

Calgary Steals the Scene



Not so long ago, there was a critical need in Calgary for infrastructure to support year-round film and TV production. Today, a once-vacant 8.35-acre lot is now graced by a sleek white building: the Calgary Film Centre Limited (CFCL), home to three purpose-built sound stages and three multipurpose workshops and warehouses. When it opened in May 2016, its arrival was accompanied by something of a sigh of relief. As Seven24 Films executive producer and managing partner Tom Cox puts it, “It was a very, very welcome addition to the landscape.”

Creating the \$28-million, 80,000-square-foot facility was far from a slam dunk. Luke Azevedo, commissioner of Calgary’s Film, Television & Creative Industries, laughs when asked for an estimate of how many years it took to turn the vision into bricks and mortar.

“Depending on who you talk to, between 30 and 130 years,” says Azevedo with a smile. “As is common with projects of this scale, it was challenging but extremely worthwhile. The Film Centre has helped diversify the economy, grow jobs and put a spotlight on the province.”



CALGARY MAYOR NAHEED NENSHI

Hollywood, it was essential to have purpose-built facilities. To that end, Mayor Nenshi visited LA before the CFCL opened, networking with industry executives from the likes of Walt Disney Pictures and MGM Studios. In November of 2018, were you to drive along LA’s Miracle Mile, you might have spotted billboards featuring a spectacular shot of the Rockies, boasting that “Calgary is stealing the scene.” Beneath the slogan was a cheeky hint to industry types on their way to work: “From studios to the Rockies in under two hours. A lot gets done when you’re not stuck in traffic.”

“The pitch to foreign industry is working,” says Erin O’Connor, Business Development Manager for the CFCL. Some of the bigger projects utilizing the studios to date include the series *Fargo*, the British crime drama *Tin Star*, the Kevin Costner–Diane Lane thriller *Let Him Go*, and the feature film *Ghostbusters: Afterlife*. As of May 2020, the centre will have been 100 per cent occupied since July 2019, with the first three months of the fiscal year operating at 79 per cent capacity. There’s no doubt the global industry is taking notice.



ON THE SET OF GHOSTBUSTERS: AFTERLIFE

still a transitional phase for local industry. The long-running series *Heartland*, for example, remains in the same “old but functional” World War II hangar that it’s occupied for a decade, because at this point it would be too expensive to uproot the series.

But providing a home to Canadian productions is definitely part of the game plan, and the fact that there haven’t been more homegrown shows using the centre so far may also be an indication of its success. It’s a busy place, and not only for features and series production. Commercials, including Lay’s, AT&T and Infiniti, have all been produced in the CFCL, and creatives working with newer formats such as VR are exploring the centre’s possibilities. A company called VizworX, for example, created a virtual building for a client who wanted to see all of its proposed structure’s components before it went up. The 18,000-square-foot studio space made that wizardry possible—without anyone risking injury.

Azevedo underscores that it’s important for both traditional and local storytellers to get a chance to use the facilities to “tell Alberta’s story to the world.” To that end, part of the CFCL mandate lies in training and development, and while the provincial government–funded program for independent Alberta filmmakers called Project Lab has wrapped, Azevedo says work is underway with other levels of government and stakeholders to identify new programs. There are also plans to partner with unions, guilds and post-secondary institutions to help the production ecosystem continue to develop.



PRODUCER TOM COX ON THE SET OF HEARTLAND

Cox says there’s “a great sense of synergy between the film centre and the local industry,” adding that locals are “eager to see it succeed and grow.”

“As the industry grows and the recently announced tax credit comes on stream, assuming it’s competitive and sustainable, I think there’s every opportunity for the CFCL to expand, add stages, add production offices—all of the things that would allow multiple productions to be in there,” says Cox. “In my view, what’s there now is only the beginning.”

Calgary’s mayor is equally optimistic and aware of Calgary’s competitive advantage. He knows this is about showing off Calgary to the world. “This is about supporting the creative industries, job creation and diversifying the economy. I mean, Calgary is home to a *Ghostbusters* movie that fans have been waiting almost 30 years for,” Mayor Nenshi points out. “I hope that kids across the country who say they want to make movies when they grow up dream of moving to Calgary.”

Actor Anson Mount said it best in his letter to Calgary during the production of his series *Hell on Wheels*: “Alberta, simply put, is a film- and television-maker’s dream.”



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