

HOLLYWOOD comes to

ALASKA

« The "Big Miracle" second-unit crew and dog team work on the tundra near Barrow.

ALL THAT GLITTERS
MAY TURN TO NEW
ALASKA GOLD

By HEIDI BOHI

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A LASKA MEETS HOLLYWOOD.

At first blush, it's like the boy from the other side of the tracks landing a date with the prettiest girl in school. She sees in him what others don't and, as the story goes, the two realize there just might be something lasting there.

Hollywood has been flirting with the Alaska film and television industry since 1924, when the silent adventure drama "The Alaskan" was produced and released by Paramount Pictures. Since then, well-known studios from all over the world have sent camera crews and A-list actors to take advantage of nature's unrivaled film sets—majestic crags, haunting glaciers, quaint fishing villages

elsewhere to keep them affordable—including films that were set in Alaska.

"The Proposal," starring Sandra Bullock and Ryan Reynolds, was set in Sitka, though the film was actually filmed in Boston and Rockport, Mass. For two weeks film crews transformed the East Coast town so the unknowing eye would be none the wiser. Alaskans and the 9,000 residents of Sitka complained about everything from the mountain backdrop—which was added digitally—to filmmakers not doing their homework. Sitka does not have the never-ending sun like the rest of the state, there are no quaint shops and you don't take a boat from town to the airport.

REVENUE BLUES

What hurt the most was losing hundreds of thousands of dollars attached to the 2009 film, which grossed \$317 million. It's not the first time an Alaska story was filmed elsewhere. Columbia Pictures' "30 Days of

programs in 39 states and Puerto Rico explain why Alaska has continued to lose productions to places like Rockport. With the 10-year extension passed this spring, those in the industry are counting on the economic boost to attract investment in film production, infrastructure development and related business, as the state works to become a leading destination for film and television production increasing investments, opportunities and wages.

The first major motion picture to be filmed in Alaska after the incentive went into effect was "Big Miracle," based on the true story of efforts to rescue gray whales that became trapped in the Alaska ice pack in the late 1980s. Alaska paid out about \$10 million—30 percent of the production budget—in incentives to the production, which opened last February. According to the McDowell Group, an Alaska market research firm, the film made more than a \$16.5-million direct impact on the economy,



[LEFT TO RIGHT] Jon Voight works on "Beyond," in Anchorage. "Ghost Vision" film crew poses for a photo in an Anchorage park. Cinematographer Steve Rychetnik works on the set of "Big Miracle" in downtown Anchorage.

and "magic hour" lighting that lasts for 20 hours during the summer.

Last year's "Big Miracle" and "The Frozen Ground" created a Hollywood and media frenzy unlike anything the state has ever witnessed.

In the past, hundreds of cast and crew sneaked into the state with little fanfare to produce commercials for everything from beer to cars, along with award-winning feature and documentary productions, including "Runaway Train," "Into the Wild," and "Grizzly Man."

Despite some success, Alaska's limited infrastructure and challenging logistics—including harsh, unpredictable weather, expensive transportation and a limited talent pool, have meant production companies have taken their projects

Night" had a \$32-million production budget and was shot in New Zealand. Touchstone Pictures' "The Guardian" had an \$80-million budget and was shot in Shreveport, La. Buena Vista Movies' "Mystery, Alaska" (\$28 million) and "Snow Dogs" (\$33 million) were filmed in Alberta, Canada, and Warner Bros.' "Insomnia" (\$46 million) and the ABC TV show "Men in Trees" was filmed in and near Vancouver, British Columbia.

This is starting to change.

Ready for Alaska's industry to share in the happy endings, in 2008 the Alaska Legislature enacted the Alaska Film Production Incentives Program, which gives up to a 44-percent tax credit on productions of at least \$100,000, to entice the industry to the state. It's not a new idea. In fact, similar

adding \$285,000 to the Alaska economy every day it filmed. It also paid \$6.2 million in income to more than 1,300 Alaskans, and purchased \$7.7 million of goods and services from 80 Alaska businesses and organizations.

GLITTER AND GOLD

As the state's film industry draws more and more attention from Tinseltown and studios tease with their plans for filming more major motion pictures here, Alaskans can't help but be starstruck. In coffee shops and bars, on Facebook and in local media outlets, locals are buzzing about celebrity sightings at filming locations around the state, of people like Ted Danson, Drew Barrymore, John Cusack and Nicolas Cage.

At the same time, there are hundreds of lesser-known Alaskans who have a proven

history of making a living in the filmmaking community, and increasingly more and more who are hoping the new incentive may also mean work for them.

"Alaska Filmmakers," an online series of profiles on filmmakers, produced by filmmakers, features local independents and production companies statewide, including actors, directors, grips, electricians, screenwriters and documentary filmmakers. Now entering its second season, executive producer and founder D.K. Johnston—a filmmaker himself—returned to Alaska in 2010 after earning his master's degree in film from the New York Film Academy and started the program the following year. Drawing from the film community, he put together a production team, listed those who had experiences to share, and within a month began shooting the free series now available on <http://alaskafilmmakers.com>, the main distribution channel for the project.

"Alaska is much different than Hollywood," Johnston said, explaining his motivation behind the program. "Aspiring filmmakers didn't have a voice to speak out for them and for those just getting started, there isn't a way to network."

The first series of 12 profile pieces was a way to tell their stories, and many of them ended up getting work because of the series. The second series was completed in June and features those in smaller communities across the state.

Steve Rychetnik is director of photography for SprocketHeads, the state's high-end production company that produces commercials, feature films and documentaries, and also subcontracts out to production companies that come from the Lower 48 states to shoot Alaska. He is one of the filmmakers featured in Johnston's series and said he made a career from never saying no—dating back to the days when he would "open the fridge, grab some film, and go out and shoot as much as I wanted to."

Although he started by producing commercials and home movies as a child, his first paying job was as a cinematographer with a local television station. In 1995, he formed SprocketHeads with his wife, executive producer Carolyn K. Robinson, regarded as the force behind the creation of Alaska's film incentives.

For the first 20 years of his career, Rychetnik said, the industry was a small pool of fewer than a dozen people and everybody did everything. Today, he said, affordable, technology-based equipment is opening up the industry for the "new guy,"

who in most cases ends up in Alaska, loves it and forgets to leave.

"It's the magic of Alaska they can't escape," he said. "In an industry that's still developing, I see it as an opportunity to learn from A-list film professionals from outside of the state that come with major studio experience not found here."

LIKE FINE WINE

At 55, Rychetnik hopes the incentive-grown film industry makes it possible for him to work as lead director of photography on independent films, and eventually a larger feature film like "Big Miracle" and "The Frozen Ground," on which he worked as both a camera operator and director of photography. He sees it as an opportunity to learn from those outside Alaska, who arrive with more studio experience than can be found in the state.

Writer, director, cinematographer, editor—that, as Johnston will tell you, is a common title for those working in Alaska's film industry, and one of the things that sets it apart from Hollywood. Because

It's the magic
of Alaska they
can't escape."

—Steve Rychetnik

Alaska has a much smaller network with a limited pool of talent, those who are adept at a little bit of everything may have more opportunities available to them because they can adapt to differing needs in various productions, he said.

Michael Burns, co-owner, co-director, co-producer and co-writer for 1964 Motion Pictures—named for the year of the Great Alaska Earthquake—sees the Alaska film industry as an intern: "We're still working to prove ourselves, so we have to work harder."

Currently, he and his business partner, Dean Q. Mitchell, juggle full-time jobs with fundraising and production, to launch their film "Proper Binge," a dark comedy about a struggling alcoholic. Originally budgeted at \$300,000, they scaled back production so they were able to qualify for the tax incentive and complete the film last fall.

They are trying to sell the film commercially, and there have been starts and stops since the project's inception in 2009.

"There's no giving up," Burns said, and even

if they cannot make money on it, they will submit it to various film festivals.

Burns, 27, caught the bug in 2002 when taking a video-production class in high school. He continued to create and learn, working on low-budget or no-budget documentaries, short films, super shorts, and full-length feature films such as "Proper Binge."

"I don't do this for money—these projects are stepping stones," he said. "Each one of them is a labor of love."

A CHARMED LIFE

An actress, writer, teacher, and emerging filmmaker, Princess Lucaj increasingly sees more opportunities for Alaskans wanting to work in all disciplines of the film industry, including being hired as cast and crew in big feature films shot in Alaska such as "Big Miracle."

This is because there are fewer people here competing for the same positions than in a large market like Los Angeles. Diversification, she said, is the key to continuing to learn and be involved with film projects in Alaska.

A Gwich'in Athabaskan—Princess is not a stage name—she draws on her heritage and experience in Hollywood to expose Alaska Native youth to the industry and help those working in film gain entry into the Screen Actors Guild and receive additional training. She has worked with them as a mentor and workshop leader in Los Angeles, with Native Voices at the Autry, WriteGirl, and, in Alaska, with the Alaska Native Heritage Center, UAF Film and Theater Department and Rural Alaska Honors Institute.

Her other accomplishments include being accepted into the Sundance Institute's screenwriters' and directors' labs, and securing roles in the films "Uncross the Stars," "Big Miracle," the CBS TV series "Jericho," and "Pow Wow Dreams," a short film she wrote and directed. Last fall, she appeared in "The Frozen Ground."

"Native people are always fighting stereotypes in the industry," she said from her home in Fairbanks. "We don't always have to be cast in buckskin—we are modern people and there are more and more opportunities for us in front of the camera, or behind it, telling our stories." ▲

Heidi Bohi lived in Anchorage for 20 years and spent time in villages and communities statewide. She writes about Alaska travel, history, culture and business and continues to travel there throughout the year. She now lives in Fountain Hills, Ariz.