

Albanians from Michigan determined to bring their history to life with new film

Scanderbeg, Warrior King of Albania

One Man's Destiny Became a Nation's Epic Struggle for Freedom... Glory has a Terrible Price.

by Yusra Tekbali

An ethnic Albanian warrior clad in armor embroidered with a double-headed eagle fights an invading power until his death, freeing his people from the tyranny of foreign rule and cementing values of pride, courage and allegiance to one's heritage in Albanian identity for centuries.

Scanderbeg, Warrior King of Albania showcases the heroism and struggle of George Castriota, Scanderbeg, The Dragon of Albania, in a documentary similar to what you'd see on The History Channel- suitable since **Nua Gjelij**, the film's art director, screenwriter and producer is also a historian.

Gjelaj was born in former Yugoslavia and immigrated to the U.S. with in 1972-first to New York and then to Michigan, where he currently resides. He earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in history from Wayne State University, choosing to focus on the late medieval period in Eastern Europe.

"I was always interested in my culture," Gjelaj says. "As I studied history, particularly Albanian and Balkan history, I became fascinated with tapping into this realm that isn't really taught in schools."

His venture into film stems from his love of history and *Scanderbeg, Warrior King of Albania* is just another way to get people interested in history, Gjelaj says. He

interviewed scholars from around the world and the film is based on Catholic monk, Marin Barleti's biography of Scanderbeg.



Nua Gjelij is art director, screenwriter and producer for *Scanderbeg, Warrior King of Albania*.

"Scanderbeg was so important because he protected the Albanian identity from becoming something it wasn't, even though remnants of the Ottomans' 400-year rule of Albania can still be in Albanian culture and identity."

Still, insists Gjelaj, *Scanderbeg, Warrior King of Albania* isn't just for Albanians. Non-Albanians can enjoy the film because they aren't familiar with the story.

"Often, Hollywood regurgitates a lot of the same stuff, and this story is a fresh alternative to that," he says.

From inception to idea to completion the project took about five years, and would have been completed sooner had there been an adequate amount of finances from the beginning, Gjelaj says. It helped that the film's director, Albanian Nik Gjonaj was always on the same page and in tune with Gjelaj.

Fantastic Films International picked up *Scanderbeg, Warrior King of Albania*, when it was screened at Riley Studios at the Fairbanks Theater in Hollywood last November; it's the first documentary the company has picked

up.

"It showed at the Berlin Film Festival in February," Gjelaj says with the pride of a father seeing his son bring home a Little League trophy.

Gjelaj hasn't had any previous experience making films and teamed up with Gjonaj by a convenient stroke of luck.

"I paint a lot of portraits and figures of Albanian history," Gjelaj says. "I decided

to sell my painting of Gjergj Kastrioti on E-Bay and the winner was Nik.”

Gjonaj says Gjelij is too modest about his artistic craft.

“He’s a great artist,” he says. “I heard about his paintings before and then one day I’m just searching the web and fall in love with this painting.”

“I was a bit peeved cuz he got it for cheap,” Gjelij says with a chuckle.

The two met at his sister’s bar to “seal the deal” on the purchase, and ended up discussing their mutual interest in Albanian culture and history, sparking the genesis of the film. They originally spoke about making a feature film, but decided a documentary would be more practical.

“My biggest challenge as a director was to work within our constraints, Gjonaj says. “My eyes were bigger than my stomach and I couldn’t fulfill my vision.”

Gjelij sold his paintings throughout the process, and the men financed themselves before being supported by an Albanian woman from Birmingham, Michigan.

Enter Tringa Gojcaj.

“She had the resources we needed when we reached a low point, and really came in at the perfect time,” Gjelij says.

Gojcaj, a real estate agent, hopped on as the film’s executive producer after reuniting with Gjonaj’s father over a restaurant she sold him ten years ago.

“I met Nik and Nua after that and I saw that these two young fellows had reached a dead end on a project they poured their hearts into,” Gojcaj says.

Her nephew, Anton Gojcaj, plays Scanderbeg in the film.

Along with her support and some community fundraisers the filming continued, Gjelij says.

“The money, the time, the hurdles- it will test your patience. You have to have a strong passion, you need financing and you need vision,” he says.

Gojcaj agree that passion is really what brought everyone together

“Even when it felt like no one was supporting us, we knew the project was worth it, and we had to bring Scanderbeg to life.”

Gjelij says he tried to maintain a non-biased approach to portraying the history of Scanderbeg, a Catholic warrior who drove out the Muslim Turks.

“Most Albanians are Muslims, yet they also consider Scanderbeg a national hero,” he says. “Still, it was important for us not to demonize the Turks; we wanted to be fair.”

Shooting the film involved traveling to places around the world and reconnecting with Albanian culture in order to create a tangible connection to the story, Gjelij says.

“It’s one thing trying to read about places and another to breathe the air and feel the land; it’s almost metaphysical that way.”

Gjelij says him and Gjonaj still have their heart set on turning *Scanderbeg, Warrior King of Albania* into a full-length feature. Their goal is to land a development deal that will help turn show the epic sweep of Scanderbeg’s story.

“Think *Braveheart* on steroids and that’s Scanderbeg,” he says. “He fought for 25 years, intense warfare.”

“We really think it needs to be a feature film,” Gjonaj adds. “Francis Ford Coppola would be a great director for it-we think it’s right up his ally.”

Gojcaj prefers Mel Gibson.

“He suffered to make *Passion of the Christ* in the same we are suffering to make *Scanderbeg, Warrior King of Albania* into a bigger film,” she says. “People didn’t believe in him until he did it and we can relate to that.”

Gojcaj says she’d also love to see *Scanderbeg, Warrior King of Albania* adopted as a teaching tool in middle schools and high schools.

“We didn’t make this to get rich, we just really think this history is immensely important and one that must be told,” she says.

Gjelij and Gjonaj founded *Illyria Entertainment* with the goal of making films that entertain, educate and inspire.

Gjelij says the most important thing he’s learned working on *Scanderbeg, Warrior King of Albania* is to be flexible and roll with the punches.

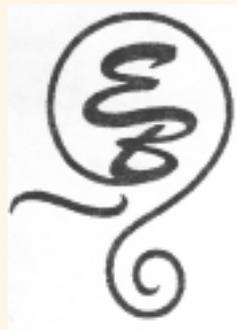
“Don’t pigeonhole yourself. Don’t say ‘I’m just gonna be a documentary filmmaker.’ A filmmaker is a filmmaker, a writer is a writer and an artist is an artist,” he says.

American audiences will relate to the film because our current politics represent many of the ideas Scanderbeg fought for, he says.

“The idea of the underdog fighting against an overwhelming power, shows that people will resist because it’s better to have the bad rule of your own than a benign foreign invader” Gjelij says.

The film’s message embodies the notion that you can’t impose your idea of how to live on others,” he says, conscious of the political implication. “You can’t rewrite history, but you can at least learn from it.”

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