

Blockbuster directors to build T.O. studio

<http://www.thestar.com/Business/article/203065>

Ridley and Tony Scott to play prime role in reviving city's slumping industry, creating hundreds of jobs

Apr 14, 2007 02:30 Am

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Europe's largest film studio, Pinewood Studios Group of London, is expected to open a major new studio complex in west-end Toronto, giving Hollywood North a badly needed lift, the *Star* has learned.

The project's developer is Toronto's Castlepoint Studio Partners Ltd., which is believed to be in partnership with Pinewood, whose owners include noted British director Sir Ridley Scott, say sources.

The deal, which closed earlier this week, will see the development of 100,000 square feet of new studio space near Bloor St. W. and Lansdowne Ave., according to sources close to the deal.

By attracting new production to Toronto, the studio will have the potential to generate hundreds of jobs and tens of millions of dollars in economic benefit for the city. Production companies spent more than \$700 million filming in Toronto last year, down 21 per cent from the almost \$900 million reported in 2005, according to the Toronto Film and Television Office.

One issue has been the lack of larger sound stages to accommodate big, special-effect movies.

The Incredible Hulk, for example, is supposed to be shooting in the city this summer, but some have questioned whether there is enough capacity to accommodate the Marvel Studios blockbuster.

But perhaps a greater issue for Hollywood has been the soaring Canadian dollar, which has been a major deterrent to U.S. production houses looking to film here. The new studio will not open in time for the *Hulk*, which has a budget of more than \$100 million (U.S.), but it could be ready for clients by the end of next year, according to the source.

The city's movie business has been thrown into turmoil in recent months with the closing of Cinespace Film Studios in February, as well as a strike by the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists, or ACTRA.

"It's phenomenal that you have a studio the calibre of Pinewood behind this, because it puts Toronto further on the radar map of global production companies," said one source.

An added benefit to Toronto of having a major operator such as Pinewood would be referrals. The city stands to attract more international business, or possible spillover traffic from Pinewood's European operations.

British director Scott (*Gladiator*, *Alien*, *Blade Runner*, *Black Hawk Down*) and his brother Tony Scott (*Top Gun*, *Days of Thunder*) have clout in Hollywood, and are partners in Europe's largest film studio, which has been host to virtually all the James Bond and Harry Potter films.

The closing of the Queens Quay E. studios of Cinespace in February represented about 20 per cent of the available studio space in the city, so the news is coming at a good time for a beleaguered industry still limping along after 9/11 and SARS. The movie industry was estimated to lose \$400 million from the six-week ACTRA strike that ended in February.

ACTRA announced yesterday that members had voted overwhelmingly to accept a deal reached with producers.

According to public records, Castlepoint closed a deal on Tuesday to purchase a 2.3-hectare site at Bloor St. W. and Lansdowne Ave., the former home of automotive parts manufacturer Tower Automotive Inc., which shut down last August.

Castlepoint has asked the city to designate the site a community improvement area to facilitate incentives to attract new industry.

The zoning is compatible with movie studio use. However, it must still undergo a site plan review process and the necessary permits must be obtained. The source said the company would likely build five sound stages totalling 100,000 square feet of new space.

There is an existing building with 100,000 square feet that will be used for offices, and another 50,000 square feet of space to be used for workshops. There is also a 10-storey, heritage-designated building.

Dominic McMullan, a spokesperson for Pinewood, said from London yesterday that the company would not comment on rumour or speculation. Castlepoint developer Alfredo Romano, who purchased the site, would not confirm whether he planned to build a studio or whether a deal had been made with Pinewood.

However, in 2005 his firm partnered with Pinewood to make a bid for a 12-

hectare spot in the portlands area, coming in a close second to Toronto developer Sam Reisman's Filmport project.

Romano would not say what he paid for the site, but one source said the total cost of the project would be in the \$35-million- plus range.

Romano, along with cousin Mario, is a major residential developer in Canada and the United States, and is the largest private holder of property on the Toronto waterfront through Castlepoint Group.

The company is in the process of marketing a condominium designed by star architect Daniel Libeskind.

Castlepoint' s studio will pose a challenge to the Filmport project, the mega-studios currently being built in the portlands area.

Filmport's deal became controversial as competitors sniped about the 99-year lease and a non-compete clause that shuts out other studios on Toronto Economic Development Corp. property.

"They (Castlepoint) have proven that you don't have to be dependent on waterfront land to make viable studio space," said a source.

One thing the new studio won't have, though, is the mega sound stage — ½ more than 40,000 square feet — ½ that Filmport is building.

There will likely be two 30,000-square- foot studios and several smaller ones. "Pinewood already has a mega-stage in Europe, and they didn't want to build a white elephant in Toronto. A mega-stage is great for special effects but it wouldn't work in their business model," said the source.

Pinewood, which went public on the London Stock Exchange in 2004, has been looking to expand outside Europe.

Canada makes sense because it has underdeveloped facilities and a cheaper dollar than the United States, said a source.

Pinewood says on its website that it is seeking to develop its operations offsite as part of a larger growth strategy, "exporting its reputation and expertise to other facilities by taking on operator roles."