

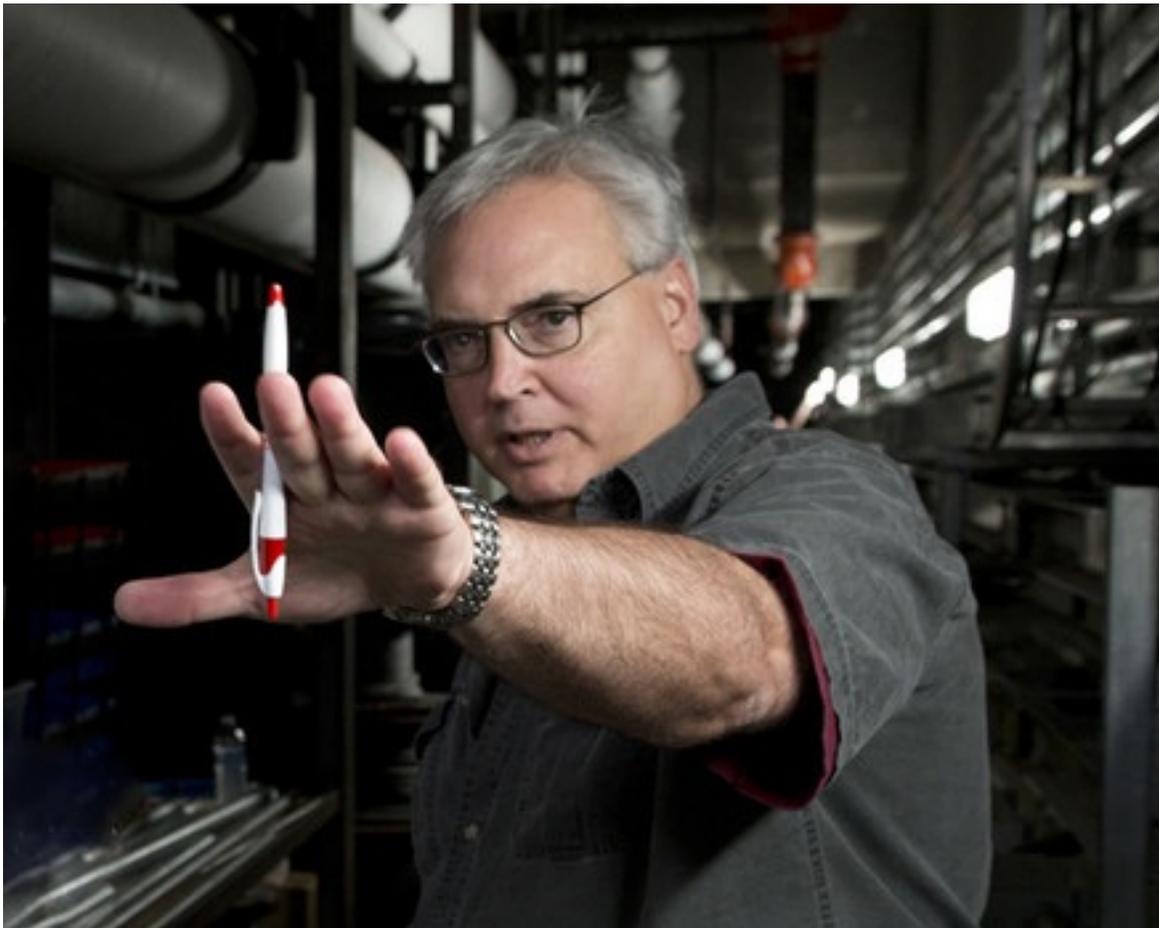
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Hollywood looks to KC locations as KC film community develops

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Kansas City-based filmmaker Andrew Pritzker on the set of his sci-fi short, "E.P.G."

Photo by Jenifer Cady

Kansas City's potential to be a location for Hollywood TV shows and movies seems to be developing fast—so fast that even cross-state rival St. Louis is airing local TV news segments touting KC as an up-and-coming Midwest version of Hollywood.

A recent segment on St. Louis's Fox 2 KTVI News pointed to various TV shows being shot in KC and depicted the metro area's diverse cityscape, arts-oriented culture and easy accessibility as Hollywood-location selling points. Meanwhile, KC 41 Action News recently aired a segment titled "Group Hopes to Bring Hollywood to Kansas City," referencing the production team that brought the *American Ninja Warrior* TV show to Union Station and their desire to shoot more shows in KC.

Hollywood producers like a lot of what they see in the metro area. KC not only allows easy accessibility, but offers a variety of diverse locations in a short driving distance, which makes it ideal for shooting movies.

Hollywood-based actor/producer David Dastmalchian, who grew up in Kansas City, has been working in conjunction with the newly resurrected KC Film Office's new Film Commissioner, Stephane Scupham, while bringing his next independent production to town. "We scouted maybe 15 locations here—and it wasn't hard getting around," Dastmalchian said. "Try doing that in L.A."

Dastmalchian says he wants to shoot his film here because "there's so much of the city that never has been seen in films before and it fits into our story." Dastmalchian told a KC41 TV reporter Josh Helmuth that he could even do a lot with the abandoned "ghost mall" Metcalf South. "Action, adventure, romance—the possibilities could be endless," he said. You got an urban-cool slick landscape—and the grittier urban landscape as well."

"When anyone goes into the West Bottoms they can't believe that's here," said Scupham, who became film commissioner in October 2014, more than a decade after the KC Film Office (now part of the Visit KC tourism office) was last open for business. Scupham wants all Kansas City-area-based movies to be shot here, and believes the only thing keeping Hollywood producers away right now is the lack of tax incentives—something many cities and states outside of California already offer.

“When there are tax incentives—when the landscape is level—then we can compete with other states. And then we might see some blockbuster movies made here—or maybe another *Gone Girl*.”

Gone Girl, which filmed for six weeks in rural Missouri, was the last big-budget movie to benefit from the Missouri Film Incentive that expired in November 2013, Scupham said.

However, *The Good Lie*, filmed in 2014, marked a particularly frustrating lost opportunity for KC. Based on a series of *60 Minutes* segments (that were filmed in KC), *The Good Lie* features scenes in which Reese Witherspoon’s character helps resettle Sudanese refugees in KC and Atlanta. However, scenes supposedly set in KC’s Country Club Plaza were actually filmed in Atlanta—which offered tax breaks.

Scupham said state tax credits would extend to any filmmaker in the KC area—Hollywood or independent, short-form (under 30 minutes) or feature-length. “Any filmmaker who meets the qualifications of a tax incentive program, no matter where they are from, would be able to submit for consideration for approval by the Department of Economic Development through the respective state (in our case Missouri or Kansas).”

“Kansas City is the only city with a film office in Missouri—and that is a huge help in promoting KC for filming,” she said. “And we work well together over the state lines here. We have a larger crew base than many cities our size, and the professional crews we have are topnotch. These people have very solid professional resumes.” In fact, most of KC’s professional crews make their living working on commercials and corporate projects, Scupham says.

The KC Film Office’s long-term vision is to help make KC the Midwest Hub for film production. “Going forward we want to sustain and grow that as well as foster an environment for filmmaking locally,” Scupham said. “We also want to grow an infrastructure and encourage an environment that invites outside production to work here.”

Shooting an Independent Film Short in KC

Beyond the world of big-budget, blockbuster Hollywood features, Kansas City also nurtures its own independent film community, producing feature-length and short-format movies. One recent independent short, titled *E.P.G.*, happened to shoot its final scene at this KC examiner’s home.

Written and directed by Andrew Pritzker (a 2007 Nicholl Fellowship Finalist and former Los Angeles resident who now lives in Kansas City), *E.P.G.* stars well-known local actors Chad Crenshaw and Jeffrey Staab, both of whom have appeared in a wide variety of local movie shorts, webisodes and features, as well as in local TV commercials.

Also featured in *E.P.G.*'s cast are actress Jennifer Seward-DeRock and Kansas City's own Kip Niven, a longtime star of stage, screen and television who grew up in Prairie Village and is possibly best-known for guest-starring on such TV shows as *The Waltons*, *Alice* and *Night Gallery* in the 1970s and 1980s. (Niven recently starred in *Jayhawkers*, a locally made feature in which he played Kansas University basketball coach Phog Allen during Wilt Chamberlain's first year at KU.)

Pritzker has so far directed four documentary-style art films in KC and he co-wrote three shorts for the Kansas City 48-Hour Film Project (which invites filmmakers from around the world to produce a complete short movie in just two days), but *E.P.G.* is the first narrative short he's directed in Kansas City. "We tried to get a film off the ground two years ago through my company, QikFinger Films, and ran into a few brick walls. However, that experience gave us a chance to work out the bugs and seek out the best cast and crew."

So how does shooting in KC compare to shooting in Hollywood? "Shooting in L.A. can be a daunting experience; filmmaking is so commonplace that it's often viewed as a nuisance," Pritzker said. "Kansas City is friendly wherever you go. The town is wildly enthusiastic about movies and eager to help. People get it here. It's fun. Permits were easy to obtain. The crew was outstanding, passionate and skilled. They were a joy to work with. What's truly impressive is the supportive and collegial nature of the KC film community. I haven't felt this enthusiastic about filmmaking since film school."

"I can't say enough good things about the cast, crew and the support of the KC community," Pritzker said. He was especially impressed when *E.P.G.*'s makeup artist (Kara Bond) helped decorate a set and when actors who had finished their work put on their street clothes and pitched in as grips. "I didn't ask them to do it. They just did it. They wanted to help. It was a very supportive atmosphere." Produced by Pritzker, Michael Cross, Jenifer Cady and Malcolm Pritzker, *E.P.G.* was shot on a RED Scarlet Camera. "The results are outstanding," Pritzker said. "Our cinematographer, Chris Commons, was born to shoot 4K."

Other *E.P.G.* crewmembers included sound mixer C.J. Drumeller; production coordinator Lydia Anderson; gaffer Cory Vetter; assistant camera Caleb Vetter; grip Levi Wilkinson; steadicam operator: Max Jolley; wardrobe and art director Taylor Nelson; makeup artist Kara Bond; and set photographer Jenifer Cady. Pritzker hopes to have his movie completed by September, after cutting the film, layering digital effects, mixing sound and other post-production steps.

Stay tuned for more about KC's independent film community in the next Kansas City Pop Culture Examiner installment.