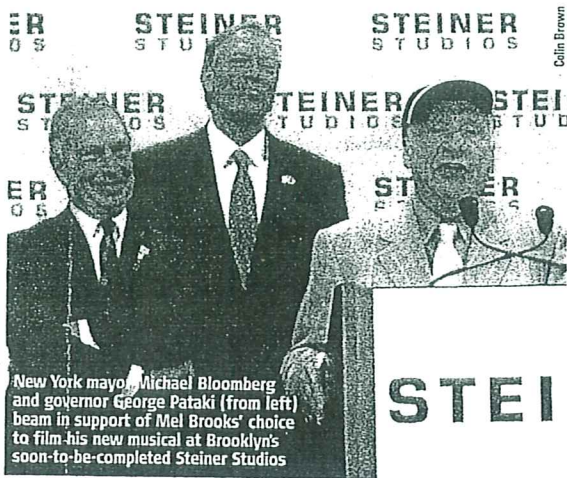


WORD OF MOUTH

Springtime for Brooks in Brooklyn

New York City beat out strong competition from Toronto to stage Mel Brooks' new movie version of *The Producers* thanks to the city's new tax credit scheme



New York mayor Michael Bloomberg and governor George Pataki (from left) beam in support of Mel Brooks' choice to film his new musical at Brooklyn's soon-to-be-completed Steiner Studios

Colin Brown



COLIN BROWN

Even in 1968, the fact that Mel Brooks was able to shoot *The Producers* for under a million dollars in locations around New York City raised eyebrows in Hollywood. So much so that a newspaper report quoted an unnamed producer as saying it was not kosher to make a successful film for so little money. Why not, the AP columnist asked him? "Because you can't steal a million dollars from a million-dollar picture."

Cut to 2005, and the amount of money that Mel Brooks will save by producing his new \$45m-plus musical movie version of *The Producers* next year under New York's new tax credit schemes could reach \$4m, he estimates. Plenty of wiggle room then for a producer to steal a living wage, especially since Brooks also confides that both Nicole Kidman, playing Max Bialystock's Swedish bombshell secretary Ulla, and Will Ferrell, as Nazi playwright Franz Liebkind, signed on to co-star at well below their usual salaries. "I'm going to shoot this picture just for the tax breaks," he jokes.

The sizeable rebate offered on below-the-costs incurred while shooting on New York soundstages was also enough of a carrot to persuade Brooks to have his director Susan Stroman shoot at Brooklyn's Steiner Studios, the new complex now being completed within shouting distance of his birthplace in Williamsburg.

"It was breaking my heart," recalls Brooks, as he and his backers Universal and Sony discussed which overseas tax havens and cheap labour pools could be exploited to impersonate his quintessential Broadway satire.

"We would have had to go to Bucharest, or to Toronto or to Vancouver to somehow mimic this great city. It's almost impossible to do, which is why my heart is now leaping with joy. You don't know what it means to me emotionally to be back here. You can go to any other city and you won't get the same dynamism — or the bagels. The Toronto bagels are mushy. Here they come right from Poland." Oh, and don't get him started on the Toronto cityscape: there is too much sky there, compared with New York.

The 10% refundable credit from New York State was signed into law last week by governor George Pataki at a ceremony held at Steiner Studios ahead of the facility's official opening in a few weeks time. A further 5% tax credit, plus an offer of free advertising on municipal bus shelters and the like, is also in the offing from the City of New York, whose mayor Michael Bloomberg also showed up at Steiner.

"We're sending a message to Canada, to the cities that have pretended to be New York — that they're not; and to Hollywood that pretends to be everything it wants to be. But to do so we have to be competitive with the Vancouvers and the Torontos. This 10% credit takes away that competitive benefit," declared Pataki. "Bottom line is this: all those New York wannabes ain't gonna be."

words from a governor, who is touted among Republican circles as a presidential successor to George W Bush, assuming he gets the better of another potential pretender to the West Wing, Arnold Schwarzenegger, the California governor who has been touting movie tax breaks of his own.

For starters, the Steiner Studios will need all the New York tax credits it can muster if it is to make good on the \$128m that has been lavished carving the five hulking, state-of-the-art soundstages from what was once the largest naval shipbuilding yard in the US. Some \$28m of that sum came from the City of New York to help foot the bill for infrastructure improvements, such as laying fibre optic cables across an expanse of Brooklyn waterfront site that still largely resembles a decrepit industrial relic.

The remaining \$100m was raised privately by real estate developer Douglas Steiner, who is now chairman of the studios bearing his family name. When it is completed, his 15-acre complex will occupy the same lot space as the Culver City studios in Los Angeles and

boast the largest purpose-built soundstage on the American continent outside Hollywood. It will also cap a five-year struggle by Steiner.

At one point, in 1999, it seemed that he and the two original entrepreneurs who dreamed up the idea would be muscled out entirely when Robert De Niro and Harvey Weinstein teamed up with another real estate developer and announced grand plans for as many as 12 soundstages across the Navy Yards. When City Hall, under then-mayor Rudy Giuliani, rebuffed these power-players in favour of Steiner, there was talk that De Niro's Tribeca and Weinstein's Miramax might boycott the navy yards when it came to shooting any of their projects in New York. (As it happens, Weinstein was a producer on the Broadway version of *The Producers* — although the Miramax mogul is not listed as being involved in its movie version).

After enduring such a saga, the Steiner Studios know just how difficult it is to turn projects of this scale into reality, especially since renting soundstages is such a fickle and low-margin business that studio lots need to depend on also attracting production companies and related outfits as year-round tenants. For these reasons too, Steiner's president and CEO Jay Fine professes himself unfazed by Toronto's own plans for an even larger Hollywood-scale studio and backlot planned to be built on that city's waterfront starting in 2006. "I wish Toronto the best of luck. But we know just how hard it is to pull something like this off. I had a full head of hair five years ago," says Fine.

Appropriately enough, cameras are due to roll on *The Producers: The Movie Musical* next springtime. There is no word yet on which other film productions are coming to Steiner, despite all the supposed interest the tax breaks have generated in Hollywood — or indeed when the first haul of production deals will

"I'm going to shoot this picture just for the tax breaks"

Mel Brooks

Will Ferrell (below) has signed on as *Fuehrer*-fantasist playwright Franz Liebkind, while Nicole Kidman (bottom) will provide secretarial support as Scandinavian siren Ulla. Both have agreed to lower their salaries to work on Brooks' project

