

valleywood

by Beth Daigle



Welcome to Valleywood

It's here! The film industry is upon us in all its glitz, glamour and glory. Well, maybe not so much of the glitz and glamour quite yet, but the excitement of it all has certainly set the Merrimack Valley abuzz.

Hollywood types have been looking more and more closely at Massachusetts for their big screen backdrops as a result of film industry tax incentives brought about in 2005 and 2007. These incentives, which have significantly encouraged major motion pictures to gravitate our way, offer filmmakers credits equal to 25 cents for every new dollar of spending brought into the state.

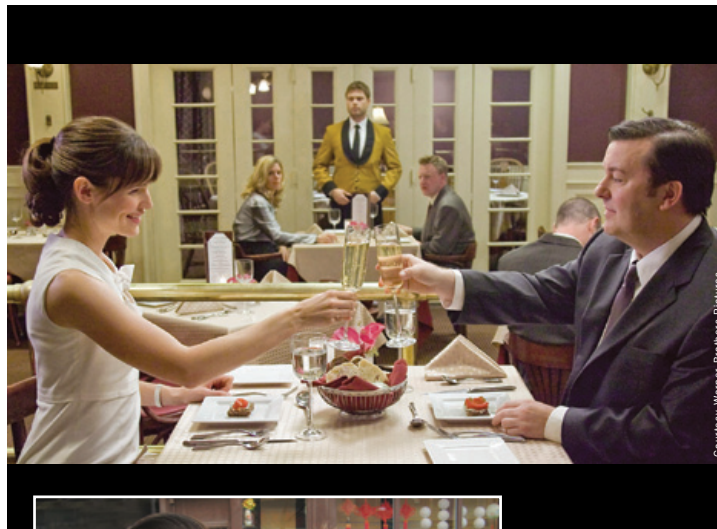
Boston has been an obvious choice to host a number of high profile films, but our own Merrimack Valley has become a strong contender in the competition to be the ideal movie locale. "The Fighter," starring Mark Wahlberg and Christian Bale, was filmed in Lowell in 2009. Not long before that, also in Lowell, director Ricky Gervais filmed "The Invention of Lying" with stars Jennifer Garner and Rob Lowe. Others include "Knowing," filmed partially in Westford with Nicholas Cage, "The Box," starring Cameron Diaz in North Andover, and "The Edge of Darkness," starring Mel Gibson, with scenes filmed in Lowell.

Though the hype around the production of these films and their famous casts was widespread, the industry and big names had been here before. In 1991, scenes for the movie "School Ties," featuring early performances by Matt Damon, Ben Affleck and

Brendan Fraser, were filmed in downtown Lowell. A Lowell native myself, I can recall the intrigue and excitement on the city's streets as this relatively unfamiliar experience descended upon us. To have celebrities in our midst back then was an unforgettable event. The mood today, while still enthusiastic, is a bit more accustomed to this occurrence. Interestingly, many Hollywood notables hail from Lowell, including Bette Davis, Olympia Dukakis, Ed McMahon and Michael Chiklis. Now, more than ever, Hollywood is interested in Lowell and the Merrimack Valley.

Handling the influx of industry attention is no simple task. To manage the growth, local film offices have been established to welcome and support the incoming creators, crews, actors and actresses. The Massachusetts Film Office in Boston oversees all state-based projects. Locally, the Greater Merrimack Valley Convention & Visitors Bureau has created a team to focus specifically on the industry's interest in the region. That team is doing all it can to welcome and accommodate filmmakers. Deb Belanger, the bureau's executive director, says, "The exposure for the region is priceless."

Meanwhile, residents are embracing the presence of this industry in our neighborhoods and are bursting with community pride as their city or town appears on the silver screen or, better yet, when one of their own has inspired the production. Such is the case with "The Fighter," in which Wahlberg plays Lowell boxer Micky Ward.



Courtesy Warner Brothers Pictures



Photo courtesy of the Merrimack Valley Convention & Visitors Bureau

Above: Jennifer Garner and Ricky Gervais filming a scene from "The Invention of Lying" at COBBLESTONE'S Restaurant in Lowell. The movie was released in October of 2009. Left: Ricky with Deb Belanger, executive director of The Greater Merrimack Valley Convention & Visitors Bureau, during a break in filming.

Accommodating the needs of cast and crew, on or off the set, is an undeniably unique experience. Scott Plath, fellow Merrimack Valley Magazine columnist and owner of Cobblestones Restaurant in Lowell, knows firsthand what it's like to be a part of the action. Scott has seen it all, from the blacking out of 100 windows at Cobblestones to turn daytime into night for a dinner scene in "The Invention of Lying," to Wahlberg and Bale enjoying dinner among the locals on four or five occasions. "There is no way to measure the type of impact that something like this has," Plath says. "There is nothing that I can think of that creates morale for an area like having Hollywood come to shoot a movie — it's exciting."

The New Hampshire side of the Merrimack Valley has also attracted the attention of the film industry, particularly independent films. The New Hampshire Film & Television Office recently helped facilitate the making of "Mystery Team," and "The Pond," two independent productions filmed in Manchester, and Nashua respectively.


The movement of the movie industry to what we are now calling Hollywood East brings multiple benefits beyond the thrill of celebrity and industry hype. The economic impact, including the creation of jobs, has been a significant justification for government officials who support this initiative. Films like "The Invention of Lying" brought in revenues in the \$2 million range, allowing

Merrimack Valley businesses that assist the film industry an opportunity to thrive in an otherwise down economy. Local paint companies benefited as design crews came in for set supplies, local security firms were called in, and local catering companies supplied meals.

Massachusetts and the Merrimack Valley are poised for great things as our presence in the film industry continues to grow. Talks about Plymouth Rock Studios, a state of the art film and television studio in Plymouth, are currently on hold due to funding issues, but the idea that a facility of this magnitude could be in our future confirms that the area is an up and coming destination for the film industry. Nick Paleologos, executive director at the Massachusetts Film Office, says, "We've grown at a very rapid pace over the past three years, and we're looking to maintain a relatively consistent level of production into the future — somewhere between six and 12 major productions per year. As long as the incentives remain in place, the industry will continue to prosper."

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