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Scout & About

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Homegrown filmmaking gets a boost

Scout & About: New Mexico 2012

By TODD LONGWELL

When Alicia J. Keyes moved back to her hometown of Albuquerque in 2008, she was primarily looking for a safe, clean, uncongested place where she and her husband, Peter Touche, could raise their twin sons. But she also hoped the city's burgeoning entertainment community fostered by the state's 25% refundable tax credit for film and TV production -- which in recent years has attracted big studio films such as "The Avengers" and TV shows like "Breaking Bad" -- might serve as fertile ground where she could explore her own producing ambitions.



'Blaze You Out'

Four years later, she has exceeded all expectations, with two independent features in the can -- the horror film "Biomass" and the dark drama "Blaze You Out," set against the backdrop of a small New Mexico city plagued by heroin addiction -- and an ongoing mockumentary web series, "Enter the Dojo."



'Enter the Dojo'

"My success is the direct result of being here, because I've been able to hook up with filmmakers who have experience because of the incentive," says Keyes, who spent four years as an acquisition exec with Disney in Los Angeles before moving to London in 2003 when she married Touche, a British-born film financing exec.

Touche has got into the act, too, producing co-writer/director Rajeev Nirmalakhandan's "The Odd Way Home," starring Rumer Willis, currently shooting in Las Cruces.



'Roswell FM' took advantage of a local university film program.

Of the roughly 40 states around the U.S. offering production incentives, over the years New Mexico has arguably been the most proactive in using its program to promote the growth of the indigenous film industry, offering filmmakers a 50% wage reimbursement for on-the-job training of state residents in advanced below-the-line crew



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positions.

Since 2004, the state has maintained the Film Technicians' Training Program, co-sponsored by the New Mexico Film Office and IATSE Local 480, giving students at six colleges across the state hands-on training in over 100 different film and TV crafts.



'Breaking Bad' is set and shoots in the state.

At Eastern New Mexico U in Roswell, film program director Alan Trever had the school purchase an array of state-of-the-art film equipment that he loans to small feature film productions at little or no cost in exchange for the productions using his students on the crew. Films that have taken advantage of the program include "Ilegales," "Dead Man's Burden," "Roswell FM," "The Rambler" and "Last Stop," all of which have budgets in the \$500,000 to \$650,000 range.

"It's a win-win because it gives students training on actual sets and it allows the filmmakers to get high-quality equipment that they don't have to ship in from some other place," says Trever.

But not all the news is good. When Gov. Susana Martinez took office in January 2011, she vowed to scale back New Mexico's incentive program. In the end, the legislature preserved the 25% tax credit, adding prime-plus-1.5% interest on their previously interest-free loan program and putting a still-generous \$50 million annual cap on the credit. Martinez has since made a concerted effort to convince Hollywood that the program is still in business, but the uncertainty engendered by her initial moves has caused the number of Hollywood productions to fall off, creating a domino effect for indie producers.

"You need that thriving economic base so guys can work on their (own) \$30,000 movie," says line producer Brent Morris ("The Devil's Rejects," "Monster"), a Hollywood transplant who produced the upcoming documentary "Made in New Mexico," about the state's production biz. "A lot of (crew people) have more menial jobs on bigger films, and that's how they support their independent film aspirations."

But the pre-Martinez influx of production is still propelling the creative ambitions of Albuquerque native Steven Michael Quezada. The 22-year veteran of the national stand-up comedy club circuit parlayed his recurring role as DEA agent Steven Gomez in "Breaking Bad" into his own locally produced latenight talk show, "The After After Party With Steven Michael Quezada," and he is now developing his own New Mexico-based series, "Duke City," with actors Wes Studi ("The Last of the Mohicans") and "Breaking Bad" co-star Dean Norris attached.

"It's funny how with the blessing you get from Hollywood, people start to take you seriously," says Quezada, who earlier co-starred in several films drawn to New Mexico by the incentive, including "First Snow" starring Guy Pearce, and "Beerfest." "This truly opened the door for me, especially with the success of 'Breaking Bad.' "

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