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THREE THINGS THAT MATTERED: FILM

BY NEIL MORRIS

State film incentives were gutted. North Carolina's tax incentive program for film, television and commercial productions paid out more than $60 million in credits in both 2013 and 2014, a boon to the state's film industry. According to the N.C. Film Office, production companies spent more than $316 million and created more than 3,000 jobs in North Carolina during 2014 alone—24 percent more than in 2013. More than 50 productions registered with the film office and shot in North Carolina in 2014.

In September 2014, Gov. Pat McCrory signed the 2014-2015 state budget, which eliminated the tax credits and created a grant program where productions receive up to 25 percent of their qualified in-state spending. However, the grant program was funded with only $10 million, and, as a result, productions dried up. Only three qualified for grants before the funds were exhausted. TV series like *Sleepy Hollow* and *Secret and Lies* left for Georgia and California, respectively. At least five feature films shot in N.C. during 2014 or earlier were released into theaters this year. In 2015, no major motion pictures were produced in the state.

Recognizing the devastation wrought on an industry that benefits both urban and rural regions, the General Assembly increased grant funding to $30 million for the 2015-16 fiscal year, plus another $30 million for 2016-17. The additional funding may lure smaller independent productions, short-run television series and commercials. But motion pictures like *The Hunger Games* and *Iron Man 3*, both partly filmed in North Carolina, won't be coming back anytime soon. The former tax incentives, already proven to work, were not revived.

Luxury cinema reached the Triangle. After years of gestation, the boutique movie theater movement finally reached the Triangle. Three new so-called luxury theaters opened this year: CinéBistro in Cary's Waverly Place shopping center, CineBowl & Grille in Cary's Parkside Town Commons and Silverspot Cinema in Chapel Hill's University Place. Each offers plush reserved seating and upscale food offerings.

To keep up with the times, the Raleigh Grande renovated its theaters to include the sort of comfy seating and food tables found in these new premium movie houses. The Carolina Theatre in Durham crowdfunded $60,000 for new seats. Even the North Carolina Museum of Art got in on the act with its newly renovated SECU Auditorium, which opened in November with all-new seating and a 2K digital projection system.

However, with such seeming progress comes casualties. Ambassador Entertainment will close the two-screen Colony Theatre in Raleigh, which has operated under various formats and owners since 1942, this month. Ambassador owner Bill Peebles says part of the savings from shuttering the Colony will go toward improving the also-venerable Rialto Theatre in Raleigh's Five Points area. No word if reclining chairs and mahi soft tacos are in the works.

Local filmmakers and festivals shined. The Triangle's cultural and academic landscape makes it a hotbed of filmmakers and festivals. Raleigh native Peyton Reed padded his directorial resume with the Marvel Studios summer hit *Ant-Man*. Durham-based filmmaker Cynthia Hill enjoyed another breakout year, as her popular PBS program, *A Chef's Life*, won a Daytime Emmy for Outstanding Directing in a Lifestyle/Culinary/Travel Program. Meanwhile, Hill's latest documentary feature, *Private Violence*, which premiered at the 2014 Sundance Film Festival, was nominated

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for a news and documentary Emmy.

Burgeoning and established fests dotted the area in 2015, with several enjoying notable anniversaries. The North Carolina Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, one of the largest and most enduring LGBT movie events in the country, celebrated its 20th anniversary in August. The Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, one of the largest doc-only festivals in the country, held its 18th edition in April. The Carrboro Film Festival turned 10 in November. The 16th Nevermore Film Festival returned to the Carolina Theatre, as did the popular RetroEpics Film Festival, screening classic cinema for more than a decade. A newcomer to the area's festival scene was the Longleaf Film Festival, which debuted at the N.C .Museum of History in Raleigh.

The Strange Beauty Film Festival explored the quirkier side of short film for its sixth year, and, most important for experimental cinema, the new Unexposed series brought challenging fare and the people who make it to intimate spaces in Durham. Look for big news about Unexposed in the new year. ▲

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Silverspot Cinema, one of the Triangle's new boutique theaters

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