

Film-Friendly State: Shooting in Illinois
Chicago has served as a backdrop for a number of films...but as Jennifer Sheffield found out, Illinois has a lot more to offer than just a pretty skyline

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In her role as managing director of the Illinois Film Office, Betsy Steinberg spends a lot of time talking with filmmakers on both coasts and overseas. "In Chicago, and around the state, the abundance of looks is never-ending," she says. "Every filmmaker says it is the most under-photographed place in the movies." Beyond blockbusters that prey on Chicago iconography, Bollywood has shot in Illinois and Chicago suburbs have provided backdrops for documentaries, television pilots, and shorts. The state-sanctioned Illinois Film Office and Chicago Film Office – a division of the Mayor's Office of Special Events – facilitate all forms of visual media production and offer websites for those seeking resources, from cast and crew, tax incentive information, even a regional breakdown of what kind of weather to expect!

Background

Richard Moskal has been director of the Chicago Film Office since 1996. "In that time, the independent community in Chicago has grown quite a bit, and [has] been very significant," he says. "If you look at the number of independent features we have hosted, it started with two or three. That number is up to 30 in a good year and has a lot to do with visual technology lowering the cost of production."

The activity of his office differs from that of Steinberg's in that, "If you are shooting in the city, Rich deals with street closures and parking permits," she says. "Frankly, [Chicago] works with more indies than I do, since a lower budget production might not spend enough to be eligible for our tax credit."

Moskal confirmed that his office serves a lot of indies due to the state's incentive requirements. To be eligible in Illinois, a film must spend at least \$50,000 if it runs 29 minutes and under and at least \$100,000 if run-time is 30 minutes and over.

Steinberg encourages all skill levels to apply. "Attached to most credits is a competitive need application," Steinberg explains. "Anybody that shoots here must show how the credit positively impacts their budget by comparing it to another location. If I live in Gary, Indiana, I might show that a camera package costs \$5,000 in Indiana, but only \$3,000 in Illinois."

Tax Incentives

Illinois's first wage-based tax credit was enacted by the General Assembly in 2003. As of December 15, 2008, Illinois boasts an aggressive 30 percent film production tax credit on all expenditures, including post-production with no expiration date, designed to attract local vendors to film activities. "We turn around in six to eight weeks after getting spending information," boasts Steinberg. "There are states that take a year or more to get money back to producers."

Current government incentives were prompted by the state's measurable highs and lows in attracting filmmakers. In 2000, the state suffered a "mass exodus" of the film industry and in 2003, hit a low of \$23 million in revenue. According to Performink, "Chicago's independent film industry held steady in 2005, with an estimated 40 features made," also stating that most local productions were, "the under-\$100,000 DV variety, with notable exceptions, including the John Malkovich starrer *Drunkboat*." In addition, more than 20 local indie features debuted. A record of \$155 million in 2007 solidified a rebound for Illinois and officials expect 2009 to be the strongest yet. Numbers will not be available until an audit is performed, and, "I can't speak on 2009 because we still have a project in town," Steinberg says.

The most progressive feature moving Illinois into the future? It's the only state in the country that asks filmmakers to open up their interview process to women and racial minorities: Applicants must submit a diversity plan. "The process has opened up the industry to a broader base than has historically been involved in film," Steinberg says. An online guide helps filmmakers locate minorities working in the industry and Steinberg says the program is paying off, adding, "[The Plan] is not a quota, we just ask for a good faith effort in opening up the process."

Unique Features

Chicago is known for its skyline, "gritty back alleys," and historic neighborhoods, for which the film office website offers a database of images, but according to Steinberg, Illinois offers much beyond the iconic shots of Chicago people are used to seeing. "I tell people, if you need a desert, don't come to Illinois," she says. "But we can find anything else for you."

The state office "Night at the Movies" program, kicked off in June, 2008, allows citizens around the state to see movies shot in Illinois for free and learn about how local locations were used. "We arrange to bring the movie to that part of state and talk about its economic impact," explained Steinberg. Screenings have included *Wanted*, filmed in Champagne, and *The Unborn*, partially shot in Kankakee, a small town west of city.

The Central Illinois Film Commission (CIFC) in Springfield is, according to president Cameron Counts, "a well-kept secret," but, he says, "I'm trying to change that," adding, "We are completely independent and funded by our membership dues so our primary difference from the Chicago and Illinois Film Offices is we operate yearly on less than they spend on staples."

The CIFC, which is filing for 501(c) 3 status, was founded by a small group of "lifers" who travel to work in the field, but call Springfield home. "We mostly have 'hobbyists,' relying on a full time job, but working projects in their spare time," Counts says. "If we were in Chicago, we'd have more lifers...just not enough consistent paying projects down here. I would call myself a success as president if I can develop 'hobbyists' into lifers."

"Sadly, we're treading water since Central Illinois is not on the production map as destination, yet," Counts says. "Though, we have installed a cast and crew info-line, so when we do have shoots, interested workers may call and listen to a recorded message."

He elaborates: "For us, education is the biggest thing, hoping to inspire people to not wait for Hollywood to come knocking, but develop projects locally. We are exploring opportunities with a local college and it's a huge mandate of mine to start a film school in Springfield." He started a club called Club CIFC that will be a crash course in film-making. "Participants have to switch jobs each project for cross-training, but also, to assist newcomers in deciding what they want to do," he says.

Limitations

In Illinois, there is no cap for spending by a production. However, compensation paid to Illinois resident employees has a maximum of \$100,000 per worker. The state does not have grants as part of its film office, however, Steinberg points out, "The great thing for indies is that if you do meet the minimum, you get 30 percent back on post spending as well." Overall, "any money spent that puts people to work has a terrific affect on our local economies," she says. "Indies may not dine in restaurants, but are going to lumber yards to buy materials and fabric stores for costuming needs. What's great is we have strong crew base and vendors who want to work with a lower price point."

According to Moskal, "We're very much involved in the day-to-day production details and community outreach to make things happen in way which make sense to filmmakers and the city to get their jobs done better and easier."

"In Chicago," Moskal explains, "we get very hands-on in strategizing how to make dollars go farther like finding ways to shoot that don't require city services. The unknowns of today could be big budgets of tomorrow. It is in our best interest to treat everybody with care. Chicago is fortunate to have significant number of film schools, which turn out a new generation that deserves to be helped out."

Recent Shoots

Since 2000, eight documentaries, 124 feature films and two shorts along with *Ocean's 11*, *Spiderman 2*, and the *ER* series.

Additional Assets

Production – Angle Park, Inc. Film & Video, Kartemquin Films

Universities – Columbia College of Chicago, DePaul University Center for Cinema and Interactive Arts, Film Center at University of Illinois, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

Distributors – Facets Multi-Media

Festivals – Big Muddy Film Festival, Ebertfest, many more

Contests – “Shortcuts” Short Film Contest. The 2010 contest launches after the first of year. The 2009 winner, *An Evening with Emery Long*, was screened on October 20, at the Chicago International Film Festival.

Indie Examples

Uncle Nino – <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0327210/>

Dirty Work (formerly *Southside*) – www.dirtyworkthemovie.com

Hannah Free – www.hannahfree.com

Fireproof – www.fireproofthemovie.com

Bottom Line

Fireproof spent \$500,000, but according to Steinberg, “We’re able to provide indie films a fast and easy tax credit system. A lot of producers take advantage of the speed and simplicity, and because they get credit back quickly, they spend it on post-production.” She remains optimistic, stating: “[The state] is supportive of our mission toward bringing in revenue and creating jobs for Illinois.”