Hollywood North at the Distillery District

With the protracted screen-writers’ strike settled in the nick-of-time, February 24th will bring Oscar Night to Hollywood and film-lovers around the world. This seems a good time to explore the astonishing role the Distillery District has played in Canadian and international film-making.

Between September 1990, when the Gooderham & Worts Distillery shut down, and May 2003, when the new Distillery Historic District officially opened, hundreds of movies, television shows, commercials, and music videos were shot at the site, making it the largest film location outside Hollywood. Some of the world’s biggest stars wandered these streets and strutted their stuff in the nearly abandoned buildings. The quintessentially Canadian industrial site masqueraded as Antebellum Virginia, Victorian London, turn-of-the-century PEI, Prohibition-era Chicago, Jazz-era Harlem, Depression-era New York, Nazi concentration camps, post-war Montreal, and futuristic X-mania. Occasionally, it masqueraded as contemporary Toronto.
Filming has tapered off since the nearly deserted Victorian industrial enclave has become a lively, arts and entertainment centre in its own right. But the cinematic craft continues to be hotly debated over coffee, drinks, or a scrumptious meal by Distillery denizens. And a few films and commercials – such as the Ontario Tourism ad featured in the opening photograph – continue to be shot there.

Although none of this year’s Oscar-nominated movies was filmed at the Distillery District, one of this year’s nominees – 29-year-old, actor, writer, and director Sarah Polley - practically grew up in the District. From 1990 to 1996, she starred as Sara Stanley in the hugely successful TV series, Road to Avonlea, which transformed distillery buildings and lanes into small-town Prince Edward Island in the early 1900s. Still houses became post offices and hardware stores; former stables became ... real stables; genteel folk and ragamuffin kids swept and darted around the site. This year, Polley is nominated for Best Adapted Screenplay for Away From Her. Polley not only wrote the script (based on an Alice Munro short story), but directed the film, and coaxed Julie Christie out of quasi-retirement ... into giving an Oscar-nominated performance as Fiona Andersson, who is slipping into the fog of Alzheimer’s disease.

Over the years, other Canadian actors and directors with Oscar nominations to their credit, have worked at the Distillery District. These have included the formidable Canadian couple of Hume Cronyn and Driving-Miss-Daisy Jessica Tandy (in Deepa Mehta’s 1994 Camilla); Ghostbuster and Tandy-costar Dan Aykroyd (Tommy Boy in 1995); native actor, writer and singer, Graham Greene (PSI Factors: Chronicles of the Paranormal in 1996); celebrated stage actor, Kate Nelligan (Captive Heart: The James Mink Story in 1996); and much nominated, life-time achievement award-winner, director Norman Jewison (Bogus in 1996).

Undoubtedly the best-known and most-nominated picture to be shot at the Distillery District was Chicago in 2002. This satirical, mega-musical was nominated for 13 awards, and walked away with six, including Best Picture and Best Supporting Actress (for Catherine Zita-Jones, who defeated her also-nominated co-star Queen Latifah). The cast also included previous Oscar winners, Richard Gere and Renée Zellweger who razzle-dazzled their way around the site. The Stone Distillery was transformed into the “Cook County Prison for Women” under a blanket of artificial snow. Although 1920s and ‘30s Gooderham & Worts wasn’t known to be directly connected to Chicago’s Prohibition King, Al Capone, some G&W booze undoubtedly made its way to the Windy City where “the gin was cold and the jazz was hot.”
The list of other Oscar-nominated and winning actors and directors who have plied their trades at the Distillery District is long. Among others, it includes, in no particular order: Jack Palance, Shirley MacLaine, George C. Scott, Gene Wilder, Jon Voight, Al Pacino (*The Farm*), Cicely Tyson, Tatum O’Neal, Diane Keaton (*The Good Mother*), Jason Robards, Louis Gossett, Jr. (*The James Mink Story*), Whoopi Goldberg, Michael Douglas (*Don’t Say a Word*), Robin Williams, Olympia Dukakis, Geena Davis, Gerard Depardieu, Kathy Bates, Liam Neeson, Nicholas Cage, Kevin Spacey, Matt Damon, Russell Crowe (*The Cinderella Man*), Danny Devito, Halle Berry (*X-Men*), Forest Whitaker, Mira Sorvino, Ian McKellen, and Ron Howard.

Of course, the fuller list of movies, actors, directors, and singers who have worked here is huge. It includes many fine Canadian and non-Canadian artists, who made the Distillery District a centrepiece of Hollywood North.

As Oscar Night 2008 fades into history, start planning your own Distillery District International Film Festival. Identify films of interest – whether *Road to Avonlea*, *Cinderella Man*, or *Robocop*. Screen them at home. Look for signs of the Distillery. And then tour the site with the songs, dialogue, and special effects still swirling in your head.
Many thanks to Jim White, who coordinated much of the film activity at the Distillery District and shared his knowledge. All the photographs of filming at Gooderham & Worts were by Jim White.

For a more complete list of Oscar-nominated or winning actors and directors who have also shot projects at the Distillery District, go to Oscar Nominees at the Distillery District.

For a fuller list of actors, directors, and individual projects – whether award-winning or not – go to Hollywood North-Distillery.

For more information about actors, directors, or individual projects go to The Internet Movie Database.

Please send your comments or questions to Manager of Heritage Services, Sally Gibson, sg@thedistillerydistrict.com.

For more about the history of the Distillery District, visit www.distilleryheritage.com.