

Opportunities for Filmmaking in Budapest

Whether you are an independent artist, masterminding your low-cost film project while staring into your robust arabica and freshly exhaled smoke, or an established production studio, looking for a

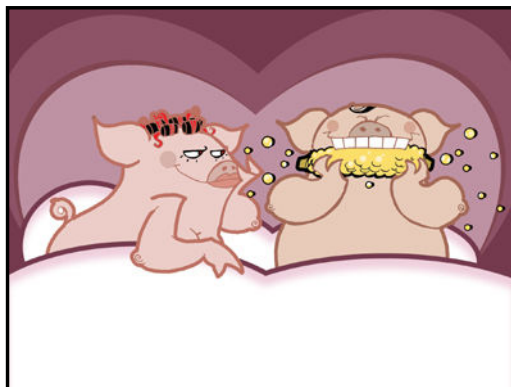


complete off-the-shelf solution of studio, cranes and crew, Budapest's talent and scenery can provide high-quality services and a reasonable price.

In Hollywood circles, they say that the best-trained camera operator's come out of Budapest.

And, as you may or may not know, German and Italian feature films, as well as Hungarian home-grown, are produced in Budapest year-round. Hollywood directors, such as Steven Spielberg and Betty Thomas, shot scenes for *I Spy* and *Munich* in the Hungarian capital, as well.

For big capital-spend projects, the upside is simple to see: Paying for helicopter rentals and stunt pilots is cheaper than in any major western capital city. And depending on which street you are rolling your camera in, you may



feel like you are in an architectural dream, belonging to a communist social realist or a Kafkaesque bourgeoisie boulevard. Some streets even look like they came out of a Hansel-and-Gretel children's book, or 18th century Vienna (ask for Szeczenyi fürdő for a palatial spa experience). You can find beautiful Jewish temples, empire-driven cathedrals, and even Calvinist churches two centuries old. There is a

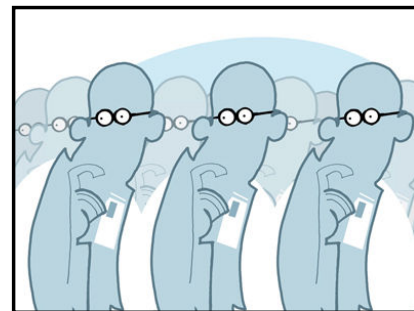
miniature replica of a 17th century castle in the city park (Népliget), serving as a museum and background for wedding photos.

Beauty sometimes begs for anonymity. Your talent won't have desperate fans looking to knock down security personnel and barricades for autographs. It is

not how Central Europeans behave toward celebrities. This is in sharp contrast to how actors are pursued in the United States or United Kingdom.

I conducted an impromptu survey to find out what other media professionals, working out of Budapest, consider key advantages to shooting film, commercials or documentaries here. I met with Bullet Shih, who is working on a docu-mentary about the under-recognized Hungarian composer, Gabriel von Wayvitch. Bullet, a Budapest-based artist from New York City, said, "Hungarian film crews are well-versed in technique." Concerning union rules and regulation, he added, "There seem to be fewer hassles, when compared to New York."

I can confirm that statement from my own personal experience. I have never been questioned while spreading out my weighty Manfrotto tripod and Canon XL-1 camera on a Budapest street inside the inner ring. On a busy street in Manhattan, this is often problematic. Expect police hassles.



Jenő Vass, co-owner of MyFilm Ltd., said, "Multinationals like Procter & Gamble have relocated their European headquarters to Budapest, and that gives us more chances to win multinational accounts with bigger budgets." This also gives him a chance to exercise the creativity of his crews, including their strong experience with animation. I asked him to provide a recent example.

He confided, "I can give you two. We clinched a contract with MasterCard, through the branding agency, McCann WorldGroup. This was the first commercial shot by MasterCard in Hungary, and it was later released in more than 18 countries as part of their worldwide awareness-building campaign." Mr. Vass added, "The other is [New-York-based] Time Warner.

My personal production, though ambitious, is without a Hollywood or corporate budget, and no government funding. It is also telling.

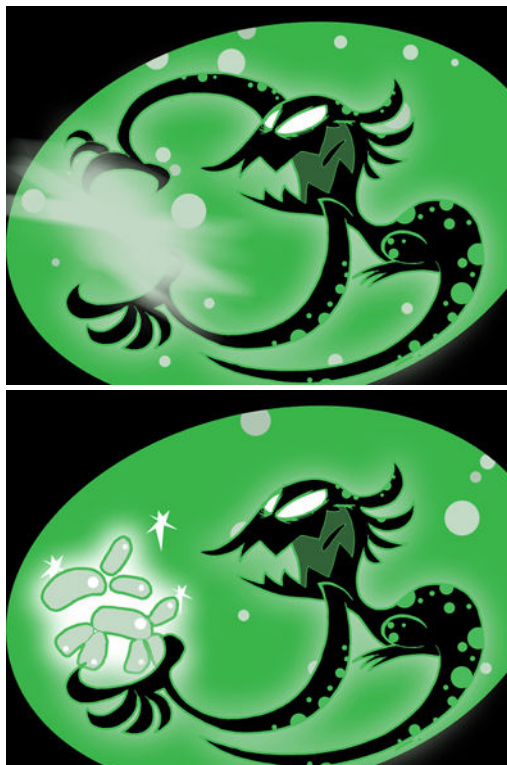
I transplanted from New York City eight years ago with ambitions of being the next Chris Marker or Tony Buba. My goal has been to make an entertaining documentary with serious socio-cultural undertones, yet without simplifying the debates and discourses around a controversial topic. That topic is genetically modified foods, also known as GMOs and transgenic crops. I focused on having hard science mix with entertainment and humor.

In Zagreb, I found a cartoonist that designed one of my key characters. He goes by the name of Tellus N. Trubble, the animated character, that is. (Tellus is the latin name for Earth.) He lives in a 1950s putrid-green apartment with an old television and old refrigerator, full of canned food. The cartoonist told me about a classical animation school in Zagreb that, as of two years ago, was still not offering computer graphics courses. It was bent on traditional

animation skills. Mr. Trubble was later animated in a Macromedia-Flash-compatible product called *Toon Boom Studio* by Csaba Zabos, a local Budapest-based artist.

Turns out, it would have cost me more to design two or three company logos in New York City or Stockholm than the design, creation and animation of Tellus **[pictured below]**.

On the high end, less than one-minute's animation cost me 8,000 USD in Budapest. The here undisclosed studio is busy making animated commercials and children's education programming for well-known Hungarian, American and Canadian companies. Though it sounds expensive, it is still 50% cheaper than what I would need to pay for equivalent quality in New York or London.



They are many animation shops outsourced by German animation studios, who in turn are outsourced by Hollywood studios. This helps keep secrecy about new animated movies, coming out of Hollywood — one-artistic-hand-know-not-what-the-other-doeth-sketch type of thing.

Suppose you want to rent a studio with three cameras, full crew, and everything you can imagine — except the audience. You can get such an out-of-the-box solution for just about 3,000 USD, tax included.

Maybe you are an independent and want to know about “just enough to win”, starting with a shell: the studio.

A young shop, providing studio services, recently proposed the following prices: 3 Canon XL1 cameras for 50 USD per hour (not each, but in total), 25 USD per hour for the studio itself and 25 USD per hour per person (cameraman, grip, etc. — all with completed Budapest film-school certification).

Next is camera work. I was happy with a Budapest cameraman who traveled with me for a single-day project in the Tihany area north of Balaton with his own camera. It cost less than 100 USD. A cameraman in Split, Croatia, with experience covering sporting events, 70 USD, but he did not have his own camera.

I must warn you, however, that people are not naïve. The wave of use and abuse has passed and people in the community talk to one another. Friends and colleagues of our Budapest media cluster work in Stockholm, Hollywood, New York, Melbourne, London, Amsterdam, Belgrade, Milan, Bratislava, Moscow, Berlin and Paris, just to name a few places, where we cross-pollinate.

Promise a project and fail to give it to the team and I promise you that people will learn that you are undependable and not to be taken seriously. Translation: “If I were to work with them, I want a down-payment and contract.” And that may take the spontaneity and fun that you can otherwise have in Budapest.

There are other benefits, as well. As Mr. Vass said, in response to my emphasis on business benefits: “You need business justifications to film in the city of bridges, baths, gastronomic delights, splendid landscapes, beautiful people and the Danube River?”

– Adriano Sverko, independent producer and director
www.asvmproductions.com



Lesser known facts:
Film Production and Budapest:

- ✓ Budapest film business professionals landed in Hollywood prior to and during WWII, often changing their “ethnic” names to something more palatable for American audiences. Example: Czukor György repackaged himself and became George Cukor in Hollywood.
- ✓ Some of these icons are coming back to invest: Andrew Vajna, who produced *Jacob’s Ladder*, *Evita*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Basic Instinct II* and several *Terminator* movies, is building Etyekwood, a studio complex just outside of Budapest.
- ✓ It may seem common sense that post-production work such as color correction is cheaper in Budapest than in Vienna, but it is also cheaper than in smaller nearby capitals such as Bratislava and Zagreb.
- ✓ The talent pool is more than local: 3D programmers, animators, clothing designers and set designers aren’t just Hungarian — There is also foreign talent looking for opportunity, from places such as Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Croatia, and countries further east, such as Russia and the Ukraine.