

A Flicker of Progress on Maine Films

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When Brad Pitt and Johnny Depp are fighting sea beasts off Southwest Harbor, maybe Maine will have made it.

When CBS-TV's new fall schedule includes "CSI: Westbrook," we'll be certain Maine has made it.

But that's not now.

Maine is known mostly for quiet movies set along a rocky coast, thrillers in the woods (which may or may not be shot in Canada) and, naturally, anything related to Stephen King.

That may be changing.

Thanks to a combination of independent filmmakers, aspiring producers and cinema supporters, a movement is afoot to put Maine on the movie map.

The Maine Studio, one of the largest movie production facilities in New England, may push that forward.

But it appears there's plenty of work to be done.

"We're far from a sustainable film and TV presence in this state," said Lynn Kippax, former chairman of the Maine Film Commission.

The Maine Studio, occupying 43,000 square feet on Presumpscot Street in Portland, opened last month.

The space, which belonged previously to Nappi Distributors, is available for shooting, editing, music production and set building.

"In state and out of state, there's a natural curiosity about the film industry in Maine," said John Seymore, chief operating officer for the studio. That's translating into a lot of calls, Seymore said, as people decide whether to produce projects here.

But there are still obstacles, he said. Large film and TV studios, in particular, are looking for tax incentives, he said.

That cash doesn't look to be forthcoming at the moment. In the last legislative session, lawmakers considered a bill to offer tax credits for movie production companies that spend more than \$50,000 in Maine. The bill stalled after legislators couldn't find money for the program.

Kippax said that if the state is to have any hope of attracting large film productions, it will need that money to compete with other states and cities that offer tax credits to filmmakers.

"Film business is a manufacturing business that comes in on its own wheels, doesn't pollute and cleans up after itself," Kippax said.

Kippax, who worked on the HBO movie adaptation of the novel "Empire Falls," said films also stimulate the economy where they're produced.

And movies can act as a training ground for young filmmakers.

But it's a bit of a Catch-22.

Films require talent, from set design and photography to sound and wardrobe, and producers aren't going to go to places that don't have at least a minimum of those resources.

Kippax said some of that talent is already here, in companies that produce graphics, animation, commercials and advertising.

There are also plenty of aspiring filmmakers. Aaron Gaudet of Bangor directed "The Way We Get By," a documentary on the lives of the troop greeters at Bangor International Airport.

Festivals such as the Maine International Film Festival and the Camden International Film Festival continue to attract new films and talent each year.

Participants in the 48 Hour Film Project, which challenges teams to create films from scratch over two days, have had their entries screened at the Cannes Film Festival. Sputnik Animation had a short feature, "Skinned Alive," shown at Cannes in 2007.

Andy Davis, a local filmmaker who has directed several films including "Mud," "2" and "I'm Sorry," said there are various tiers to the filmmaking community in Maine.

On one level, some are trying to attract big productions from California and New York to film in Maine.

On the other level, there are local independent filmmakers who struggle to find funding and get their ideas on screen.

Davis is in post-production on his new film, "Adelle," a tale, set in the 1930s, of a deaf girl trying to survive the elements and frightening images while lost in the Maine woods.

"Being brought up here, (Maine is) special to me because it's what I know," he said. "You tend to write about what you know and in turn make movies about what you know."

Davis said he hopes the state and filmmakers can work together to expand the film community. Efforts like the Maine Studio.

"If they can do it right, I think it would be a great and positive thing for the film community in Maine," he said.

Seymore said building up Maine's movie-making machine will take time and investment.

He points to the example of Nappi Distributors, which provided the space for the studio free of charge.

"It's a risk," he said. "But it's a risk worth taking. A risk that creates jobs."

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