



BY MARTIN SILVERSTONE

THE TRIBE

PHOTOS BY MATT HARRIS

WE ARE LINKED, NOT SO MUCH BY WHO WE ARE, BUT BY WHERE WE DREAM TO BE.

TWO DECADES AGO, TWENTY-FIVE-YEAR-OLD SASHA Savic was a popular and successful radio disc jockey in the peaceful, thriving city of Sarajevo. He was on top of the music world, for sure, but his real love was fly-fishing. He was from an angling family, you see, his grandfather having bought him his first fishing license when he was two hours old. So it was no surprise that the spring of 1992 found him deep in the Slovenian Alps on the River Soca, trying to coax a giant, emerald-colored marble trout, a taimen-like fish, to take one of his flies.

Luck? I don't know if you can call it that, perhaps providence or fate might be a better word. But while he was away, the Siege of Sarajevo, as it became known, began. Over four years, the residents of this ancient European city were forced into a state of medieval deprivation during which they were in constant fear of death. No Sarajevan was safe, and Sasha certainly could not return home. He hiked out of the mountains to begin anew, all he had was what he carried—two fly rods.

Sasha landed on his feet in Prague. And since then he's done okay, to the point that 20 years later he found himself in a position to produce, direct, write and star in a film that, after viewing, I highly recommend. No, it's

not a story about a young man escaping from a war-torn country, working hard to climb up to the top of the media totem pole with a corner office on the 14th-floor in a New York skyscraper, a stone's throw from the 9/11 Memorial.

Not that such a story would make a bad film, but for the last two years, Sasha has spent his own time and money, as well as called in favours from lifelong friends, all to produce a film in support of Atlantic salmon conservation. He didn't quit his day job, which is CEO of a global media company, but he may as well have. For eight months, Sasha immersed himself completely in the world of film production, even attending New York's Film Academy four times a week. He learned enough to know he needed help, and so he went after the best cinematographic and sound support he could find, but never afford.

Oscar-winning director Danis Tanovic (*No Man's Land*), also from the Balkans, became his mentor and kept him on track. Velibor Bozovic, a childhood friend from the narrow streets of Sarajevo "volunteered" to follow him around the Northern Hemisphere to visit a veritable "Grand Slam" of Atlantic salmon rivers, all while lugging high-definition video equipment. And there were more that gave their time, like Q Department whose

sound score provides a strangely uplifting audio background. How could he afford these multi-CLIO winning sound specialists? Simple, he convinced the president that the Atlantic salmon needed a top-notch sound studio, and offered to take the generous CEO fishing one day.

All told, *A Passion Called Salmon* looks fantastic enough, both technically and creatively, to have cost at least a few million. Sasha managed to bring it in on budget, however, which meant no budget, really. Just what he was willing to spend of his own money. Still, for someone as badly addicted as Sasha, it didn't seem like too much to try to answer some weighty questions about Atlantic salmon angling: Why do we go so far out of our way in order to catch big salmon? What is behind an almost obsessive connection with this creature? Why do we need to seek seclusion and soul searching at the end of the world?

Armed with a Thoreau quote that fills the screen early in the film—"Many men go fishing all of their lives without knowing that it is not fish they are after"—Sasha and cameraman Bozovic hit the road on a quest to discover the exact cause of the Atlantic salmon addiction.

As a road movie, it's more *Easy Rider*, than *Thelma and Louise*, but without the violence. Despite limited time at each location—perhaps luck is the right word here—Bozovic always seems to capture some great fish action. His camera work really puts the rod in the viewers' hands. I was



ALL PHOTOS SHOT DURING FILMING OF A PASSION CALLED SALMON.



expecting a travelogue, but this is a genuinely beautiful piece of cinematography, with a very heartfelt storyline.

It's not fish porn, although salmon anglers will drool at the fishing footage from Russia, Norway and Canada. There are few, if any, bluebird days. Bozovic had to film in whatever weather and lighting nature provided that day. They were fortunate, however, and the fish cooperated. During the first day of their trip to the Yokanga, Savic began casting and asks cameraman Bozovic: "Camera is on?" Almost instantaneously he hooks a 30-lb salmon, and yes, camera was on. And it's certainly not an instructional fly-fishing film, although there is some terrific footage and the sequence of our own Bill Taylor battling a Cascapedia behemoth could be a fitness video, and alone is worth the price of admission.

And what is the price of admission? Well simply, other than the reasonable \$29.99 it costs to order the DVD, you need to be an "M.O.T." or Member of the Tribe. You know, the tribe of people who always want to be somewhere else, and that somewhere else is on an Atlantic salmon river.



And that's where the movie opens, with Sasha wanting to be in that other place. We find him in his New York office (yes on the 14th floor), smack in the crush of the human multitudes, struggling to stay ahead in the urban rat race, or in the words of his own voiceover "trapped in a jungle more concrete than any other in the world, too invested in our eternally desperate attempts to be on time, to work more than possible, to be successful, to conquer the world."

His spirit seemingly defeated, Sasha's head sinks into his hands. On the wall behind his computer, a poster comes into focus and in it the wilted worker finds salvation. It's a photo of the Sela River in Iceland. A salmon river.

What is it about these places that even a two-dimensional image can help refresh a body and rejuvenate a soul? Soon the sounds of forest and river drown out the cacophony of the New York streets. The cityscapes are replaced with sweeping aerial views of the Yokanga, the Alta, and the Cascapedia. You can feel yourself beginning to relax.

On our way to somewhere else, the first stop on this continent-hopping journey is in Sasha's own past. Some

remarkable archival imagery from his childhood in Bosnia, reveals he is the first grandchild of a fishing family. And he climbs up the ladder his grandfather held for him, from all kinds of angling to bigger and bigger fish, to fly-fishing, and finally, as if he had to earn his stripes, his first experience fishing for the King of Fish on Scotland's legendary Spey.

It is here that the story becomes familiar to members of the tribe. He hooks a fish, but of course it is he that becomes hooked for life. Now, we join Sasha on his quest to discover what is behind such an obsessive force, a force so powerful that it drives so many to devote so much to fish for salmon. His quest takes him (and us) on a who's who tour of the Atlantic salmon conservation world. Orri Vigfusson, Bill Taylor, ordinary anglers, and legendary guides all offer their expertise. The film outlines not only who is working to save salmon, but also how they are going about it. The film is about salmon, but it doesn't try to follow the fish, it follows the anglers. There are surprises. A glimpse into a fundraising dinner in New

York gives a rare inside view which this (never-invited, but not bitter) salmon magazine editor found fascinating. An impromptu shot of the late Stan Bogdan chatting with fishing comrades, is like a cameo appearance by a big Hollywood star in an Indie movie.

From drinking bubbly at a ritzy high society fundraiser in New York, to trying to catch a few desperate moments of sleep in the back of a Soviet-era helicopter, Sasha and Velibor offer us seldom-seen glimpses of the salmon angler in both his (or her) natural and not-so-natural habitats.

There is method to the madness. Sasha is trying to include, not exclude the viewer. At each stop in his two-year odyssey, he explains the need for more people to get involved with salmon conservation. And he pleads for more youngsters to be welcomed into our aging and declining fraternity. Can a new, younger generation identify with the fishing that goes on in some of the most exclusive waters of rivers like the Yokanga, Alta and Cascapedia? You attract new athletes to any sport, not by televising the pickup games on a dusty field at a New York high school or a game of shinny hockey at a neighborhood skating rink. No, the battle to get youngsters involved in any sport is fought in the grand stadiums where the very best, like the Beckhams, do battle with the Renaldos, or the Crosbys with the Ovechkins.

No one will confuse Sasha with David Beckham. From the first moment you see him sorting his gear in the garage, or clambering over a fence to cast in New York's East River, we know he is one of us. A committed member of the tribe—feeding his salmon addiction in any way he can. We all have our secret ways for getting a hit. For example, I slip away every summer to wet a line in the Petit Saguenay. With a drive of five hours, it is one of the closest salmon pools to Montreal. I've yet to catch a salmon on one of these 48-hour marathons, but you do what you have to do. And whatever it is you do, *A Passion Called Salmon* offers a vision of the kind of salmon fishing all in the tribe aspire to.

Despite the exclusive locales he films in, Sasha knows his fellow tribe members. He may open a window onto an *uber*-expensive beat on the Alta, but he also offers scenes that we are all familiar with. After releasing a pretty silver



A Passion Called Salmon, DVD, 110 minutes, HD, \$ 29.99
Available through asf.ca



torpedo from the Bonaventure, one of the most public of salmon rivers, he pulls out two glasses to celebrate. And just when the script calls for a bottle of an expensive single malt to appear, he and his guide toast the day's success with a glass of gin-clear Bonaventure river water.

There are other scenes, too, that could not be scripted, like Jim Lawley's eight-year-old son, James, landing his first salmon. Or a tense confrontation with Kola poachers, where Velibor kept filming surreptitiously, after being ordered angrily and repeatedly to shut off the camera. Of course it takes more than an angry Russian to scare a couple of Sarajevans...especially when one of them is over 6 feet, 5 inches tall!

Then, as quickly as a salmon leaps and splashes back into the water, the movie draws to a close and we find ourselves walking beside Sasha amid the clamor of the Occupy Wall Street protests in Manhattan. He seems oblivious to the turmoil around him, the blank look on



his face tells us his mind is still back in a spruce-scented forest, by a gurgling river. Despite his journey, he is no closer to understanding our special connection with *Salmo salar*, but he has learned an important truth. His voiceover rings authentic against the background images of angry protestors. "We need to act and save the places where salmon thrive," he says at the film's end. "Get informed and get involved in writing the next chapter of this story for the generations that will come after us. There's not much time left. Act now."

As the credits roll, I remember the quote from the film's beginning about not knowing it isn't fish we are after, and another Thoreau quote comes to mind: "If a man walks in the woods for love of them half of each day, he is in danger of being regarded as a loafer. But if he spends his days as a speculator, shearing off those woods and making the earth bald before her time, he is deemed an industrious and enterprising citizen."

Well, Sasha Savic and all who helped him on this project, spent much longer than a morning walking in the woods to get the footage for this film. Sasha is no loafer. Now, it's the afternoon, and the industrious and enterprising salmon angler has created a one-of-a-kind movie, the profits from which will go towards saving not only Thoreau's woods, but also our beloved salmon. If you want to help, act now. Your action doesn't need to be as complete as Sasha Savic's, who committed two full years and all the energy and money he could muster. It can be as simple as buying this film. Spread the word, as many tiny acts can make a big difference. And, when you spot the DVD on a friend's shelf or coffee table, raise your hand and high-five the owner, while declaring proudly—M.O.T.!

I salute you, fellow member of the tribe. ↗

Biography ????