

# The movie industry is starting off with a bang in Alberta

Jessica Lowell | February 13, 2021



**W**hile many industries are hurting during the pandemic, movie productions are thriving in Alberta.

Last year a lot of productions big and small made their way to the province and many more are expected to come.

"This is great news for Albertans - there have been a lot of job losses - we all know unemployment's around 12% these days and the film industry is instant jobs and cash flow for our economy," said International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (I.A.T.S.E) Local 212's President Damian Petti.

That money flows into the community in ways that are very beneficial, that money goes to coffee shops, gas stations, hotels, restaurants and more. It's an injection of many millions of dollars into the economy and employs thousands of Albertans who spend their money locally as well.

Petti said the pandemic has a lot to do with why these productions are coming here, "Many producers of projects from across the border to the south firmly believe that Alberta will probably not shut the industry down and that the studios and the streamers - they typically have really good Covid protocols."

It's the confidence that Alberta is a prime environment to work in safely, that there are provincial and federal incentives that drive the industry and the exchange rate, which makes it preferable for foreign producers to come to enjoy a pretty good return on their exchange, that are other major factors on why productions are coming to Alberta.

Rural Alberta towns are popular for producers because they boast so many different looks for a variety of projects said Petti, "We play for the Midwest United States very well - We have a range of looks - Drumheller is obviously one of the most popular locations because of its diverse landscapes and then you go to the west and you've got all the mountains and you've got prairies and really nice scenery."

Rural Alberta is benefiting from that and when a production comes to town, they invest in these communities. They will pay fees to do things like shut down roads or to make sure businesses don't lose revenue, sometimes they will install things like playgrounds or do renovations to structures, it's a sort of motto they follow, "We try to leave the place better than when we found it," he said.

Petti said lots of different people who might not think they would qualify to work in the film and television industry might be surprised to find out that a lot of tradespeople transition easily and that there are so many jobs for small business owners as well, "I do still think there is a process - we do have a set etiquette course that people are required to take - it's kind of like the stock market - the jobs happen when the industries busy and we are entering into a busy cycle."

Jobs tend to be a bit more seasonal, as there are usually more productions in the Summer and days can be much longer on a film set than in typical jobs, it's not uncommon to work 13- or 14-hour days but the money can be quite good.

Alberta is sort of coming into its own where producers are giving us a second look - they're seeing that we have a stable crew base - in recent years we've expanded our studio capacity - we have 3 sound stages that were opened 4 years ago in Calgary and a number of warehouse spaces being retrofitted he said.

Currently, on one of those stages, The Jim Henson Company has started production on a Fraggle Rock re-boot. With the pandemic, the company wanted to find a new home where they could film full-length episodes and moved production from the U.S. to the Calgary Film Centre.

In the last couple of years, some pretty impressive projects have been filmed in Rural Alberta including the Kevin Costner and Diane Lane suspense thriller "Let Him Go." which came out last November. Crossfield was the background for "Ghostbusters: Afterlife" due out this November after being pushed back from its original release date and Land, directed and starring Robin Wright which dropped into theatres this weekend. There are also a few upcoming and currently running series like "Guilty Party" with Kate Beckinsale, another season of "Jann" with Alberta's own Jann Arden. It's also likely that another season of "Heartland" will shoot this year and the Netflix zombie series "Black Summer."

19 projects are currently in the works within Alberta, but even more, are being scouted and greenlighted each day. Industry giants Disney, NBC Universal and HBO are some of the companies looking to Alberta to be their perfect set.

"We think Albertans are proud of this industry and we'd like to see it grow even more - There's an opportunity for the provincial government to expand the incentives along with the industry - there's an overall cap on the incentives so if we grow quickly the incentives might go away but we're hoping the government is looking at expanding the cap so we can continue to grow at a rapid rate," said Petti

Brock Skretting, head of advocacy with Keep Alberta Rolling said, "As an industry really trying to get the word out there about the economic opportunity - about just how much spending happens - this is not just a arts and culture endeavour it's also an economic endeavour."

Ghostbusters: Afterlife spent over 500 thousand dollars just on lumber alone, which is big for the forestry industry in Alberta. They also purchased an estimated 225 thousand litres of gas and spent almost 400 thousand dollars on catering. this means industry and local business are benefiting from these productions and big movies and series also bring tourism opportunities he said.

One of the goals of the non-profit is to impart on the provincial government the need for a competitive tax credit, "The need for that carrot so to speak to lure productions in and to support local producers as well." Skretting said.

"Using the leverage and special skills of this industry to market our province and tell the story of Alberta through all these different stories of film projects," he said. It's about getting Albertans back to work and he believes leaders will see this as something to go big on and really support and get money flowing into the small business chambers coffers. ■