

VARIETY

Oregon Location Spotlight

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North Star

Hollywood productions are migrating to Oregon for its ample facilities and tax rebates • *By Todd Longwell*

Ask Oregon Film executive director Tim Williams why productions should shoot in the Beaver State, and he'll spell it out in stark and simple terms.

"The locations are diverse, and we have a 25% cash rebate, and it's payable as quick or quicker than any other state that I know," says Williams.

The WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes slowed business down in 2023, but Oregon has seen a steady influx of film and TV productions in recent years, including Guillermo del Toro's Oscar-winning animated film "Pinocchio" (2022); the sci-fi feature "65" (2023), star-

ring Adam Driver; director-star David Oyelowo's "The Water Man" (2020) and Aidy Bryant's Hulu series "Shrill" (2019-2021).

"There have been sizable projects coming through, so I went from traveling a lot to staying at home," says Ime Etuk, a veteran assistant director who recently co-wrote and directed his first feature, the upcoming "Outdoor School."

Awesomeness production executive Don Dunn had executive produced a trio of Portland-set "To All the Boys I've Loved Before" movies for Netflix that were actually shot in Vancouver, but when he

ran the numbers for "Trinkets," a coming-of-age comedy series for the streamer also set in the Oregon city, he found that it would only cost a little bit more to shoot it there. His experience proved to be so positive that he returned to Portland last spring to shoot Awesomeness' upcoming Paramount+ original movie "Little Wing," starring Kelly Reilly and Brian Cox.

"We used a lot of the same crew that we used on Seasons One and Two of 'Trinkets' and we got a lot of support from the film commission," says Dunn of the "Little Wing" production.

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Hulu's "Shrill," which Aidy Bryant both starred in and co-created, made good use of Oregon locations.

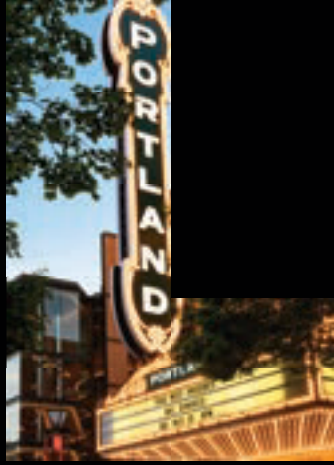
The state's commission, officially known as the Oregon Governor's Office of Film & Television, maintains a large photo database that productions can access, and its staff will put together a lookbook and connect potential producers with permitting agencies and location scouts. What sets it apart is Williams' ability, informed by his years as a producer (he has credits including "In the Bedroom"), to analyze a film's budget. Among the tools he uses: MovieMagic Budgeting software.

"My first step with everybody is to have them send me a budget and I will physically go through it in MovieMagic and tag it for the incentive, so we can give a better projection of how much the rebate might be," says Williams, who handles the auditing process with the commission's IT and financial manager, Nathan Cherrington. "You're dealing with us and that's it."

Oregon became a minor league player in the incentive game in 2005, when the state raised its top payroll rebate to 16.2%. It subsequently landed films such as "Twilight" (2008) and "Extraordinary Measures" (2010) and the TV series "Leverage" (2008-2012). By the time Williams took the role in September 2014, the film business had slowed — the two "Twilight" sequels were lost to Vancouver — but production was still humming on the TV side with NBC's "Grimm" (2011-2017) and IFC's "Portlandia" (2011-2018).

While film and TV projects are glamorous and, at times, very lucrative, commercials have sustained Oregon's production community. Portland-based ad agency Wieden+Kennedy has created campaigns for Beaverton-based Nike (e.g., "Just Do It") and other major brands, and over the years, the business mushroomed as alums from Wieden+Kennedy and Nike went on to launch their own agencies, like Swift and Instrument. These firms service the growing market, which includes other big local footwear and apparel makers such as Columbia Sportswear and Adidas — both of whose





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North American headquarters are located in Portland — as well as tech companies such as chip-maker Intel, which maintain a large presence in the area.

“There’s been a lot of good quality tech work which has shifted a lot of energy and created a ‘Why not?’” says Davis Priestley, founder and president of Revery, which bills itself as a “global storytelling studio.” Google has an office in Portland and “now Airbnb is here. There’s no reason why not to shoot an Airbnb lifestyle spot in downtown Portland.”

The state has also been a force in the animation world for decades. It began with the late Claymation pioneer Will Vinton, best-known for the California Raisins campaign in the 1980s and Eddie Murphy’s animated series “The PJs” (1999-2001). Will Vinton Studios later morphed into Laika, which has produced award-winning animated features including “Coraline” (2009) and “Missing Link” (2019). In Portland, there’s also Bent Image Lab, which does both animation and visual effects, and a satellite office of L.A.-based animation house ShadowMachine, where Guillermo del Toro’s Oscar-winning stop-motion feature “Pinocchio” was shot.

“Animation is a very large and consistent workforce, and it was one of the few things that drove us through the pandemic,” says Williams. “We had three feature films up here and they just went remote and kept going.”



Clatsop County Jail, featured in “The Goonies” opening prison break scene, now houses the Oregon Film Museum.



However, when it comes to film and TV tourism, live action is the name of the game. The biggest draw is 1985’s “The Goonies.” The Oregon Film Museum is housed in what used to be Clatsop County Jail in Astoria, which was the setting for the prison break scene at the beginning of the movie, and it helps put on an annual “Goonies Day” event every June 7.

For “Goonies Day” in 2015, marking the 30th anniversary of the film’s release, “we had about 15,000 fans in town, and Astoria is a town of 10,000,” says Mac Burns, executive director of the Clatsop County Historical Society, which runs the film museum and three others.

There’s also the Oregon Film Trail, a statewide network of 41 signs across the state marking the shooting locations of films ranging from “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” (1975) and “Sometimes a Great Notion” (1971), both adapted from novels by Ken Kesey, to “Stand by Me” (1986) and “Free Willy” (1993).

For most, Oregon is defined by the urban and suburban environs of Portland, the state’s largest city, whose quirks were lovingly satirized in “Portlandia.” Director Gus Van Sant, who made several of his best-known films in Oregon, including “Drugstore Cowboy” (1989) and “My Own Private Idaho” (1991), says that, in many ways, the city depicted in the series isn’t that different from the one he encountered when he first moved there in 1970.

“Its bohemian culture was longstanding,” says Van Sant. “A lot of hippies moved there out of their own communities, and the city was very to itself and not particularly concerned with [anything] outside of Portland.”

Although approximately 2.5 million of the state’s 4.24 million residents live in the city’s metropolitan area, it occupies only 6.8% of its 98,466 square miles. Outside of Portland, things are vastly different culturally, leaning red politically, and its topog-



Animation is a very large and consistent workforce.”
— Tim Williams

raphy varies widely, from rocky coastlines in the west to high deserts in the east, with the Cascade Mountains running north to south in between. Producers concerned about keeping dry should know that it’s also less wet. Portland is No. 3 on the list of large U.S. cities with the most rainy days, but Oregon as a whole ranks No. 20 on the list of states with the highest average annual precipitation.

“It doesn’t rain much here,” insists Jason A. Atkinson, a producer and former Oregon state senator who lives in the southern part of the state. He adds: “This is where most of the grapes that are blended in the Napa Valley wineries are grown. It’s like Napa Valley with peat.”



Portland was a backdrop for “My Own Private Idaho,” with River Phoenix and Keanu Reeves.



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Fishing for Production

Oregon's broad spectrum of programs and facilities are baiting more film and TV projects

• By Todd Longwell

A production coming to Oregon with an in-state spend of \$1 million dollars or more doesn't have to hire locally to qualify for the state's incentive program, but it's still likely to be staffed largely by Oregonians.

"Over the last eight or nine years, in excess of 85% of the crews on larger movies have been locals," says Tim Williams, exec director of Oregon Film, aka the Oregon Governor's Office of Film & Television.

"We have young members coming in all the time and a lot of them came in within the last few years," says Portland-based Sierra Bay Robinson, a veteran costume designer who now works full-

time as the southern business agent for IATSE Local 488. But she says it's hard to accurately measure the increase in membership for Oregon alone, since Local 488's jurisdiction includes three other states (Washington, Montana and northern Idaho).

Many states offering film and TV incentives pay lip service to workforce development, but few take it as seriously as the Beaver State does. In 2018, it launched the Oregon Media Pathways program, which trains people from historically disadvantaged communities for entry-level production jobs. It schools them in a wide variety of skills, both tech-

nical and social, including how to read call sheets, walkie talkie lingo, production workflow, safety and general set etiquette. Then it goes a step further and not only connects them with potential employers, but also reimburses the production company for their wages for a set period of time if they're hired.

Oregon Film runs the Pathways program in partnership with several outside organizations, including IATSE and nonprofits such as the trade organization Oregon Media Production Assn. and Outside the Frame, which provides homeless and marginalized people aged 16-30 the tools

to develop production skills and shoot their own films.

"When the program started out, it was really just focused on feature films," says Outside the Frame film career coordinator Maria Moreno. "But now we have expanded into placing folks on the commercial side, because advertising is a really big part of the industry here."

In November 2022, the state legislature passed a bill to create the new creative opportunity program. It gives Oregon Film \$375,000 annually to help fund preexisting initiatives, including Pathways, Outside the Frame, the Outdoor Adventure Film grant, the Tell Your Story grant and partnership programs such as CINE/SEEN, the BIPOC filmmaker grant and OMPA's creatives of color networking events, as well as new programs and partnerships with groups such as Desert Island Studios, Lion Speaks and the film programs at Southern Oregon U. and the Portland Art Museum Center for an Untold Tomorrow.

Oregon also has a growing physical infrastructure, including a wealth of big equipment rental houses such as Pacific Grip and Lighting, Gearhead Production Rentals and Koerner Camera, the latter of which stocks the latest high-end digital cinema cameras and lenses. But it's not exactly rich with soundstage facilities, and the ones it has tend to be on the small side, like Picture This Production Services and Stage and Coach Sarge Cine, which each have two stages, the biggest being Coach's 4,500 square foot stage. Currently, its largest facility is Vision Stages, in Troutdale, six miles east of Portland, which has four stages totaling 36,000 square feet of soundstage space, including a 13,000 square foot stage with 22-foot ceilings. Opened by location manager Dan Eason in 2021, it scored a coup when it hosted Nathan Fielder's HBO series "The Rehearsal."

"For a long time, we've had many different converted warehouses for soundstages," says Williams. "What we don't have is a purpose-built soundstage, and we're actively working to figure out how to do that." 🎬

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Nathan Fielder shot his HBO series, "The Rehearsal," at Vision Stages in Troutdale.



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“Portlandia,” starring series co-creators Carrie Brownstein, left, and Fred Armisen, right, here with Jason Sudeikis, filmed in Oregon.

Incentivizing Oregon

Recent legislation offers a strong lure to film

in the state • By Todd Longwell

Oregon signaled it was serious about attracting production in 2022, when Gov. Kate Brown signed into law a bill significantly sweetening its incentives, officially known as the Oregon Production Investment Fund. This bill raised the base cash rebate on Oregon payroll for film and TV projects from 10% to 20%. If the producers are paying an aggregate of at least 6.2% in-state withholding taxes, the rebate gets bumped up to 26.2% under the Greenlight Oregon labor rebate program, established in 2005, which applies to salaries of both resident or non-resident employees, up to \$1 million per person or entity.

Additionally, projects can now also get a 25% rebate on production-related goods and services purchased through in-state vendors, including loan-out corporations registered to do business in the state.

The amendment to the incentive also raised its budget cap 40%, to \$20 million annually.

“The nice thing about our incentive is that it’s always been kind

of modest, but we’ve been able to prove our worth to the policy-makers, and they have gradually improved it as we’ve shown its value, and now it’s pretty competitive,” says David Allen Cress, producer of “Portlandia.”

To be eligible for the incentive under the OPIF program, a production must have a minimum of \$1 million in qualified in-state expenditures. Projects spending less than \$1 million but more than \$75,000 can also qualify as a “local” OPIF (L-OPIF) if they are being produced by a local producer or production company and have a crew and a speaking cast that are at least 80% Oregon residents. There is also a “regional” OPIF (R-OPIF), which adds 10% to the cash rebate from the OPIF and L-OPIF programs after audit to any project that has one day more than 50% of its shooting days outside of Portland’s 30-mile production zone.

Visiting productions also enjoy a benefit available to all Oregonians: the state has no sales tax. 📍

From Buster Keaton’s ‘General’ to ‘Animal House’

The Beaver State has appeared in a wide range of

movies since the silent era • By Todd Longwell

The General 1926

A Civil War tale of a young man’s efforts to rescue his train and his girl from their captors, this silent comedy classic co-directed by and starring Buster Keaton was shot on the Oregon, Pacific & Eastern Railway in the Willamette Valley using three vintage locomotives purchased locally.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest 1975

This Oscar-winning adaptation of Ken Kesey’s 1962 novel was filmed entirely on location in the state, primarily at the Oregon State Hospital in the capital city of Salem, a working psychiatric facility, with real patients appearing alongside a cast led by Jack Nicholson.

National Lampoon’s Animal House 1978

The University of Oregon in Eugene stands in for Faber College in this profane comedy, with the former site of the Phi Sigma Kappa fraternity playing the decrepit Delta House. The parade sequence was shot in Cottage Grove.

The Goonies 1985

The adventure comedy was filmed at several locations in the northwestern city of Astoria, where it is set, including the Flavel House Museum and the old Clatsop County Jail, now home to the Oregon Film Museum. Coastal scenes were filmed more than 26 miles to the south at Ecola State Park.

Twilight 2008

Based on Stephenie Meyer’s seminal YA vampire novel, it was shot in numerous locations in the Portland area, including the ultra-modern Hoke House and Leodis V. McDaniel High School, as well as in Silver Falls and Ecola state parks and the towns of Oregon City and St. Helens.

Wild 2014

The story of a troubled woman (played by Reese Witherspoon) who embarks on a solo hiking trip on the Pacific Coast Trail, it was filmed in the cities of Ashland, Bend, Eugene and Portland, Smith Rock State Park and Crater Laker National Park. 📍

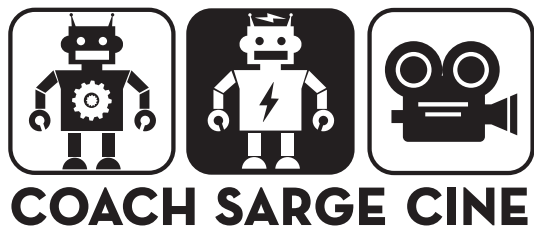
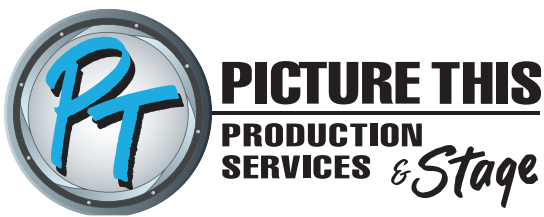


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Reese Witherspoon’s “Wild” shot in multiple Oregon locations.



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Animation Laika No Other

Along with ShadowMachine, the award-winning studio anchors Oregon's robust opportunities

for animators • By Rafael Motamayor

Even before Nike founder Phil Knight acquired the studio that would be renamed Laika in 2002, it was already a staple of the Oregon filmmaking landscape. Will Vinton Studios spent 30 years creating stop-motion animation staples such as the California Raisins, and that history and legacy permeates both Laika's work and that of the other studios that make Oregon the stop-motion capital of the U.S.

Since its rechristening in 2005, Laika has become one of the prominent stop-motion studios in the world, earning several Oscar nominations starting with the studio's debut film, "Coraline." As Dave Burke, COO and CMO of Laika, tells *Variety*, "The films we're making are getting more and more complex in terms of the number of characters, shots and sets built."

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Laika Studios' "Missing Link" featured the voices of Hugh Jackman as Sir Lionel Frost and Zach Galifianakis as Mr. Link.

Even two decades later, the spirit and history of Will Vinton Studios' Oregonian roots live on in Laika. The company's next feature, "Wildwood," is an adaptation of the novel by the Decemberists' Colin Meloy and a love letter to Portland, Ore., where director Travis Knight re-creates in miniature many of the city's recognizable landmarks. The production is Laika's largest to date, with the studio employing 500 people to bring it to life. But this is only the beginning; Burke says Laika plans to have "multiple productions running concurrently, so we can roll people off one project onto another."

It's a bit of a chicken-and-egg situation whether it was the prevalence of animation studios in Oregon that attracted animators and other stop-motion crew members, or the other way around. "It's

a community here," explains Kirk Kelley, chief creative officer of studio HouseSpecial and animation director for the upcoming short "Brim Broome Boulevard." "People come to work on a project or two and just stay here."

Multiple studios have followed Laika's example in Oregon in recent years to great success, helping to lure talent. Shadow Machine, which just won the animated feature Oscar for "Pinocchio," is one such studio. It is the second-ever stop-motion film to win the award. Co-founders Alex Bulkeley and Corey Campodonico have been friends since the first grade, and since 1999 they've worked in the animation field, starting with producing the stop-motion animation of the earliest seasons of the award-winning "Robot Chicken."

Stop-motion has more than just animators and storytellers as part of the talent pool, but also sculptors, mold makers, costume designers and other artisans who benefit from the state's artist-friendly environment. "When there isn't a stop-motion project happening, there is still a very artistic community in Portland to support that talent pool," says Campodonico, who compares the animation done in Oregon to sourdough baking in San Francisco — it can be replicated elsewhere, but it won't be the same.

"The state and local government have implemented policies that have encouraged growth in the local film industry, and incentives to hire local talent," Burke adds, praising the Oregon Media Production Assn.

As for the future of Laika, the company recently announced plans to build a stop-motion animation studio in Maryland at the historically Black university Bowie State, and hopes to establish an animation and motion graphics program more locally at Portland Community College. "We've been looking at making the entry barrier lower for a career in stop-motion animation, working with underrepresented groups to get a foothold in the industry," says Burke. 🍌



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