

Movie Madness

It's Hollywood on the Hudson: More and more A-list moviemakers are choosing the Valley as the backdrop for big (and small) budget films. Why? You'll have to ask the Hudson Valley Film Commission's Laurent Rejto

by **Randy Burgess**



Last summer, I read an article in a local paper that described how, in March 2005, filmmakers had descended on a series of locales in Orange and Ulster counties and used them as stand-ins for rural Wisconsin.

These locations included the Sky Top Motel in Kingston, the Reservoir Dairy Deli in Shokan, and the Phoenicia Diner. This seemed both magical and bizarre to me. How, I wondered, could an ordinary diner, whose pancakes and sausages I was intimately familiar with, be transplanted to a Midwestern state I've never even visited? And why had the filmmakers picked the Valley for their sleight of hand? This demanded investigation.

A little digging revealed that something called the Hudson Valley Film Commission had helped to coax not only this movie — the 2006 Robin Williams thriller *The Night Listener* — to the region, but other recent productions besides. These have ranged from the monstrous (budget-wise and villain-wise) *War of the Worlds* to a host of small, independent pictures more intent on creating art than grossing billions. Filmmaking in the Valley is on the rise, and the commission is one reason why.

In point of fact, the commission is one man, and he runs it according to his pleasure — though obsession might be a better word. The man is Laurent Rejto, who in 2000 cofounded the Woodstock Film Festival with his wife Meira Blaustein, and his obsession is helping filmmakers get their films made. Economic development is of course a prime motive, given the millions of dollars that a big production can spend in just a few weeks. Yet for Rejto to take up your cause, you don't have to be famous, well-financed, or well-connected. In some cases, you don't even need to be out of college.

You just have to want to make a film in the Hudson Valley.

I called Rejto to arrange an interview. His phone voice is cool and melodic, but the man who opened the door to his modest Woodstock townhouse was large, wild-haired, and ruffled. As we talked he gave the impression of multiple persons inside one skin: guarded yet nakedly open, sad yet funny, self-deprecating yet intensely proud of what he and Blaustein have done to bring film to the area.

"The greatest pleasure is being able to help a filmmaker find what they want, or being able to cast people from the area into a film," Rejto said. "And then after the film is released, being able to show it at the Woodstock Film Festival — that's fantastic!"

Unlike other nonprofit film commissions in New York and around the country, Rejto gets no public funding (he was offered \$250 by Ulster County last year, but turned it down as a pointlessly small

The Thing About My Folks (2005)

Starring Paul Reiser and Peter Falk, this was one of the first movies with a well-known cast that the Film Commission helped bring to the Valley. The comedy was shot in the Ulster County towns of Saugerties, Woodstock and Shokan



(PHOTO, FAR LEFT) MICHELE BAKER



Stephanie Daley (2006)

Slated for general release later this year, this film has already garnered awards at the Sundance and Woodstock film festivals. Shot locally, the movie stars Timothy Hutton, Amber Tamblyn (formerly TV's Joan of Arcadia), and Stone Ridge resident Melissa Leo; writer/director Hilary Brougher is originally from New Paltz. Above: Tamblyn at Wallkill High School; the cast in the Esopus Creek



ANNE JOYCE/COURTESY OF MIRAMAX FILMS

The Night Listener (2006)

This thriller, starring Robin Williams and Toni Collette, needed a location with an old-fashioned water tower near a suitable home. Rejto enlisted the help of two local scouts, Bill Stitt and Michelle Baker. After combing locations in five counties, Baker found the perfect bullet-shaped tower in Montgomery, Orange County. Above: Williams and Bobby Cannavale at the Phoenicia diner

sum). With no budget and no salary, time is Rejto's only resource — and he spends it freely. Of the 16-hour days he works year-round planning the film festival, about 10 percent go toward commission business: phone calls, meetings, scouting trips, and (above all) broadcast e-mails. Such e-mails ripple outward, eventually reaching every industry contact in the Valley:

- CIVIL WAR BATTLEFIELD LOCATION NEEDED. This location scout is for a \$100 million-plus production by one of today's premier directors. Trees should be deciduous, not pine, and they stress the rolling hills of Virginia, not mountains.
- A FEATURE FILM IS LOOKING TO SHOOT IN THE HUDSON VALLEY but needs a Classic Style Butcher Shop for their main location — a place where they still cut slabs of meat as opposed to boxed meats.
- NIGHT OF THE LIVING JEWS — another Hasidic zombie movie, shooting in Accord, August 16th through 20th. Casting call for Man, WASPY strong, stable father type, also able to flip and go insane.

These messages give a glimpse of Rejto's reckless empathy for anybody with a script and a camera: The first was on behalf of a Steven Spielberg picture, *Lincoln*, that ultimately shot its reenactment of Manassas elsewhere; the second was for *The Cake Eaters*, an independent picture starring Bruce Dern and directed by Mary Stuart



MICHELE BAKER



War Of The Worlds (2006)

The Tom Cruise/Dakota Fanning smash includes a scene of a ferry capsizing, parts of which were filmed on the Hudson at Athens, Greene County with “a thousand extras — very cool,” according to Jerome Stoeffhaas. The photo of the meadow above is what Rejto used to lure Spielberg to the region



Masterson, which was filmed in Catskill and is due to be released this year; and the third for a zero-budget comedy short, written and directed by two ambitious 19-year-olds.

It’s Rejto’s willingness to get involved that makes him so effective, said Jerome Stoeffhaas, deputy director for the Governor’s Office of Motion Picture and Television Development. “He aggressively responds to every call we send. He’s willing to do whatever it takes to stay in the game — get in the car and drive around to locations, take pictures, follow up. That doesn’t happen in other places.”

In the case of *War of the Worlds*, Spielberg’s production company, DreamWorks, was seeking a field and a ferry landing as backdrops to alien attacks. Tipped off about the search from the governor’s film office, Rejto knew he had a shot at luring the filmmakers to the Valley — but he had to act fast. He jumped in his car to shoot photos of fields in Woodstock, Willow, and elsewhere, then called towns all along the Hudson River, looking for ferry landings. The production company liked the photos, but what they liked even more was Rejto’s suggestion that they hire a local helicopter pilot for additional scouting. And it was through the helicopter scout that DreamWorks located the perfect river cove in the town of Athens, where the famous ferry scene was eventually filmed.

“If it hadn’t been for the helicopter, none of that would have happened,” Rejto said. “It’s always some tiny thing like that. That’s why you have to go out and do everything you can, because otherwise you have no chance.”

The commission isn’t working in a vacuum, of course. Other factors draw filmmakers to the Valley: the proximity to studios in New

York City, but who persist in shooting projects in L.A. or New York City, to start lobbying their studios to shoot here instead. Quixotically, he dreams of empty business parks in Kingston being transformed into enormous sound stages.

One last thing about Rejto: he is a filmmaker himself. He fell in love with the medium in sixth grade, when his art teacher introduced him to claymation. He won a full scholarship to the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan, met Blaustein there and made several small films with her. Even today he has six unsold screenplays on his shelf. For a writer, this can be a painful state of affairs. Yet — as several people pointed out to

Laurent and Meira love cinema, and they’ll come to a set just to hang out

Blaustein (left) and Rejto flank actor Steve Buscemi



me — screenwriters and directors can rarely manage more than one film every few years, whereas in that same time Rejto and Blaustein will assist in the conception and birth of literally dozens of films.

“Laurent and Meira love cinema, and they’ll come to a set just to hang out,” said Nicole Quinn, writer and director of *Racing Daylight*, shot in Accord and Stone Ridge last summer with Melissa Leo and David Strathairn as time-haunted lovers. “That kind of atmosphere is what we’re all hoping for in an industry here.” ■