

ON THE RISE  
**CHI TOWN**  
ON THE RISE



## EVER MORE ENTICING TAX CREDITS, LOCATIONS THAT RANGE FROM GRITTY URBAN TO TIMELESS SUBURBAN, AND AN INCREASINGLY DEEP, TRAINED WORKFORCE HAVE SPURRED A PRODUCTION RENAISSANCE IN CHICAGO AND ITS ENVIRONS.

WRITTEN BY DAVID HEURING

Chicago's reputation as a brawny, no-nonsense metropolis contrasts sharply with Hollywood's buttoned-up company town tradition. But the Windy City has learned a lesson or two from the dream factory in the last decade and is quickly blossoming into a major film and television production center.

Chicago's urban landscapes, diverse neighborhoods and nearby rural and small-town settings have always had their distinctive charms, visible in a spate of memorable features in the 1980s and '90s, including *The Blues Brothers*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, *The Fugitive*, *The Untouchables* and *Road to Perdition*. After some growing pains and a pandemic-induced interregnum, Chicago is humming. In 2021–22, more than 40 major productions were mounted in the city, including indies (*Black Mold*, *North of the 10*), streaming series (*Shining Girls*, *The Bear*), network television (*One Chicago*, *Batwoman*) and studio features (*Be My Eyes*, *Heist 88*).

The boom can be traced back to 2003, which saw the first incarnation of Illinois' production tax credit, a 20% break that offered a glimpse of what was possible. In 2009, the credit was boosted to 30%, and soon thereafter a 10-year extension was passed—a major catalyst, especially in the episodic sector, because shows could commit to Chicago with less uncertainty. Starz's *Boss* and Fox's *Empire* put down roots, as did the NBC Universal Dick Wolf *Chicago* franchise, including *Chicago Fire*, *P.D.* and *Med*.

Vendors like Panavision, Keslow, and Cinelease arrived or expanded their facilities, and in 2011, Cinespace Chicago Film Studios opened on the 70-acre site of the former Ryerson steel complex. In the ensuing decade, that key facility has grown to include 36 soundstages, helping to bring an estimated \$3 billion in film-related spending to Illinois. The largest independent movie studio outside of Los Angeles, Cinespace's recent tenants include Showtime's *The Chi* and *Shameless*, and FX's *Fargo* season four. New studios and soundstages are under construction or planned for Chicago over the next two years.

Film production spending in Illinois amounted to three-quarters of a billion dollars in 2021, the most recent year for which there are figures. At least 80% of that was expended in Chicago. That's more than triple the number for 2012, roughly \$190 million. By 2019, the year before the pandemic hit, that estimate was just north of half a billion.

**JANUARY 2023**  
Illinois Film  
Production  
Tax Credit is  
extended for  
another decade

**Illinois residents and nonresidents with a WAGE UP TO \$500,000 qualify for the credit**

**QUALIFYING NONRESIDENT POSITIONS:**  
writers, directors, directors of  
photography, production designers,  
costume designers, production  
accountants, VFX supervisors and editors

**If your production SPENDS \$25 MILLION OR MORE, four actors would qualify for the credit up to a maximum of \$500,000 in wages**

41.8781° N, 87.6298° W

But the latest news, received gleefully by producers, may deliver still more impetus to Chicago's impressive growth. In early January 2023, the Illinois legislature extended the Illinois Film Production Tax Credit for another decade, further enhancing several attractive changes that went into effect on July 1, 2022. Producers, especially those coming from out of state, are intensely interested.

First, the wages of all Illinois residents and those of a limited number of nonresidents up to \$500,000 qualify for the credit. That number was previously limited to \$100,000, and until recently applied only to Illinois residents. Now, qualifying nonresident positions include writers, directors, directors of photography, production designers, costume designers, production accountants, VFX supervisors and editors. And for an Illinois production

spending \$25 million or more, four actors would qualify for the credit up to a maximum of \$500,000 in wages.

Christine Dudley, executive Director of the Illinois Production Alliance, says these changes in the tax structure help Illinois adapt.

"The film industry is always going to move faster than the government," she says. "Governor Pritzker and the legislature recognize not only the last decade of industry growth, but even greater potential going forward. Streaming productions like Apple's *Shining Girls* and FX/Hulu's award-winning *The Bear*, with eight or 10 episodes, are now taking over from 23-episode linear television programs, and our tax policies must be designed with that in mind. On limited series, it's now easier for department heads to work in Chicago without moving here permanently. Those benefits everyone.

Another advantage of the program is the transferability—there's a thriving aftermarket for tax credits—and there's no cap on how much can be issued in credits in a fiscal year."

Chicago's strong growth over the past decade led to concerns about the available depth of crews, but Dudley says that is being alleviated, in part thanks to superlative efforts by union locals and to respected production training programs at Columbia College, DePaul University, Northwestern and elsewhere. She adds that the ability to bring in top out-of-state department heads under the new law will further accelerate the education and experience of local talent.

"When the 2022 expansion legislation was crafted, a workforce development fund was initiated," says Dudley. "Through the fund, the state offers grants specifically for film workforce



## NEW MEMBERS

PRODUCED BY TRAINS THE SPOTLIGHT ON SOME OF THE GUILD'S NEWEST MEMBERS, AND OFFERS A GLIMPSE AT WHAT MAKES THEM TICK.



### ANDREW SINGER

You might say Andrew Singer is in the parody business. Three of his most noteworthy executive producer credits, *Portlandia* (2011–18), *Documentary Now!* (2015–19) and *Schmigadoon!* (2021), are send-ups of PNW hipster progressives, earnest nonfiction programming and Golden Age Hollywood musicals, respectively. He currently serves as exec producer on *The Other Two*, which examines the vagaries of fame and fortune in the internet age with razor-sharp wit. The DNA of these shows can be largely traced to *Saturday Night Live* alums. That's hardly a coincidence, since Singer is copresident of film and television at Broadway Video, for which longtime *SNL* producer Lorne Michaels is a principal player.

#### WHO OR WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO GO INTO PRODUCING?

In a world and business that are largely transactional, I am inspired by the fact that we literally produce things. I recently got to screen our series *Schmigadoon* for my three young children. I took pride in knowing that we manifested something new and original in the world.

#### WHAT'S THE BEST PIECE OF ADVICE YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED ABOUT PRODUCING?

That talent is our North Star, and that great producers leave no fingerprints. Both are cultural touchstones of Lorne Michaels.

training. The trade unions recognized the need and helped tailor the legislation. Everybody's devoted to increased strategic training programs. They've really put their shoulder to the wheel to make sure that more people are getting into the pipeline and getting their cards."

NBC, HBO and other production partners have provided enthusiastic cooperation for training, and Dudley says the result has been significant. Illinois was also the first state to insert a below-the-line diversity clause into its tax credit program, a move that has been closely imitated in New York and has been reviewed by California for its diversity and inclusion efforts.

Tyson Bidner served as producer on eight Chicago-shot episodes of *The Bear*. The critically lauded FX series is set in a sandwich shop copied from an actual River North Italian beef joint frequented by the show's creator, Christopher Storer.

"This was a show that was meant for Chicago," says Bidner. "But given the environment we're in, every studio weighs the pros and cons of shooting in a certain place. So the tax incentive helps. What's great about Chicago is that it's a film and television powerhouse. They have deep crews. So even if during the pilot and the first season (of *The Bear*) there were eight or nine (other) shows going on, they could support them. Not every city can. We have crews with a deep level of experience, which brings professionalism to every aspect."

Bidner credits the Chicago Film Office for helping with permits and traffic—important, given how busy the city is. The surreal nighttime bridge sequence that opens the first episode was a coup, he says.

"It makes the series," he says. "No disrespect to Toronto, but shooting this in Toronto and trying to make it seem like Chicago—you're missing an element. It worked out so well that we're going back in the heart of February to do this again."

Tyler Romary serves as executive producer on the HBO comedy-drama series *Somebody Somewhere*, soon to air its second season. The show takes place in small-town Kansas, but it's primarily shot 30 miles from the Loop, in Lockport and Warrenville, Illinois. Producers point to the deep pool of actors in Chicago and the grounded and nuanced feel of Midwestern performances as big draws.

"Chicago has become the new Atlanta, in my opinion," says Romary. "We were originally going to shoot our project in LA, but locations were tough, and for budget purposes, we couldn't get there. Lockport was perfect. We bring department heads from the coast, and our post is done in LA. The towns are great. They welcome us with open arms. Changes in the tax incentive have helped. The Chicago Film Office has been extremely helpful if there's a snag, and they've been super about connecting us with the unions. It makes for a smooth transition, which helps when you're coming in from LA."

Wileen Dragovan is also based in Los Angeles, but her experience in Chicago production goes as far back as *The Fugitive*, on which she served as location manager. Her current project

is *South Side*, a slice-of-life comedy set around a rent-to-own business and the small-time hustlers who run it. After its debut season on Comedy Central, the show moved to HBO Max and is now cruising into its third season.

*South Side* is set in, and mostly shot in, the Englewood neighborhood of Chicago. Some interiors are built on stages at Cinespace. Other identifiably Chicago locations have included the Shedd Aquarium, Comiskey Park, and the Museum of Contemporary Art. One entire episode was a takeoff on *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*.

The show turns out 10 cross-boarded episodes during the three summer months, when there's less competition for crew and equipment. Dragovan sees an increasingly fluid migration of crew between LA, Atlanta, Chicago and other production centers.

"The show is written for Chicago," she says. "When we started, COVID was making it difficult to take full advantage of the tax credit. But the IATSE locals have done a great job of getting more trained people, and the expansion (of the credits) has helped in that regard. So many people were working together to make that happen.

Part of the city's unique appeal, says *South Side's* Dragovan, is the local on-camera talent. "Maintaining that flavor is important for us," she says. "And the crew situation is less parochial, because a lot of people from other parts of the country have come here to chase work. With streaming, there's a lot more opportunity everywhere. When you're on a production, you can't help but learn very quickly."

"Shooting in Chicago never feels provincial, because it's a big city," she says. "But it is more of a clubby, homegrown atmosphere. That's less true now than it was in the 1990s, when everyone was from the area. The recent change in the tax credits, which means you get a break on out-of-town actors, directors, production designers, etc., will only accelerate that evolution."

UPM James McAllister has been based in Chicago for three decades but works all over the world. Recent Chicago-based assignments include Matt Reeves' *The Batman* and David Fincher's forthcoming feature *The Killer*.

"Until 10 years ago, it was very up and down, and very feature oriented," says McAllister. "The increase in infrastructure has been important, but other markets are busy, too, just based on the amount of product. You need the work to build the infrastructure and to get experienced crews. Everything is moving in the right direction."

McAllister points out that Smash Virtual recently completed a 19,000-foot virtual production stage in Chicago's South Loop, fully equipped with LED video walls, live camera tracking and an Unreal Engine 3D system.

"Directors love to shoot in Chicago, because there are so many looks," he adds. "Mostly, the Fincher film was about the gritty, urban city streets. But we also shot in the suburbs, places that

don't get a lot of filming, and I think David was very happy about that. We had a few sets that were not specific to Chicago, and we were able to find settings to replicate other places or stand as fictional cities, and still stay within the same area. You have urban and rural, and you have mundane suburban, but also suburban with some texture and flavor."

McAllister calls Chicago home, and says he works there as much as he can. "I've got a family here and it's been a good community for that. We're very supportive of each other. People in Chicago will help other productions and look out for each other. They want to see the city succeed and look the best that it can—especially crews that have seen it go up and down. You have a good solid, kind of a Midwestern work ethic to start with. The attitude of both film offices is 'How can we make this work?' The universal goal is that everyone leaves happy." ■

## SELECT CHICAGO FILMING RESOURCE GUIDE:

**Illinois Production Guide**  
[il.reel-scout.com/crew\\_login.aspx](http://il.reel-scout.com/crew_login.aspx)

**Chicago Film Office Resources**  
[chicago.gov/city/en/depts/dca/supp\\_info/chicago\\_film\\_office2.html](http://chicago.gov/city/en/depts/dca/supp_info/chicago_film_office2.html)

**Chicago Creative Directory**  
[creativedir.com/category/filmvideo](http://creativedir.com/category/filmvideo)

**Cinespace Chicago Film Studios**  
[cinespace.com](http://cinespace.com)

**Chicago Studio City**  
[chicagostudiocity.com](http://chicagostudiocity.com)

**The Mill (VFX, postproduction, color correction)**  
[themill.com](http://themill.com)