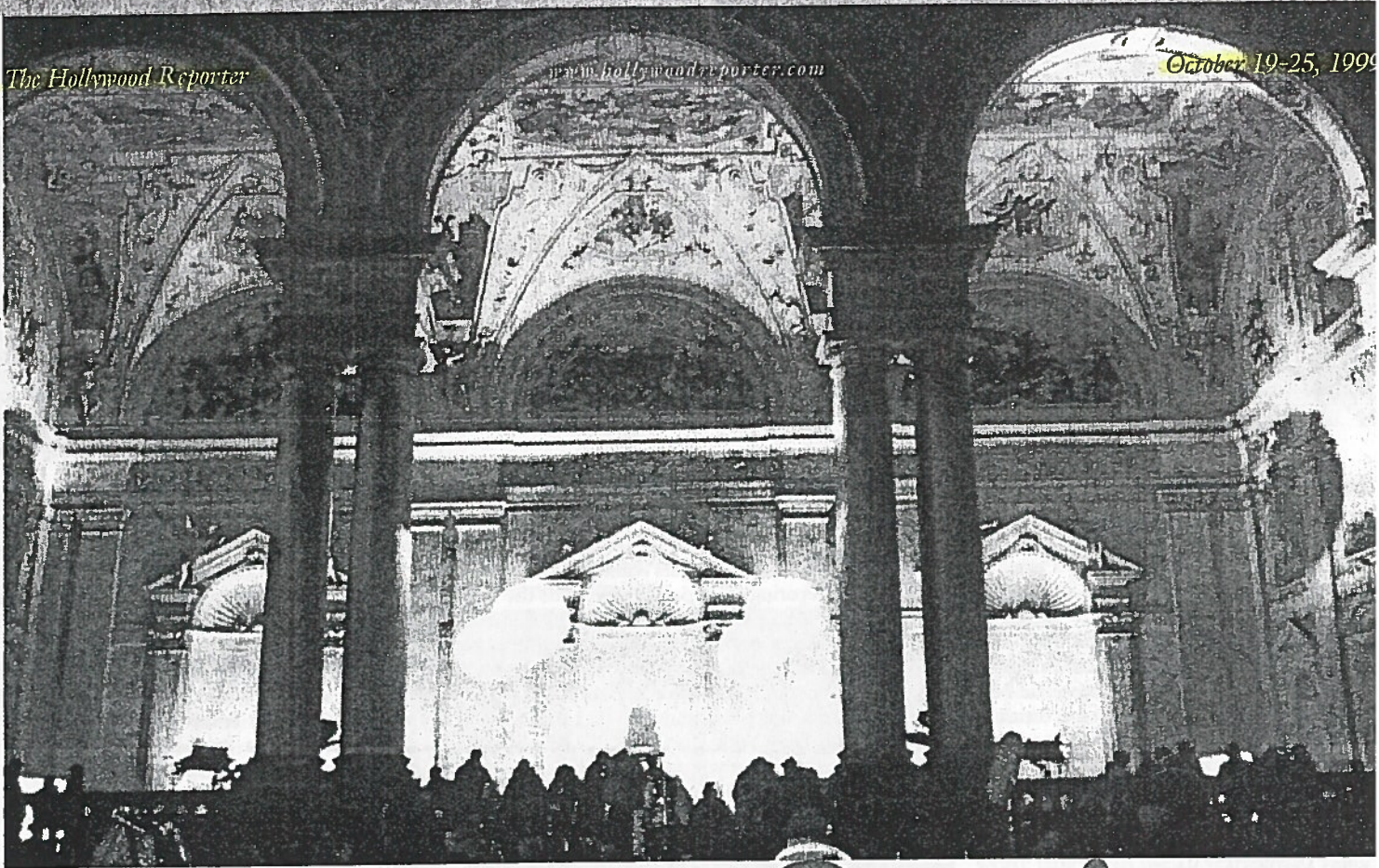


Jaap Buitendijk/USA FILMS



Prague Spring

Eastern Europe's most beautiful destination is now a full-on production haven

BY NICK HOLDSWORTH

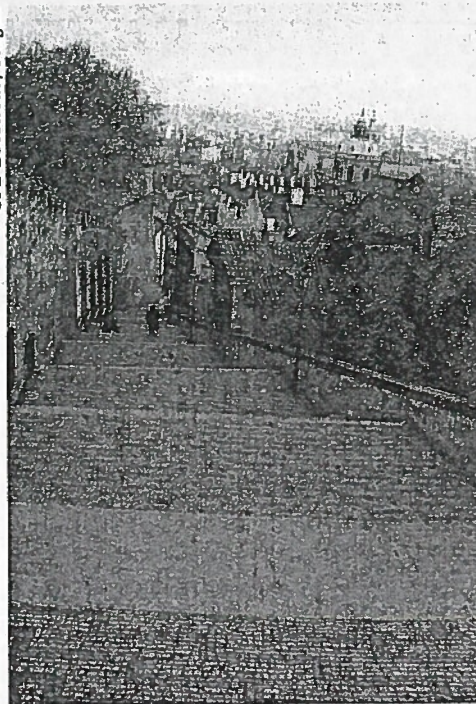
Dungeons and Dragons" could have been made anywhere in the world at any modern film studio. Director Courtney Solomon's film version of the fantasy adventure game depicts a world inhabited by weird creatures and bizarre heroes who exist in no place and no time.

But the Czech Republic and the soundstages of Prague's Barrandov Film Studios were chosen not only for their low costs and professional infrastructure, but also because the small Central European country continues to offer one of the world's most diverse choice of unexploited locations.

Ten years after the Velvet Revolution ushered in democracy after 40 years of communism, Prague is well-established as a low-cost, high-production-value venue for shooting everything from commercials and TV mini-series to full-length features.

The core of skilled local crews and technicians that existed at Barrandov 10 years ago has grown and multiplied as Prague-based line-production companies and service firms have sprung up to cater to largely foreign co-pro-

CFL Locations, Prague



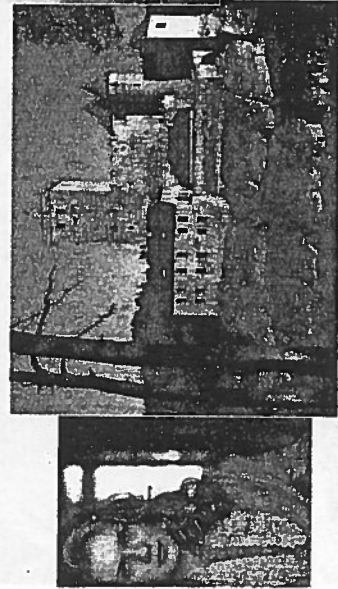
ductions and advertising business.

Although costs have edged up as better trained, English-speaking crews, technical talent and services have begun to emerge, productions shot in the Czech Republic are still 40% to 50% cheaper than those made in London or Los Angeles.

Low costs and a rich pool of talent were key among the factors that enabled Matthew Stillman and David Minkowski of Barrandov Studios-based Stillking Films — the co-producer of "Dungeons and Dragons" with Joel Silver's Silver Pictures — to make the project on their home turf. According to first-time director Solomon, the effects-heavy adventure sag would have cost \$80 million - \$90 million had it been made on a Hollywood studio lot. The final budget, including effects work, came in at \$35 million.

"Dungeons and Dragons" features Jeremy Irons as the dragon-riding villain Profion and

DAY FOR FRIGHT: "Plunkett & Macleane's banquet scene was shot through the Waldstejn Gardens' arches, actually an exterior; Prague doubled in the movie as Newcastle, at left.



CZECH THE BEAUTY: Kirsten Dunst, left, stars in "All For the Gotten," based on novels by Ivan Turgenev and Anton Chekhov; Kost Castle; Prague panoramas; Pernstejn Castle in winter; co-producers Minkowski and Stillman took a Czech crew to Austria to shoot "Into Thin Air: Death on Everest."

Thora Birch as the imperiled Empress Savina who gets help from petty crook Ridley (Justin Whalin of TV's "Lois and Clark") against a pantheon of monsters, freaks, Orcs (armor-coated half-man half-beast foot soldiers) and fearsome flying dragons as he battles to win back a magic rod without which the Empress will lose control of her magical empire.

The quest to defeat evil, save the beautiful ruler and — perhaps — win her heart are all themes that will be familiar to the army of Dungeons and Dragons aficionados the world over. But the film promises to attract a much wider audience than the likely core followers — the million-plus "Dungeons and Dragons" board-game players.

The wealth of castles, ancient villages, unspoiled landscapes and other previously un-filmed locations in the Czech Republic were critical to a film seeking to transfer the fantasy world of an internationally popular cult board game to film. The cult of fantasy-film freaks and cyber-junkies that constitute a substantial avant-



BONING UP: Matthew Stillman, left, at Barrandov Studios; "Dungeons and Dragons" director Courtney Solomon with Jeremy Irons in the "Bone Chapel," a 16th century church festooned with bones from the Plague; producers Kia Jam, Tom Hammel and David Minkowski take five at the embankment of the "burning river" scene.

buzz patrol that invigorates word-of-mouth on a project like this with a potential worldwide audience of 25 million youthful enthusiasts has been working overtime since well before "Dungeons" wrapped location filming in Prague just a few weeks ago. The same fantasy fanatics who lined up to pay \$8 to see the "Star Wars: Episode I — The Phantom Menace" trailer are rattling the Internet for any information about what "D&D" will look like.

Minkowski is the guy who knows. Currently in postproduction in Hollywood working with computer special effects wizards Station X Studios (a new company set up by members of the Digital Domain creative team that won an Academy Award for special effects in "Titanic"), he reckons the combination of exquisite

locations — medieval castles and country houses with cutting-edge visual effects — will only add to the film's dense, atmospheric appeal.

"The new 'Star Wars' came out just as we were preparing for shooting, giving us the benefit of seeing what the latest state-of-the-art visual effects looked like," he says by telephone from Los Angeles. "Now a few months later we are in postproduction and are able to take that as our starting point and go even further."

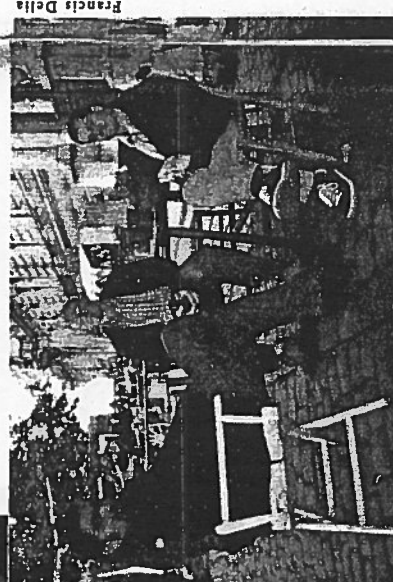
The New York University Tisch School of the Arts graduate whose production experience includes working with Gus van Sant and George Lucas as well as on the Warner Bros. "Batman" films, believes the \$35 million "Dungeons and Dragons" marks a milestone in the development

never really seen on screen before."

That "Dungeons and Dragons" executive producer Joel Silver felt confident enough to entrust the \$35 million (\$10 million spent locally) project to Prague says a lot for the quality and strength of the production industry that has developed here.

Fellow co-producer Sweetpea Entertainment — which together with Stilling began with Solomon to realize a seven-year dream (complicated by a long legal tussle with the board game's owners) to film "Dungeons and Dragons" — looked at and rejected Romania, Hungary and Luxembourg before deciding on the Czech Republic. Luxembourg, which like Ireland offers tempting tax breaks to lure filmmakers, still came in as costlier than Prague despite 29% tax offsets.

Matthew Stillman, the 30-year-old British managing director of Stilling King Films, came to Prague in 1993 a few months after earning his politics degree at Sussex University in Eng-



land. He had been trying to break into the film industry in London but despite some success producing a documentary film, he came up against a wall.

Taking a week off to see a friend teaching English in Prague, he toured Barrandov Studios and was immediately fired with enthusiasm for the opportunities begging to be exploited. Trial and error and some blatant cheek won him a foothold producing pop videos and commercials.

Gathering talented and largely English-speaking Czech professionals around him, he rapidly built Stilling Films into a production services company that grew by 50% a year. In 1999, Stilling will turn over \$20 million for nearly 500 shooting days, including 110 com-



GERMANY? GRAND CANYON? NO, THE CZECH REPUBLIC: Pernstejn Castle doubles for the Alps; a flooded mine dubbed "Amerika" by locals was used in "D&D" as an effects bed; a plaster skull and other props at the Barrandov Studios.

mercials and pop videos and two features — "All Forgotten" (based on Ivan Turgenev's novel "First Love" and Anton Chekhov's "The Peasant Woman") and "D&D."

Last year, Jake Scott's "Plunkett & Macleane," an anarchic costume comedy set in 18th century England and shot here and Czech film "Navrat Idiota" (Return of the Idiot) directed by Sasa Gedeon demonstrated the company's commitment to developing local talent.

Stillman, a tall, youthful man whose informality disguises an astute entrepreneurial awareness, banks on that talent. Some 40 producers work out of the firm's open-plan offices in an old energy plant room at Barrandov, a sprawling complex of seven huge soundstages (three of the largest can connect to give a 200-yard straight shooting run), labs, vast costume and prop departments and a 40-acre back lot 20 minutes from Prague's city center. Strong and long-established relations with top crews and other freelancers enable quality teams to be swiftly assembled for any project.

Stillman, who has set up offices and affiliates in London, Budapest, Warsaw, Cape Town and Sydney, believes Prague's location, infrastructure and access to talent makes it the ideal center for any director or producer contemplating shooting in Europe.

"The service sector in Prague is well established," Stillman says, leaning back in his chair inside the large glass-walled cubicle that is more an open-plan venue for brainstorming than director's office. "The next two years will see the city become a crowded market," he says. "Stillking began as a gateway for information, a route through to answers to questions." The company is making use of the Internet to provide virtual production services as well.

The concept of offering producers and directors a one-stop shop for European productions is not one that is unique to Stilling, according to film industry professionals in Prague, but Stilling is better placed than most to offer a ready-to-run integrated service. Its producers — such as head of production Michal Skop — are young, bilingual, educated and smart.

"We've learned fast in the last few years how to do business with Western co-producers," says the 29-year-old Film Academy of Music and Art, Prague graduate, "and the best now

DPs and art and the key makeup, production and (where necessary) costume designers. Everyone else can be found locally, and virtually every member of a crew from grip on up will have enough English to keep things running smoothly.

Add to these advantages the absence of unions and the ability to negotiate extremely flexible conditions as well as low-cost location fees (the famous Charles Bridge in the heart of Prague can be rented for \$7,000 for early morning shoots; a medieval castle may cost \$14,000 for the day) and Prague looks ideal to producers.

So where are the drawbacks? In a word: fatigue. In the 10 years since Prague opened to filmmakers and tourists, the city has become a Mecca for backpackers, art lovers and holidaymakers from all over the world who flood into the city every year, contributing a massive \$4 billion annually to the Czech economy. Every film shot on location in Prague or the Czech Republic acts as an advertisement, luring in more tourists. The city's 1 million inhabitants are tiring of the crowds and putting pressure on city hall.

Independent producer Václav Marhoul of Prague-based Silverscreen was commissioned two years ago by the city council to write a report on the potential for establishing a Prague film commission. At the time, there were still some positive attitudes towards filmmaking among the politicians. Marhoul proposed a flexible regime of location permits with requirements that producers sound- and/or light-proof residents affected and pay part of their permit fee into a fund to restore historic buildings and monuments.

Nothing was done, and since then public opinion has moved even more sharply against filming in Prague. (During the research phase of this story, a cabdriver launched into a stream of invective when confronted with a road closed for filming.)

"Now city hall is floating the idea of only allowing one film permission for location shooting in Prague a month. We're all hoping that it comes to nothing," says Marhoul, a former head of Barrandov Film Studios. "We all understand how proud people feel of Prague, but it is a very shortsighted idea. Not only money is at stake, but the high level of training and skills given to Czech filmmakers from the huge number of productions that come here is also at risk."

BEGGARS' BANQUET: Take two of the banquet scene in director Jake Scott's "Plunkett & Macleane," using the open-air Senate Gardens as a great hall in London.

understand that it is all about flexibility, professionalism, personality and good working relations." It's these qualities that put Prague ahead of other low-cost Eastern European venues for production, as well as the facilities offered by Barrandov Studios, the region's largest movie-making complex, industry professionals say.

Rumania, Bulgaria, Poland and Hungary all offer budget facilities and rich locations, but poorly developed infrastructure, a lack of good-quality soundstages and paucity of local talent can drive up costs. In Prague, all a producer needs to do is fly in his top team — director,