

Features

Made In Michigan: Indie Film

BRIAN G. WALSH | THURSDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2007

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The old warehouse is bare. The roar of traffic outside halts production at regular intervals. Actors run and jump in front of countless blue walls that make you feel as if you've been thrust inside a video game.

No, this isn't the latest Hollywood blockbuster being shot on the sprawling sound stages of a Hollywood studio. Veteran, award-winning special effects expert John Higbie's science fiction film "The Magic Mentah," aka "Amsteroid," was shot entirely inside an abandoned warehouse on Jackson Road in Ann Arbor.

Higbie opted for digital sets and locations, photographing talent on a blue-screen stage. This eliminates set construction, storage, prep and disposal. "Digital set-pieces created for one show can be re-used without warehousing costs," he says. "We're getting closer to the point where the variables are limited to the talent themselves."

Hollywood, Michigan?

The old model used to be you had to move to Hollywood in order to make films. However, new technology and a quality-of-life awareness have combined to bring about a shift in that old paradigm.

Higbie's credits include "Titanic," "I, Robot," "Journey to the Center of the Earth 3-D," "The Time Machine" and a long list of blockbuster films. This Michigan native returned home after working 18 years in LA in the visual effects business for quality of life reasons.

"I wanted my life to revolve around more than just my craft," says Higbie. "You reach a point where you ask yourself if your day-to-day life is what you want it to be. Can you look out your window and see the color green?"

But moving away from an industry as geographically rooted as Hollywood is difficult. Even with the advances of technology and communications, maintaining a long distance career in the film industry is difficult.

"Projects come and go. You need resident production companies who are doing recognized work. Even one such company would make a major difference, like [Will Vinton](#) did for Portland and [WETA](#) for New Zealand," says Higbie.

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You can also add to that list Austin native Robert Rodriguez, whose [Troublemaker Studios](#) has singularly transformed the Texas college town into a major film production hub. It's that kind of regional loyalty the Michigan film community is starving for. Native sons like Sam Raimi, [Mike Binder](#), and [David Goyer](#) have all made highly successful names for themselves in Hollywood, but had to move away in order to do it. And they haven't returned.

So, a new generation of filmmakers needs to sow the soil in Michigan, pursuing their independent projects and hopefully sticking around once they find success.

"The basic problem for independent filmmakers usually occurs in pre-production; raising the money," says Janet Lockwood, Director of the [Michigan Film Office](#). "I do wish our filming incentive threshold was lower than \$200,000 so small budget filmmakers could take

advantage. We're working on that."

Like Massachusetts and Texas, Michigan has enacted legislation to revitalize its film economy but some say it doesn't go far enough. Along with more tax incentives, assistance raising capital and greater access to technical support are vital to developing an industry. Unfortunately, government isn't well-suited for this kind of industry development. What Michigan needs is a "center of gravity" to attract all levels of the movie-making industry to move here permanently.

Until then, local filmmakers are left to their own devices.

D.I.Y.

"I love Michigan," says Detroit Public School teacher and independent filmmaker Marcus G. Davenport, "there are so many stories to tell."

Davenport spent nearly \$40,000 and worked as a one-man film crew to produce his basketball documentary, "[Flint Star: The Motion Picture](#)." It was tough row to hoe but the fledgling filmmaker not only remains undaunted, he's already putting together his next project: A football documentary called "Life In The League," with current and former NFL stars going on the record to describe their lives as pro football players.

It's that same inspiration and do-it-yourself spirit that fuels partners Anthony Vallone and Sara Stepnicka. Producing the as-yet unreleased drama "[Sometimes in Life](#)" as well as "The Mongol King" and the upcoming sci-fi film "Road Kill," the duo soldier on even though they have experienced incredible set backs.

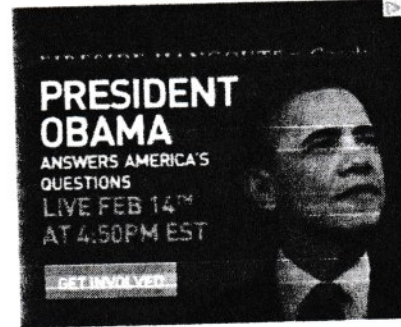
"A month before production our team split, leaving us to rewrite the script with \$10,000 less than what we had to begin with," says Anthony Vallone. "Our camera broke three times and we ran out of money about a week before production ended. We scoured the entire state of Michigan only to find no-one had the camera we were using (Canon XL-H1). That was a tremendous wave to ride out but in the end it actually made the project better."

What saved Vallone and Stepnicka's production wasn't a large infusion of cash, but a determination to overcome obstacles and create new solutions to problems.

"One thing we have that doesn't cost anything is a belief in ourselves. When things don't go our way, we make a new way that will work," says Sara Stepnicka.

Resources are not as plentiful, but the Midwest work ethic and fascination with the motion-picture process makes filming in Michigan unique.

"Being an independent filmmaker in Michigan presents certain challenges," says Derek Justice. "There's a smaller resource pool, but it also generates more excitement. In LA everyone is doing a movie, so it's nothing special. Here, people are more interested in participating in independent productions."



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