he knew how to sell it.

Following several years "dabbling" in exercise videos and commercials—and volunteering as an assistant to a New York film distributor in order to learn the ropes—Simandl formed North American Releasing in 1984. The company's first film, *Ladies of the Lotus*, was made for \$160,000 and grossed half a million dollars in its first three days. By 1989 hematology was behind him, and he's been making movies, with alarming success, ever since.

"Larry, just before the shot I want the set cleared so we can have a minute to let the actors get into it."

Michael Mazo, the director of *Downdraft*, stands on an apple box peering into the dimly lit set

through a large opening designed to accommodate lights. Despite his slight build and quiet presence he is undoubtedly the eye around which this conscientious crew buzzes.

On the floor of the set, which the day before was blown up in a dramatic shootout, actor John Pyper-Ferguson lies on his back awaiting his death scene. A large purple wound bulges from his belly, and his long dark hair and goatee are smeared with blood. An effects person sprinkles black ash over him as small fires flare up in isolated bits of wreckage that once constituted the high-tech electronics lab known as "P4."

For all intents and purposes, it could be the set of any low-budget action film produced in the last 15 years. What distinguishes it is that it's the first production to be shot on a sound stage that only weeks before housed hundreds of empty potato crates. The evidence sits just next door, on the unfinished "Stage C": meter-tall crates piled four high and perhaps 12 deep, crouching in the darkened, hangar-like space like something from the final scene of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

"When I came here and they told me they were converting potato factories into studios," says Charles Wood, the film's production designer, "I was somewhat skeptical. But actually the studio space itself is as good as anything. They're good stages, they're clean, with good ceiling heights and good access."

It was one of the happier coincidences for Simandl that potatoes and movie crews require similar environments. Thus the meter-thick walls, 2 1/2-meter-thick ceilings, ventilation shafts, and drainage ditches—all used to keep potatoes under optimum storage conditions—were ideal for the sound- and weather-proofing needed for film work. The four storage facilities cover 3,456 square meters (11,338 sq. ft.), and when renovations are complete they will comprise the second largest sound stages in the Czech Republic, just behind Barrandov.

Barrandov, previously the country's only significant option for studio space, was unsuitable to

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Simandl for a variety of reasons, only one of which was its western-level prices. An equally important reason for setting up his own shop was practical: The Barrandov studios "are not designed for the kind of movies I make. They cannot do any explosions or gunfire, because the buildings are [too] old."

Enter Milín.

Exactly fifty years ago, this sleepy village of under 2,000 was the site of the last European battle of World War II. In a modern-day twist, it now hosts a cinematic villain threatening to ignite World War III. Yet despite the daily rumble of an encroaching Armageddon, few Milín residents seem to care.

"They're just over there doing their job," said one local merchant. "Sometimes they come in here and buy paint." Nekl Pavel, the town's young mayor (and a former employee at the potato warehouse) is more impressed. "They've made that space valuable and useful,



Vincent Spano, who has acted for moviemakers as diverse as John Sayles, and Francis Ford Coppola, makes his action-movie debut in Lloyd Simandl's *Downdraft*.

unlike before when there were only enough potatoes to fill one building."

Unlike many makers of exploitation films, Simandl appears especially sensitive to his surroundings and the working conditions of his employees. In fact, in a business where the human element is often missing, Simandl comes off as a surprisingly decent individual. Chris Binney, *Downdraft*'s third assistant director, echoes the thoughts of many when he says, "I think Lloyd is a very good guy; I think he's honest. I think if you're straight with him, he's straight with you."

Vincent Spano, who has acted for moviemakers as diverse as John Sayles, Francis Ford Coppola, and Roger Vadim, confirms this impression of Simandl. "I think Lloyd is a great man. There just seems to be a great respect for him here."

This attitude extends to nearly everyone he works with, from his 19-year-old P.R. and distribution person Andrea Dědičová, to the man with whom he alternates in the director's chair, Michael Mazo.

In the best of all worlds, Simandl's movies would include more than simply action films. "Unfortunately," he says, "there is nothing else the world wants. They don't want French or English or Czech movies; they want American mainstream entertainment." Mazo concurs: "The safe thing right now is to work in the action genre, because that's what the foreign market eats up. I think we're all desiring to do something a little bit different, but it's a market-driven company and we all have to be aware of where the dollars

come from."

Only once did Simandl attempt something different—a period romance set in Karlovy Vary which Dědičová says "Lloyd did with his heart." Called *Heaven's Tears*, it was "the only picture I lost money on. Everybody tells me it's a beautiful movie—people cried. But it doesn't have enough sex, it doesn't have enough action, it doesn't have enough names, and market-wise it was a big, big loss. So there'll be no sequel." But didn't he get any personal satisfaction from making it? "Very expensive satisfaction," he laughs. "I don't want to lose money for art's sake."

Comparisons with Roger Corman, whose exploitation pictures of the Sixties and Seventies trained a generation of young filmmakers, are obvious. Simandl, who knows Corman personally and considers him "a person who nobody can even look up to because he's a genius," seems pleased with the comparison. And yet he thinks most of Corman's more familiar pictures couldn't compete on the international market today because the quality required is so high.

According to Simandl, international buyers don't make large distinctions between his own "high-gloss, high-look" movies and Hollywood's—but only because he makes his movies look as close to A-level as possible. It's a system he's refined to a science.

At his Milín studios, Simandl's plan is to shoot ten months out of the year, and complete five to six movies. By continuing to groom a young generation of Czechs—and a handful of local English-speakers—in the ways of American moviemaking, Simandl hopes to see the company running itself in two to three years, freeing him from the tedium of day-to-day operations.

"My ultimate goal is for this studio to still function when I'm not here anymore," he says. When asked if this is so he can sit back and watch his stocks rise, he laughs.

"No, so they can bring flowers to my grave!" ❧