The HBO limited series *White House Plumbers* was originally set to begin production at New York City’s Silvercup Studios. But that was before the pandemic. Instead, the production relocated upstate to the Hudson Valley in 2021. The move proved fortuitous. “Every day, we were going farther north, looking for period homes and trying to feel ‘safer’ outside of the city,” recalls series director and executive producer David Mandel, known for shows such as *Veep*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and *Seinfeld*. Set in the early 1970s and chronicling President Nixon’s Watergate fiasco, *Plumbers* featured a range of locations that, surprisingly, could all be found in Upstate New York, from a D.C. Senate hearing room to Cuba’s Bay of Pigs. “We needed a beach,” he says, “and an area on the Hudson River worked well for us.”

Adds Mandel: “I don’t think we could have pieced that show together as easily with real-world locations somewhere else. More importantly for *White House Plumbers’* period wardrobe and production design, we took advantage of New York City tailors and secondhand shops, because if you need something, you’re not in the middle of nowhere—you’re in f***ing New York.”

That unique New York mix—home to high profile talent, skilled crews, one-of-a-kind resources, and the most iconic metropolitan skyline in the world—has historically made the Empire State one of the world’s busiest film and TV production centers. Production spend in the state has continued to grow, from $4.87 billion in 2019 to $5.99 billion in 2022. Some of the biggest productions include such acclaimed series as *Succession*, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* and *Severance*, along with crime stalwarts *FBI*, *Blue Bloods*, and of course, New York City’s long-running *Law & Order* franchise.

**Empire State’s Torch Burns Brighter**

*Boosted tax incentives have reinvigorated production in New York—city and state—where talent, labor, and resources have always been rich. By Anthony Kaufman*
Even so, for the last couple years, New York was falling short as a location destination.

**Jersey Duel**

After New Jersey instituted an aggressive tax incentive program in 2021, it was not uncommon for filmmakers to cheat Newark for New York.

To combat runaway productions next door, New York recently passed its own expanded tax incentive program, which increased the annual allocation from $420 million to $700 million and extended it from 2029, when it was originally scheduled to sunset, to 2034. It also increased the base credit from 25% to 30%, allowed for above-the-line qualifying expenses, a 5% bump for TV series that relocate to New York, and a 10% credit bump for most Upstate counties, amounting to a generous 40% tax credit.

The new tweaks, which went into effect in April 2023, respond to several key points for producers and studios. “We knew we needed to make some changes to be competitive and respond to the needs of productions,” says Hope Knight, president, CEO and commissioner at Empire State Development, the economic development agency that oversees the credit program. For instance, the extension gives producers a firm sense of stability and certainty, according to Knight, especially given the long lead time needed for multiseason series. And for the first time, the above-the-line credit, capped at $500,000 for individual salaries, fulfills a crucial missing piece that now matches other U.S. state programs.

“If New York didn’t react to what New Jersey was doing, claiming above-the-line and pulling cast and crew from the city, it was going to kill New York,” says Jake Fuller, head of production at Jax Media, the longstanding New York-based producers of such shows as *Broad City*, *Russian Doll* and *Search Party*. “I am heartened by the incentive, and feel that people are more bullish now about shooting in New York,” he continues. “It’s now enough that producers with projects set in New York will actually think about shooting them in New York, where at other times in the past, it was immediately written off.”

**What’s Due, When It’s Due**

The new legislation also addresses one of the most significant complaints more recently heard from producers: Delays in paying out the tax credit. “It was the biggest problem,” says Peter Saraf, New York-based producer of *Little Miss Sunshine* and *The Farewell*. “What should take one to two years extended to four to five years, and that gets expensive. If you’re holding millions of dollars, the value of that money gets chipped away.”

But the new law allows productions to take the credit within the year of its allocation instead of having to wait a year.

“We received a lot of feedback that people were not able to access credits in a timely manner,” admits Knight,
attributing delays to a COVID backlog, as well. “Today we’re processing them in more a timely basis,” she adds, “and eligibility in the allocation year is going to provide for much faster access to the incentive.”

Statewide Ripples
The 10% increase for Upstate productions—for shows that have 50% of their principal photography in the region—also makes it more attractive to shoot across the state. “With the 10% lift-up, it’s really helpful,” says Tyson Bidner, executive producer of A24’s The Whale, which shot at Umbra soundstages in Newburgh, New York. “They have solid crews, they have the infrastructure and locations, and the added 10% takes the hit off hotel costs.” Plus, adds Bidner, “It’s really pleasant to be outside of the city.”

According to Hudson Valley Film Commissioner Laurent Rejto, the new program is already having an impact, with four independent productions shooting in the area this summer. “And I’m talking to 10 indies. Some are coming in from places like New Mexico, which wouldn’t happen if it weren’t for the tax credits.”

“You have decades of institutional knowledge that you just don’t have in other markets. There is an institutionalized workforce that is extremely versatile and has a level of expertise that is unique to New York.”

— KWAME AMOAKU, NEW YORK CITY’S DEPUTY FILM COMMISSIONER
Stages Galore
Rejto also points to investment in film financing and infrastructure, plus the arrival of new soundstages, as adding to an already active scene. In addition to Umbra, there’s Mary Stuart Masterson’s Upriver Studios, which housed MAX’s Pretty Little Liars, and Kingston Studios, home to Hulu’s Monsterland. And New Jersey’s Cobalt Stages recently launched a virtual studio hub in Woodstock, New York.

Last year, Great Point Studios opened Westchester County’s giant Lionsgate Studio Yonkers, an ever-expanding, 1 million-square-foot complex set to operate nine 20,000-square-foot stages, more than any other facility in the Northeast. The City of Yonkers even trademarked the name “Hollywood on the Hudson.” In nearby Hastings-on-Hudson, Atlanta-based Electric Owl Studios is planning an eco-friendly 18-acre production facility for 2025.

Over at Erie County’s Buffalo FilmWorks, the studio just launched one of the largest soundstages in the world—a 77,832 square-foot behemoth that makes “people’s eyes light up,” says Jennifer O’Neill, founding partner and CFO. “There are some very large productions scouting with us,” she says. “And now that we have the new tax incentive, it allows us to be competitive with New Jersey and Ohio.”

Adding to the diverse array of new and widening statewide options, the New York metropolitan area is also burgeoning. Beyond studio mainstays such as Steiner Studios and Broadway Stages, as well as longstanding operations Silvercup Studios and Kaufman-Astoria Studios, Netflix set up permanent shop two years ago with its own six-stage, 170,000-square-foot lot in Bushwick, Brooklyn—a new complex that Panorama Brooklyn Studios just opened near the Brooklyn Bridge—and Robert De Niro is behind the construction of a new $600 million complex called Wildflower Studios in Astoria, Queens.

“There’s no problem here with stages,” says Doug Steiner, chairman of Steiner Studios, who is “ecstatic” about the passage of the new credit program and has high hopes for a “big rebound in the industry as companies try to distinguish themselves in the market,” he says. While many insiders note an overall dip in series production that started last year, Steiner says episodic continues to be a bright spot. “Series is a better business for New York,” he explains, “because it’s more hours of screen time.”

Deep Crew and Talent Base
Tommy O’Donnell, president of Teamsters Local 817, is also upbeat about series production. “I think the tax credit is going to make New York the go-to place for episodic programming,” he says. “Because they can last anywhere from three to 10 months, with a chance for recurring, it’s good for the stages and the crews.”

O’Donnell and others acknowledge that big blockbuster studio films will inevitably go overseas to chase cheaper costs and rival incentives, but talent also prefers episodic shows, which allow them to work where they live.

NEW MEMBERS
Courtney Kolloff is a senior visual effects producer in charge of VFX for multiple TV shows and features at Ingenuity Studios, including the feature Joy Ride (2023), and the series Abbott Elementary (2022) and Brooklyn Nine-Nine (2021).

AT WHAT POINT IN YOUR LIFE DID YOU DISCOVER WHAT A PRODUCER BRINGS TO THE TABLE?
There are so many types of producers with so many different tasks. It is not a cut-and-dried job. Producers can bring so much to the table to enhance a project. Also, producers usually know how to stay budget-friendly but make sure there is no sacrifice to the creative.

WHO OR WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO GO INTO PRODUCING?
The always wanted to work in entertainment, but I didn’t know which career path was for me when I was young. People only think of actors/actresses and directors, but what about the organization behind all the movies and TV shows? Once I knew I loved to project-manage, I just fell into my role, and being a producer made sense.
Bidner recalls working as a producer/UPM on *The Americans*, which was largely shot in Brooklyn, even though the story was set in Washington, D.C. He says New York as a main location is often the starting point for many production discussions. “A lot of the talent is here in New York, or is from here or has a connection to New York. They want to find a way to make it work in New York because they don’t want to be away from their families or their homes,” he says. “If it’s scripted in New York, and they’re from New York, then it’s truly beneficial to make it work here.”

New York also prides itself on a deep and experienced crew base. “You have decades of institutional knowledge that you just don’t have in other markets,” says Kwame Amoaku, New York City’s deputy film commissioner. “There is an institutionalized workforce that is extremely versatile and has a level of expertise that is unique to New York.”

Amoaku also points to workforce development programs such as Reel Works and Made in NY, which is helping to “replenish the ranks,” he says, with also a nod to diversity and inclusion. The Mayor’s Office of Film and Television just released a report indicating that 1,100 New Yorkers have enrolled in the program, 94% of whom are people of color, with 78% of graduates continuing to work in the industry more than two years after graduation.

New York is also a major creative and industry center for documentary filmmaking, including significant and award-winning nonfiction companies, from Alex Gibney’s prolific Jigsaw Productions to Liz Garbus and Dan Cogan’s Story Syndicate.

“The reasons we’re here is that our creative community is very much based in New York,” says Mala Chapple, chief operating officer of Story Syndicate, producers of HBO’s recent series *The Last Call* and Netflix’s hit doc-buster *Harry & Meghan*. She points specifically to corporate backers such as HBO and Netflix having offices in the city, along with a base of nonfiction filmmakers and a “hub of experts and people that we’re interested in profiling,” she says. When true crime is the subject du jour for nonfiction, there are few places that are richer with material.

**NY Plays Itself**

New York City itself—densely packed with more than 8 million people—has always presented its own unique set of rewards, as well as challenges for filmmakers. Historically, producers have claimed that permitting and parking in the city can be difficult, for example. But last year, the New York mayor’s office announced its first-ever Film and Television Production Industry Council—cochaired by the DGA’s Neil Dudich and producer April Taylor—to address some of the problems, many lingering from precautions taken during the worst days of the pandemic.

For many producers, the hassles of shooting in a one-of-a-kind place like New York are worth it—and now, especially, with the new tax incentives, can financially make sense again. For Jax Media’s Fuller, shooting in New York will always be a unique and distinct experience, unlike anywhere else in the world. “As a producer in this city, you’re forced to react to it rather than it react to you,” he says. “In other places, you’re allowed to curate and create a bubble, but not in New York: You have to contend with the city, fortunately or unfortunately, and I think that adds a special sauce to what you’re doing.”