

The Iron Revolution

Even if you know nothing about the Romanian Revolution you may be familiar with the gruesome YouTube footage showing the shooting of the 72 year old President and his wife on Christmas Day which has been viewed over a million times. With no line of soldiers or final cigarette, the couple were frog marched from an army barracks, past thirty or forty idling soldiers and pushed against a wall. One of the escort started firing his machine gun as he backed away from them, before the actual execution party had time to raise their weapons. The grainy film does not show the impact of the first bullet because the cameraman is still running towards the action as he starts filming. We see first a smoky haze and then two bodies, hands bound with string, Elena curled up and Ceausescu thrown back on his knees by the impact of the bullets. Too late for the kill, the rest of the soldiers start to fire at the corpses, some from upper windows of nearby buildings, everyone wanting to be part of this final moment of a Revolution that had started only ten days earlier.

I watched it for the first time in the summer of 2013, I had been sent a script, a four hour dramatization of the 1989 Romanian Revolution set over the final three weeks in the life of the dictator. A co-production between HBO Europe and its subsidiary HBO Romania, the script was in English but the intention was to shoot the film with a Romanian cast speaking their own language. Having just finished directing a rather fantastical account of the life and career of Leonardo Da Vinci the idea of doing something truthful was enticing and although the script was a little confusing, I put that down to a combination of my ignorance of the subject and the translation. What it could not disguise was a brilliant, almost Shakespearean, plot of a man who goes from absolute tyrant to elderly fugitive in under a month. Romania of course has a well established Film Industry and a number of world class film makers, but under President Ceausescu, Television had been limited to two hours a day and consisted of political speeches and party propaganda so the industry was still a relatively young one.

I arrived in Bucharest in August for an exploratory meeting with the Writer, a commanding figure, cropped and tanned, part novelist, part screenwriter and, as quickly became clear, mainly property dealer. He started our first meeting by informing me that the Revolution was a completely boring story and that no one in Romania would be remotely interested. 'Great!' I thought as he ran through the characters: Ceausescu, his wife Elena, Iulian Vlad, the head of the Securitate (secret police), Stanculescu the General who took charge of the Army after the apparent suicide of the Minister of Defence Vasile Milea, dismissing each one as 'dull', 'stupid' and 'impossible to create a character out of'.

The story told by the script was dominated by a few major events, a protest at the eviction of a Hungarian pastor in the provincial town of Timisoara ruthlessly suppressed by Ceausescu, an ill judged propaganda speech from the Party Headquarters in Bucharest that led to more rioting, the suicide of the Minister of Defence and the final flight of Ceausescu by Helicopter from the roof of the same building followed by his capture, trial and summary execution three days later.

The script offered oblique references to Gorbachev foretelling the end of the regime and mysterious 'blonde' young men appeared, without being clearly identified, at each of the major events apparently acting as provocateurs. I asked the writer what this meant and was told that the revolution was a Russian led plot organized by Gorbachev and involving

van loads of Russian agents distributed round the county effectively staging a pantomime revolution to effect the forcible removal of the elderly dictator. I was thrilled, at last a plot I could understand: a coup. I asked why the script did not make this clear and was quickly told that it was 'impossible to tell the truth about the Revolution in Romania', not least because it wasn't a revolution as everyone who was in power before the events remained in power afterwards. When I protested rather pompously that I was English and we had to tell the truth, the writer replied that while I was indisputably English, this was not England and that in Romania you definitely can't just say what you want.

At this point you might think that a wise man would have picked up the remaining half of his ticket and gone home and tried to get another job, however I was excited by the conversation and went back and said that work was needed on the script, to make the story more accurate and the actions of the characters easier to understand but I was 'in'. My Romanian producers agreed that the script was not effective and said they would be delighted to have a better one, I asked if they were aware the writer alleged it was a Russian plot and they raised their eyebrows, 'Obviously' they said, 'Everyone knows that'.

The story was set in the month of December 1989 and unusually for Romania there was no snow that year. The plan was to shoot in January but research quickly suggested that there was a stronger chance of (unshootable) snow in the New Year, we therefore decided to start earlier, shooting exteriors in December, break over Christmas and move on to the interior scenes that were less weather dependent in the New Year. This meant there would be just three months to prep, cast, research and rewrite the film to be ready for transmission in the anniversary year of 2014. I explained that we would need to have a full crew starting pre-production in four weeks, on September 15th and while it would be impossible to write a new script in a month we would need to have a detailed breakdown of the new structure as evidence that the script could be written in time.

This was agreed and I started to look at the key locations and interview crew. Normally a director will have a working knowledge of the work of key crew members: designers, directors of photography, visual effects supervisors and if not, a quick look at their credits will give you a basic sense of who you are talking to. A foreigner does not have such an easy frame of reference so I started a crash course on Romanian cinema and at the same time began meeting potential crew members. Within a couple of weeks we agreed a Production Company (one of the two in Bucharest) a talented and experienced crew including a Production Designer, Costume Designer, VFX Supervisor, First AD and Location manager.

At the same time I met with the 'Historian' who had been advising on the factual accuracy in the film. An acknowledged expert on every detail of the events, he was, he explained, intimate with many of the actual participants, including Vlad, the Securitate chief whose unpublished biography he had written and Stanculescu, the Army Chief, who he had interviewed, at length, on several occasions. He confirmed Russian control of key events, the use of provocateurs and said that Vlad had provided explicit information to Ceausescu, direct from the Malta summit of December 1st ('the end of the cold war') that Bush and Gorbachev had effectively 'green-lit' a Russian 'coup'. He was a fascinating and deeply knowledgeable raconteur and we seldom met for less than seven or eight hours going through every detail of the chronology that I was developing.

Alongside this intellectual interrogation I was tramping the actual streets and buildings where the events had taken place, working out with the production team, how we would physically stage the action. The Ceausescu's had dozens of State owned houses but their principle residences were at Snagov, on the shore of a lake a few miles outside the capital, and the Primaverii Palace in Bucharest itself, each equipped separate 'day' bedrooms and a joint 'night' bedroom, a swimming pool, a cinema and the 50's style hydrotherapy equipment that the Ceausescu's loved so much. Still government controlled, the buildings turned out to be run by the same staff who had worked there under the Dictatorship and during my visits I learned that the dictator's favorite film, watched several times a month, was Robert Redford's 'Great Gatsby', his beloved dogs and that no guests of any description were allowed in the Bucharest palace, which had a modest staff of four, except for Ceausescu's three children who all had permanent rooms although they rarely visited. The President and his wife, I was told, finished work at 5pm, like any other 'worker' and came home to an empty house. There was no library, no newspapers and no TV so they would eat, maybe watch a movie and then go to bed. Occasionally they might visit to a private club nearby and play cards with a small coterie of friends, with no danger of interference as the streets around the residences were all closed to the public.

We travelled to Timisoara, a provincial town an hours flight from Bucharest, which was the 'birthplace' of the revolt. It was the planned eviction of a local Hungarian Pastor which attracted protests from his community which in turn attracted a larger crowd who eventually marched on the Town Hall. There was some violence that night but the next day, on Ceausescu's orders, the Army arrived and dozens of protesters were shot in the main square in front of the Cathedral.

We visited the morgue in the basement of the Civic hospital, dimly lit corridors, concrete floors and bent metal gurneys standing in line, literally one of the most terrifying spaces I have ever stood in. There I met a large square woman in her seventies who was on duty on December 17th 1989, when the shooting started. She explained the corpses arrived so fast that there was nowhere to put them and they had to be stacked on top of each other. She started to cry as she described the scene and said she had never spoken about it before, not even to her children, it was too horrible. She had witnessed refrigerated trucks arrive to take the bodies away, not to be buried but to be transported to Bucharest where they were secretly cremated on Elena Ceausescu orders.

Later the same morning I was in Timisoara police station looking out on the courtyard where 750 detained 'revolutionaries' had been processed on that night, before being distributed to local prisons. One of the officers, learning of our project said we should meet the Police Chief as he had been on duty as a constable at the time. He turned out to be a large, plain speaking man, locally famous because on the third day of the 'revolt' he had disobeyed orders and changed sides, joining the 'people'. Now he was their Police Chief, but he remembered the details of the night with a young constable's practiced accuracy. He said that the police were aware of some organization behind the events, he described the systematic breaking of windows 'we could see that the same projectile had been used for each window'. I asked him about the rumored presence of Russians in the town (as alleged by the Writer and the Historian) he smiled and said definitely not, the windows were broken by Securitate, the state police, who wanted visible evidence of damage to justify the mass arrests. I asked about reports of convoys of foreign cars moving in formation across the country and he answered that the Serbian Market in Timisoara attracted people from all over the country, there were plenty of convoys, that's

how it worked, but no Russians. His tale was unemotional but detailed, he talked about a group of 'elite' soldiers who arrived after the shootings and stayed at a local Hotel. 'Diversionary Specialists', they were dressed in civilian clothes and equipped with multiple identities and numerous 'gadgets'. Members of Battalion 601, their specialty was breaking up crowds and they came from Bouzot, in other words they were the Romanian army, not Russians.

As the day went on I began to feel slightly less secure about some of the information I had been given and I went back to Bucharest and explained that I needed a researcher who could help me access some independent information I managed to get an introduction to a young and very pregnant investigative reporter from a small Budapest paper. We met in one of the city's fashionable bars and I poured out my anxieties that the Russian plot theory did not seem entirely convincing, conscious that a foreigner was unlikely to have got the story right in a couple of weeks. She was immediately suspicious of my 'Historian' who she explained was both a military officer and a known Securitate collaborator. This had not been kept secret from me and indeed the Historian had told me this himself but by this time I had begun to understand that almost everyone of a certain age had some connection with the Securitate including as it turned out the Writer who also admitted that he also was an ex Police official.

The 'Journalist' agreed that we needed to have our own sources who were less connected to the state, so we started to assemble lists of people who were alive and track them down. One of the harder events to penetrate was Ceausescu's final speech delivered to 150,000 hand picked supporters from the balcony of the Communist Party Headquarters in the main Square at Bucharest, a televised speech that was mysteriously interrupted when the crowd appeared to panic giving the very public impression that Ceausescu was not in control. Both Writer and Historian had assured me that Russian professionals armed with explosive devices and batons were responsible for disrupting the event. The visual record is incomplete because the TV camera's went blank when the incident started and did not resume till the crowd had calmed. However, as it was beyond my budget to film such a huge crowd, my idea was to set part of the scene inside the Television Outside Broadcast Van that was recording the event for the TV audience. This would allow me to use some of the actual news footage on the monitors in the van and dramatize the tension of the moment.

So we set out to track down the TV technicians who were at the demonstration and a few days later I found myself in a top floor workshop littered with broken computers and electronic salvage, interviewing a long haired engineer who had been in the OB Van on the morning of the speech. He was part of an elite TV unit, whose sole occupation was the recording of Presidential speeches and he said he could show me a recording of the 'studio output', as opposed to the interrupted TV transmission, so I could see what actually happened when the TV's went black. He explained the camera positions, what each camera could see and where the panic had actually started. It was a specific disturbance in one corner of the square, several hundred yards from the balcony where Ceausescu stood, in front of what is now the Radisson Bleu Hotel. This 'action' precipitated a brief stampede pushing the crowd forward toward's the presidential balcony. He was certain it was not the multiple action of different 'provocateurs' as all the movement was in the same direction but from inside the van he couldn't identify the cause, only the effect. Like the police chief he was very detailed and sure of his account and when I asked him if he had told his story to anyone else, he said, 'yes, to Colonel Voinea'. Like everybody else he

had made an official statement to the Parliamentary Commission on the Events of the Revolution.

I knew a little about this Commission which had produced a one million page report composed of thousands of eyewitness statements from every involved party compiled by Colonel Voinea who had acted as the Ceausescus prosecutor and is clearly visible in the YouTube footage of the trial. I also knew that a few days after the trial Voinea was interviewing the Bucharest Crematorium attendants about the burnt bodies from Timisoara and he had led the prosecution case against Minister of Defence, Stanculescu, who was prosecuted for his conduct five years after the actual events. I had seen a few pages published on the internet and discussed the report with the 'Journalist' who explained that it had never been published. She had already applied to Parliament on my behalf and asked to see it and was told a) that it had been lost and b) if it was found she couldn't see it anyway.

While all this was going on I was starting to cast the key characters. Most major towns in Romania have their own theatre company and actors tend to be attached a particular theatre, however it was August and the Theatres were closed for the summer so I sat in a small room with a local Casting Director I started to meet people. Most of the actors spoke some English, or were translated, occasionally we would hazard some mutual French together. It was extraordinary enough to be able to encounter so much new (to me) talent so quickly but what made the process more remarkable was that almost everyone had participated in the events of the Revolution in one way or another. Thus the casting process became yet another form of research: one actor had been outside that Pastor's house in Timisoara where the revolt started, three had watched from the barricade in Bucharest as the tanks rolled into the crowd, another was at the TV station and witnessed the chaotic first utterances of the new government, all of them dragged out of different theatre rehearsals into the real events. Every conversation became another contribution to the investigation and the events of the story slowly became clearer.

I started a new outline, initially creating a detailed scene by scene breakdown of how the story would be told: the Palaces, the TV Van, the Mortuary and even the Great Gatsby all made an appearance. However there were still gaps, the death of Vasile Milea, Minister of Defence, on the night before Ceausescu fled, was hard to understand. Both the 'Writer' and the 'Historian' said it was a cowardly act of 'self harm' designed to get himself out of the firing line, but shooting oneself in the chest did not seem a very practical way of avoiding responsibility and I argued it was suicide but had no evidence. At the same time I still did not know what had caused the Palace Square disturbance even though I knew where it had happened and our deadline was fast approaching.

The Writer was not impressed with the new 'research' but repeated the mantra 'tell me what you want and I will write it'. I felt this was the moment to introduce a new writer and but I was told that there were no other writers in Romania who were suitable. This was obviously ludicrous, but the position was maintained, some UK writers were discussed but I felt it would be hard enough to get a Romanian writer to take on this schedule let alone a foreigner who would know nothing about the story. I did in the end meet one young and talented Romanian writer who was on the verge of directing his first film. After a long attempt to persuade him he finally decided that he could not do justice to something so complex at such short notice so it was decided that the original writer should write the first 60 mins of script based on my detailed breakdown. It was now the second week in

September and the deadline was upon us so the script had to be written...in three days. The life of the film and all the jobs involved would rest on whatever was produced over a single weekend.

I was not confident that we would get a green-light on that basis, indeed it seemed an exercise deliberately designed to fail so I sat down in my hotel room to write a parallel script myself to be ready for Monday. I started writing on the night of 12th September working with a young Romanian assistant who translated my pages into Romanian as I worked. All the conversations and the tiny details we had learned in the weeks we had been researching, came together and we finished the dual language document on Sunday afternoon and two scripts, one in each language, arrived on time on Monday morning, with a full schedule a budget and a potential cast list. It was an imperfect process but the decision to green light the film and commit to it's budget had to be made that week in order to allow the pre Christmas shoot to be practical.

A script also arrived from the 'Writer' and was translated into English but it was quickly agreed my script offered the most practical route to production. There were however anxieties about a Romanian broadcaster presenting a Romanian story that was written and directed by a Brit. This was understandable but at the same time I pointed out that they had repeatedly told me that there were no other candidates. The next morning after much discussion, the script and budget were 'green lit' everyone agreeing that we had the capability to be in production on time and a great story to tell. I telephoned home to warn my family not to expect me for a bit and we drank toasts in Romanian and English. Our excitement was short lived, at eleven o'clock that night we were informed the Romania partners had changed their mind and were pulling out and that without their participation we could not go forward. The production was dead.

At this point the 'Journalist' emailed to say that Colonel Voinea, author of the unpublished Parliamentary report on the Revolution had agreed to come to my office on a Saturday afternoon and speak on the record. He proved to be an unlikely but charming figure with a slightly Dan Aykroyd air and a very quick mind. I made a hesitant speech about the fact that because I was making a drama with actors no one would believe anything that I said but that at the same time I needed to know exactly what happened and why it happened in order to do my job. He nodded and said that he thought that a dramatic film was a perfectly reasonable way to tell the story and that people had difficulty in making sense what happened in the confusion of events.

What followed was one of the most extraordinary interviews I have ever experienced. Voinea had interviewed hundreds of people in the streets of Timisoara, he had taken every soldier back to the place where they stood and asked them to recount the number of shots, the direction of fire and so on. He had then taken every wounded civilian and worked out the trajectories aligning gun and wound. He had talked to the Cemetery workers who burned the bodies, the TV Technicians, the crowd members in Palace Square, more crucially he had interviewed all the government officials and Army Generals and had indeed prosecuted many of the key players. For reasons that will be come clear I have not had the opportunity to independently verify everything he told me but in three very packed hours he was a lucid and confident witness. He confirmed that there were no Russians in Timisoara, that the damage to local property was the work of the Securitate who needed visible evidence to justify their arrests. He explained that the 'disturbance' in the square was caused not by 'provocateurs' but by a group of students

who had hitched from Timisoara determined to spread the news of the killings. They had spent the night camping in a local park and when they were refused entrance to the square by one police barricade they had charged another checkpoint running into the back of the crowd creating the mini stampede that had interrupted the speech and led directly to Ceausescu's flight.

I asked about the rumours of explosions, Voinea said one of the students had a shoebox with some fireworks in it and had let one off, he knew because he had a statement from a woman in the crowd who saw it happen. Most astonishingly he explained that the death of the Minister of Defence was neither self harm, nor suicide, it was an execution. He told me who shot Milea, where, when and on whose direct order. I remember the 'Journalist' smiled because she had suspected this all along. Voinea's version of events in every respect supported the eyewitnesses I had met, the policeman, the mortuary attendant, the TV technician. Ever since I had arrived in Romania people had been telling me with a kind of hopeless shrug: "You'll never find the truth, there are too many stories, it's all too complicated", but listening to Dan Voinea, it didn't seem complicated at all. I asked him why Ceausescu was executed in such a brutal and legally dubious fashion, an apparently clumsy way to start a new government. The official reason was that it was fear of a counter revolution inspired by the dictators supporters. 'No', he said simply, 'everyone in the room knew that if he stood trial in a conventional way they would all be incriminated'. The only practical solution was to have him executed in a procedure that could not be duplicated. Indeed capital punishment was outlawed in Romania the week after Ceausescu was executed.

He went on to describe what happened next, because the death of Ceausescu was not the end of the Revolution. Of the 1,104 people killed in Romania that December, 942 died after the arrest of Ceausescu and as Voinea talked I began to understand why. He explained that although some deaths were a result of confusion and lack of effective communication, under cover of the chaos there was a brutal retaking by the State of the principle government buildings. He specifically described the recapture by the army of the Party Headquarters which had been 'occupied' by students. It was, he said, a military operation of floor by floor extermination conducted with lethal efficiency. An act which had been photographed by a UK journalist, who was subsequently killed when the plane he was leaving the country in was shot down.

When I got back to England I still wanted to substantiate the Voinea's information, his report seemed the obvious place and he had told us there was a copy lodged with the European Parliament which might be easier to access. In fact we were finally given permission to view a Romanian copy under supervision, no notes or copying were allowed, but it consisted of witness after witness telling the same story. And what is the story? The Western world still sees the overthrow of 'Communism' as the main event, Romanians take a more cynical view, because so little changed: 'We couldn't even organize a revolution' they say, but there was a Revolution, a real one. Ordinary people, who had seen the Berlin Wall fall a month before, stood together to put an end to tyranny. There was no organization and unknowingly they were supported by the Securitate intent on ridding themselves of an outdated leader and moving their operations into the new post Perestroika world. When the revolt became too successful and started to demand not just the overthrow of the dictator but the system that supported him, it was brutally and systematically suppressed by the State, with a little helpful chaos on the side. This was

not the action of Russian spies or foreign terrorists but Romanians, including some who remained in power in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution.

My short stay in Romania made clear the long healing that misrule requires and importance of understanding history, of truth and of reconciliation, not just embracing the enemy but also in the simpler sense of working out how things add up. At the same time working, albeit briefly, with a production crew of designers, VFX artists, cameramen and actors allowed me to experience at first hand the extraordinary energy and creativity of the country. Two weeks ago I was driving through Kensington and saw several hundred people standing in line in a leafy residential street. Despite the impossible length of the queue everyone seemed relaxed almost cheerful and it was only later I understood that these were Romanian's waiting to vote in their Presidential election. Much has been achieved in Romania since the fall of Ceausescu but the surprise victory of 'outsider' Klaus Iohannis, due to be officially confirmed next week, offers new hope that the country may finally be allowed to understand it's own history.

Charles Sturridge 2014