



'Transformers 3' makes itself at home on Michigan Avenue

Published July 16, 2010

Sporting all-black military gear on a hot summer morning, "Transformers 3" actor Josh Duhamel took a leisurely bicycle ride around Pioneer Court off Michigan Avenue on Friday while waiting for his next scene.

A crowd of onlookers pressed up against a barricade to get photos of the actor, while others gathered to gape at the chaotic mess of flipped-over cars, fake chunks of rubble and dirt strewn across Michigan Avenue. A small hot dog stand propped alongside the famous boulevard completed the bizarre scene.

For Duhamel, a regular in the "Transformers" series, it was another day at the office. For Chicagoans? A rare up-close look at Hollywood glamour and excess in action.

Friday was the first day of a three-day "Transformers" shoot around Pioneer Court that has shut down Michigan Avenue from Wacker Drive north to Ontario Street for the weekend. Office workers had to find new routes to work, hemmed in along their way by sight-seers and celebrity-seekers, all urged by radio-wielding security to keep moving.

Some of the onlookers saw the movie's stars, Shia LaBeouf and Rosie Huntington-Whiteley, film a scene in which they sprinted toward an upturned vehicle for cover. Clearly visible in the background is the Michigan Avenue Bridge, which also made an appearance in both of director Christopher Nolan's Batman films.

City officials believe films shot in Chicago that showcase attractive settings like North Michigan Avenue – even with the apocalyptic accoutrements -- can increase tourism.

That is one of the reasons the city was willing to turn a key section of Michigan Avenue over to "Transformers" until 5 a.m. on Monday. The estimated \$20 million the film is projected to generate for the local economy and the 200 jobs it created also played a role.

"Michigan and Wacker is the most requested film location we have for movies, TV shows and commercials," said Chicago Film Office Director Rich Moskal. "Filmmakers shooting in Chicago are going to want to take advantage of it. ... It requires a combination of logistics and balancing what the city needs and what producers feel they need in order to pull off the film"

The producers of "Transformers 3" agreed to schedule filming on Michigan on dates that didn't clash with Taste of Chicago or Lollapalooza. They also provided the resources and staff needed for security and safety.

On Friday, the biggest challenges – besides temperatures that pushed 90 degrees – were the disruptions that are inevitable when closing streets and creating a scene, literally, during work hours on a week day. That wasn't as much of an issue with 2008's "The Dark Knight," which filmed mostly at night.

Chicagoans handled the upheaval to their day well, for the most part. Besides a few people muttering under their breath, few complained about having to take a longer route to work. Most seemed excited about seeing a little bit of Hollywood in downtown Chicago.

Ryan Froneyberger, a regular on the Transformers message board seibertron.com, took Friday morning off to watch the filming.

"I'm ignoring work," said Froneyberger, 35, a real estate agent who works from home. "I'm hoping to see autobots. My wife and I were here (Thursday) at 9:30 pm to see them setting up and we'll be back on Saturday and Sunday. It's exciting that they chose this location. Leave it to ("Transformers" director) Michael Bay to do something like this."

A crowd that skewed heavily female gathered around the barricaded area in Pioneer Court, hoping to catch a glimpse of Duhamel as he sat under a nearby tree. Duhamel made their visit worth it with an impromptu meet-and-greet, signing autographs and posing for photos.

As for his secret to dealing with the heat, the actor said, "It was good under the tree."

The morning had its slow moments -- the skydivers and fireballs that are part of more action-packed scenes are set for Saturday and Sunday -- but onlookers didn't seem to mind the hours in the sun.

In Los Angeles, where filming is significantly more common, maybe they wouldn't have stopped at all.

"It's part of life in Los Angeles," said FilmL.A. President Paul Audley, who oversees the film permits process in Los Angeles. "Some people come out and observe it if it's a really big one with a lot of noise and crashing trucks, but a lot of people are so jaded to it by now."

Audley said there were few complaints in Los Angeles when the shooting of Nolan's recently released film "Inception" closed six downtown blocks for two weekends, or when the "Iron Man" sequel "took up a lot of turf."

"We close a major street once a week for filming," Audley said. "L.A. is pretty film friendly. I think because we do it so much, the tolerance level may be higher."

"Transformers 3" filmed some scenes in L.A. in May, but the majority of the movie is being shot in Chicago. Shooting in the city is scheduled to last through August 23.

Some scenes that will purport to be in foreign countries will be shot in Chicago. But unlike the Batman films, which claim fictional Gotham City as their setting, "Transformers" will be seen as taking place squarely in Chicago.

"Chicago will be showcased in a high profile light and shared with audiences around the world," Moskal said. "We're going to benefit once the movie comes out -- which is bound to be a blockbuster -- and we're going to share in that excitement."