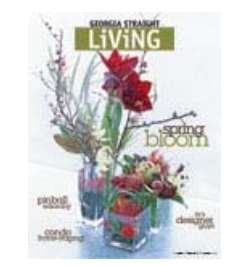




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Doc reflects future of war and filmmaking

By Pieta Woolley
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From The A-Team to Soldier of Fortune magazine, everyone loves a mercenary. So Vancouver-based software developer Nick Bicanic knew he had a winning idea for a film when he pitched it to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in 2004.

Fascinated that his lawyer buddy James left the corporate world for a job as an international gun-for-hire, Bicanic told CBC he wanted to make a film about the proliferation of private military contracts worldwide.

He, along with cowriter and director Jason Bourque (another Vancouverite), said there are 20,000 mercenaries in Iraq, with virtually no accountability. They told CBC that this is unprecedented: it's changing the face of modern war.

The duo had a vision: a balanced image of the new mercenary, breaking through the pop-culture Rambo archetype and the historical disgust with men who kill for money.

But the pitch didn't connect.

"CBC had an open bias against private military contractors," Bicanic told the Georgia Straight in an interview at a Davie Street cafe. "They said they were only interested if we showed these guys in a bad light."

But CBC's director of documentaries, Jerry McIntosh, told the Straight that his concern was whether or not the filmmakers had access to their subjects. The CBC, he said, would not try to influence content at a pitch meeting. He pointed out that the network gets about 40 pitches for every one that staff accepts, and said he's looking forward to seeing the final film. (The public broadcaster also follows a Journalistic Standards and Practices manual that dictates "the CBC...must ensure that its programming is fair and balanced.")

With no deal, the pair warmed up their Visa for an 18-month, no-investor, international moviemaking marathon that resulted in the 86-minute documentary *Shadow Company*. On the film's Web site (www.shadowcompany.com/), the trailer got 300,000 hits in its first 48 hours on-line. When the movie premiered in Texas, at the South by Southwest Film Festival in March, organizers had to toss them out of the theatre for each of the three screenings. So many viewers wanted to ask questions afterward, Bicanic said, they could have stayed all night.

The less-than-\$100,000 film still doesn't have a distributor. But its Canadian premiere is planned for Toronto's Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Film Festival, from next Friday (April 28) to May 7. And several American senators have asked for copies, according to Bicanic.

The film represents not only the future of war, they said, but also the future of filmmaking.

"If we'd waited for CBC or Telefilm to fund us, we'd never have made the film," said Bicanic. "Or it would have taken us four years."

Because cameras and editing equipment have become so inexpensive, he said, filmmakers can circumvent the traditional route of investors and distributors, and streamline by self-financing projects. For example, when Bourque flew to Washington to conduct interviews, he filled the role of an entire crew himself. In fact, Bourque remembered, film executives at the 2005 Banff Film Festival discouraged the duo from making a film on Iraq. It wasn't because of the controversy, he said, but because so many other filmmakers were pitching films on the same war. Bicanic pointed out that none of those films have been completed yet.

Shadow Company does not look cheaply made. It's heavy on interviews, but the people are so interesting, little else is necessary. Interviewees include working mercenaries in Iraq and Africa; Madelaine Drohan, the Ottawa author of *Making a Killing: How and Why Corporations Use Armed Force to Do Business*; and Phil Lancaster, a former Canadian military officer and current United Nations consultant in Sudan.

Bourque, a Vancouver Film School grad, used his Gen-X aesthetic to keep the film moving for a MuchMusic generation, he said. Both filmmakers are eager to distance themselves from Michael Moore, though. They shot the film without a narrator, and without any shots of themselves, to keep the focus on their subjects. "This is their story, not ours," said Bicanic.

Their own stories certainly influenced the making of the film, however. Bicanic grew up in Croatia. He started and sold a software company in London, England, then met a woman who lured him to Vancouver. He's frustrated that most young North Americans curtain-off the world beyond their own neighbourhood, and he hopes the film helps change that.

"It's sad," he said, pointing out that the protests against the Vietnam war were massive compared with those against the war in Iraq. "A lot of people feel there's nothing they can do, so they think, 'I'm just one person, so I'm going to sit at home.'"

Bourque, who grew up in New Brunswick, shamefully agreed that he hadn't known where Equatorial Guinea was before he started filming *Shadow Company* (it's in West Africa). He helped ground the film, ensuring it would be comprehensible to those without an Eastern European-style depth of interest in world affairs.

Neither filmmaker plans to become a professional mercenary.

"There's certainly an appeal," Bicanic said. "There are guys going out on an adventure trip, up to high jinks—it's the modern equivalent of riding shotgun on a stagecoach. For guys who leave the army, and all the skills they have are those skills, \$1,000 a day is attractive. It's easy to critique them for being soldiers for money rather than ideology, but this is their job. They have mortgages. They have kids. If I were in that situation, I'd do it."

Bourque just laughed at the idea. "Our girlfriends wouldn't allow it," he said, smiling.



While making their mercenary study *Shadow Company*, Nick Bicanic (left) and Jason Bourque played the part of an entire film crew. Pieta Woolley photo.

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