



From Motown to Movietown

Thanks to Michigan's new film incentive, Hollywood heavyweights are setting their sights on Detroit. By Ellen Piligian



Clint Eastwood. Drew Barrymore. Adrien Brody. Sigourney Weaver. Christina Ricci.

Sure, these Hollywood stars have all walked the red carpet. But what they also have in common is making movies in Michigan, thanks to the state's film incentive, which went into effect April 7, 2008. It's the most aggressive in the country with a 42 percent tax credit for producing films in Michigan.

Now as Motown turns into Movietown, there's more than excitement: The business is creating jobs and spurring economic growth.

"Jobs are huge," says Anthony Wenson, chief operating officer for the Michigan Film Office. "It's about diversifying our economy in industries that are growing." In fact, the Hollywood invasion caused its Lansing-based office to grow from a staff of one to eight almost overnight, he says. "The film incentive has been a huge booster shot to the arm [of the state]."

Top and inset: On the set of Clint Eastwood's film "Gran Torino." Bottom: Drew Barrymore and Christina Ricci.

Top: Photos by Dave Krieger; bottom left: photo provided by wireimage; bottom right: photo provided by shutterstock

Hollywood of the Midwest

While Michigan has been part of many films over the years—including “Somewhere in Time,” “Out of Sight” and “8 Mile”—those were occasional and usually due to relationships with a filmmaker, says Wenson. After seeing success in other states—about 39 offer film incentives—and considering Detroit’s talent base, legislators realized Michigan had potential as a Midwest Hollywood.

“Producers are finding there is an immense opportunity for locations, from the shoreline to our trees to our hills to flatlands to different architecture,” Wenson says. “That’s huge. Every director I’ve talked to who has shot here has had conversations about shooting their next film here.”

As of last November, about seven months after the incentive passed, the film office had processed more than 100 applications, approved 69 films and brought in \$170 million in in-state productions on 28 different projects—most of which were shot entirely in Michigan, says Ken Droz, manager of creative and communications for the film office. “That’s pretty darn phenomenal,” he says, adding that it was validating to see Clint Eastwood arrive last spring to direct and star in “Gran Torino”—the story of a Korean War veteran who decides to reform his Detroit neighborhood. “Here’s a bona fide, A-list filmmaker. He came for the dollars, but he was able to make it work.”

To take advantage of the incentive—up to a 42 percent refundable tax credit on all Michigan expenditures—filmmakers must spend at least \$50,000 in the state on projects that include films, documentaries, TV movies and music videos. Scripts cannot be obscene or pornographic. So far most film budgets have been less than \$10 million, says Droz, but bigger films are in the works.

The incentive allows the state to take part in the \$40 billion a year film industry, which is growing at about 1 to 4 percent annually, Wenson says. The incentive also applies to the profitable interactive game industry. Though nothing in the interactive game field has been approved yet, “we have an ... opportunity to tap to grow revenue for the state,” Wenson says.

So You Want To Be in Pictures?

Because filmmakers get the maximum tax break by hiring local talent, the legislation has created several jobs—from production assistants to hotel employees to equipment experts.

“I’ve been doing this for more than 20 years and have never seen legislation [create jobs] so quickly,” says



Top: A scene from “America,” a drama filmed in Detroit; bottom: Sigourney Weaver stars in “Prayers for Bobby.”

Photos courtesy of Ben Mark Holzberg, Lifetime Television

Maureen Donohue Krauss, deputy director for Oakland County Department of Economic Development and Community Affairs. “It really helps our smaller companies.”

One of the most aggressive films in terms of Michigan talent is the latest Rob Schneider film, “American Virgin,” which was shot in Detroit. “They spent 100 percent of their budget in the state,” says Droz, who points out that only a handful of films have done that. Producers brought six cast members and hired the rest locally, including 18 speaking roles and extras. More than 90 percent of the crew was Michigan-based, says executive producer John Schneider, who says they hired Detroiters to drive equipment trucks. “People couldn’t be nicer,” says Schneider, who adds that he’s already setting up his next film here. “They are excited about the future.”

Craft service firm Kind Services Inc. of Auburn Hills had to hire additional employees to handle its work on such films as Drew Barrymore’s “Whip It” and Rosie O’Donnell’s “America.” “We have not had any time off,” says Megan Meganck, who owns the company with

Coming Attractions

Michigan is an eclectic canvas for filmmakers—from stately mansions to urban streets to magnificent shorelines. See it close up in these new films:



"Gran Torino"

Clint Eastwood plays a Korean War veteran who decides to reform his Detroit neighborhood.

Locations: Highland Park neighborhood, Hamtramck, Royal Oak, Grosse Pointe.

"Demoted"

Sean Astin and Michael Vartan play a pair of prankster salesmen who get demoted.

Locations: Novi, Southfield.

"Miss January"

Starring Kim Cattrall as a former cinema siren involved in a child custody battle.

Locations: Romulus, Westland, Livonia.

"Whip It"

Drew Barrymore and Ellen Page in a comedy about roller derby girls.

Locations: Detroit, Ypsilanti, Ann Arbor.

"Youth in Revolt"

Michael Cera is a teen who meets his dream girl in this comedy.

Locations: Ann Arbor, around



Traverse City and Interlocken.

"America"

Rosie O'Donnell in a story of a boy who gets lost in the foster care system.

Locations: Detroit, Highland Park, Pleasant Ridge.

"All's Faire in Love"

A comedy about Renaissance Faires with Christina Ricci and Ann-Margret.

Locations: The Renaissance Festival in Holly, Flint.

"Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story"

 (TNT)

Starring Cuba Gooding Jr. as a doctor who goes from the streets of Detroit to become a top neurosurgeon.

Location: Detroit.

"American Virgin"

Comedy with Rob Schneider and Jenna Dewan, whose one wild night threatens her college standing.

Locations: Greektown and the Bouzouki Lounge, Detroit, Ann Arbor.

—E. P.

her husband. "We're growing as quickly as we can."

The Somerset Inn in Troy was looking to lay off 15 employees before the "Gran Torino" crew, among others, rolled in last spring. The inn has hosted four film companies, pulling in more than 6,000 room nights from the film business. "We've hired 15 to 20 people, mostly to take care of the film people," says Duane Swanson, director of operations.

Among those "in the biz," opportunities have been great. Martial arts master, actor and stunt coordinator Peter Malota, a veteran of eight Jean-Claude Van Damme films, moved back to Michigan after 20 years in Los Angeles to run a martial arts school. Now, in addition to teaching at his school, he's training 45 students in stunt work and film fighting, and he is the stunt coordinator on "All's Faire in Love" with Christina Ricci. Thanks to the local film business, Malota is able to stay in town. "I don't have to go back and forth to L.A. anymore," he says.

Even Hollywood endings can happen in Detroit thanks to Rosie O'Donnell. Unhappy with the actors reading for the male lead in "America" last fall, O'Donnell found her star, 17-year-old Philip Johnson, a high school senior with no acting experience, when she and executive producer Larry Sanitsky spied him in a restaurant just days before shooting. "He's been fantastic," says Sanitsky. Moreover, they were so impressed with Detroit that they relocated the story there. "We wanted an urban, gritty look," he says, adding that the experience has been fantastic. "I would absolutely come back here [to film] in a minute."

Detroit's Tarrance Alfred also got a lucky break. The martial arts and leadership trainer got into the film



biz after “Gran Torino” location scouts inquired about his mother’s home. They didn’t use the home, but they hired Alfred as an assistant location manager. Alfred said hello to Eastwood every day on set. “He’d call me by name and shake my hand; I was flabbergasted,” he says. Alfred learned a great deal from his on-set experience. “It’s gotten my foot into the Hollywood door,” he says, add-

ing that he’s already in talks about future projects.

The filming incentive has been great for local filmmakers such as Carrie LeZotte, with her \$90,000 budget for a documentary about Detroit’s immigrant history. LeZotte says the incentive enabled her to hire a research assistant and media manager. “It’s a small project, but it had a huge impact for us.”

Room for Growth

There is room for growth in terms of infrastructure as the state becomes a movie mecca. In particular, there’s a need for more seasoned film crews and Hollywood-style studio facilities. This would translate into more dollars spent in the state, because filmmakers wouldn’t have to bring their own crews to Michigan or head back to Hollywood to use a sound stage. Building these resources takes time, but what is lacking is on its way.

Boot camps and training programs are cropping up to train production staffs. Deputy Wayne County Executive Azzam Elder says they will do what it takes to make the film industry viable. For instance, Wayne County partnered with Dearborn’s Henry Ford Community College and TicTock Studios of Holland, Mich., to create a basic film set training course to prepare people for entry-level jobs. They are also fostering programs to educate local government and businesses on how to use the incentives.

There are a number of much-buzzed-about studios in the works throughout the state, which will allow filmmakers to work year-round, says Wenson. So far, Grace and Wild in Farmington Hills has the state’s largest sound stage at 15,000 square feet and also has the state’s only 16- and 35mm film lab.

“Business was slow until the film business got here,” says Ginny Hart, vice president of sales for the HD Studios division, which provided production offices for “High School” and “Demoted,” two comedies by producer Warren Zide, a Detroit native who’s already planning his third film in Michigan.

One major studio is expected to be completed in Oakland County by late 2009. S3 Entertainment

Living in Style

When it comes to living in “the D,” there is no shortage of cool places to call home. That’s good news for creatives setting down roots. Just ask Detavio Samuels, a group account director for GlobalHue, a Southfield marketing firm. He moved to Detroit from New Jersey last year and nabbed a bi-level loft with a spiral staircase at the Lofts of Merchants Row. Now he’s settling into his new digs at the Westin Book Cadillac Detroit.

Here are some of the new developments for anyone with style:

The Ellington: This new development is in the heart of Midtown with retail on the first floor. Lofts feature private balconies and granite countertops, and residents are right across the street from

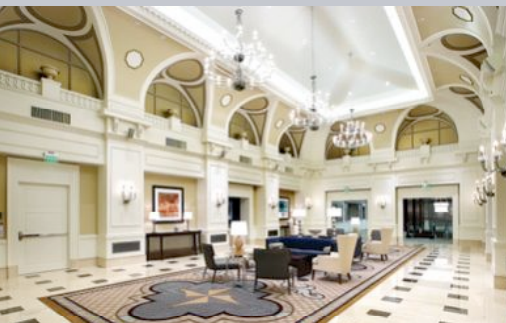
the Max M. Fisher Music Center, home to the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. Visit ellingtonlofts.com.

The Lofts at New Amsterdam: These new lofts are in the historic Caille Building, where they used to make coin slot machines. Nearby are the Albert Kahn-designed Fisher Building and TechTown, a business accelerator for technology startups. Go to jonna-detroitlofts.com.

Westin Book Cadillac Detroit: The condos above this elegant and newly renovated historic hotel offer high-end living. Residents have access to amenities of the hotel, including 24/7 security and a valet. Visit bookcadillac-residences.com.

The Lofts of Merchants Row: Located downtown, these lofts are a short walk from a Detroit Tigers baseball game, a show at the Fox Theatre or a jog along the Detroit River. Living options range from studios to three-bedroom units with retail on the street. Go to loftsofmerchantsrow.com.

—E. P.



Westin Book Cadillac Detroit

Group—a full-service film production company that’s worked on several films since April—is in talks to create a \$60 million Hollywood-style studio complex with six sound stages between 12,000 and 20,000 square feet, including one devoted to training and education. The company is so positive about filming in Michigan, it relocated its headquarters from Los Angeles to Ferndale, says managing partner and co-founder Jeff Spilman.

Things don’t seem to be slowing down for the budding film industry. That’s good news, because it nicely dovetails into a broader economic plan for the city that launched last summer. The plan—one of six initiatives outlined by

Detroit Renaissance, an organization dedicated to the region’s economic growth—is geared specifically to the region’s creative economy.

Beyond Movies

Besides the city’s rich musical heritage—from Motown to techno—the Detroit region has been a major center for fields such as advertising, architecture and commercial film. At one time Detroit churned out more commercial and industrial film than anywhere in the world. The city is home to leading arts institutions such as the College for Creative Studies, named one of the 60 best design schools in the world by Business Week in 2007.

If fact, Detroit sits near the top of many rankings in terms of creative economy attributes and infrastructure, says John Austin, executive director of the New Economy Initiative for southeast Michigan, an eight-year, \$100 million effort to foster economic growth and transition southeast Michigan to an innovation-based economy. Among the rankings, Austin says, Detroit is behind only Chicago and New York City in terms of people in advertising jobs, and metro Detroit has the second highest percentage of creative workers among the 50 largest metro areas in the U.S.

“When we talk about the creative economy, a lot of people immediately think of music or fash-

ion or film,” says Doug Rothwell, president of Detroit Renaissance. In reality, jobs that pay are in advertising, marketing, architecture and design, digital and traditional media, film production and distribution. “Those are the [industries] we’re trying to lure.”

Detroit has a great chance to attract profitable industries. Among the findings in a study by AngelouEconomics, commissioned by Detroit Renaissance in early 2008, more than 33,000 people now work in the region’s creative sector, and their industries are growing twice as fast as the service sector and four times as fast as manufacturing. Plus, those jobs in Detroit pay about 50 percent more

than the U.S. average—\$64,768 versus \$42,535.

Detroit Renaissance’s plan encompasses a marketing and branding campaign called “Detroit Make It Here” with a Web site serving as its hub for news, social networking and information for the region’s creative class.

“We have this seasoned community of creatives largely overshadowed by automotive,” says Michelle Darwish, an editor for Detroit Make It Here and Crain’s Detroit Business, which powers the site. “Because of that, they sort of fly under the radar. The point is to help them find each other.”

Hopes are high for southeast

Michigan, and the film incentive seems to offer a beacon of what could come. Outsiders already see the potential. “You have a place that deserves a chance and people with passion,” says producer John Schneider. “It’s about rebuilding a great American city.”

Or you could just take Clint Eastwood’s word for it as he looks straight into the camera for a promotional film on the incentive: “Michigan will be the next film capital of the world.”

Ellen Piligian is a freelance writer based in Detroit whose stories have appeared in People, the Detroit Free Press and The New York Times.