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N.Y. Eager to Play Lead Role in TV-Film Industry

The city is attracting more productions thanks to tax credits and its new star: 280,000-square-foot Steiner Studios.

By Matea Gold

NEW YORK — The Brooklyn Navy Yard has seen its share of big productions in the last two centuries.

In 1862, the armored gunboat Monitor was fitted with state-of-the-art iron cladding here that helped it fend off a Confederate war vessel during a pivotal Civil War battle. The battleship Maine was built in the yard, a few years before the Spanish sunk it in Havana Harbor in 1898. During World War II, the site teemed with more than 71,000 workers, many of whom helped construct the battleships Arizona and Missouri.

But lately, the former shipyard — now a 300-acre industrial park with prime waterfront views of the Manhattan skyline — has been buzzing with a different sort of activity.

In recent months, the likes of Matthew Broderick, Nicole Kidman and Denzel Washington have been working in a cavernous white building along the eastern edge of the complex. The site where workers once repaired engines and assembled submarines is now home to Steiner Studios, a sleek new production facility that boasts the largest soundstage outside Los Angeles.

Just 9 months old, the 280,000-square-foot facility has emerged as a potent weapon as New York works to lure more film and television production to the city.

City officials said they had already attracted \$300 million worth of movies and television programs this year that otherwise would have gone to Canada, Europe or Los Angeles. This spring, seven television pilots were taped in New York, which is usually host to only one or two a season.

Industry veterans credit the recent spike in local productions in part to the city's new "Made in NY" incentive program. Film and television productions that do at least 75% of their soundstage work in New York qualify for free marketing on bus shelters and a discount for services provided by local vendors, as well as a year-old 10% state tax credit and an additional 5% city tax rebate that took effect in January.

Uneasy Los Angeles officials are now stepping up their efforts to get an industry tax credit

passed in California.

"Any time a feature or a television show is not done in L.A., that's jobs and revenue that are lost," said Steve MacDonald, president of Entertainment Industry Development Corp., the private nonprofit that coordinates Los Angeles-area production.

But New York officials said they had attracted new production with more than just tax credits. In a city where space is at a premium, the new Navy Yard studio has proved to be a major draw.

"One thing the industry had been looking for was more capacity," said Katherine Oliver, commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Film, Theatre and Broadcasting. "That's something we heard over and over again."

With 1,000 parking spots, built-in production offices and five massive soundstages ranging in size from 16,000 to 27,000 square feet — all connected by huge doors — Steiner Studios is an attempt to mimic the experience of a Hollywood back lot.

"What we built is sort of a suburban community in the heart of New York City," said Chairman Douglas C. Steiner, a real estate developer who spearheaded the \$118-million project. An entertainment industry neophyte, Steiner consulted with studio production chiefs for two years to design the complex.

The New Jersey-based builder was not the first to see the potential in erecting a production studio at the old shipyard, which the Navy stopped using in 1966. But an earlier proposal by Miramax failed to get City Hall's backing. Steiner's own effort to get the city to invest in infrastructure improvements was delayed by the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Six years in the making, the project was so long in coming that its opening has been greeted with some disbelief in the industry.

"People are coming to town asking, 'Is it really as good as I hear it is?'" said Jonathan Filley, co-producer of "The Inside Man," a Spike Lee movie starring Washington that is filming at Steiner Studios.

There were some kinks to work out in the early months. A roof leaked, threatening early set construction. The commissary won't be finished until the end of the year, so crews set up a makeshift dining area in an empty room. And the original dressing rooms proved to be too cramped for major stars.

"We told them, 'You can't put Nicole Kidman and Robert Downey in a space like this,'" said Laura Bickford, who is producing "Fur," a movie about photographer Diane Arbus, at the new studio. "We just combined two and made it double, and they're happy as clams."

Like "Fur," the movie version of "The Producers" was likely going to be filmed in Canada if Steiner had not opened.

"We are a gorilla of a musical, and because we had so many dancers and so many giant production numbers, it really took a space like Steiner to make it happen," said Susan Stroman, director of "The Producers: The Movie Musical," which was the first film to venture into the new complex in November.

With the tax credit, the cost of production came out to be about the same as it would have in Canada, said producer Jonathan Sanger.

"But we all felt 'The Producers' was a quintessential New York movie and should be made in New York," he said.

The city has always had a robust film and television industry, generating an estimated \$5 billion worth of annual local spending. But the high cost of filming, along with a limited supply of soundstages, had led many producers to do brief exterior shoots in New York and go elsewhere for the more extensive studio work.

"New York had become the home of the hero shot," said Hal G. Rosenbluth, president of Kaufman Astoria Studios in Queens, which held the title of the largest soundstage in the city until Steiner opened.

Rosenbluth insisted that the presence of another competing studio, combined with the city's incentive program, would generate more business for everyone.

"I think it's a testament to the belief in the growth of the industry," he said.

Rosenbluth is working to shut down city streets around Kaufman to make the complex more like a Hollywood lot and is erecting a 18,000-square-foot soundstage.

Meanwhile, Silvercup Studios in Long Island City — the area's largest production center, with 18 soundstages — is also starting a major expansion.

"There is some competition, but we think [Steiner] is hitting different parts of the marketplace," said Stuart Match Suna, president of Silvercup, which hosted five of the television pilots shot in New York this season.

Suna noted that in past years programs such as "Seinfeld" and "NYPD Blue," which were set in New York, were taped in Los Angeles. He said he hoped that the city's efforts to hold onto local production would change that.

"We're not trying to poach from L.A.," he said. "The goal is to keep the shows that are about New York, to really get the benefit of the true essence of New York."