

Lights, Camera, Action!



by Sandra Desrochers

You're home from work, settled into your easy chair, and watching the latest CSI episode. As a commercial pops onto the screen, you start to get up to grab a snack from the kitchen. But something on the TV grabs your attention. It's a Wal-Mart commercial, set in a museum. But wait a minute, that's not really a museum. It's the Great Hall in Mississauga's Civic Centre disguised as a museum! You'd recognize those marble columns and Great Stair anywhere.

There always seems to be a film shoot underway in Mississauga, but they are co-ordinated so efficiently, we hardly notice until we recognize a City building, park or street when it shows up on the big (or small) screen.

This co-ordination rests with the City's Film Liaison Carmen Ford, assisted by Film and Event Co-ordinator Pia Poblete. Although Carmen's office is tucked away in the depths of the LAC, she spends much of her time in her car, in meetings, scouting locations, or on the phone. This down-to-earth business woman eschews the glamorous lifestyle of her rich and famous clients. There's no time to hob knob with Brad Pitt when film scouts, City facility staff and residents (usually via their ward councillors) need her services.

At five years old, Mississauga's Film Office, as an independent section, is comparatively young and small compared to its counterparts in cities like Hamilton and Toronto. Mississauga is keeping pace in the industry, though. This, despite the high Canadian dollar and less than ideal tax credits in Ontario (compared with the US and other provinces). The city targets the film industry through joint promotion via the Ontario Media Development Corporation and advertising in glossy guides. A City-focused brochure and website are in the works, which should further increase Mississauga's profile as an ideal filming city.

Carmen's roles are to promote Mississauga as a film-friendly destination while keeping the peace among affected residents and businesses. "Opinions and attitudes towards the filming business vary," says Carmen. "Most residents are thrilled or intrigued when a shoot comes to their neighbourhood, but for the few who are in a hurry to get somewhere, it can be a nuisance." She gets the usual complaints dealing with parking, disruption and congestion, but the spin-off revenue for local businesses can't be denied and the general consensus is extremely positive.

As a master peace-maker, Carmen strives to make everyone happy. "I prefer to handle each complaint personally and as quickly and efficiently as possible," says Carmen. This is probably one of the reasons why Mississauga's Film Office is reputed to excel in the area of customer service.

Carmen enthuses on the City's amazing facilities and great staff co-operation, making her job a genuine pleasure. "We have immaculate parks, a lovely marina and wonderful neighbourhoods like Port Credit, which is a favourite among film scouts," Carmen says. "And, facility staff, who frequently need to be involved in the process, are extremely accommodating."

Once a popular filming location, City Hall is becoming too busy with pedestrian traffic to make it practical. Carmen blames Placemaking – in a good way. “The public’s interest in downtown Mississauga as a community destination is definitely increasing, which is great!” says Carmen. “Thanks to Placemaking initiatives, there are more events and people than ever in the City Centre, so bringing film crews to the area can be disruptive.” There are exceptions though, such as a shoot planned for the Civic Square in early June. Carmen adds, “Staff responsible for the “My Mississauga” events have been extremely accommodating to help to make this happen.”

The City attracts an equal mix of motion pictures, TV commercials and non-profit productions, although it is rare for the City to be the primary location for a movie. Carmen is a strong advocate for Canadian film. “We should be less reliant on foreign production,” she says. “We need to put more resources into developing the business side of the industry.” Up to now, there were no sound stages in the Toronto area – which is incredible considering the number of film shoots here. Thankfully, two large studios are being constructed in Toronto, with one in the west end close to Mississauga.



Carmen was Mississauga’s delegate at a recent film industry conference in Los Angeles, where Ontario’s impressive promotional booth was awarded “best in show.” Back on home turf, Carmen isn’t divulging any industry secrets. When asked about the most famous, or the nicest or most difficult movie star she’s encountered, she was happy to discuss Canadian Paul Gross (in the “nicest” category). “Paul is a very talented actor who has chosen to stay in Canada, putting money back into the local film industry. He’s a great guy – very down-to-earth.” On the other hand, there are movie stars who act like spoiled brats or are just a little strange. One famous male lead with an ego the size of Texas (who shall remain nameless) insisted that no one dare make eye contact with him or speak directly to him.

If you think you’ve seen someone in town who looked like Kiefer Sutherland or Michael Douglas, you may have spotted the real deal when they were here filming “The Sentinel.” Or maybe you saw Colin Farrell who had scenes in Applewood Park - which had been converted into a cemetery. And what about the time Britney Spears just showed up without notice? That one got by Entertainment Tonight, but where were the Mississauga paparazzi? Carmen really does know how to keep a secret!

So, the next time you see an all-too-familiar-looking scene in a movie or commercial, it might just be because it was filmed where you work or live. You may not be famous, but maybe your surroundings are!

Top Photo: Carmen Ford (on the Mountie’s right) joins other Ontario reps at a recent conference in LA.

Bottom Photo: Carmen Ford (right) displays the first-place ribbon for the Ontario film booth at the LA conference.