

Matthew Stillman was 24 and broke when he landed in Prague. Four years later he owns one of Europe's hottest film production companies.

Go east

By Richard C. Morais

ANY DOUBTS ABOUT THE PRESTIGE of filmmaker Matthew Stillman were dispelled the moment my British Airways flight from London touched down at Prague's airport. With much bowing and scraping, I was separated from the crush and ushered into a waiting car—with chauffeur.

And this just because I was Stillman's guest. Who is this guy?

In the spring of 1992, at the age of 24, this 6-foot-5, boyishly handsome,

middle-class Londoner arrived in Prague on a week's vacation. It changed his life. He had been trying to get film work in London, working as an extra one day, making a charity's documentary the next. "London was a gray entity," he says.

Prague, by contrast, was alive, throwing off its past. Stillman and a friend spent their vacation investigating the crumbling Barrandov Film Studios, which had been founded by

President Vaclav Havel's uncles in 1931. They found sprawling, raw soundstage space and skilled craftsmen. "A kind of dust had settled on it all," recalls Stillman. But the facilities were intact and there were plenty of skilled technicians looking for work, at wages that were very low by international standards.

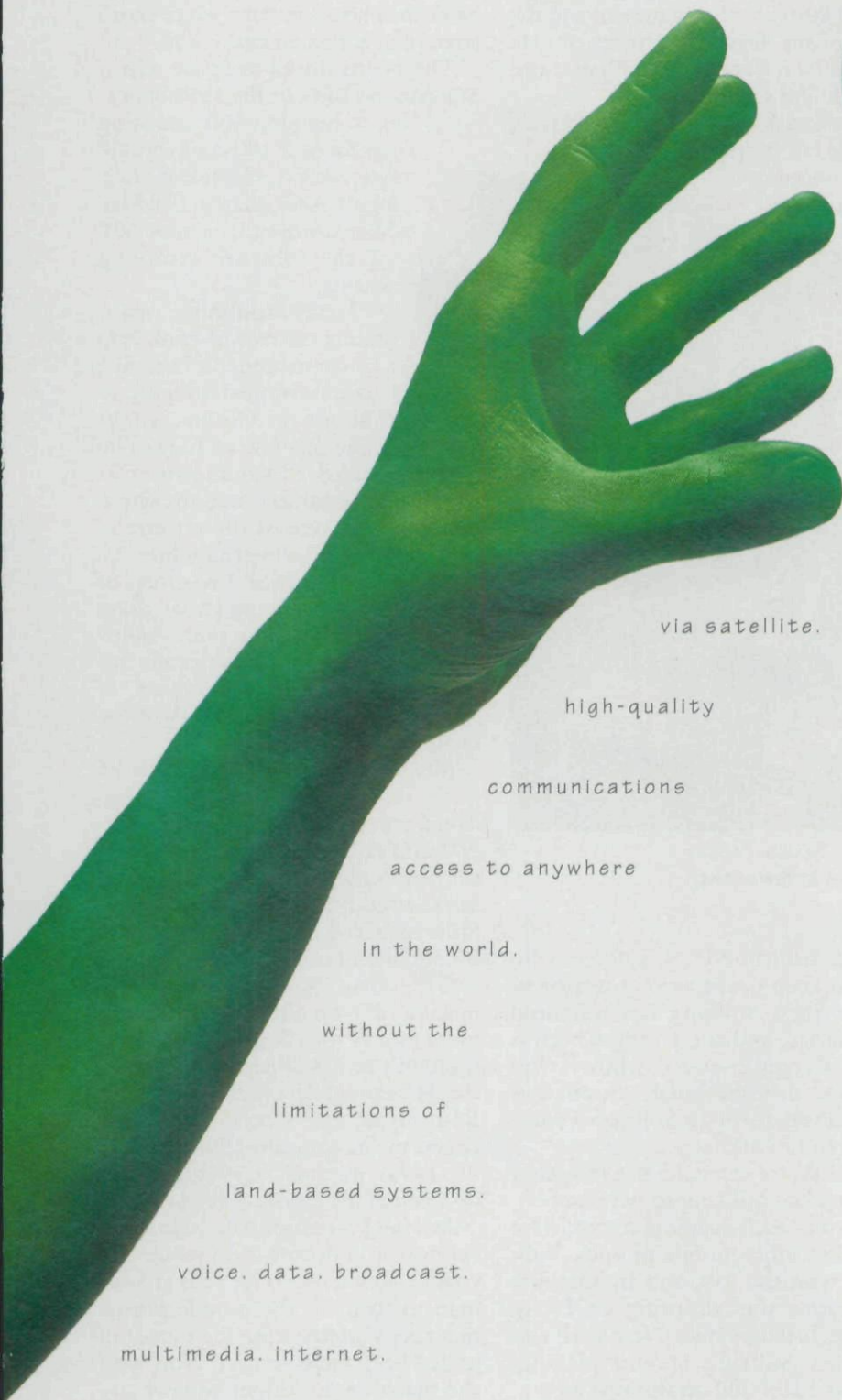
Stillman's job-hunting days were over. On the spot he became an entrepreneur. In late 1992, he and a partner founded Stillking Productions Ltd. with \$500. They put a typewriter and an answering machine in a \$150-a-month room in the Barrandov Film Studios.

The partners raised some cash running a hot Prague nightclub, which cash Stillman immediately rolled into an airline ticket to Los Angeles. k.d. lang, the pop singer, was looking for a Central European location for her next video, and Stillman pitched her

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Matthew Stillman and his Stillking Productions staff
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production executives. "I knew nothing," recalls Stillman. "They asked me detailed production questions, like was there negatives insurance, and I said, 'Yes, we have insurance.' Somehow they agreed to do it with us."

When the k.d. lang team arrived in Prague for the two-day shoot, Stillman got his first reality check. "It became clear I didn't know what I was doing. The producer ordered me off the set," he says tersely.

Stillman was out of business, but

In 1994 the United Nations tapped Stillman to make a commercial for its fiftieth anniversary series, to be aired worldwide on the Turner networks. Stillman had a budget of some \$150,000 for this assignment and the pick of any director in the region. He chose Ivan Zacharias, a 22-year-old Czech film school student.

Zacharias made a deceptively simple but deeply moving spot about the courage

laptop on his glass desk—all covered with dust, ash, sticky coffee and coke stains. Next door, 26 full-time producers and assistants—all bilingual Czechs—smoke Marlboro Lights and work the phones under a white board stretching across an entire wall.

The board drives the pace. On it Stillman has laid out the 1996 shooting schedule, 400 shooting days for over 100 commercials: Fiat, AT&T, Heineken, Kellogg's, Audi, Mazda, Goldstar. Stillman says that almost 60% of the jobs are returning clients.

James Studholme, managing director of Blink Productions London Ltd., first commissioned Stillking to shoot a Gothic, night scene in a Czech field. The client: Polaroid. "I would conservatively say the same thing anywhere else would have cost three times as much to shoot," says Studholme.

Stillking Production's revenues of \$1.8 million two years ago have, along with the awards on the walls, multiplied, to \$10 million. Net profit this year should be in the region of \$500,000; Stillman owns 90% of the company.

Movies are next. In the last year he has overseen production of four American television films, each delivered under budget. *The Ring*, a film starring Natassja Kinski and Michael York, aired on NBC in late October. Stillman saved NBC \$100,000 on its \$2.3 million budget.

Of course Stillman dreams of making his own films. That will take more money than Stillking has, but it shouldn't be a problem. Mick Hawk, the 34-year-old American president of Bonton AS, the Czech Republic's largest media company (*FORBES*, June 20, 1994), intends to personally put up some of the money Stillman needs.

At Hawk's fashionable Jugendstil apartment in downtown Prague, the volatile young executive yells at Stillman to turn off the mobile phone that keeps interrupting the dinner of grilled beef and rosemary. Now with the machine no longer squawking, Hawk tries to ferret out the secret of Stillman's pull at the Prague airport. Stillman narrows his eyes. "Trade secret," he says. ■



The stars and set of NBC's *The Ring*, shot at Barrandov Studios, Prague
Stillman saved NBC \$100,000, and more films are in the works.

entrepreneurs don't give up. A beer-and-goulash in Prague cost about a dollar, and Stillman slept in a basement flat with no windows. Six months later he got another break. Dentsu, the biggest Japanese ad agency, wanted a Prague location for a cigarette commercial and hired him. His Stillking Productions netted \$24,000 on the \$250,000 budget. Stillman was learning fast. "The producer gave me lessons in what dollies and pieces could do what," he says.

Stillman's partner grew disenchanted and left in 1994, and Stillman replaced him with a local partner, Dan Bergman, who had production skills. Word about Stillking's ability to deliver quality productions at costs 30% to 50% lower than in London or New York spread.

of the frontline U.N. soldiers who try to keep peace among warlords. Since then Stillking has nurtured Zacharias, and the young Czech is now a regular award winner who shoots international campaigns exclusively through Stillman's company and its affiliates.

In July, for example, the ad agency BBDO asked Stillking to bid competitively on a \$1.5 million commercial for LM Ericsson's mobile phones. Stillking won the job, and by October Zacharias was shooting in Hong Kong, Iceland, Italy, New York and Prague. Stillking should pick up almost \$200,000 on this one ad.

In Stillman's expanded Barrandov offices today the taciturn Englishman quietly orchestrates events over his mobile phone and the Macintosh

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