

THE BIG FRAME-UP! PART 2:

HOLLYWOOD MEETS SMALLVILLE

BY KATE TREMILLS



The room goes dark. The screen lights up. We are instantly transported to another world. Thanks to the brilliant magic of movies, we forget that it's a fictional world. But when a film is shot on location, it's a world that is all too real for the inhabitants of that place. And the far-reaching effects and hilarious hi-jinx that a production brings are just as impactful.

In a small town or a distant country, the world stops. People transform into star-seeking maniacs. The local radio show reports celebrity sightings every hour. Paparazzi chase through quiet neighborhoods. And streets are blocked with cameras and hundreds of crew. With Hollywood come the good, the bad and the ugly.

Every location, big and small, recognizes the good that Hollywood brings, as in the recent filming of *An Unfinished Life* starring Robert Redford, Morgan Freeman and J-Lo in rural British Columbia. "Businesses and amenities such as accommodations experience a spike in revenue, as do restaurants, office rental companies, office furniture rentals and car and truck rentals," explains Victoria Weller, executive director of film for the Thompson-Nicola Film Commission. "Productions hire local contractors in all capacities. Ranchers, in particular for this area, benefit since they are often cast in movies."

Maybe it's the bragging rights, but everyone feels a bit special when the movies come a-calling. "There is some universal belief that being in close proximity to a Hollywood actor does actually make you a better person," reflects Chris Mitra, a resident of Kamloops, where *An Unfinished Life* was filmed. "That was definitely the feeling around here while they were shooting the movie. This entire town went J-Lo crazy for over a month."

If a film actually highlights the region, it can revitalize the tourist trade. Mary Nelson of the Virginia Film Office talks about how films draw people to her region. "In the case of Virginia, films such as *Dirty Dancing*, that filmed at Mountain Lake Resort, are still having a positive impact on people coming there," explains

the appreciative communications manager. "Feature films have a large promotional budget, and localities such as Virginia are capitalizing on this fact to promote their areas."

It doesn't even seem to matter if your town name is changed or your local restaurant is posing as a diner on another continent; you feel proud. For some regions, that positive portrayal brings more than just a paycheck. Film shoots helped to heal old wounds in Cambodia, explains Nick Ray, a local locations manager, with the impact of films such as *Tomb Raider* and *Two Brothers*.

"Films can help to raise the profile of Cambodia on the international stage," states Ray enthusiastically. "Cambodia has traditionally suffered from an image problem due to the traumas of the past, but all that is changing as tourism takes off. When big movies come to film here, it reinforces this new image of stability and success."

The same holds true for cities in the U.S. that have lost a sense of civic pride, such as Philadelphia, according to Sharon Pinkerson, executive director of the Greater Philadelphia Film Office.

"The more films and TV shows produced in the region, the more locals are imbued with confidence that the place they call home is an exciting place to live and work," insists Pinkerson. "This is a side benefit that cannot be manufactured. Tour operators worldwide now include Philadelphia in their U.S. packages, whereas they never did before the films *Philadelphia* and *The Sixth Sense*."

The brush with Hollywood often puts stars in the eyes of local residents for the first time, making them realize the film industry isn't out of reach. Film commissions and training schools start to pop up and location managers are born, adding not only economically to the area but also helping to increase and diversify the local talent pool.

But Hollywood creates a big wave when it comes to town and sometimes the wake is painful. Along with the glitzy stars come

the relentless paparazzi. With cameras and sound crews come traffic delays and late-night rackets.

Furthermore, the film business is a fast-paced and intense world whose priorities and goals sometimes fly in the face of the needs and specific concerns of the people in the location where they are shooting. "Because of the nature of movies—tight schedules and long days—sometimes they can be careless and things get broken," Nelson reveals.

Another form of damage comes in the form of the double-edged sword of Hollywood inflation that occurs with stars buying homes in the area and causing prices to rise. Buying a house becomes more difficult for the people who live in the region year-round, especially when they have to rely on local industries, not occasional Hollywood cash, to pay the mortgage.

Sometimes the mere presence of stars doesn't damage the location as much as the people in it. "I don't know what it is about celebrities, but they can change ordinarily well-behaved citizens into nuts," remembers Nelson. "Anthony Hopkins, for example, was an absolute gentleman during the filming of *Hannibal*—very kind and willing to interact with the public. At times they were quite overbearing in trying to meet him or get autographs."

And residents may get a little greedy when they hear about a big-budget shoot coming to town. Relates Mitra, "When people came (to Kamloops) to rent accommodations for J-Lo, they found a house and asked the owner what he wanted for a month's rental. The owner asked for \$30,000. He saw the word 'Hollywood' and figured he should be making some money. I think he was offered \$5000 to \$6000, which was more than fair. But he didn't think

Sultry Jennifer Lopez heats up the locals on location



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that was good enough."

When a town is high on being chosen by Tinseltown, the fall is twice as hard when a star complains. Case in point: While shooting *The Pledge*, director Sean Penn needed a climate that would provide lots of fog and snow, and chose Lytton, British Columbia, for that reason. "But Robyn Wright, his wife and star of the film, criticized the weather and location, saying it was treacherous and snowy and the weather was lousy," reveals Weller. "The community felt hurt by her comments whereas, previously, they felt proud that they had the look Penn required."

It's in all these types of situations that Hollywood could probably use some self-awareness and a real attitude adjustment. Ray emphasizes how important it is for Hollywood to step outside of its own bubble. "Directors and talent come in all shapes and sizes. But I see it as a fundamental part of my job...to remind crews that they are in Cambodia and to be mindful of what the Cambodian people have been through, and for them to tread gently in accordance with this."

After the initial excitement of the "Hollywood presence" passes, the inconveniences of film shoots start to be more noticed. Explains Weller, "The media frenzy can be hard on the community's citizens. Like when people had to deal with paparazzi trespassing on their property because they lived near where Jennifer Lopez was staying."

Even the best of intentions can go awry, notes Nelson. "We had an experience many years ago during which a nighttime Vietnam raid was conducted along the James River downtown. Since it was not a residential area, no one expected that it would affect nearby neighborhoods. But, in fact, the water magnified the sound. Many people heard shots and helicopters and were quite alarmed."

This incident caused such a stir it sent city officials barking at everyone involved with the film. "We heard from the mayor of Richmond the first thing the next morning," Mary explains. "He was not amused! It seems that some of the large lights used were visible from a major interstate. And several people were convinced they had seen a U.F.O."

From raids to rumors, Hollywood can really make an impact on a small town. With most film shoots lasting only one to two months, the majority of places enjoy the ride. Just like a relationship, these towns get the honeymoon without the long-term headaches. But when the relationship keeps knocking on your door, it's time to bring in a counselor. Because, eventually, every town learns that Hollywood is one high-maintenance partner. - MPM