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New York Is Making a Comeback as Film Production Ramps Up

L.A. finds itself ever more vulnerable as TV and movie jobs shift to other cities and states.

By Richard Verrier, Times Staff Writer

Start spreading the news: After years of watching cheaper locales stand in for New York, the city that never sleeps has become a fierce competitor in the race to lure film and TV productions.

Last year was New York City's busiest production year in more than a decade — a remarkable comeback after a steep slump deepened by the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

In 2005, the city's location shooting days increased 35% over the previous year to 31,570, according to the Mayor's Office of Film, Theatre and Broadcasting. That figure covers television and film shoots that are on location, not in studios or soundstages.

Although New York still ranks second in overall production to Los Angeles, where shooting increased 4% last year to 54,876 days, the Big Apple is gaining ground.

"New York has become a serious competitor for feature films and even television production," said Steve MacDonald, president of Film L.A. Inc., which coordinates film permitting in the city and county. "We need to be concerned."

New York attracted \$600 million worth of movies and television programs and more than 6,000 additional jobs last year as a result of a new "Made in NY" incentive program that went into effect in 2005, said Katherine Oliver, the city's film commissioner.

Those incentives, which include a 5% city tax rebate over and above a 10% state tax credit, are modest compared with those offered by some states.

Nonetheless, they have given a leg up to a city that already is a major media center.

Many stories take place in New York, which is home to top writers and directors such as Martin Scorsese and to Dick Wolf, creator and executive producer of the "Law & Order" franchise. Wolf's new show on NBC, "Conviction," is already shooting in New York.

New York's production gains come as Los Angeles finds itself increasingly vulnerable to poaching of production jobs by other U.S. cities and states, more than 20 of which now offer tax credits and other incentives.

Thanks to the weakening of the U.S. dollar, filming in Canada and other countries is less attractive to producers than it once was. But the rise of other domestic rivals has led California union and industry officials to push for state legislation that would offer tax breaks to productions shot here.

Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa also has proposed waiving film permit fees at city-owned facilities.

In 2005, New York drew more than 250 independent and studio films and 100 new and returning TV productions, including "The Sopranos" and "Love Monkey."

This year looks to be even busier. Lisa Rawlins, Warner Bros.' senior vice president of studio and production affairs, said New York's tax incentives were "a significant factor" in her studio's decision to shoot six feature films there in 2006.

"Anytime you offer up New York City with added economic incentives you've got a winning combination," Rawlins said.

In the lucrative area of TV production, New York lured seven TV pilots last year, up from the typical one or two. This year, Touchstone Television is shooting four of its 25 pilots in New York, in addition to the popular series "Hope & Faith."

Again, New York's tax credits helped clinch the deal, said Barry Jossen, executive vice president of production for Touchstone Television.

Most of the shows and movies being shot in New York are set in the city, with a few exceptions. An upcoming Matt Damon and Jack Nicholson movie called "The Departed," for example, is set in Boston.

Although New York has long been a major player in production, which contributes \$5 billion annually to the local economy, for years it was perceived as too expensive.

As a result, producers on a budget would often grab a few exterior shots of the Empire State Building or the Brooklyn Bridge and then take their production to another city.

Los Angeles has played host to innumerable stories set in New York. On TV, even series such as "Seinfeld" and "NYPD Blue" that drew their inspiration from the city were shot in Los Angeles. Similarly, "CSI: NY" currently shoots here.

On the film front too, New York often has lost out even on movies with the city's name in the title. When Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen made the 2004 film "New York Minute," for example, most of it was filmed in Toronto.

"We were lucky if they were here a minute," joked Oliver, who set out to change that after Mayor Michael Bloomberg appointed her in 2002. "We just want to have an opportunity to host the projects that should be here."

To stem the outflow, Oliver and top entertainment executives crafted the Made in NY program, which gives tax refunds on film and TV shows that are produced at least 75% in New York. Qualified productions also receive promotions on city bus shelters and the city's TV channel, and discounts on services provided by local vendors.

The city extends free parking and police services and waives permit fees for film and TV shoots.

The city has encouraged development of large-scale sound stages, such as the 280,000-square-foot Steiner Studios at the historic Brooklyn Naval Yard. Two other leading stages, Silvercup Studios in Long Island City and Kaufman Astoria Studios in Queens, are both expanding.

The changes have been especially welcome among independent filmmakers, whose small budgets used to make shooting in the city prohibitive.

"New York was never really a viable option for us because it was so expensive, but now these incentives have come into play, it's made it very competitive," said Randall Emmett, a veteran indie producer who is considering shooting several movies in New York.

Leslie Holleran, a producer on the upcoming Richard Gere movie "Hoax," agreed. The \$25-million film, shot in New York last summer, will earn as much as \$3 million in tax refunds.

In a city renowned for its red tape, Holleran said she had few complaints. "They bent over backward to try to make things work," she said. "It was a walk in Central Park."

Answer each of the following questions in a paragraph of about 60-80 words; (use your own words!)

- 1) Why has New York been less attractive for filmmakers in the past decade and what has the city done to reverse that tendency?
- 2) What does the development in New York mean to California, especially Los Angeles, and why?
- 3) Why might many filmmakers still choose Los Angeles to shoot their movies? What could be done to keep the film business alive in California? Use the arguments from the text and your own ideas.
- 4) If you were a filmmaker, where would you rather shoot a movie that is
 - a) set in New York?
 - b) set in Los Angeles?
 - c) set in neither of the two cities?