



The Stillman show

Matthew Stillman is a man who makes an instant impression. We arrange to meet outside South Kensington Tube station. But when the lift Sin Londoner finally arrives - clad from top to leather-buckled toe in black, a mobile phone glued to his ear - the first thing he says is, "Can I borrow a couple of dollars to pay the taxi fare? I've only got dollars left." So that's how you make your money, I think to myself.

This 33-year-old's name might not mean much in the UK yet, but it will soon, thanks to his eye-catching rise from student to movie mogul. Eight years after moving to Prague he's eastern Europe's King of the Flicks. He was also recently voted one of the 50 key players in the international entertainment business by the Hollywood Reporter.

His film company, Stillking, produces commercials, pop promos and films for a host of corporate, music biz and Hollywood clients. Last year it shot about 150 commercials for the likes of Pepsi, Nike and Volkswagen. This year sees the release of two Stillking-produced movies: *Dungeons & Dragons*, featuring Jeremy Irons, and *From Hell*, a \$25m Jack the Ripper tale starring Johnny Depp.

The company has been growing by "over 40 per cent a year", according to Stillman. Annual turnover has hit \$30m and Stillking employs 130 full-time staff, though he declines to reveal its profits. On any given day, as many as 500 other people might be temporarily on his payroll - working on projects in Prague or elsewhere in eastern Europe.

Publicly, he plays down the significance of being ranked alongside the likes of Lachlan Murdoch, Silvio Berlusconi and Greg Dyke in the Hollywood Reporter power list, saying with a chuckle: "It's very flattering but I try not to take these things too seriously." Still, he hasn't done badly for someone who

started out in business with \$500, a typewriter and a telephone.

One of three children, Matthew Stillman had a comfortable upbringing in Richmond, on the affluent outskirts of south-west London. He is from a family of achievers. His grandfather led a body called the 1948 Group, which developed UK trade links with communist China. His father imported everything from porcelain lamps to paperweights from the Far East. His mother worked her way through the ranks at Air France, eventually becoming head of the airline's Heathrow ground staff.

He was educated at University College School, London, which has a history of grooming high-achievers - its alumni include Sir Chris Bonington, Sir Stephen Spender, British Airways

chairman Lord Marshall of Knightsbridge, Sacha Baron-Cohen (Ali G) and Alex Garland, author of cult 1996 novel, *The Beach*, upon which last year's film starring Leonardo DiCaprio was based.

After graduating from Sussex University (where he studied politics) Stillman tried to break into the British film business. But the economy was in the doldrums and the industry was in terrible shape. "I called production companies looking for work and got a temporary

job as a runner for Chris Evans at a satellite station, but there were very few openings," he says.

So, when the opportunity to visit a friend in Prague came, he jumped at the chance. It was 1992 - only three years since the velvet revolution, and the Czech Republic was still making the transition from communism to capitalism. While there, Stillman visited Barrandov Studios, a sprawling complex with seven huge sound stages and a 40-acre back lot, founded in the

Double-Czech: On the set of Stillking's Jack the Ripper film, *From Hell* (above), an extraordinary reconstruction of 19th-century Whitechapel on the outskirts of Prague; Robert Carlyle opens fire (below) during production of *Punkett & Macleane*, also in the city

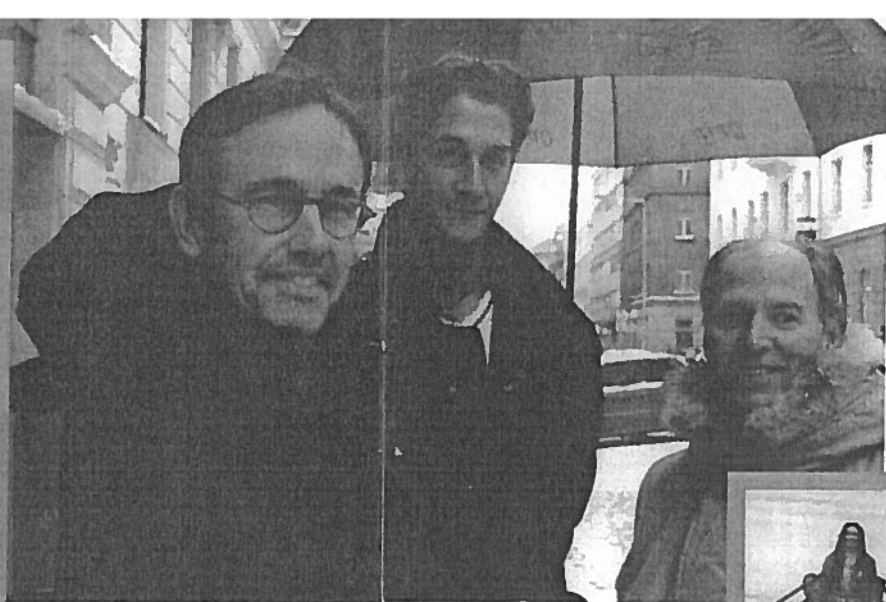


As Hollywood goes mad for Prague, the Englishman behind the city's premier film company wants to stay one step ahead

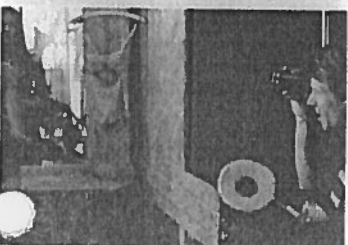
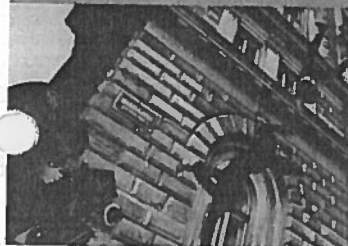




"Sure, I made mistakes, but being in Prague I had the chance to learn from them - I couldn't have done that in London"



The tall guy: Stillman (centre) on the set of *The Bourne Identity*. Flanked by producers Patrick Crowley (left) and Frank Marshall



Take three: Scenes from the set of last year's Stilling Pepsi commercial, directed by Michael Bay of *Armageddon* fame

"I knew nothing," he recalls. "They asked me detailed questions like, 'Is there negatives insurance?' and I said, 'Yes, we have insurance,' not knowing what they were talking about. But they agreed to do it with us." When the Lang crew arrived in Prague for the two-day shoot, however, Stillman got his first reality-check. "It became clear I didn't know what I was doing and the producer ordered me off the set," he says.

It was a setback, but Stillman wasn't going to give up that easily. His overheads were cheap - a beer and goulash was under a pound in Prague, and he lived in a cheap, windowless basement apartment. A few months later, Dentsu, the major Japanese advertising agency, needed a Prague location for a cigarette commercial and hired Stilling, which netted 10 per cent profit on the £150,000 budget. The company was in business.

At this point, Nick Spikings bailed out, "because it was a such a scramble trying to keep things going", remembers Stillman. There was still a touch of the frontier town about Prague. "Communication with the west was difficult and the phone lines were always going down." And he had yet to learn the local lingo. "At that point no one in Prague really spoke English - It was all Russian or German and I spoke neither." He points out that he now speaks fluent Czech.

Despite these difficulties, Stillman was determined to tough it out in Prague. Besides, the "relative anarchy" had created opportunity. "The more legislation and bureaucracy there is, the harder it is to get things done," he says. "At that time there was very little red tape. If you were determined enough to get things done, you could."

The new kid on the city's movie-making block learnt fast. He made contacts and put time and effort into promoting Stilling globally, flying out to London and LA to meet ad- and movie-industry executives. Gradually the hard work paid off. In 1994, Stillman pitched successfully for the chance to make a £100,000 advert to celebrate the United Nations' 50th anniversary in 1995. Blue-chip accounts soon followed and that year Stilling began making adverts for IBM and Nestlé, among others.

By now the company was providing across-the-board production services: finding locations; putting a crew on a job; managing a project's finances; hiring the art department, and constructing the props. It was

a big job and there was plenty of scope for things to go wrong.

"Sure, I made mistakes, but being in Prague I got the opportunity to learn from them - something I couldn't have done in London," says Stillman.

"Sometimes I pitched too low for a job and ended up out of pocket. Or a local contact who promised to secure a location would let me down. But, crucially, we got things right more often than we got things wrong. It was all part of the learning curve."

1995 was breakthrough year, the company made more than 20 commercials. With its growing expertise in production management, the progression to films seemed a natural one, and the year also saw the making of Stilling's first feature, *Hidden in Silence*, a TV drama for a US cable network about a Polish girl who hid 13 Jews from the Nazis.

These days, Stilling is well and truly established, its workload split between movie-making and commercials. It has now made 13 TV or feature films - including *Plunkett & Macleane*, *The Mists of Avalon* and *From Hell*. Two-thirds of its work is still generated by the Prague office but the company's other main east European venture has also taken off. Stilling's Warsaw subsidiary, opened three years ago, is now the leading maker of commercials in Poland.

The company enjoys enormous prestige in Prague, where it rents a modern open-plan office at Barrandov Studios. Most days you will find Stillman at his glass desk there, quietly orchestrating events via his mobile phone and laptop, while several dozen producers and their assistants work the phones beneath a white board, detailing work in progress, that stretches across an entire wall.

Among Stillman's fans is Eric Fellner, co-chairman of Working Title Productions (the British film company responsible for pictures such as *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *Billy Elliot*), who worked with him on *Plunkett & Macleane*. His biggest vote of confidence, however, came when Elizabeth Goth, the Dow Jones heiress, took a 20 per cent stake in Stilling for an undisclosed sum.

Stillman, who radiates confidence, puts his success down to three things.

He acknowledges the importance of being in the right place at the right time. TV and film production has exploded in the Czech capital in recent years and he admits: "I don't think I could have done what I've done if I

turned up in Prague now. The industry is so much more developed."

He also pinpoints the importance of building a reputation for trust. "It's all about contacts and delivery," he says. "You have to make sure you come clean on what you say you can do because the key thing in this business is reputation. People need to be able to trust you to get the job done."

Finally, he puts much of Stilling's success down to the fact that he has gathered around him a group of young, energetic, English-speaking Czechs. "Most joined with little or no film business experience but are now dealing with a lot of the production management issues," says Stillman. "They've played a vital role in enabling the business to grow so quickly."

The film business, perhaps more than any other, is full of people whose ambition outstrips their talent. But Stillman appears to have the intelligence, vision and strategic overview that will be necessary to guide Stilling to greater heights.

He has proved adept at staying ahead of the game - he it by entering new markets such as Poland or forging alliances with big-hitters in Hollywood and the advertising industry. Though he admits: "Now we have serious investors we have to behave a bit more grown-up. Indeed, the reason I decided to give an investor a stake in the company was to try to grow up as a company. I wanted to bring in serious people and create a stronger management structure."

What motivates him? He naturally insists that, primarily, it's not money - though the fact that he has no desire to float the company, even though doing so would net him millions, suggests he may be telling the truth. "My main concern at the moment is to continue growing the company," he says.

Things seem to be proceeding according to plan. Last month Stilling started shooting a £28m remake of *The Bourne Identity* starring Matt Damon. Stillman is also in talks about a number of other possible feature-films and TV movies, including a sequel to *Black Sheep*, a comedy-drama starring Sir Anthony Hopkins and Chris Rock; *Resident Evil*, based on the video game, and a modern-day version of *Murder on the Orient*

Express. For now, he is happy to let the studios finance the films that Stilling produces - though in the longer run he would like Stilling to develop more of its own projects.

The continued growth of Prague's film industry seems sure to benefit him but he is surprisingly unenthusiastic about the place. "I doubt I'll be based here forever," he says, lighting a cigarette.

"The important thing to me is to go where the dynamism is, be it Prague or wherever." With that, his mobile phone springs to life and it is time for Stillman to head off and cut his next deal. But you know what? He insists on settling his measly £2 taxi fare debt before he leaves. FT



STILLKING: A SHOWREEL

Plunkett & Macleane (1998)

Starring: Liv Tyler, Robert Carlyle and Jonny Lee Miller

Audience comedy about two 18th-century highway robbers.

Muricans & Dragons (2000)

Starring: Jeremy Irons

A fantasy adventure film based on the cult game of the same name.

UK release date: February 16 2001

The Bourne Identity (2001)

Starring: Matt Damon and Frankie Potente

Thriller based on a Robert Ludlum novel.

UK release date: late 2001

POP PROMOS

Geert Halilwell, David Bowie, Beyoncé, the Pretenders, Duran Duran, Blur, Kid Lang, Olina Carroll and Ozzy Osbourne

COMMERCE

Mercedes, AT&T, Polarnord, Pepsi, Sony, Texaco, VW, Stella Artois, Cadillac, IBM, Adidas, One 2 One, Audi, Coca-Cola, Cadbury, Carlsberg, France Telecom, Honda, Merrill Lynch, Barclays, Fanta, Siemens, Camelot, Samsung