

# PLAYBACK

## How Canuck actor's role became a Serbian cultural icon



June 15, 2012 by [Danielle Ng See Quan](#)

Fictional ex-drug agent turned beach bum private investigator Nick Slaughter has become a cultural icon in Serbia, a symbol of freedom and political opposition for student protestors against former dictator Slobodan Milosovic.



And the documentary *Slaughter Nick for President*, executive produced by Liza Vespi, and co-directed by Stewart, Vespi and her brother Marc, documents Canadian actor Rob Stewart uncovering the story of how and why the fictional character he played in '90s TV series *Tropical Heat* (a.k.a. *Sweating Bullets*) attained cult status in the Eastern European country.

The film took three-and-a-half years to make, funded solely by the Toronto filmmakers, private funders and loans from friends.

“This is a wonderful example in my opinion, being the executive producer, of really taking a risk, seeing an opportunity and just hoping to hell it's going to pay off, because when you don't have all of those traditional funding routes, with the Telefilm and the OMDC and all that, it's very scary,” Vespi tells *Playback*.

And what started as a curiosity, a vanity search on a social media site, also became a story about how Canadian television can affect people in ways that were never intended.

“I was so embarrassed about that show, I should tell you, because partially, I didn't know what I was doing. I hadn't acted before. I was a writer, director; I didn't know what the hell I was doing,” Stewart tells *Playback*.

“That was my first real gig, and I didn't want to be famous for that show anyway,” he adds.

The story came full circle for Stewart when, in 2008, during his first foray onto Facebook, he serendipitously discovered a fan base for Nick Slaughter, which became the basis for the documentary.

“I just typed it in to see; I was broke, so maybe [I'd wind up finding] some residual cheques, or to see if it was playing anywhere in Europe,” says Stewart.

He instead found a Serbian fansite with more than 8,000 followers of the show, which he says had been airing in endless reruns on all four of the country's channels.

The cultural phenom started with wall graffiti in the Belgrade suburb of Zarkovo, where the artist wrote, “Nick Slaughter, Zarkovo hails you.”

“What was ironic for [all of] us involved was our situations when I found out,” says Stewart, referring to the fact that he was back living in his parents’ basement after a bad year. In recent months he’d faced personal difficulties, as had Liza and Mark as well.

### **Symbolic role**

After contacting the site’s administrator, he received a letter detailing the symbolic role Nick Slaughter had played during peaceful student protests in 1996-1997 against Milosovic’s fraudulent election. The country’s top punk band Atheist Rap had even written a song, using the graffiti phrase in the chorus.

He sent the letter to Liza Vespi, who he had known for years, having grown up together and worked together. She immediately saw the bigger story to tell.

“He sent [the email] to me on a lark, and he said, ‘Check this out, isn’t this freaky?’ And it just came to me in a flash at that very moment of receiving that email,” Vespi tells *Playback*.

That was January 2009. From there, says Vespi, there was a sense of urgency to get to Serbia for June, because Atheist Rap was performing a concert as part of its 20th anniversary tour.

That meant that there was no time to go through traditional funding routes to make the film.

And Vespi adds that the filmmakers didn’t really know where the story would take them once they arrived in Serbia.

“We were thinking of it quite like a Hunter S. Thompson-eque sort of journey. It was a little bit of gonzo journalism. We started digging deeper and finding out about the dark days in Serbia and the story of a peaceful overthrow of a brutal dictator, and that’s when we really got interested in the story,” says Vespi.

Meanwhile, Marc Vespi contacted Atheist Rap and arranged for Stewart to play guitar on the seminal song during the concert. They were also able to set up a production crew in Serbia through the band’s contacts.

“We had a plan B that if we arrived at the airport and nobody really cared, it was going to be a self-deprecating doc about me, and me trying to find something that wasn’t there, and it was going to be more of a funny thing,” says Stewart.

Upon their return, they completed post-production, again with their own money and industry connections, and had some help from a man they call “Mr. Brampton,” who gave them a 3,000-square-foot office in Brampton to work out of.

This weekend, the film will have its world premiere at NXNE in Toronto, and Vespi says they’re looking for broadcast sales and distribution, and taking a strategic approach going forward, by screening the film at festivals, including Cinema City International Film Festival in Serbia after NXNE.

She adds that the process of making *Slaughter Nick* speaks to the state of the current documentary marketplace in Canada.

“[There were] massive funding challenges. Not only is it extremely difficult to make a film when you’re not getting any of the traditional supports, then you have to sell it. With the marketplace so fractured, the role of the sales agent and distributor is that much more labourious,” she says.

“I do believe the funders in this country have to recognize that there are creative people out there who are willing to take risks, put their time on the line, put their own personal money on the line to create content for broadcasters and to be the keepers of Canadian culture. It doesn't have to be top down, it can be bottom up. Like, let's support our grassroots people that are out there doing stuff and not just writing grant proposals and waiting for the gatekeepers,” she adds.

*Slaughter Nick for President premieres at NXNE June 16 at 7:30 p.m. at the NFB, with a second NFB screening on June 17 at 12:30 p.m.*

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