

# Really Little Hollywood

**Rhode Island wants to be a filmmakers' paradise. And thanks to one screenwriter and a lot of political support, America's smallest state has set the stage to make it happen**

BY KRIS FRIESWICK

**S**teve Feinberg is tired. For two and a half years, he has been the busiest and, until a few months ago, only member of the Rhode Island Film and Television Office. His job is to woo Hollywood heavies and persuade them to make their feature-length films and television series in the country's smallest state. It's a full-time-plus job, and he can't remember his last real vacation.

For Feinberg, this job is more than a paycheck—it's about hometown pride, which is why he doesn't mind working seven days a week (well, not much anyway). Born and raised in Cranston, R.I., Feinberg spent 22 years living and working in Los Angeles as a filmmaker (he co-wrote the screenplay for the 1993 action movie *Fortress*, starring Christopher Lambert). He loved the West Coast life, but his dream was to return to his home state and help develop a viable film and television industry in the place he calls "a big back lot," a reference to the variety of locations in Rhode Island—city, country, ocean, farmland, historic streetscape—within a half-hour drive of each other.

"I always loved Rhode Island more than California," Feinberg says. "I had goals in my head ... about what we really needed to do to change things up" in Rhode Island's film community. His goals were to create a tax incentive to lure moviemakers, build a soundstage so production crews could do more of the total filming and postproduction work in the state, and ramp up its promotion as a great place to shoot. "We had great ingredients but no leadership," he recalls.

His wishes have come true in spades. Since he began his role in April 2004, Feinberg, with the help of a film and television tax credit approved by the Rhode Island General Assembly in 2005, has lured more than \$120 million in production to the state he loves. That doesn't include the undisclosed amount that Disney expects to spend shooting *Dan in Real Life*, starring Steve Carell, and *Evening*, starring Meryl Streep, both of which will be shot entirely in Rhode Island. *Evening* is the second film Disney has made here in less than a year. The first, *Underdog*, the largest production in a New England state, wrapped in August. Rhode Island is well on its way to earning the nickname "Little Hollywood."

As director of the Rhode Island Film and Television Office, Steve Feinberg has managed to lure more than \$120 million in production revenue to his home state, thanks in part to a tax credit approved by the Rhode Island General Assembly in 2005.



## ABOUT TIME

The uptick in activity is all the sweeter in a state that saw much of the economic boom of the 1990s and early 2000s pass it by. In the past four years, starting about the time that former Providence Mayor Vincent “Buddy” Cianci Jr. was shipped off to prison for corruption (he’s due back in town at any moment), the state has been undergoing an economic and cultural renaissance. Much of it has been powered by tax breaks and incentives similar to the one now available to film and TV production companies: For every dollar the company spends in the state, it will get a Rhode Island state income tax credit worth 25 percent of the expenditures. The tax credits are transferable, which makes them like cash. The credits make Rhode Island competitive with other states that have similar tax credits, like New York and Louisiana, as well as cities in Canada that have become popular film production venues.

“Film crews spend money like it’s going out of style,” says State House Speaker William Murphy, who, with State Senate President Joseph A. Montalbano, spearheaded the tax incentive legislation. The incentive has been highly successful, he says. “It’s been great for the state. I’m looking at multiplier effect. The indirect benefit to state tourism is going to be substantial.” Murphy recalls that when the NBC series *Providence* was in production (1999 through 2002), the crews shot only some exterior scenes in the city, which was good for Providence’s image but didn’t put much money in the economy or sustain the local TV and film production community.

Those days are gone. Since the incentive, the state has hosted the entire production of the Showtime series *Brotherhood*, CBS’ new series *Waterfront* and full-length features *The Education of Charlie Banks*, *Hard Luck*, *Normal Adolescent Behavior* and *Underdog*. *Evening* and *Dan* will be shot in 2007, as will *The Prince of Providence*, a biopic about Cianci based on *Providence Journal* reporter Mike Stanton’s book by the same name. It’s to be directed by Michael Corrente (who directed *American Buffalo* and *Outside Providence*,



Due to Providence’s Hollywood success, Mayor David Cicilline has created the Film Squad to provide assistance for filmmakers.

among others). Russell Crowe is rumored to be interested in the title role.

## RHODE ISLAND’S SECRET WEAPON

Rhode Island was the first New England state to pass a film and TV tax incentive, but Massachusetts and Connecticut recently enacted similar legislation. That will make local competition for the movie business even stiffer. Although those states may have the incentives, they don’t have Feinberg, and his part in bringing the movies to his home state cannot be understated. Before the tax credits were even a twinkle in Murphy and Montalbano’s eyes, Feinberg stood on the steps of the State House with Phillip Noyce, the director of *Brotherhood*, and talked him into

shooting the entire pilot episode in Providence with nothing more than an appeal to the director’s artistic integrity.

“I knew how [Noyce] worked,” recalls Feinberg, a fan of Noyce’s *Clear and Present Danger*, *Patriot Games*, *The Quiet American* and *Dead Calm*. “He’s about telling the truth, and that’s what I really admire.

“I said, ‘Are you going to shoot the majority [of the pilot] in Toronto?’ and he said, ‘Yeah.’ I said, ‘Phillip, you’re not going to be telling the truth.’” After glaring at Feinberg for a few heart-stopping moments, Noyce agreed and decided to shoot the pilot in the state’s capital.

To seal the deal, Feinberg promised Noyce’s moneymen at Showtime that he’d try to get a \$300,000 legislative grant to partially compensate the studio for shifting the bulk of its production from Toronto, where it already had set up an office. The grant was approved, showing not only Showtime but also the rest of the Hollywood establishment that Rhode Island really wanted its business. The tax incentive was passed shortly afterward.

## DOES FILMING REALLY HELP BUSINESS?

Although locals in Providence regularly deal with parking restrictions, film crews, closed streets and production trailers blocking their driveways, they genuinely seem thrilled that Hollywood has discovered their little piece of the world.

Hugo Zuccolo and his brother, Joseph, have owned the men’s clothing store Zuccolo’s on Providence’s Federal Hill for 24 years. Hugo says the films have been great for business. Crews often call the store for costumes, suits or fittings for productions.

“People like the films,” says Zuccolo. “I think it’s kind of neat. The way they’ve handled it hasn’t caused too much of a disruption. It’s still a novelty. New Yorkers are more jaded than we are, but here it’s still new.”



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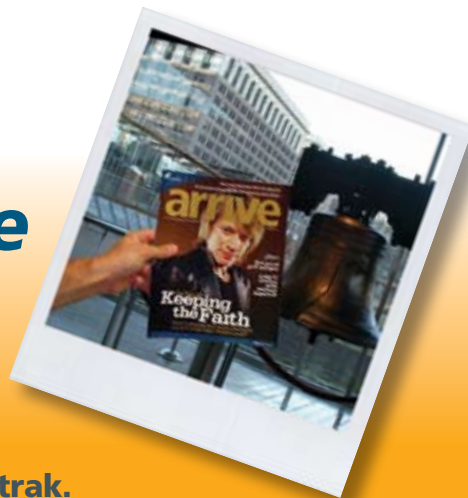
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Disney's *Underdog*, the largest production in a New England state, wrapped in August. The studio execs were so pleased with their experience in Rhode Island that the studio is shooting two more features in the state.

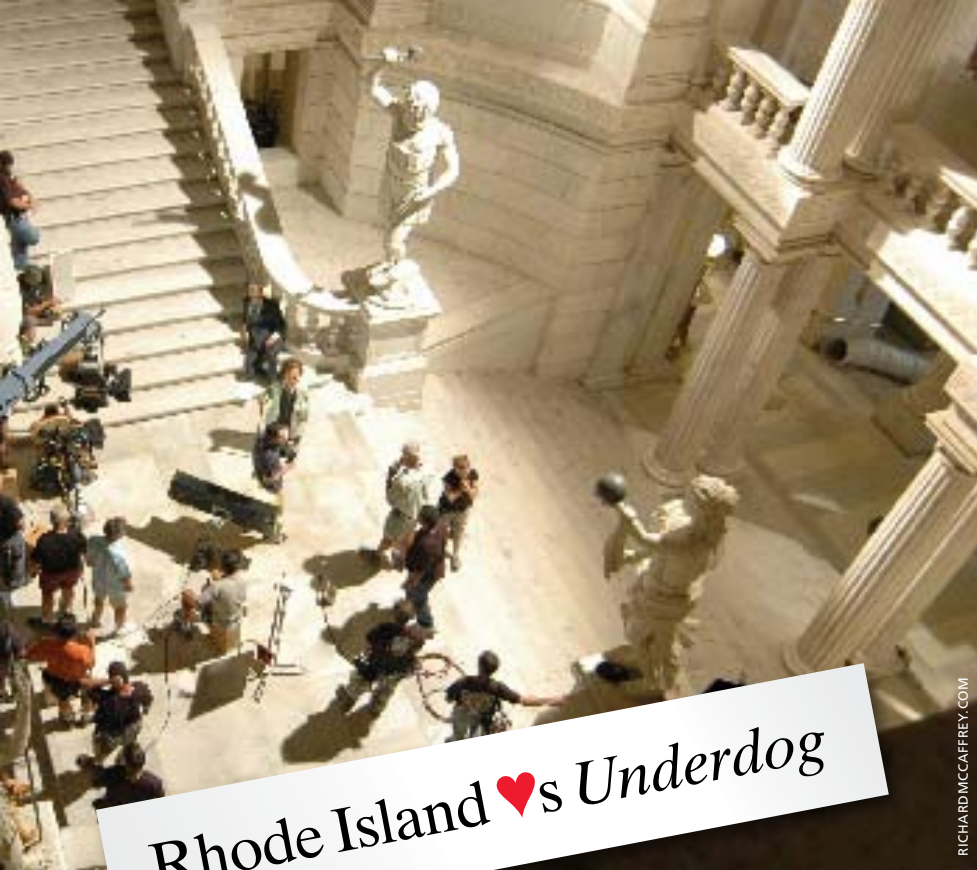
The discovery of Rhode Island, and especially Providence, as a production haven has "added to the economic vitality of the city," says Governor Donald Carcieri. "It's great for the city. They're great jobs. It adds to the panache of what's happening in Providence."

### I ♥ R.I.

Feinberg has become a combination pitchman/cheerleader/ambassador to keep the work flowing. He arranged for Noyce and his producer to meet with Providence Mayor David Cicilline, Carcieri, Murphy and Montalbano on the same day. When the producers of *Underdog* came to town to scout locations, he proffered "Rhode Island ♥s *Underdog*" T-shirts, balloons and candies and stocked the visitors' hotel rooms with the goodies. He also arranged for them to have a midnight tour of the State House with the chief of the Capitol Police, and the movie ended up filming

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# Rhode Island s Underdog

extensively there.

“That’s me just thinking up ways to make them feel like they’re part of our neighborhood,” says Feinberg of his red-carpet treatment. “That’s how I perceive Rhode Island, and I try to pass that along.”

He even managed to get the support and cooperation of the notoriously uncooperative teamsters union, which handles all transportation on film shoots. The fact that many teamsters have worked more in the past two and a half years than they had in the past 10 certainly must have helped. After taking on the role at the Film and Television Office, one of the first things Feinberg did was ask Teamsters Local 251 Principal Executive Stuart Mundy to write to Hollywood’s studios letting them know Rhode Island was a film-friendly state.

“I’ve given [filmmakers] an open-door policy that they can come to me with anything,” says Mundy, who adds that not one grievance with the union has been filed since Rhode Island started the incentive program. “I’ve developed a pretty good relationship with Warner Brothers,” he says, sounding like a Hollywood insider. “I even talked to them


about looking at Rhode Island for other projects.”

## BRING ON THE FILM SQUAD

Although filming has taken place throughout the Ocean State, Providence has been inundated with so many films of late that Mayor Cicilline created a Film Squad to coordinate permits, road closures and other assistance for filmmakers. He even vacates his own office occasionally for crews who want to film there. His cooperation netted him a nice perk—he had speaking parts in episodes of *Brotherhood* and *Waterfront*, and he recently got his Screen Actors Guild card.

Cicilline makes sure, though, to warn filmmakers not to get too used to all the hospitality in Providence.

“We’ve really worked hard to be really accommodating, so in addition to having economic value of coming to Providence, the word is out that the town rolls out the red carpet,” says Cicilline. “I’m always joking with the film people. I say, ‘Enjoy it while it lasts because in 20 years, when it’s not such a new industry, we won’t be so terrific.’ People will be like ‘again?’”

That’s a day that Feinberg would be thrilled to see. Maybe then he could take a real vacation. 

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