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Hollywood on the Rio Grande: Filmmaking in New Mexico

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Go Southwestern, young gals: from left, Judith Burnett, Elisa Negrin, and Suzanne Andrews in The Far Side of Jericho, shot in Western-perfect New Mexico

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By [Robert Nott](#) | The New Mexican
December 1, 2006

"We don't have to be Hollywood. But I don't see why we can't be Vancouver."
— Jon Hendry, business agent for International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, Local 480, New Mexico

"I don't think we should be either [Hollywood or Vancouver]. We should be who we are — although Vancouver had a pretty good run." — New Mexico filmmaker Alton Walpole

Right now, the bad news about the filmmaking industry in New Mexico is that it's tough to find any bad news. Yes, you may hear of critics who wonder whether it's a state-sponsored pork-barrel project that's bound to backfire, crew members who grumble that a lot of out-of-staters are moving to New Mexico to establish residency fast so they can work here instead of Los Angeles, and actors who gripe that they're not getting anything more substantial than day-player parts. But overall, everyone is pretty happy with a business that not only brings a lot of money to the state but also a touch of glamour.

The first motion picture shot in New Mexico was Thomas Edison's Indian Day School (1898), and roughly 300 films and/or television programs have been shot here from that time through the 1990s, according to 100 Years of Filmmaking in New Mexico (published by New Mexico Magazine). But the recent upswing in motion-picture activity suggests that we're about to become Hollywood on the Rio Grande.

Why? Because the state can make some money and movie producers can save some money — thanks to financial incentives meant to draw filmmakers to the Land of Enchantment. The program was initially signed into law by Gov. Gary Johnson, but it's Gov. Bill Richardson who is credited with turning these initiatives into a stronger, more appealing package — to such a degree that now film companies really need to search to find a good reason not to shoot here (i.e., they need beachfront property for a seaside love scene or something).

What incentives are there? To start with, and assuming you qualify (qualifications vary based on incentive options; it's best to check out the New Mexico Film Office's Web site, www.nmfilm.com, for details), there is a 25-percent tax rebate on all production expenditures subject to taxation by the state.

Then there's the loan program, which offers a zero-percent-interest loan for up to \$15 million per

Block

project. This amount can even represent 100 percent of the movie's entire budget. That loan agreement is guaranteed regardless of how the film turns out in quality or at the box office.

Finally, there's free use of state lands and buildings (if you want to shoot there), access to a props and costume shop located at the old Penitentiary of New Mexico, more than 300 days of sunshine (this according to the film office's classy-looking 2006 film directory), and "a film office willing to jump through rings of fire" (from the film directory again).

Blue skies, free locales, and plenty of props aside, the tax rebate and loan program are what attract to the state such pictures as *3:10 to Yuma*, *The Astronaut Farmer* and *Wild Hogs* and the television series *Wildfire*.

No wonder that, compared to the 300 film and television projects made here between 1898 and 1998, nearly 100 more have been made between 1999 and today, according to www.nmfilm.com — and about three quarters of those projects have been shot since late 2002, when Richardson took office.

"When I moved back here 15 years ago, nobody thought it would be a movie state," explained Santa Fe-based filmmaker Alton Walpole of Mountainair Films, who spent the past summer working as a union production manager on a trio of locally shot horror films. "We got like one movie a year back then."

Jonathan Wacks, chairman of the College of Santa Fe's Moving Images Department, echoed Walpole's comments. "Five years ago, I'd never have imagined that we'd be where we are now — discussing the state of filmmaking here. The incentive program is an incredibly effective and well-structured program," he said. "It's working."

The skinny on the money

Apparently it is working. According to Eric Witt, the governor's director of legislative affairs and media arts and entertainment development, the state has waived roughly \$30 million in taxes or interest on the filmmaking program since early 2003. In return, Witt estimates the state has taken in about \$260 million in money spent by production companies.

Actually, the state has probably benefited to the financial tune of about \$780 million, according to Witt, once you calculate the economic impact generated by the money as it passes through a variety of hands. Witt described how this works via e-mail, using the analogy of Nott Productions spending \$500,000 at Witt Lumber for set construction material.

"Witt Lumber then takes that \$500K, and, after taxes, does some fixing up of its shop, replaces inventory, and pays its employees, who in turn take their paychecks and buy groceries, clothes, pay rent, and go out to eat and so forth. So our economy continues to cycle that original \$500K payment from Nott Productions through the system until it generates a multiple effect of much more than \$500K in economic activity by the time it has run its course. The multiplied effect gives a more accurate picture of the true impact of that original \$500K expenditure on the local economy. We use a multiplier of 3 for the film industry. The specific value of multipliers, while studied extensively by business research groups and the like, vary by industry and remain something of an art since you're dealing with a very complex system. Some states go as high as 4.8 to 5 for their film-industry multipliers, but we want to be on the conservative side so we use 3." (On a personal note, Nott Productions has never had \$500,000 to its name, and neither has Nott.)

Edward McLoughlin, a Santa Fe-based crew member who has worked as a set dresser on about a dozen New Mexico film productions, thinks Witt's point is not emphasized enough. "I don't think it's getting across to the media how much money is being spent by films in New Mexico," he said. "Whole art departments are going out spending money in local shops, local businesses, on hotel rooms, cars, in lumber, antique shops, even in Goodwill. We went into Goodwill not so long ago and spent \$1,500! It's just amazing how much money is being pumped into the local economy."

That trickle-down effect includes money made by local retailers when a John Travolta or Andie MacDowell (to name two stars who recently worked in the state) purchases clothes, home furnishings, or jewelry in their shops.

The state also negotiates a profit-participation deal with production companies that get the zero-percent loan. That's one reason the state insists that qualifying companies have a pre-set distribution deal in place. Since most films shot in New Mexico in the past two years are just making their way to theaters now, it's too early to track that aspect of the money, Witt said. (But consider this: the Jessica Simpson/Dane Cook comedy *Employee of the Month* was filmed here for a budget of about \$12 million, and it's already taken in more than twice that at the box office.)

You can work in movies too!

It's not just about money; it's about jobs. In order to qualify for the loan, 60 percent of the below-the-line payroll (devoted to the technical crew) must be paid to New Mexico residents. This encourages producers to hire New Mexicans on technical crews. Once again, figures help tell the story. According to Jon Hendry, business agent for the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees Local 480, which covers New Mexico, union membership has jumped from about 500 to nearly 1,000 in the past couple of years. A film electrician can earn about \$40,000 in just 20 weeks of movie work, Hendry said. Hendry and the union were instrumental in promoting the film program, and he is unabashed about the need for the state to keep making movies.

"I don't think we're growing fast enough," he said. "We're the first state to shoot a movie, *Indian Day School*. We're the first state to have a film commission [founded in 1967]. We're the first state to implement these kinds of incentives. I'm worried that the momentum won't continue. We don't have to be Hollywood, but I don't see why we can't be Vancouver. I do worry that people will say, 'That's enough.'"

Hendry said right now the state is scheduling five to 10 movies per year. He'd like to see that skyrocket to 10 to 20, and yes, he thinks he has — or will have, by the end of 2007 — enough crews to handle the workload. An average crew ranges in size from 100 to 200 members, according to an IATSE Local 480 representative.

That growing membership is being fed by a statewide training program designed to teach residents the basics of movie-crew work. This Film Technician Training Program, which is partially funded by the state, is administered through four state colleges, including Santa Fe Community College.

Which leads to the critical questions: do we have enough crews, and is the training paying off?

Gripes, grunts, and groans

Both Hendry and Lisa Strout, director of the state's film office, say the state has five full crews ready to work. Others, such as Walpole, wonder if that number is accurate. The Film Technician Training Program is certainly churning crew members out. Barton Bond, who administers the program at SFCC, said 36 students signed up for spring classes and another 63 for the summer. Yet at the beginning of November, he was down to 12 students. A few dropped out, but what about the rest?

"What's happened in the past couple of semesters is that the big productions have come in during the middle of our class structure, and they suck up our students," Bond said in a tone that seemed to mix pride and concern. "It's a little scary, I won't lie to you."

He and his training-program peers around the state are now working to restructure the curriculum so they can ensure that such students get a crash course in the form of six weeks of "set etiquette." "We're confident that by the time the students get through that aspect, they can get on the set and equip themselves pretty well," Bond explained. "They don't have many skills at that point, but at least they know the drill and can get on the set and learn very quickly."

But are they any good?

The answer to that question depends on whom you ask, according to Walpole. He uses the old fable of the blind men and the elephant — which suggests one can't understand something by simply touching its individual parts — as an analogy. Wacks suggested talking to crew members and out-of-state filmmakers to get an answer to that question, so we did.

Marcia Calosio, who has worked as a set decorator in the business for about 20 years, has made six films in New Mexico, including the recently lensed *No Country for Old Men*. "I do location work all over the country," she said. "And I found that the crews there in New Mexico were more creative, overall, than crews I've met in other regions."

Patty Long, a unit production manager from Los Angeles who has worked on three projects here, agreed. "I've had very good experiences in New Mexico," she said. "There is a battle for crews, which makes it a little tricky, because there are so many productions in New Mexico." When she worked on a pair of Tony Hillerman suspense dramas here a few years ago, she figured there were two full crews available for filmmakers. "I would venture to say it's much stronger now than it was two or three years ago," she said.

Tom Shell, a producer who made the low-budget Western *The Far Side of Jericho* here earlier this year, said he hired 90 percent of his crew from New Mexico. "The individuals were not only nice, but solidly trained — they knew what they were doing," he said. Walpole, who worked as a line producer on that picture, recalled that *Jericho's* cinematographer, Patrick Cady, wasn't particularly happy about having to use local crews — at first. But by the time the film had wrapped, Cady had changed his mind, Walpole said with a laugh: "He ended up liking them so much he brought the entire crew out to L.A. on his next project."

Good word of mouth is vital to the program's future. "All it takes is a couple of bad experiences and film productions go back and tell people," explained Mark "Lucky" Duran, who worked his way up in the business from property master to art director and production designer over the past decade. "Bad news spreads faster than good news."

There is the occasional voice of criticism out there. Susan Benjamin, a Los Angeles-based set decorator, recently came to New Mexico to shoot *Wild Hogs*, the John Travolta-Tim Allen comedy about aging hippie bikers. She ended up working with some of those recently trained film technicians. "With any novice, it's frustrating to give them an address and have them call you five times because they can't find where you are — and they're from New Mexico, and you're not! That added a little to the stress level," she said.

Likewise, Benjamin sensed that many in the crew were accustomed to the easygoing pace of life in the land of *mañana*. "When the camera rolls, the camera rolls. I enjoyed everybody, but it was a little bit difficult to get them up to speed as to how quick we do things or need things in the movie business," she said. Still, she acknowledged that many of them just need to gain experience, so those who are "really interested in the film business will definitely get ahead of their game, and that will be a great thing."

Can you make a movie here for peanuts?

One question raised by a number of industry people is what to do about developing local above-the-line talent. Above-the-line refers to the creative team: producers, directors, writers, and actors. "It's where we have to go, with our own filmmakers," Hendry said of the future.

But for now it seems that those filmmakers have to move here from elsewhere with established reputations or else build reputations for themselves, and that's not easy to do. "In New Mexico there are not that many producers who develop their own projects," Walpole explained. "When productions start locally, you'll see the other trades kick in. Everything feeds everything else."

"Actors are not going to get lead roles here," he continued. "And New Mexico is a great place for writers to live. But are they going to sell their scripts in New Mexico? Probably not."

That's not stopping local independent filmmakers from forging ahead. Some of them criticize the state's film program for catering to big-budget outsiders who have big-name stars and a guaranteed distribution deal. But Strout insists that anyone is welcome to walk into the office (now located on Montezuma Avenue, above the Jean Cocteau Cinema) and ask for help.

"The first thing we would do is sit them down and ask, 'Who are you? What do you do? What do you want?'" she said. "If they need help with the legal aspects or getting insurance, we can help. We want to encourage them to work in this community. We have small films, big films, everything in between. We are supportive of independent talent."

It's time for the state to start nurturing its own above-the-line talent, she acknowledged. "We need to start with our stories, we need to find our writers," she added.

Those writers and their stories are out there, judging by the number of independent movies shot in this state and screening at either the New Mexico Filmmakers Expo (Friday through Tuesday, Dec. 1-5) or

the Santa Fe Film Festival (Wednesday, Dec. 6, through Dec. 10). Between the two events, the total exceeds 100, according to Stephen Rubin, deputy director of the Santa Fe Film Festival.

Are these film artists getting help from the state? The real question might be, are they asking? "The only time I approached the state was after we were done."

Albuquerque-based filmmaker Aaron Hendren said. Hendren shot his first narrative feature film, *The Faithful and the Foul*, in July on a budget of about \$20,000. (It screens at the film festival this year.) He thinks the state is just beginning to look for ways to aid guys like him. "It seems like so many people here have the potential to be independent filmmakers," he said.

"As far as I knew, there wasn't really any financial support that I could get for the kind of work I was doing," said filmmaker Moisés González. He and partner Deryle Perryman made *Dangerous Highway*, a 75-minute documentary about musician Eddie Hinton, on a budget of \$25,000 ("largely through American Express," he said). González said he's talked with Strout about what the future holds for indie filmmakers in this state. "I think they are trying to do something different," he said. There's more disappointment than bitterness in his voice when he talks about trying to find a way to get in on those incentives; he is baffled that millions of dollars go into making films that aren't particularly good while small, smart indie filmmakers can't get financing as easily.

But indie producer/directors usually can't afford union crews, they rarely have distribution deals in place, and it's often hard for them to meet some of the criteria of the incentives plan. Dan Otero, for instance, who shot the sci-fi comedy *Zen and the Asteroid*, said the film office advised him to apply for the (then 15 percent) tax rebate, but he had to provide 50 percent matching funds, which he could not do. That's not stopping him from looking for state funding for his next film, a sword-and-sorcery saga called *The Dark Saga*. "A good \$5 million budget would make a very good movie," he explained. "But I think, realistically, that if we can get a budget of \$500,000, we can make a very good movie as well."

Help on the way

Witt and Strout both said the state wants to aid homegrown talent. Back in August, the office announced that Richardson had established the New Visions/New Mexico Contract Awards, which offer up to \$20,000 for resident filmmakers to use toward making or completing a project. A total of \$160,000 is available in the fund; Strout said about 230 people (including Hendren, González, and Otero, it turns out) applied for it. Awardees will be announced before the end of the year, Strout said.

In October, the state gave a \$1 million grant to the College of Santa Fe to create the New Mexico Filmmakers Intensive, an immersive filmmaking program that covers producing, directing, and screening. (Classes start in January, and there's room for 26 students.) The College of Santa Fe announced in August that it would award 10 scholarships of \$10,000 each to New Mexico residents to study film at the college's Moving Image Arts Department.

The Governor's Cup awards, founded in 2004, also support New Mexico film artists. To date the awards have given out more than \$20,000 in cash and associated services to help filmmakers create short movies. The four 2006 Governor's Cup movies will screen in the film festival this year; look for an announcement of the 2007 Governor's Cup winners in January.

"We want to promote New Mexico filmmakers, because other states are saying, 'How can we do that?' and some are better-suited to compete with us," Witt said. Indie filmmaker Mary Feidt of Santa Fe has nothing but praise for the system. "I think the state is definitely trying to help out," she said. "They are trying to make it desirable to keep people or entice people to come here to make movies. Even with my own small project, that's a possibility." Her documentary *Tangled Up in Bob* was shot out of state but used local talent, so she got some tax benefits and was able to actually pay her small crew. That picture will also screen at this year's film fest.

So what else do we need?

Besides supporting regional talent, the state needs studios. It's about to get one — and possibly two.

Late in July, Pacifica Ventures, owners of Culver Studios of Culver City, Calif., began building Albuquerque Studios, billed as a full-service venue for movies, television, music videos, commercials, and digital media. The studio, in the Mesa del Sol development just south of Albuquerque International Sunport, will feature eight soundstages, back-lot space, set-construction facilities, postproduction facilities (still a rarity in the state), and offices on 28 acres of land. Two of the eight soundstages are due to open in mid-January; the rest are to be gradually readied through spring.

"The incentives prompted us to realize that if we build a class-A facility here, film companies that were coming in would be more inclined to bring all their productions here," explained Nick Smerigan, vice president of Albuquerque Studios. Though it hasn't booked any productions yet, Smerigan is confident the company will attract moviemakers looking for studio space. (The Greer Garson Communications Center and Studio, housed on the College of Santa Fe campus, has two operable soundstages now; Wacks is hoping to find a way to add a third to stay competitive with Albuquerque and keep filmmakers interested in Santa Fe.) Smerigan said he expects Albuquerque Studios to be manned by 70 to 80 regular employees, the majority of whom will be New Mexicans.

Meanwhile, Lions Gate Films has announced plans to build a \$15 million studio on 53 acres of land in Rio Rancho sometime in the next two years. While a representative of Lions Gate did not return phone calls seeking comment, the plan has come under some fire from Rio Rancho residents who are not happy that the city is giving some of the land to Lions Gate for free. Likewise there are rumors that the city — or the state — will loan Lions Gate a considerable amount of money to build there. Witt said he was unable to comment on any business dealings the state has with Pacifica Ventures and Lions Gate, but he acknowledged that they were "talking about working with them."

Witt, Strout, Hendry, and Walpole agree that the building of infrastructure is a clear sign the movie industry is moving forward at a healthy pace. From Hollywood's perspective, the soundstages are an added enticement, Calosio said. "Nobody can beat New Mexico; I think it has a good, long run still," she said. "One indicator is that Lions Gate and Culver Studios are building studios in Albuquerque. ... I don't feel that anyone would be dumb enough to put their money into something like that if they didn't see a future in it."

Speaking of the future

Hendry wants to move fast: more studios, more union workers, more movies. The financial incentives

aren't going to get much more attractive, he acknowledged, because at some point the state is going to realize it can't make money on the deal if it gives much more. Witt concedes that point.

Hendry said he plans to lobby the Legislature next year to pass a law that will allow everyone to invest in the film industry here by buying bonds. He's still working out the details but said it would be akin to investing in the oil industry. He's paying attention to other states' efforts to attract filmmakers, though, and doesn't want to give them the slightest edge: "To be truly sustainable, we have to be one of the big five. Not with eight pictures a year, but 10 to 20 pictures a year; not just in Santa Fe and Albuquerque, but in places like Silver City. There's no reason we can't spread the wealth if we have people who can work there. But we can't sit back and say, 'We're done!'"

Walpole thinks we should move slowly and realize that the healthiest living entities are the ones that grow organically. "At best, the whole industry is a roller-coaster ride," he said. "You can't be everything to everybody, and New Mexico can't do that. We should take our share of the work and let it grow gradually."

Strout seems to fall somewhere in the middle. "We're paying close attention to other states' incentive programs," she said. Several other states, seeing New Mexico benefit from show business, are now putting together equally attractive incentives. "Being close to Los Angeles is a plus. But we don't want to become Hollywood. There are 300 projects shooting in L.A. every day. We don't want to get there."

Witt said the incentives program has a few warts that need to be done away with. For one thing, he doesn't think the 25 percent tax rebate should apply to the multimillion-dollar salaries of major film stars. "All in all, we've laid a good foundation for the future growth of this and related industries in the state," Witt said. "We're where we want to be in terms of the path we laid out four years ago, but there's still a long road ahead. We've got to keep our eye on the ball and maintain our position as a leader in creating a production environment that makes sense for both production companies and, most importantly, for the people of New Mexico."

"A lot of other states — and other countries for that matter — are looking at what we're doing with an eye to replicate it in their own territories. So the competition for attracting productions will become more intense. But this is a complex business — if it were that easy, everybody would be doing it — and we're farther down the road than most in terms of the maturity of our program, crew availability, etc. Still, that's another reason it's vital to grow our homegrown production base and to expand our involvement in all phases of production beyond just principal photography."

What happens when our governor moves on?

Though there may be some concern that the state's film business will dry up the moment Richardson's term expires in 2008 (assuming he doesn't leave office early for another reason), industry insiders don't believe that will be the case.

"It's not a Democratic or Republican program," Strout said. "Both sides see the value. The governor loves the fact that there are high-wage jobs in this industry. He's been crucial in its success, but I believe he's created a legacy that will continue after his administration."

Walpole agrees: "The mandate and the law built around the incentives program, if done right, should be stronger than whoever is in power, stronger than the one person promoting it."

Wacks, a proponent of supporting local talent who wants to keep the film business in Santa Fe as much as possible, still wonders about the future. "What happens when Connecticut creates a 30-percent incentive deal, which it is doing?" he asked. "And around the corner, be it Illinois or California, they are not going to sit back and watch this business disappear. And then Hollywood on the Rio Grande just becomes the Rio Grande. Johnson unleashed the incentives. Richardson ran with it, but someone else could say, 'I'm not that interested.'"

New Mexico filmmakers who want to work at home hope it will last forever. "You don't have to drive down Ventura Boulevard to get to work," Walpole said. "You can go down La Bajada hill."

McLoughlin, who went from running a property house in England to working as a set dresser in films here, couldn't agree more. "There's nowhere else in the world where I can be a filmmaker, walk in on the set, and do what I've wanted to do since I was 12, and that's incredible," he said. "I couldn't do this in L.A. I couldn't do this in London or New York. Maybe I could, but all those people I've worked with in L.A. or London or New York have all come to New Mexico and said, 'Oh my God, you mean I don't have to live in L.A.? I want to move here!'"



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