

Schwarzenegger pumped on Columbus for movie making



Tim Feran, The Columbus Dispatch

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Arnold Schwarzenegger was waiting for a bus at a COTA stop recently as part of a scene for his upcoming movie 478. But as unusual as it might have been to see the film star and former governor of California waiting for a bus in Columbus, when the cameras started to roll something even more unexpected happened.

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But as unusual as it might have been to see the film star and former governor of California waiting for a bus in Columbus, when the cameras started to roll something even more unexpected happened.

A real bus stopped and I ran up, thinking it was the bus we were using in the movie, Schwarzenegger said. The door opens and I'm thinking, This is not our guy driving, and the driver says, Geez, its you!"

Far from ruining the scene, however, the intersection of real life with movie magic only made the scene better, Schwarzenegger said.

And, much as the accidental opening of a bus door led to good things, the movie itself may open the door for better things for Columbus.

For the past several years, Columbus has lagged Cleveland and Cincinnati in attracting movie productions. Lured in part by the Ohio Film Tax Credit, such big-budget films as The Avengers and Captain America have set up camp in the other big cities in Ohio while a smattering of low-budget productions have called Columbus home.

That bothers Schwarzenegger, whose fondness for central Ohio dates back more than 40 years, when local businessman and sports promoter Jim Lorimer brought the then relatively unknown Austrian bodybuilder to compete at Veterans Memorial in 1970. After years of sports ventures and other bodybuilding events, the two joined to create the Arnold Classic in 1989 -- and Schwarzenegger has been coming back at least once a year ever since.

So I was always trying to figure out how to get a movie made in Columbus, Schwarzenegger said.

The opportunity came last year when a production company approached the film star with a script about a man who loses his wife and child in a plane crash caused by an air-traffic controller's mistake.

The producers had previously shot a movie in Cincinnati and thought they could find the right locations for their next film in Ohio, probably in Cincinnati.

They were very comfortable shooting in Cincinnati, Schwarzenegger said, and I said, 'Hey, Columbus is a great city, too.'

I know Columbus is not known as a place to make movies, but what people don't understand is because I've been coming here for 40 years with the Arnold Classic I know so many people who are all willing to help," he said. You can't put a value on that kind of cooperation. The very reason why the Arnold Classic is so successful is because the whole city organizes, everybody cooperates."

A visit to Columbus was all it took to clinch the deal, said John Daugherty, executive director of the Columbus Film Commission.

Once we can get them here, it's a pretty easy sell, Daugherty said. I took them all out to eat. I worked closely with the production manager. We were able to connect them with the proper people, literally within minutes. They've been great to work with."

In addition to having the right look for the film, Columbus also has a skilled labor force, a growing film-industry infrastructure, a cosmopolitan atmosphere, "and the contacts, the goodwill that Arnold had," said Eric Watson, one of the producers.

Goodwill goes a long way, Watson said. Those intangibles matter. I know he's involved in the business community here. Those things build on each other. For instance, the mayor has helped us in significant ways, ways we've never seen in any other city."

As important as all of those elements are, however, the soil in which to grow a film industry is the tax credit, Watson said.

These incentives tend to build infrastructure, he said. "States that use them intelligently are where infrastructure has been built. Michigan had a strong incentive program. Now they don't. So the people who worked there are moving here."

The surge in production in Ohio and the resultant increase in employment and spending has largely been sparked by the tax credit, which reimburses production companies 25 percent of what they spend in Ohio and 35 percent of wages paid to residents.

Since 2011, when the state increased the tax credit to \$20 million, 1,729 full-time jobs have been created and more than \$400 million in total economic impact has been felt, according to the Ohio Department of Development. In Columbus, thanks to two films -- 478 and I Am Wrath starring John Travolta 834 jobs have been created and \$16.6 million is estimated to have been spent.

One of the issues we have right now is we hit our tax cap of \$20 million, and hit it in first three months of the (fiscal) year, Daugherty said. It already has applications for July 1. We're easily missing out on five or six films that would like to come shoot."

In the past few months Daugherty and others have been lobbying to get the tax cap raised.

We think it's possible, if we play our cards right and we get the tax cap raised, that we can put people to work year-round and grow the film industry as a whole," he said.

Schwarzenegger, ever the optimist, believes that the cap will be raised and that he and other movie makers will be back.

This movie has opened the door, Schwarzenegger said. I'm sure these producers will be back again. There's a lot of stuff they can do here."

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