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NYC Mayor's Office Leads Early Talks About Road Back For Film And TV Producers In COVID-19 Epicenter

By Dade Hayes



Amazon's *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* is one of the signature shows produced in New York. Amazon

With production at a standstill in most of the world, the path back for New York-based film and TV producers is particularly fraught.

The city is the global epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic, with nearly 300,000 people infected and about 18,000 people dead.



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In an effort to coordinate the early conversations about the restart, the Mayor’s Office of Media and Entertainment is convening the first of two Zoom calls Thursday for those in the industry affected by the COVID-19 crisis. Hundreds of freelance filmmakers, craftspeople, producers and executives are expected to dial in given the swirl of uncertainty and the acute safety and financial hazards that lie ahead.

Many industry capitals are experiencing pain and confusion about best practices, as Deadline’s ongoing “Reopening Hollywood” series has shown. But the blow to New York is a visceral one, especially after a banner 2019, which boasted a range of splashy, quintessentially New York titles like *The Irishman*, *Joker*, *Uncut Gems* and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*.

Matthew Gorton, a spokesman for the Empire State Development Corp., said the state has “conducted extensive outreach to key industries and businesses, including the film production community, since New York State on Pause went into effect. Film production is an important part of New York State’s economy, and will play a critical role in its economic recovery.”

New York City and the state were in the vanguard of early tax incentive programs, with the state rolling out a 30% tax break on costs incurred in the state, which added up to \$25 million in savings in the first year, 2004. That sum grew to \$425 million in 2017. Shooting in the state — most of it in New York City — generated an estimated \$8 billion of direct spending in 2017 and 2018.



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“We’re in daily touch with the creative community, asking what they need to keep going today and to be part of a smart, lasting recovery tomorrow,” said Anne del Castillo, Commissioner of the Mayor’s Office of Media and Entertainment, in a statement provided to Deadline. “We’re

listening to their questions, concerns and suggestions to make sure they're part of the conversation at City Hall.”

What does that “recovery tomorrow” look like, though, in a city where cast and crew alike travel by packed subway train, crowd around monitors and eat from craft-services tables set up on sidewalks?

Doug Steiner, the real-estate developer who founded Steiner Studios in Brooklyn, is among many who believe the industry’s recovery starts with comprehensive testing.

On a typical week, anywhere from 2,500 to 4,500 workers typically fill Steiner’s 50-acre layout, shooting series like *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* or studio films like *Joker*, along with numerous other projects. “Without testing, I think it’s a tough thing to open any kind of business,” Steiner told Deadline. “It’s a problem. I could see facemasks or gloves. People adapt.”

While it has some outdoor space, most of Steiner’s 780,000 square feet are indoor stages. Unlike movie or Broadway theaters with fixed seats, each production has a different physical setup within those four walls, meaning it’s largely up to them to create and monitor the space.

Tom Bernard, co-president of Sony Classics, is convinced a recovery is not only possible but certain. “Once there’s a vaccine, things change dramatically,” he said. Even before then, Bernard is optimistic about the theatrical business, festivals and awards shows, all onetime industry fixtures that now feel completely remote.

Until a vaccine or reliable treatments are more readily available, most New York industry figures see a period of experimentation both in front of and behind the camera. Logistics-wise, soundstages like Steiner or Silvercup in Queens offer space that can be contained. But what about the 766 productions issued permits by the city last year to shoot across all five boroughs? Who will park cars or dress sets or the myriad other essential functions and how will they be protected? What about actors of advanced age? All those questions and more are still, for now, unresolved.

The Independent Filmmaker Project is moving forward with its annual IFP Week in September and the Gotham Awards in November, according to the organization’s head, Jeff Sharp. The series of panels and workshops will be dominated by COVID-19 topics. Similar to the mayor’s office Zoom calls, Sharp said, “It will be one of the first opportunities that we as a community will have to come together and discuss these topics about this new world we’re living in.”

Steiner, who has mapped out an extensive expansion of Steiner over the next 10 years, is trying his best to remain optimistic.

“New York got hit the hardest and the soonest,” he said. “And will come out of it soonest.”