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Hawaii heats up as production hot spot

5:12 PM PDT 10/14/2010 by Todd Longwell, AP

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"Hawaii Five-0"

State is riding a wave of location-filming success. Can it last?

Hawaii sizzles with

location shoots
 Eight people to know in Hawaii

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There was a contagious buzz coming from the 7,000 or so people who turned out for a free outdoor screening of CBS' reimagining of "Hawaii Five-0" on Waikiki Beach last month.

From a local's perspective, the PR bonanza wasn't so much about civic pride or the thrill of getting a sneak peak at one of the fall's hottest shows; rather, celebrating a gravely needed boost to the Aloha State's economy.

"[Honolulu mayor] Kirk Caldwell was there, thanking everyone for the economic impact of the show," says Chuck Boller, executive director of the Hawaii International Film Festival. "People are excited by the possibilities."

It's not just "Hawaii Five-0" that has islanders feeling good. Hawaii's recent production slate includes another new series, ABC's midseason drama "Off the Map," and nine feature films, including Clint Eastwood's Oscar bait drama "Hereafter"; the Bethany Hamilton biopic "Soul Surfer"; "The Descendants," starring George Clooney; the locally written and produced "Get a Job," starring Willie Nelson; the Japanese film "Uchu Senkan Yamato"; the Adam Sandler-produced comedy "Just Go With It"; "Caesar: Rise of the Apes"; and "Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides."

"Tropic Thunder"

The tiny island of Kauai, which in years past has hosted such films as "Tropic Thunder" (2008) and

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"Six Days, Seven Nights" (1998), is also getting a piece of the action.

"In 2009 we had only one movie, and that was Roger Corman's [Syfy Network telefilm] 'Dinocroc vs. Supergator,' but since February we've had a run of four projects," says Art Umezu, head of the Kauai Film Commission.

"As soon as 'Soul Surfer' finished, the 'Descendents' came in, prepped and shot for three weeks, and a few days after they wrapped, trucks and crew came in to prep for 'Just Go With It.' " And biggest of all was the fourth installment of "Pirates," which shot on Kauai and Oahu during the summer, bringing into the state an estimated \$85 million.

Hawaii's packed production docket constitutes a remarkable accomplishment for a state that, just a year ago, was facing another economic suckerpunch.

Tourism -- the state's No. 1 industry -- was in the throes of a decline the likes of which had not been seen since the Great Depression. Annual film and TV expenditures were down more than 40% from a peak of \$229 million in 2007.

At the same time, the production community was bracing itself for the impending exit of "Lost" -- which the state estimates pumped \$400 million into its economy during the course of its six-season run -- with little hope that another series would step in to fill the void.

On top of that, the state's so-called "high-tech" tax credit, Act 221, which had been used to fund such homegrown films as "Princess Ka'iulani" and "You May Not Kiss the Bride," had been dramatically scaled back by the legislature the previous spring.

So what went right this year? "We don't know," Umezu admits. "Sometimes the stars and the moon align."

That seems to be the case with the 2010 reboot of "Hawaii Five-0," whose original incarnation ran on CBS from 1968-80. The network had tried to revive the classic series before, most notably in 1997 when it commissioned a pilot from writer-producer Stephen Cannell starring Gary Busey with several original cast members reprising their roles, most notably James McArthur as Danny Williams, aka Danno.

"Hawaii Five-0"

"[CBS] has always been passionate about it," says Peter M. Lenkov, exec producer of the updated "Five-0." "It was just a matter of finding the right take on the material."

The good news for Hawaii was that any revamp of "Five-0" simply had to shoot there. The presence of the latest "Pirates," however, was not similarly assured.

The two previous installments lensed briefly on the islands, but were shot primarily in the Bahamas and on the Caribbean island of Dominica. For the fourth "Pirates," Disney briefly considered taking advantage of the 40% tax credit in Puerto Rico, where the bulk of the Hawaii-set thriller "The Perfect Getaway" (2009) was shot.

The Aloha State had previously lost productions to Puerto Rico and other locales offering tropical looks at lower prices, including Australia (HBO's "The Pacific"), Mexico and various South American countries. Despite Hawaii's advantages over these competitors -- it's only a five-hour flight from Los Angeles, has a wealth of experienced, English-speaking crews and is in the U.S. -- the bottom line for studios is always cost, and there was no getting around the fact that Hawaii is a pricey tourist destination, with a good but not great tax incentive.

But Hawaii wasn't ready to lose "Pirates" without a fight.

In December, the state put a full-court press on Disney, involving everyone from Hawaii Film Office liaison Georja Skinner and representatives of the Hawaii Visitors and Convention Bureau, to Gov. Laura Lingle, who personally lobbied production executives.

Because of the tourism downturn, hotels were willing to give the production attractive rates for long-term stays, while Jeff Stone -- the master developer of Ko Olina Resort & Marina on Oahu, where Disney is building Aulani, a Disney Resort & Spa (opening in August) -- was able to offer the use of private sites he owns on Kauai.

The strategy worked: On Jan. 18, Lingle announced that "Pirates" would be shooting in Hawaii.

Overall, the Hawaii Film Office estimates productions will spend a record \$347 million in the state this year, compared with \$135.5 million in 2009. For the state's all-important tourism industry, the promotional value of having its lush tropical landscapes and exotic culture on regular display on

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screens big and small around the globe is perhaps even more significant.

"Anything that shows the scenery is going to be a plus," Lingle says. "Especially if [audiences see it] in the middle of winter somewhere back east."

Eight people to know in Hawaii

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"Forgetting Sarah Marshall"

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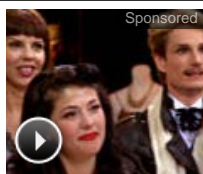
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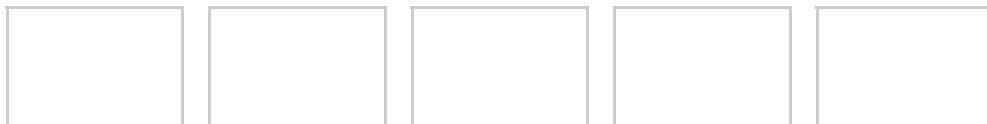


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