

Action! Local film industry thrives quietly

BY GREG KOWALSKI
STAFF WRITER

He's not a Hollywood mogul, but Ted Acheson is a major-league film producer.

Seated in his third-floor office on Maple in Birmingham, the only cameras in sight are a collection of antique wood and brass relics.

Acheson is owner of Adam Productions, Inc., and although he has a full-time staff of only five people and his offices are in a quaint house, he produces nationally recognized film productions.

"We do national dealer TV programs," he said. "We shoot, duplicate and distribute national dealership broadcast material."

Translated: He hires production people to shoot a variety of footage showing cars in different settings, such as rolling down a tree-lined road or on a beach. The footage, usually about 70 minutes long, is then sent to advertising agencies across the country and it is cut into individualized commercials.

It may not sound exciting, but it's big business. In fact, area film makers do a multi-million dollar business.

The metro Detroit area is one of the biggest film production areas in America, ranking with New York.

Products include industrial films, training films, commercials and even a few feature films.

"There is a ton of people in the film business locally," said Acheson. Some operate out of their houses, others work in sophisticated studios. But the successful ones produce high-quality work that is nationally recognized.

Acheson is one of the successful ones. In business 20 years, 11 on his own, Acheson was named the Department of Defense Cinematographer of the Year in 1969 for his coverage of the Vietnam War. It was often featured on network news.

Like most local producers, he hires support people for each project. A typical shoot includes a director, camera operator, sound mixer, grips (people who move equipment) and gaffers (electricians).

"Most crews run from 15 to 20 people," Acheson said.

Some producers occasionally work alone, but that does not affect the quality of the finished product.

Remember the "Crunch Bird"? That cartoon was produced in the early 1970s by West Bloomfield artist and producer Ted Petok who owns Crunch Bird Studios.

The cartoon won an Oscar. "It was a thrill to win an Academy Award," Petok said. He was at the Oscar's ceremony to receive his award the same year Charlie Chaplin was honored.

Although semi-retired now, he has done TV commercials and worked for ad agencies.

"If it's a small job, I do it myself. If it's larger I have some people who work with me," he said.

Petok started in the animation

'This is one of the oldest and busiest areas in the country (for film producing).'

*Shelby Newhouse
Shana Corp. owner*

business 40 years ago working with the old Jam Handy communications company in Detroit. That has evolved into the current Sandy Corp. on Big Beaver in Troy.

"It seems like the market is as great as ever," said John Rusche, vice president of media production.

Sandy mainly produces training films for the auto industry. Although the market is strong, competition is tough, Rusche said.

"There are many more competitors," said Rusche. A principal reason is that sophisticated equipment is readily available in a variety of formats from VHS to "D-2," a superior professional quality videotape.

"There is equipment for any budget," said Rusche.

Sandy deals with the "producer," the "professional" consumer, and its work is not usually seen by the general public.

Not so with the work of Southfield-based Castori and Company. If you've seen the commercial with actor James Whitmore strolling down an aisle speaking of the virtues of the area Meijer store, you've seen their work. The company also does commercials for Perry Drugs, Kmart and Total Health Care, and has worked with such notables as actor George Kennedy, comedian Phyllis Diller and professional basketball players John Salley and Isiah Thomas.

Most of the commercials are done locally with area actors.

"Unfortunately, Detroit is a well-kept secret," said executive producer Pat DuPont, referring to the general lack of awareness of how large and sophisticated the local film production industry is. She said Hollywood studios are old while the Detroit studios are new and capable of doing top quality work.

Like most local production companies, Castori has a small, permanent staff.

Most of the production people and actors are hired on a per-job basis. Actors usually are hired through local casting agencies.

"Every job is different," DuPont said. Some commercials can be shot in a day, some in three days and some in a week.

Newhouse Dana in Farmington Hills offers a full spectrum of services to produce all types of films.

Newhouse Dana is actually three separate companies sharing a single building. The companies offer complementary services.

Shana Corp. specializes in production; Unique Film and Video does editing; and Dana Newhouse Music does composing and scoring.



STAFF PHOTOS BY SHANNON LEMIEUX

Cutting up: Christa Kindt and Andy Thomsen of Unique Film and Video operate a sophisticated film editing machine in their studio in Farmington Hills.

"You can hit three birds with one stone," said Shelby Newhouse, owner of Shana Corp. Newhouse's products include ads, promotional films and documentaries. One of his films, a documentary on Chrysler Corp. made for Channel 56, won an Emmy.

"This is one of the oldest and busiest areas in the country (for film producing)," Newhouse said. Shana Corp. is capable of producing projects that can take film crews anywhere in the world.

"Last year we shot in Zurich, Switzerland, and Rome," said Newhouse.

Unique Video and Tape boasts one of the most up-to-date film editing machines in the business.

"The cutting edge of technology is here," said Newhouse. He said Unique owner Christa Kindt has edited all of his products, although she works for producers around the country.

Newhouse's son, Dana, operates Dana Newhouse Music.

"We do music for TV commercials and corporate and industrial videos," he said. An accomplished composer, he either hires musicians as needed or does composing himself on computerized equipment.

Although it isn't Hollywood, there is a bit of glamour in the business.

But Birmingham's Acheson cautioned would-be film makers.

"This is one of the toughest businesses to get into," he said. Competition is fierce and the industry is very vulnerable to recessions. The recession of the early 1980s weeded out a lot of film makers or forced them to do part-time work out of their houses.

Acheson said he wasn't trying to discourage anyone from going into the field. But he added, "Be prepared for a lot of heart break."



Film masters: Film producer Shelby Newhouse (left) and his son, Dana, often work together on film projects from their shared office in Farmington Hills.



Music — with dog: Dana Newhouse, owner of Dana Newhouse Music, occasionally plays for his dog, Nova, while he composes film scores.



STEPHEN CAMPBELL

The producer: Ted Acheson is an award-winning cinematographer who now produces films for the auto industry from his Birmingham office where he displays his antique camera collection. He is one of many film producers in this area, which is a national center for film production.

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