Movies and TV Shows Boost Tourism, Buoy the Economy

By Dr. Richard Kelley

Since the beginning of the year, we have enjoyed high demand for our properties in Hawai‘i. Good management, excellent marketing, flawless operations and warm hospitality, along with the modest global economic recovery we are experiencing, have all contributed to this gratifying picture, and each of us can take personal pride in the success of our collective efforts to make it happen.

At the same time, we should also recognize that movies and TV shows made in and about Hawai‘i have contributed to the brightening picture.

That has certainly been the case with the film *The Descendants*, which won an Oscar for best adapted screenplay at last Sunday’s 84th annual Academy Awards. The film and its team had earned four other Oscar nominations, including Best Actor, Best Picture and Best Director, and, in January, it had received two Golden Globe Awards. This publicity helped build its audience, and for many in that audience it whetted their appetite for a visit to these fabulous islands.

For Hawai‘i as a whole, *The Descendants* is great advertising. On Kaua‘i, there has already been a jump in business, particularly for tour companies that include some of the memorable locations in the movie such as the spot at Kīpū Kai where actor George Clooney and his two film daughters stood while talking about possibly selling their unspoiled oceanfront land for development. Tahiti Nui Restaurant, where Clooney’s character meets with his cousin Hugh, played by Beau Bridges, has also seen a jump in business, according to the *Honolulu Star-Advertiser*.

Hawai‘i is also getting a tremendous boost from the new version of the TV show, *Hawaii Five-0*. Particularly at this time of year, when snow is blowing across much of the continental U.S. and Canada, the amazing aerial views of Hawai‘i’s mountains, ocean and shorelines seen on high-definition television are really alluring. About 10 million viewers watch *Five-0* every week across the U.S.

Hawai‘i has been used as a location to film many other movies over the years. After the Edgewater Hotel was completed in 1951, my parents provided rooms to John Wayne while he filmed *In Harm’s Way* and *Donovan’s Reef*. (The Edgewater was located on the site now occupied by the Embassy Suites® hotel.)

Elvis Presley starred in *Blue Hawaii*, *Pearl Harbor*, *Godzilla*, *Lost*, *Windtalkers*, *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*, *Jurassic Park*, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, *50 First Dates*, *Soul Surfer* and *Tora, Tora, Tora* are just a few of the many more recent films and TV shows shot here.

*Dog the Bounty Hunter*, starring Duane “Dog” Chapman, his wife Beth and other members of their family, currently in its eighth season, films many of its shows in

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Hawai‘i. This series airs in the U.S., Canada, Norway, the United Kingdom, Ireland and Australia.

The beautiful valley at Kualoa Ranch on O‘ahu is a favorite location for filming anything that requires a lush tropical setting.

Hawai‘i’s state government supports filmmaking through the Hawai‘i Film Office, which helps filmmakers in many ways. The state also offers tax breaks and other financial incentives to companies that film in Hawai‘i.

Will Wilson, writing in Stateline, a website that bills itself as a “nonpartisan, nonprofit news service of the Pew Center on the States,” reports that about 40 U.S. states offer some form of tax credit, rebate or other financial incentive to film and television productions. Almost all the films nominated for last Sunday’s Academy Awards received some government assistance of this kind. For example, the company that produced The Help received over $3.5 million from the state of Mississippi. Wilson reported that Hawai‘i’s state government would not disclose the amount of assistance it provided The Descendants and other films.

In 2006, Hawai‘i passed Act 221, hailed as the nation’s most aggressive package of tax incentives, providing a 100 percent credit against Hawai‘i state taxes for investments in qualified high-tech companies (QHTB). Film production was included. Investors could claim this credit over five years.

At least two films with huge production budgets were then produced here with the help of Act 221. This includes Battleship, with a $200 million production budget, which Universal Pictures will release on May 12. Another was Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides, with a production budget of $250 million, which was released last May. That’s a lot of kālā (money), much of which was spent in Hawai‘i’s economy.

Then, in 2010, the Act 221 credits were severely cut back, leaving some who had made investments unable to recoup the benefits over the five-year term promised by the initial legislation.

How the cutback of Act 221 tax breaks will impact Hawai‘i filmmaking in the future is yet to be seen. I know of at least one independent filmmaker who is close to doing a new film in Hawai‘i. Let’s hope he can put it together. As shown by the The Descendants, Hawaii Five-0 and many other films and TV shows, the impact on economic activity, jobs and Travel & Tourism in Hawai‘i can be enormous.

We need the film business. “Book ’em, Danno!!”

Linda V.G. Kelley, Beth Chapman, Dr. Richard Kelley and Duane “Dog” Chapman

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