

Film workers here straining to keep up with four movies

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By Timothy McNulty, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

For more than a decade, Pittsburgh-based film and TV workers have had to hit the road to places such as Philadelphia, Louisiana and North Carolina to find work. Now, the booming Pittsburgh film industry is luring out-of-town film workers here.

"We've gone all over [looking for work] and now we're a hot spot. It's amazing," said George Jaber, the head of the local film workers union.

There are currently four major movies based and being shot in and around the region, and Mr. Jaber, 53, a theater professor and carpenter with 20-plus years in the industry, sounds both thrilled and a bit exasperated by it all. Local 489 of the International Association of Theatrical and Stage Employees has less than 115 active members on its roster, with another 15 on the way, and is getting stretched thin.

Some in the union -- grips (electricians), gaffers (rigging experts), set dressers, wardrobe personnel, painters and others -- are working on more than one movie at a time on sets across Western Pennsylvania. The surfeit of work is attracting new workers to the area and forcing tight-knit local crews to work differently.

"When you have a gaffer and key grip and they understand what's needed, and they have a team they've worked with for many years on many projects, it's a different proposition for us," Mr. Jaber said. "But we're not shirking from it and we're not afraid of it. It's a perfect storm of work opportunity for us."

The mini-boom is being fueled by a combination of tax incentives, competitive union costs and a race to beat a possible actor's strike

The state last summer approved a \$75 million tax-incentive program that issues film and TV production companies 25 percent tax credits for all spending in the state. For instance, "Adventureland," a movie that shot at Kennywood and other Pittsburgh-area locations last year, spent \$9.9 million in the state, garnering a \$2.475 million credit.

Three movies in various stages of Pittsburgh production -- "Zack and Miri Make A Porno," "Shelter" and the smaller-scale "Feast of the Seven Fishes" -- are on track to spend nearly \$60 million in the area, according to the Pennsylvania Tourism Office. Two other major studio productions with Pittsburgh offices -- "The Road" and "She's Out of My League" -- are not yet on the official tax incentive docket.

That is in addition to about \$16 million in spending last spring and fall, bringing the total spent on Pittsburgh-based productions to roughly \$76 million, supporting the statistical equivalent -- by the tourism office's math -- of 1,064 jobs.

Philadelphia has landed two major films -- "The Happening" and "The Lovely Bones" -- since the summer, but Pittsburgh has hosted more \$10 million-plus movies than its cross-state rival. Pittsburgh's IATSE local can quote lower prices to producers than Philadelphia's branch of the union, Mr. Jaber said, as the latter represents a bigger area that includes New York and Connecticut.

Pittsburgh Film Office head Dawn Keezer said "it's never been this busy" in the city, partially due to a possible strike by the Screen Actors Guild in June. The strike threat is forcing studios to rush films to completion, while they still have actors.

Not all of the increased work is going to unionized film workers. It gets spread out to caterers, hotels and even the non-glamorous world of accounting.

"I've had some interesting conversations" with film industry officials, Kevin McQuillan, a certified public accountant at the Downtown accounting firm McCrory & McDowell, said with a laugh. His firm worked with the producers of "Homecoming," which spent \$1.65 million in the state last year.

"There are a lot of characters," he said. "Fairly high stress, fairly high strung. Not your typical CPA personalities."

The tax incentives have created what is basically a startup business for McCrory & McDowell as film producers use the accountants to tally their in-state spending totals so they can reap the tax credits.

The incentives have spun off another industry, too -- brokers who trade in a secondary market for the saleable credits.

Companies usually use tax credits to offset what they owe the state in the way of corporate net income, capital stock taxes and the like. But if a company is based outside the state -- as Hollywood movie studios are -- and thus do not pay most Pennsylvania taxes, the credits don't have as much value for them.

But they can sell them, which is where brokers come in. Using a middleman (such as McCrory & McDowell's Philadelphia-based partner, MVM Associates), credit holders can sell them for cash to Pennsylvania firms, usually at a discount.

The broker, of course, gets a fee, too, supporting another spin-off Pennsylvania business.

"The economic impact, to me, is pretty obvious," Mr. McQuillan said of the incentives.

The \$75 million incentive program is subject to re-approval by the Legislature for the 2008-09 fiscal year that begins July 1.

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