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Home : Chicago : Chicago, My Kind of Movie Town



Chicago, My Kind of Movie Town

The Windy City has a legendary history of powering Hollywood stars. DAME explores its current and future talent pool

By Merry Carole Powers
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A neighbor of mine ran into Angelina Jolie when she was out shopping a few weeks ago. And just the other day, I found it nearly impossible to get downtown thanks to a blockbuster size film crew shooting a scene for the next Batman movie. Just another day in LA, right? Wrong. All these scenes played out in my hometown of Chicago, a place with a silver screen past that is once again starting to glimmer.

As a tried and true Chicago girl, I love living here. But as an aspiring screenwriter, every industry pro I've ever talked to says I need to move to LA to really get in the game. In all fairness, they're probably right. But leaving Chicago would break my heart. And as I cling tightly to my roots, I can't help but think about a time when the curtain rose on the entertainment industry and Chicago stood center stage. The world's first film studios were headquartered on the North Side, and these studios were home to some of the industry's first stars. The camera and the projector, both cornerstones of film, were invented in Chicago. We were even the early epicenter of the almighty arm of distribution, with over 15 film exchange houses that controlled eighty percent of the film distribution market for the entire country.

So, how did Chicago's film industry end up on the cutting room floor? Most accounts blame it on the weather. Apparently our cloudy, sleety, snowy, windy winters make for rather unreliable shooting schedules. And that kind of a budget threat can make a producer crabbier than a Chicago snowplow driver at 4 am in February. So the studios headed west, taking the industry with them.

But our story hardly ends there. The movies are still alive and well in the Windy City. The Chicago Film Office, a subsidiary of Mayor Daley's office, actively campaigns to bring films to town with the promise of tax incentives and seasoned production crews. And most Hollywood producers agree that Chicago is a fantastic location. They, too, talk tax incentives and talent pools. But, conversely, they offer them as reasons not to shoot in Chicago. Their budget-oriented minds would rather film only the necessary scenes in town then take the production to other countries where the deals are better and the dollar is stronger. Apparently, Prague is the new Chicago. "Chicago offers a larger value in terms of seasoned crews, diverse locations and a high level of service, but in the end, it's hard to fight exchange rates," explains Rich Moskal, the head of the Film Office.

But all this talk about my town as nothing more than a great location is where this Chicago girl cries foul. Maybe we can't offer producers and studios the

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nonstop sunshine that brings optimal shooting conditions all year long, but Chicago is still one of the most creative towns around. We've launched some of the hottest names in comedy today. Steve Carell, Tina Fey, Adam McKay and Steven Colbert are all alums of Chicago's Second City. And without them, we wouldn't currently have such shows and films as *The Office*, *30 Rock*, *Talladega Nights* and the ever-blessed *Colbert Report*.

In addition to Second City, Chicago's internationally acclaimed Steppenwolf Theater has been creative playground to Gary Sinise, Joan Allen and John Malkovich. Famed

Hollywood director Garry Marshall studied at Northwestern University. And DePaul Goodman Theatre grad, Zach Helm, screenwriter of *Stranger Than Fiction* and the soon-to-be-released *Mr. Magorium's Wonder Emporium*, is one of Hollywood's more successful writers of the day. Vince Vaughn, Joan and John Cusack, Harold Ramis and David Schwimmer are also all from Chicago.

Granted, all these folks had to jump on the westbound talent train to make it big. But these days, that train is operating in two directions. Joan Cusack and Harold Ramis both call Chicago home again. And screenwriter Steven Conrad, author of *The Weatherman* and *The Pursuit of Happyness*, is also a local resident.



Evanston-born Blake Snyder, who has sold scripts to many big names, including Steven Spielberg, currently teaches screenwriting all over the world. "Chicago writers are some of my favorites," he readily admits. "The creativity is vibrant, and the comedy that comes from Chicago is relatable in a way you don't find anywhere else."

The list goes on. *Grace Is Gone*, an independent film produced in part by John Cusack and shot in Chicago won the Audience Award at Sundance. And recently, with a sitcom development deal between NBC Universal and

Second City in full swing, it appears even the studios are doing a U-turn.

Who knows, maybe the very winters that drove entertainment away are bringing it back. God knows we have little else to do during those brutal months than stay inside and hone our craft. But winter or no winter, Chicago's film scene is much more than a geographic location that offers decent tax incentives and unique scenery. Chicago also happens to be an ideal location for growing, fostering and supplying the entertainment industry with some of its mightiest talent. And that, people, is my kind of town.

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