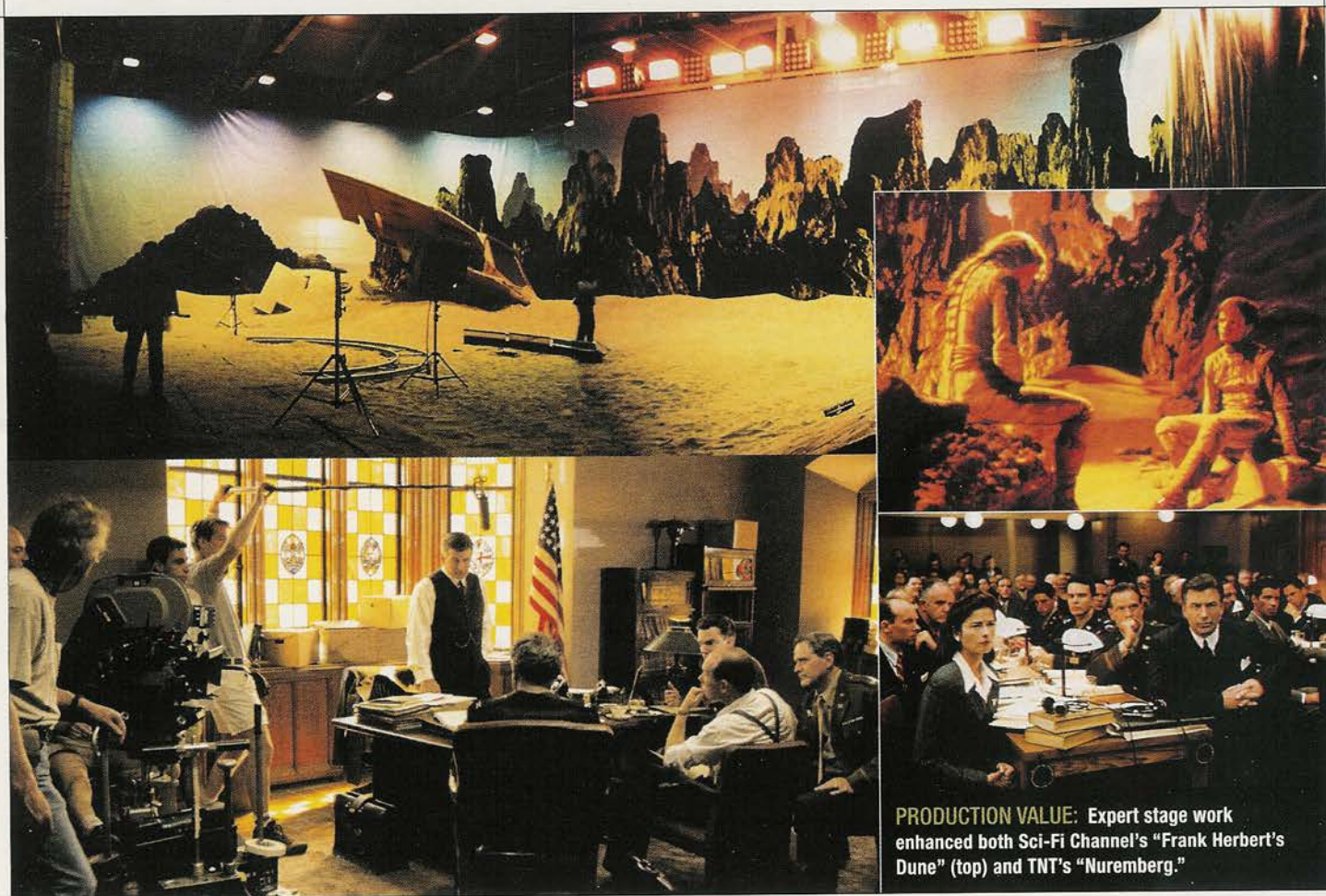


INTERNATIONAL IMAGES

Artisans from around the globe are tapped to create expansive looks for ambitious miniseries projects.



PRODUCTION VALUE: Expert stage work enhanced both Sci-Fi Channel's "Frank Herbert's Dune" (top) and TNT's "Nuremberg."

Imagine you're producing a lavish six-hour miniseries spectacular with authentic period costumes, hundreds of extras and an international star or two, but your entire production budget is only the size of Tom Cruise's per-movie salary. You can't afford to make a film in Hollywood or anywhere else in the United States, so you consider Canada, England, Ireland or Australia, where the bulk of "runaway" productions go. But the governmental incentive programs that make shooting in these locales economically feasible require you to employ a crew that is largely native, meaning that you might be able to hire the American cinematographer and the Italian production designer you have your heart set on, but the support staffs they employ to shape their art will have to stay at home.

"Canada really made a conscious effort to attract the creative community and has been wildly successful," says Gerald Abrams, executive producer of the TNT mini "Nuremberg," which lensed on location in Montreal. "And with that has come certain restrictions, and the restrictions are, for the most part, in the below-the-line category."

Faced with this reality, the makers of many TV miniseries are now looking to former Iron Curtain countries such as Slovakia, Lithuania, Hungary and the Czech Republic, where significant savings can be

had no matter which passports your crew members carry.

Writer-director John Harrison is one such filmmaker. He shot his six-hour Sci-Fi Channel miniseries "Frank Herbert's Dune" on the soundstages of Barrandov Studios in Prague, Czech Republic, with a paltry \$20 million budget and a crew that was a veritable United Nations of talent.

At the top of the list was legendary Italian cinematographer Vittorio Storaro. A three-time Oscar winner ("Apocalypse Now," "Reds," "The Last Emperor"), Storaro obviously did not come at a bargain price, but brought with him cinematic techniques that ultimately saved the production millions of dollars.

"Vittorio had been perfecting over the years this use of Translights," Harrison says, "which are these mammoth backdrops that are printed on theatrical scrim. We would take paintings, drawings, sketches and photographs and put them all on the computer and build our own world with them — [from] the big desert exteriors [to] the imperial palace." A company in Rome transferred the computer images onto the mammoth Translights — up to 300 by 100 meters — which were hung on the soundstages behind sets created by Croatian-born, Paris-based production designer Miljen Kreka Kljakovic ("Delicatessen,"

“Underground”). Using the Translights and a relatively minimal amount of CGI, the production was able to forgo location work and instead shot entirely on soundstages in Prague.

To help coordinate the production, the filmmakers enlisted Milk & Honey, an L.A.-based production-services company with offices in Prague, Mexico City, Montreal and Moscow. In addition to connecting them to stuntman Ladislav Lahoda and his Czech stunt team, Filmka, and the Prague-based Flash Effects, Milk & Honey introduced Harrison to costume designer Theodor Pistek — a Czech native famed for his work on the films directed by fellow countryman Milos Forman, including “Amadeus,” which earned Pistek an Oscar.

“He’s kind of like a living treasure in the Czech Republic,” Harrison marvels. “He is an artist, so his work is in all the museums. And he’s a good friend of Vaclav Havel,” who, after becoming president, enlisted Pistek to redesign the uniforms for the military.

There was some American below-the-line talent involved, including first assistant director Matt Clark and visual-effects supervisor and second unit director Ernest Farino.

While the Czechs welcome foreign talent with open arms, their counterparts in Canada — who get an estimated 80% of the United States’ runaway productions, according to a 1999 study funded by the DGA and SAG — can be less hospitable, says makeup artist Susan A. Cabral: “I was a department head on a miniseries called ‘The Last Don,’ and it caused all kinds of animosity. They ended up hiring a co-department head who was Canadian just make everybody happy.”

On “Nuremberg,” Abrams was forced to use a team that, save for some key cast members, was entirely Canadian. “We got really lucky,” he says, “because we hit upon the very best people. But in a way you’re constricted by these economic incentives.”

“In the European community there’s much less of a wall between talent crossing lines between one country and the next,” observes “Dune” executive producer Richard Rubinstein. “It’s just the general culture.”

Indeed, the “Dune” set sounds like Rick’s Café in “Casablanca” during happy hour, minus the Nazis: “I would walk through the production office and there’d be a Serbo-Croatian in one room communicating with Italians in the next room while I was talking in French to a guy over here and then German over there,” recalls Harrison, who employed a cast that included American William Hurt, Brit Alec Newman and Italian Giancarlo Giannini as well as several Czech actors in featured roles.

Most of the time, things went smoothly, but there were a few misunderstandings. “Pistek and his crew were talking to me about one scene, and they were saying, ‘Now



EPIC SCOPE: USA’s “Attila” boasted lavish staging in part due to a strong filmmaking tradition in Lithuania.

tell me, what do these monkeys wear?’ Monkeys?! There are no monkeys in this movie. I finally traced it: I wrote that the water masters dressed ‘like monks,’ and they translated that into monkeys,” Harrison says.

Visual-effects supervisor Gene Warren faced his own linguistic challenges while coordinating hordes of Huns on the set of the USA Network miniseries “Attila” in Lithuania.

“I had to run around the field with my interpreters and yell to do it ‘like this.’ Then they’d tell everybody in the language,” recalls Warren, who’s had previous Central European experience working on the telefilm “Snow White” in the Czech Republic. “Then you get to the first rehearsal or the first take and half go the wrong way. You’re trying to move just as fast as you move here, and it’s just not possible when you’re doing it in four or five languages.”

In addition, there were strange and unexpected problems with equipment. “Ladders,” Warren laments. “It was very difficult to find decent ladders. Here, because of OSHA rules, there are certain types of ladders you have to use. They just put together these really flimsy ladders, and they didn’t have any [around]. Even the grip department there, they just ended up with very few ladders, and they coveted them. They almost had to put a guard on them to make sure they didn’t disappear.”

For the most part, however, these countries have surprisingly strong film-production infrastructures, which include cheap studio space, cheap labor and an accomplished talent pool.

“Their filmmaking tradition goes back to the early ‘20s,” says Howard Woffinden, partner of Milk & Honey of Prague. That was when Barrandov Studios was built, and it today boasts 11 soundstages with effects facilities and a full-service Kodak lab. “There’s also a strong [history] of traditional arts and crafts in the filmmaking industry, and it can be accessed for pennies on the dollar.”

The country also possesses spectacular architecture and an appropriately Bohemian atmosphere. What is missing are labor unions.

“There are technical associations, but they

don’t really operate on the level of collective bargaining,” says Woffinden. Gaffers earn a very un-Hollywood \$300 to \$500 a week. “It’s a fairly significant reduction in labor charges. It’s only relevant because the high quality is there. If you couldn’t access that level of quality, it wouldn’t matter how much you paid.”

Filmmakers must like what they’re getting. According to the Prague Post, between the Velvet Revolution in late 1989 and July 2000, 57 international productions filmed in the city. In recent months, miniseries such as “The Lost Empire” (Hallmark Entertainment/NBC) and “Anne Frank” (ABC) and the fea-

tures “Blade 2: Bloodlust,” starring Wesley Snipes, and “Hart’s War,” starring Bruce Willis, have lensed in Prague.

There have also been notable American miniseries productions based in Bratislava, Slovakia, where the four-hour NBC World War II epic “Uprising” is currently filming, and Budapest, Hungary, where Hungarian-born, Hallmark Entertainment chairman Robert Halmi Sr. shot “Crime and Punishment” and “The Prince and the Pauper.”

Shooting in these countries, however, is not without its bothersome quirks such as the pesky visa situation in the Czech Republic. “Americans get a 90-day visa when they enter the country,” Woffinden says. “In order to renew it, you have to apply to the Czech foreign police outside the border. So you theoretically have to get on a train and go to the German border, which is all well and good if you’re wandering around central Europe on a student pass, and you’ve got nothing better to do. But if you’re Wesley Snipes, and you’re in the middle of a \$50 million picture, having to leave for the day has a totally different significance.” While the regulations have yet to change, Woffinden found a way to use a proxy so the actual person needn’t travel.

But such petty annoyances are trivial when one considers the unbeatable economic advantages these countries provide.

“They’re in the toilet when it comes to the exchange rate,” Warren says. “They don’t make very much money, and that isn’t going to go up significantly in the foreseeable future. It may creep up just because they’re real good, but they’re going to be real good and real cheap.”

For Hollywood craftspeople, hearing all this rapturous talk about the joys of foreign production is about as fun as listening to their spouse brag about an illicit lover at the company Christmas party, but if it’s any consolation, they’re still No. 1 in John Harrison’s heart. “The best crews in the world are in Los Angeles,” he says. “The best facilities in the world are in Los Angeles. But if it’s a choice of do it in Prague or don’t do it at all, well, I’m going to Prague.” □