



# **Filmmaking Outside the Box: Disconnection and Disruption in Rural Ontario**



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**DISCLAIMER:** Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Ontario Creates, the Government of Ontario, South Georgian Bay Media Association (SGBMA), and/or Nottawasaga Futures Film Liaison Office. The Government of Ontario and their agencies are in no way bound by the recommendations contained in this document.

# 1. Introduction

Film locations are abundant throughout Ontario and are represented by over 80 regional film offices. Of those, 32 are located within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), 32 are in Southern Ontario (Outside the GTA), and 14 are in Northern Ontario. Ontario has engaged in the marketing of a lookbook, and the diversity of locations resembles the diversity of towns and film offices in both rural and urban Ontario cities and towns. Inter-provincial migration, specifically urban-to-rural relocation, was at its highest level during COVID-19 between 2020 through 2022.

Year over year, over 45,000 jobs in Ontario are attributed to high-paying roles in Ontario's film and television sector.<sup>1</sup> In 2021-2022, the three major cities of Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver saw over 22,000 people leave, while over 15,000 people moved interprovincially to small and rural towns.<sup>2</sup> The small Ontario towns of East Gwillimbury and The Blue Mountains were the top 2 fastest growing communities in Canada with a 44.4% and 33.7% respective spike from 2016-2021.<sup>3</sup> With its relatively close proximity to Toronto, many people have made The Blue Mountains home and have given up their Toronto address.

Remote work opportunities and rural-based filmmakers have increased as a result, with major key creatives calling small-town Ontario their home base for their production office.<sup>4</sup> The movement of productions and entire film production companies specializing in rural-based Ontario production has also increased. Amaze Film and Television's first Amazon-scripted comedy series in Canada, THE LAKE, was filmed in North Bay, capturing the zeitgeist of Ontario cottage country.<sup>5</sup> From 2018 through to 2022, dozens of major television productions regularly occur outside the GTA in towns and cities such as Sudbury, Sault St. Marie, Hockley Valley, Cambridge, North Bay and Parry Sound.<sup>6</sup> The growth of Northern Ontario's film and television infrastructure and ongoing film and television productions is a testament to the fact that films can be made outside of major city centres. Filmmaking outside of the GTA is alive and well, and there is no shortage of new adopters moving to these rural areas of Southern and Northern Ontario.

The core objective of this study is to explore the correlations between film and television productions that are disconnected from and produced outside of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and the resulting disruptions that occur within the creative, technical and financial methodologies and processes of film and television production.

- 1 <https://www.ontariocreates.ca/assets/images/research/Statistics/Eng/2022-Film-and-Television-Production-Statistics-Backgrounder-final.pdf>
- 2 <https://www.policyschool.ca/publications/leaving-the-big-city-new-patterns-of-migration-in-canada/>
- 3 <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/as-sa/98-200-x/2021001/98-200-x2021001-eng.pdf>
- 4 <https://nottawasaga.com/film/index.html>
- 5 <https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/amazon-cancon-the-lake-1.6420535>
- 6 <https://www.ontariocreates.ca/news-publications/production-in-ontario-yearly-listings>



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**About the SGBMA:**

The South Georgian Bay Media Association (SGBMA) is a dynamic collective of media and film artists that fosters creativity and camaraderie within the media and film arts sector. Established in 2015, we are committed to enhancing media arts awareness and expertise through various services. These include consultation, training, education, media arts productions, and collaboration with local community hubs. We are dedicated to providing a platform for media and film artists to connect, share ideas, and grow through artist talks, training sessions, workshops, and professional development initiatives. Our focus extends to creating collaborative media arts projects that enrich the regional arts community of South Georgian Bay.

Our initiatives feature inter-arts and cross-sector projects harmoniously blending theatre, music, visual arts, and dance with media and film expertise. We strongly believe in equipping our rural community with digital literacy and professional media arts training. We strive to build a thriving digital media arts community by fostering public access and awareness.

**About the Nottawasaga Futures Film Liaison Office**

This regional film liaison office was established in 2001 by Nottawasaga Futures as a means to address the creation of a centralized film liaison that represents the Township of Adjala-Tosorontio, Town of Bradford West Gwillimbury, Township of Essa, Town of Innisfil, and the Town of New Tecumseth. The office has seen overall film production growth and recently provided location support and permits for the major motion picture *The Marsh King's Daughter* (2023), starring Daisy Ridley. The ability to work with a regional office provides ongoing access to popular locations such as the South Simcoe Railway, which regularly hosts television shows such as *Murdoch Mysteries* or the historical downtowns and parks that have been utilized for series such as *Titans* (2019), *Jack Reacher* (2021) and *The Boys* (2021).<sup>1</sup> This model for film permitting and location accessibility provides exponential growth for all the small to medium towns and municipalities involved, all of which are outside the GTA.

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1 <https://nottawasaga.com/film/index.html>



## Forward

With the SGBMA's hometown of The Blue Mountains reaching #2 on the fastest-growing community list, there is a new trend of meeting newly relocated Toronto film creatives at events, stores, and even parks. The ongoing interprovincial migration of Toronto creatives to small and rural towns across Ontario is exciting. It brings knowledge transfer and opportunities to the film communities located outside the major city centre in Ontario known as the GTA (aka Toronto).

Having moved in 2010 to Collingwood, I quickly learned about animators, film producers, TV production companies and key creatives such as cinematographers, actors and storyboard artists, who also made the move and called the region home.

In 2011, I produced my first feature film in Collingwood and brought in a blend of local and Toronto-based cast and crew. With less pressure on the budget, stemming from less expensive catering, location rentals and general production simplification (necessary due to less access to suppliers and rental houses), the film was produced on budget and on time. Most importantly, the film was made with the feel of being at a cottage and with a cast and crew that enjoyed the mini-vacation at the cabins and hotels where they stayed. New ideas were developed, and filming was less complicated logistically, with a welcoming town staff that was not against seeing a camera and crew on their streets, parks and community. There were little to no fees, and parking and special permits were not difficult to arrange.

I soon met other filmmakers who were also exploring filmmaking in different ways and coming up with solutions to the limitations of being outside the GTA. This new model was a blend of bringing new ideas, teaching others, sharing knowledge and experiences from Toronto-based larger-scale filmmaking, and embracing a different film culture.

Fast forward 10 years, and after thousands of Toronto transplants moved to rural Ontario, there is a growing filmmaking community in South Georgian Bay. But this is true of other filmmaking centres outside the GTA, such as North Bay, Cambridge, Parry Sound, and Barrie, to name a few.

A new school of filmmakers emerged from the synergy between experienced filmmakers and emerging local talent, as well as new methods and ways and means to produce film and television. The study was born. The goal: explore Filmmaking Outside the Box and what disconnection delivers to the plate.

Tom Strnad

Lead Strategist, South Georgian Bay Media Association Inc.



**Mobile motion capture in a dining room in Collingwood, Ontario for the VAMA Project. Photo: SGBMA, Tom Strnad**

## Methodology

The research undertaken is designed to capture statistical data and engage in opinion-focused surveys to help identify operational models outside of the box. The study reached out to 35 film and television producers, executives and key creatives, with 20 working exclusively outside the GTA, nine working throughout Ontario, and six based solely in the GTA region. Integrating data analysis, including population migration and census statistics, helps identify trends, currents and future modelling for interprovincial film creative clusters. This study seeks to provide comprehensive insight and perspectives into the inner working models of film and television production outside the GTA. The study will offer conclusions on possible industry disruptions that directly result from disconnection to the GTA and how this affects the film and television productions produced, both creatively and within core operational methodologies.



The methodology of this research project adeptly intertwined quantitative and qualitative approaches to offer insight into the methods, creative accomplishments, strategic opportunities, and unique models found in film production outside of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).

The quantitative data sources included population studies and statistical data on migration and rural communities, and film production and film industry data from industry-based reports. Assumptions included independence and equal variance within sources used for the data analysis.

The original data collected for this study was gathered from identified critical stakeholders within the targeted region and experts, including film producers, film directors, key film creatives in development, production and post-production sectors, and film companies.

For qualitative data gathered from surveys and interviews, thematic analysis was the primary tool. This involved coding the data to identify recurring themes and patterns. By doing so, we were able to extract significant insights from the personal experiences and opinions of the participants as it pertains to film and television production in different regions of Ontario. This method allowed for a nuanced understanding of the respondents' perspectives, experiences and methodologies, complementing the quantitative data.

Stakeholder engagement was a cornerstone of our research, and this was achieved through ongoing outreach to film and television producers located outside of the GTA, alongside film and television producers working both within and outside the GTA and those working exclusively in the GTA.

The SGBMA network of South Georgian Bay regional film and television production companies and Nottawasaga Film Liaison Office database formed a vast listing of potential survey participants. This was further supplemented through the addition of past SGBMA study and research and development project participants. Between October 2024 and February 2025, 45 participants were emailed the online survey or which 38 participated in the survey and 3 did not complete the survey. This resulted in a total of 35 completed surveys. Five follow up interviews were conducted from within these 35 participants between December 2024 and February 2025. The five interviewees represented a cross section of both GTA based and outside the GTA based film and television producers. Each interview was conducted by phone and lasted 15-30 minutes.

The five interviews included the following production companies:

- Jesse Thomas Cook, Liv Collins (Co-Owners and Producers, Collingwood Film Company Inc. based in Collingwood, Ontario)
- Teza Lawrence (Amaze Film & Television, based in Toronto, Ontario, residing in Collingwood, Ontario and ongoing productions in Northern Ontario)
- Boris Mojsovski (Grey Light Pictures, based in Toronto, Ontario, with recent filming in North Bay, Ontario)
- Francis Mitchell (Riverbank Pictures, based in Toronto and Clarksburg, Ontario)
- Rob Chatwin (BC Guy Studio, based in Collingwood, Ontario and PM/1st AD for Toronto film)



## 2. Background

Ontario is seeing an unprecedented migration of interprovincial movement and relocation from the major city centre of Toronto to the small to medium-sized rural towns across Ontario. During and after the COVID-19 height of the pandemic, it became normalized for Toronto residents to give up their city homes and move to their second homes in cottage country. In contrast, others had remote work opportunities that allowed them to seek out lifestyle changes outside the city. Data shows over 15,000 city-based residents from Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver moved to small towns interprovincially in 2021-2022.<sup>1</sup> Canada's 2021 census saw four small to medium-sized towns in Ontario with populations of around 30,000 or less make the list of top ten fastest-growing communities in Canada.<sup>2</sup>

*"I've heard more and more stories from people of all ages that grew up in a rural setting, did city life for a period of time, moved back, and they love it," Mr. Alexander says, adding that remote work and new communication technologies have made the move to more rural destinations more appealing, and practical in recent years.*

Christopher Alexander, President of RE/MAX Canada  
The Globe and Mail - Urban to Rural



Collingwood, Ontario at Sunset Point Park  
Photo: SGBMA

1 <https://www.policyschool.ca/publications/leaving-the-big-city-new-patterns-of-migration-in-canada/>

2 <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/as-sa/98-200-x/2021001/98-200-x2021001-eng.pdf>

## Analysis of Opportunities and Challenges

Since 2022, the South Georgian Bay Media Association Inc. has seen an increase in requests for information on filming, professional development workshop enrollment and industry development activities as it pertains to the film, television and media industries. Overall, over 20 professional film creatives, producers and directors have been identified as having recently relocated to or working in the South Georgian Bay area. This region consists of Collingwood, The Blue Mountains, Wasaga Beach, and Clearview Township. This correlates to the statistical data showing The Blue Mountains as being the 2nd fastest-growing community in Canada in 2021.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Wasaga Beach and Collingwood were identified as having over 7,500 relocated residents directly from Toronto as of 2021.<sup>2</sup> With specialists and professionals arriving from various industries, there is a great opportunity for knowledge transfer and in the development of creative industry hubs that include film, television and media arts.

The swelling of creatives and knowledge sharing brought from Toronto and the GTA to areas within Ontario is important for ongoing educational and professional development since Canada suffers from the exodus of young adults from rural and less populated areas.

***What makes rural Canada unique, however, is the small proportion of young adults aged 15 to 29 who live there. In 2011, 17% of people living in rural areas were aged 15 to 29, a proportion that was lower than the national average of 20%.***

Statistics Canada - Canada Goes Urban

The emerging film industry hubs found across Ontario, outside the GTA, are vital to bringing training, skillsets and professional mentorship to young adults across the province. Without this knowledge transfer and industry-based development opportunities, many young adults seek post-secondary and training opportunities in the GTA, only to never return to their small-town hometowns.<sup>3</sup>

1 <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/as-sa/98-200-x/2021001/98-200-x2021001-eng.pdf>

2 <https://www.policyschool.ca/publications/leaving-the-big-city-new-patterns-of-migration-in-canada/>

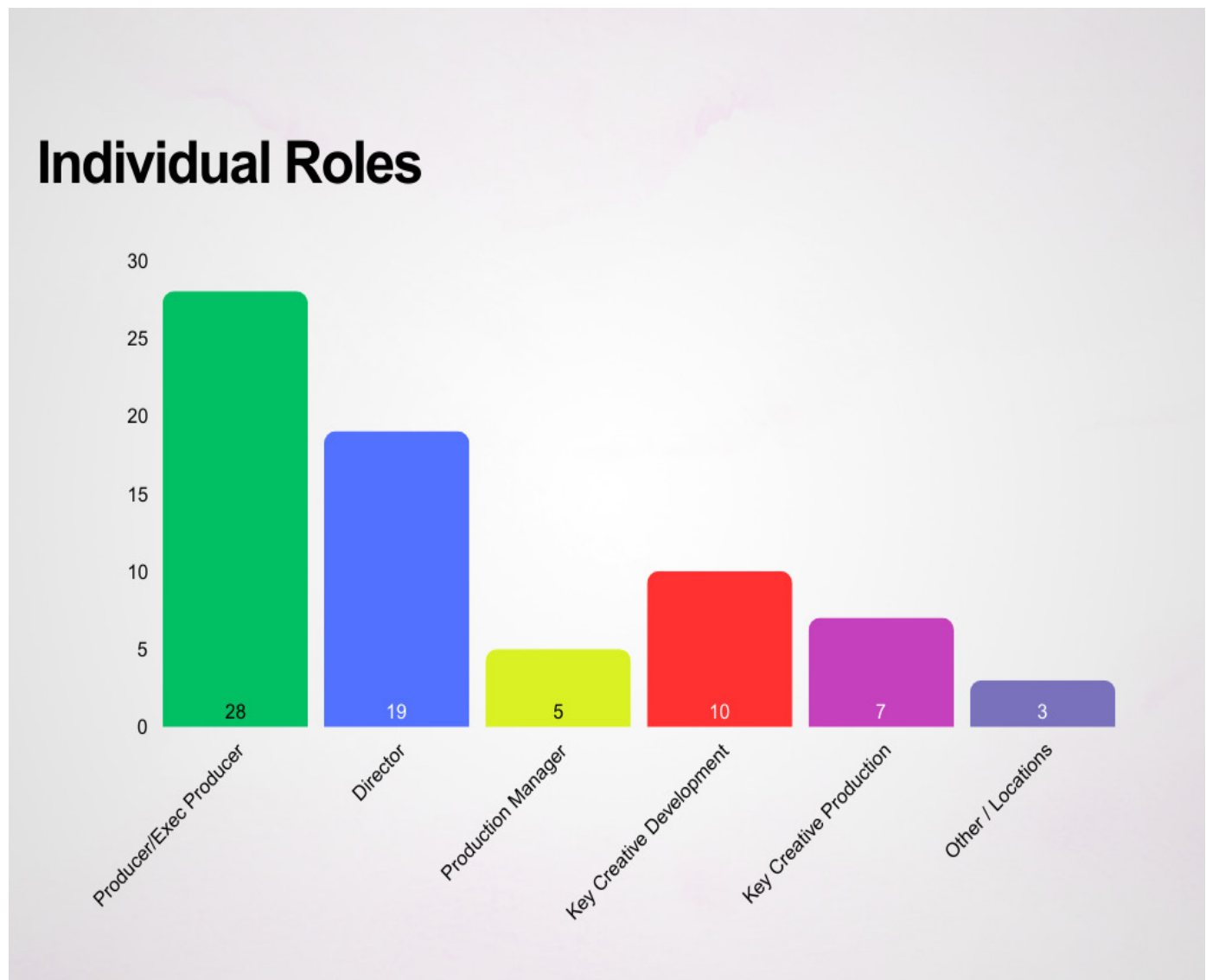
3 <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-630-x/11-630-x2015004-eng.htm>

# 3. Survey Results

## Who We Heard From: Individual Roles

For five months, we surveyed film and television stakeholders, including producers, directors, and key creatives (both in development and production), to learn more about their thoughts on filming both in and out of the GTA.

The survey was responded to by 35 film and television professionals. Of the 35 respondents, eight were based in Toronto or the GTA, 24 were based in Southern Ontario outside the GTA, and three were based in Northern Ontario. All respondents had experience working in Toronto, the GTA and Southern Ontario outside the GTA, while 10 had direct experience working in Northern Ontario.





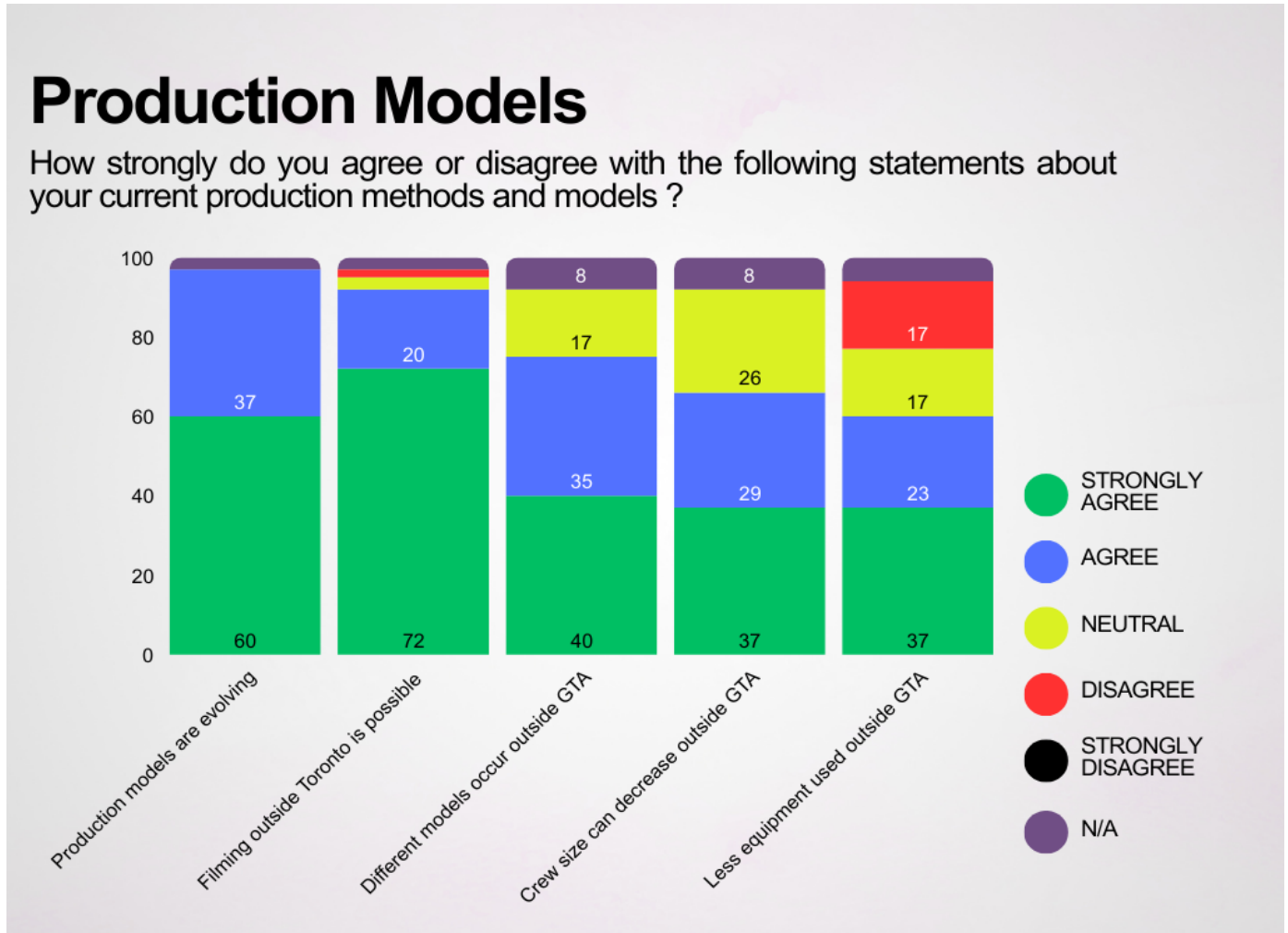
## What We Heard: Key Phrases In Comments

The following is a list of the words we heard when asking about film and television production outside of the GTA.

UNIQUE LOCATIONS  
THERE IS A 'SCENE' OUT HERE!  
SHAKING IT UP  
LOCAL PEOPLE LOVE WATCHING THE PRODUCTION HAPPEN  
LESS ADMINISTRATIVE BARRIERS  
CREW LOVES THE STAY  
FRESH AND UNTAPPED POTENTIAL  
ADAPT AND SUCCEED  
SMALL CHANGES WITH BIG RESULTS  
CRUCIAL FOR MY FILM  
I WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO DO THIS ANYWHERE ELSE  
SAVED MONEY  
ACCESS TO FUNDING  
CREATIVE FREEDOM  
MAKE IT WORK, WHATEVER IT TAKES  
BEAUTIFUL SCENARY AND LOCATIONS

## Current Thinking: Production Methods and Models Outside the GTA

Respondents identified strongly with the sentiment that filming can indeed occur outside Toronto and the GTA and that things can be done differently when working outside the GTA.



## What is filming in Toronto and the GTA like for you?

When asked about filming in Toronto and the GTA, 47% of respondents strongly agreed that film permit and location costs can be expensive. Over 76% of respondents identified the presence of sustainable practices being readily available in the GTA. 62% felt strongly about the presence of cast and crew being available in the GTA. Only 27% strongly agreed that Toronto has unique locations that cannot be found elsewhere.

Filming in Toronto and the GTA was viewed as generally being an expensive undertaking, but it did provide everything required to cast, crew and film, including sustainable initiatives. There was not a sense of complete necessity in filming in Toronto beyond the convenience and existence of the large scale film and television industry infrastructure.

## What is filming in Southern Ontario outside the GTA like for you?

Filming in Southern Ontario outside the GTA brought a strong sense of affordability, with 86% of respondents agreeing that film permits and location costs are less expensive. 97% of respondents agreed that the local community is welcoming and understanding of film production. There was a sense that filming outside the GTA does not increase production costs with 45% of respondents agreeing on that. Only 39% of respondents felt that sustainable initiatives are available outside the GTA. 88% of respondents agreed that access to cast and crew outside the GTA is not an issue.

Filming in Southern Ontario outside the GTA was thought of as less expensive and not limiting in terms of personnel. The highly welcoming local environment to film production was a key takeaway.

## What is filming in Northern Ontario like for you?

85% of respondents agreed that funding access was available when filming in Northern Ontario. Over 45% of respondents agreed that local infrastructure, such as equipment, labs, studios and crew, were available in Northern Ontario. 83% of respondents felt that the local community is welcoming and understanding of film production. There was a greater feeling of sustainable initiative access with over 55% of respondents agreeing on that.

Funding access is a key component of filming in Northern Ontario. There is also a strong sense of local film infrastructure that includes equipment, labs, studios and trained crew.

## Southern Ontario vs. Northern Ontario

Filming in both regions offered greater affordability despite the additional costs of travel and accommodations for cast and crew. Key differences between the two regions was primarily about access to funding and infrastructure. Northern Ontario was viewed as providing greater financial incentives and better access to film production infrastructure such as equipment and locally based crew.

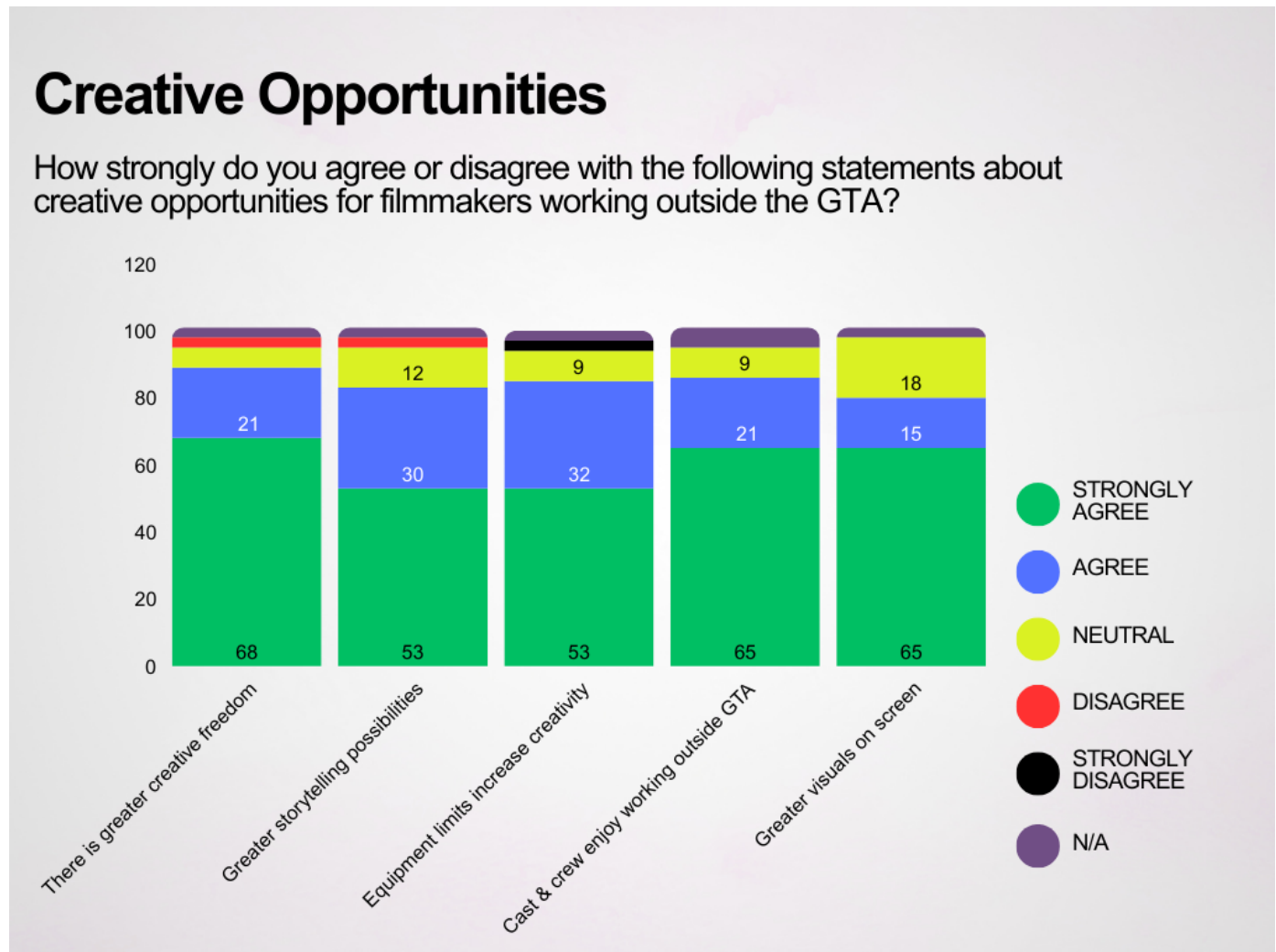
***We produced the series Carter in 2017, which was the early days in North Bay. It was exciting and dynamic. We knocked on doors for locations and accommodations for the cast and crew. It had a DIY spirit with creating spaces from old schools as production centres, and the cast and crew loved filming up there, too.***

Teza Lawrence, Executive Producer, Amaze Film + Television, Toronto, Ontario



## Current Thinking: Creative Opportunities Outside the GTA

Respondents identified strongly with the concept that there is more creative freedom and possibilities when it comes to filming outside the GTA. There was also a sense of the process being an enjoyable experiences for local businesses, residents and for the cast and crew.



We produce series across Ontario and internationally around the world and there is a unique environment available in Collingwood and Clarksburg that includes a great foodie scene. That aspect of agritourism, and the restaurant scene is reflected in several of our unscripted cooking and documentaries filmed in The Blue Mountains. We couldn't produce some of our shows anywhere but in these parts of Ontario.

Francis Mitchell, Producer, Riverbank Pictures Inc., Toronto and Clarksburg, Ontario

## When the Location Becomes The Creative Opportunity: Goodwood

Locations outside the GTA are highly viewed as offering greater visuals or as an aid to storytelling. This was also evident in the highly acclaimed and award-winning series *Schitt's Creek* (CBC), which was filmed on location in Goodwood, Ontario, about an hour northeast of Toronto. Dozens of 'Schittheads' die-hard fans visited the location regularly during production, and the series landed 5 Emmy award wins for its 6th and final season.<sup>1</sup> A series such as *Schitt's Creek* was creatively and intentionally designed as a story about small-town Ontario outside of nearby Toronto. The verisimilitude of the location of the story was at the heart of the series' success not just in Canada but worldwide.



Filming of *SCHITT'S CREEK* in Goodwood, Ontario just northeast of Toronto. Photo: Shutterstock

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.toronto.com/things-to-do/schitt-s-creek-emmy-run-shines-spotlight-on-goodwood/article\\_11ff9973-119e-5aff-8b68-738fb12306c5.html](https://www.toronto.com/things-to-do/schitt-s-creek-emmy-run-shines-spotlight-on-goodwood/article_11ff9973-119e-5aff-8b68-738fb12306c5.html)

*We would just use local restaurants and we would we would want that variety and restaurants that can cater to like all sorts of fussy diets and things like that. Because you have so many different people working on a film. So we often just bring the cast and crew together to a local restaurant for meals and it's nice to eat together and not have to worry about catering spaces and cleaning it up. The cast and crew love doing it that way. It's not something that you could do in downtown Toronto.*

Jesse Thomas Cook & Liv Collins, Collingwood Film Company, Collingwood, Ontario

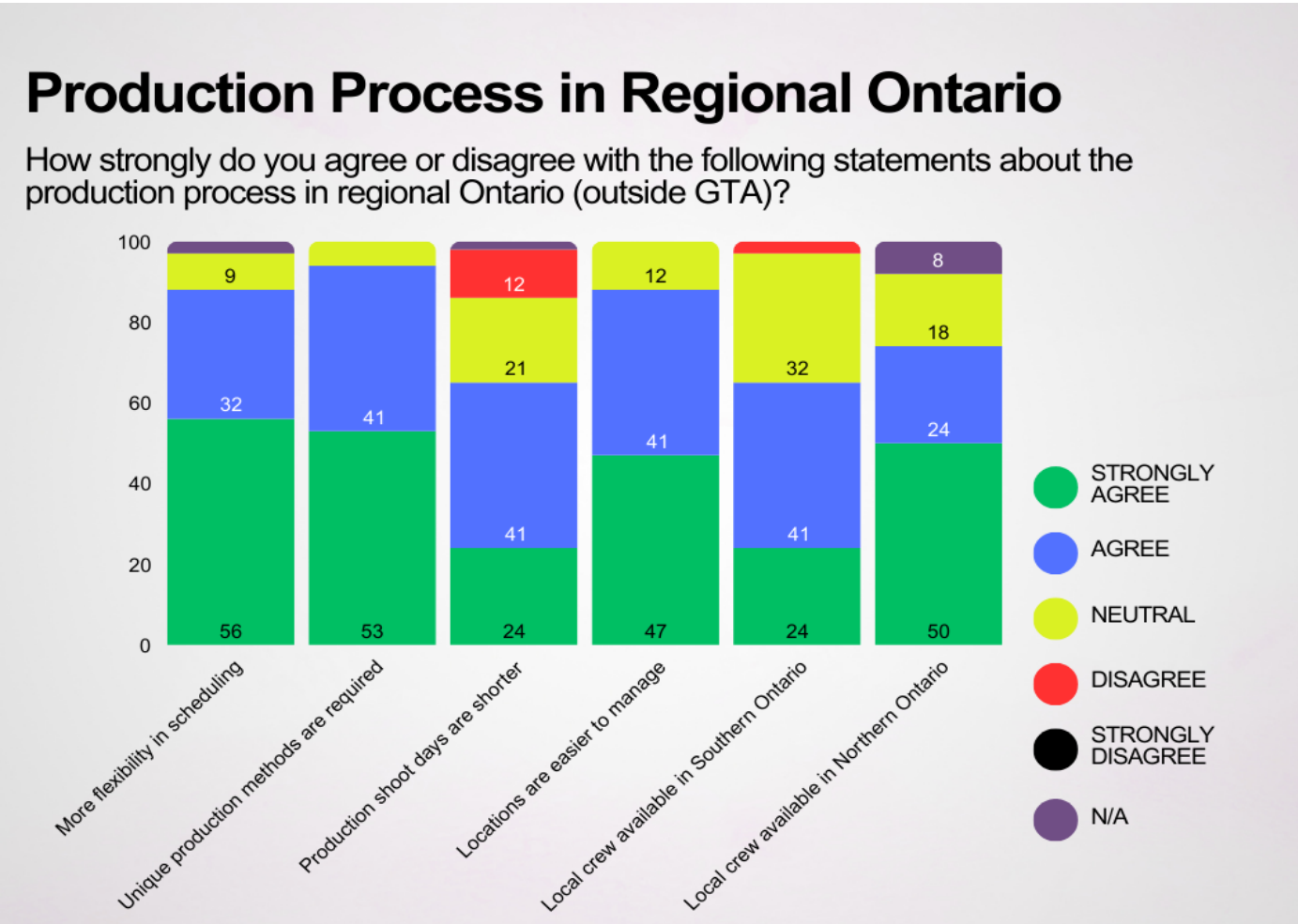


Downtown Collingwood, a popular food destination in South Georgian Bay region. Photo: SGBMA, Tom Strnad



Current Thinking: Production Process Outside the GTA

Respondents reflected a sense of greater flexibility alongside unique production methods combined with easier location management. A strong sentiment echoed a unique approach to filmmaking being required outside the GTA. There was no sense of greater speed within the production process. Finding local crew was less of a challenge in Northern Ontario.



*In 2021, we returned to North Bay with The Lake for Amazon. This time, we worked without the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund. We also saw some of our local North Bay crew return from Carter, and they moved up in the ranks from a junior to a senior role.*

Teza Lawrence, Executive Producer, Amaze Film + Television, Toronto, Ontario

## Current Thinking: Production Process Outside the GTA



Filming with virtual production for the short film KODY, directed by Rob Chatwin. Photo: SGBMA, Tom Strnad

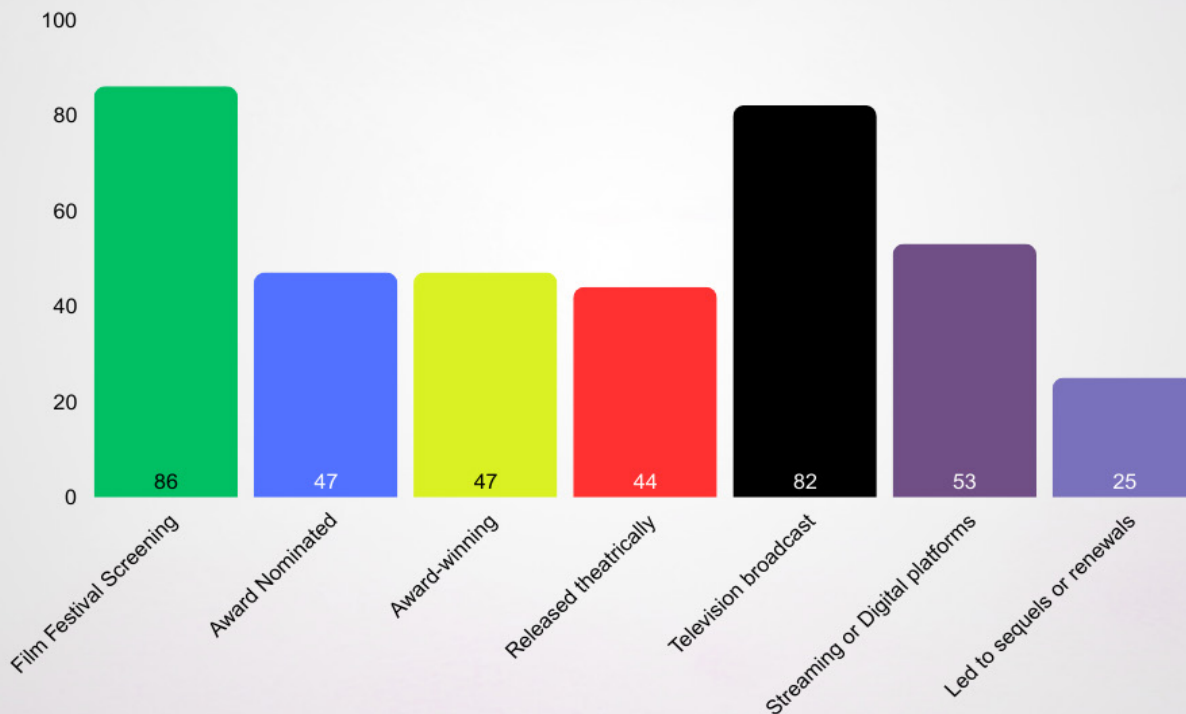
*Having been awarded the Blue Mountain Foundation for the Arts' ROBERT KEMP ART AWARD and the accompanying financial support, it allowed me as an independent filmmaker to be more free to explore and experiment within the medium. It allowed me to use new techniques with hand puppetry and digital backdrops. It also helped me to allow the creative direction to be dictated by the lead character, whose adversity in verbal communication limited the narrative but necessitated a creative decision-making process to complete the film.*

Rob Chatwin, Director/Writer/Producer, BCGuy Studio, located in Collingwood, Ontario

## Success: GTA Productions vs. Regional Ontario Productions

Respondents showed equal if not greater commercial success and artistic recognition for their productions filmed outside the GTA in regional Ontario. There is a notable increase in artistic success which may be attributed to less large budgeted commercially driven projects being produced outside the GTA.

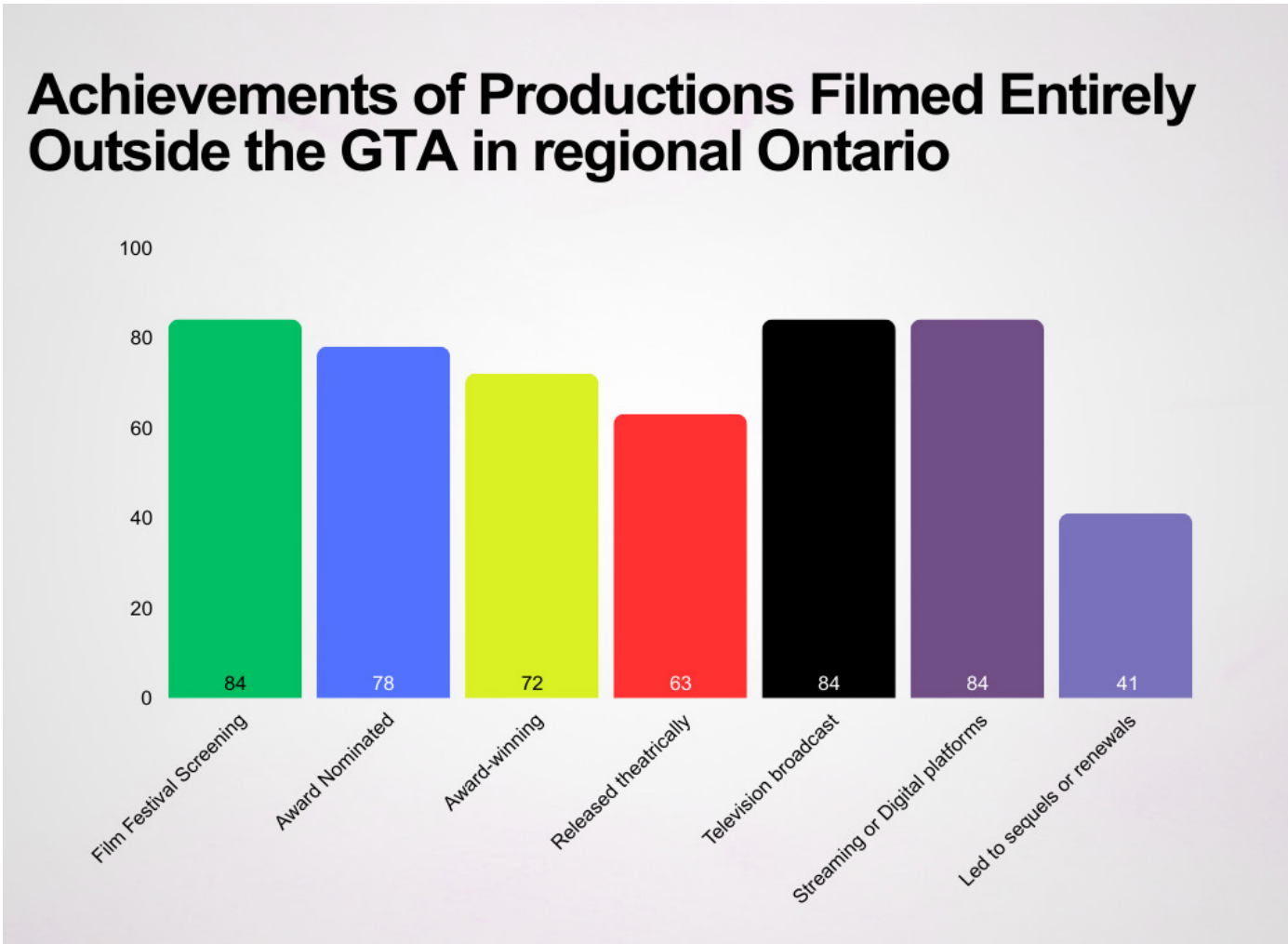
### Achievements of Productions Primarily Filmed in Toronto and GTA



For the purposes of this study, revenues were not quantified in assessing achievements but instead critical and commercial release status were the identifying factors for a projects success. The overall budget ranges for the typical scope of film or television projects produced by the production companies were small to medium sized budgets that were between \$250,000 (CAD) to under \$10 Million (CAD).

## Success: GTA Productions vs. Regional Ontario Productions

Respondents showed equal if not greater commercial success and artistic recognition for their productions filmed outside the GTA in regional Ontario. There is a notable increase in artistic success which may be attributed to less large budgeted commercially driven projects being produced outside the GTA.



Numerous film production companies based outside the GTA outlined ongoing success with festivals, markets, international distribution and nominations and awards at the annual Canadian Screen Awards (CSA). There were over 25 CSA nominations and three CSA awards in the last 3 years, within the surveyed film companies that were permanently located in regional Ontario outside the GTA.



## Success: Award Recognition for Regional Ontario Producers

Collingwood Film Company received six Canadian Screen awards in 2023 for the film *Cult Hero*, bringing it within reach of major productions by David Cronenberg and other big names in Canadian film.<sup>1</sup> Toronto and Clarksburg-based Riverbank Pictures also received CSA nominations for its series *When I Grown Up, How Do You Feel?* and has recently released the series *Trading Skills* (TVO) and *Cooking Italy* (TLN). *How Do You Feel?*, filmed in The Blue Mountains, Ontario, was sold to several territories at MIPCOM 2024 alongside other Toronto-produced series.<sup>2</sup>

*Like a lot of our crew are small business owners who like moonlight as these creatives like our costume designer got nominated for a screen award for Cult Hero and she was like up against David Cronenberg's costume designer. And she like working at the curling club in Owen Sound. But she's so resourceful and she just like jumped on it. We were like do you are you interested in doing this and she was like hell yes!*

Jesse Thomas Cook & Liv Collins, Collingwood Film Company, Collingwood, Ontario

## Success: Levelling Up in Regional Ontario

86% of respondents based outside the GTA agreed that their industry position, role, or professional growth was greater as a result of being located outside the GTA. Opportunities and success rates were at their highest outside the GTA, according to the respondents with over 80% agreeing with this sentiment. The majority of respondents, both in the GTA and outside the GTA, agreed that there is an opportunity for film professionals and crew to level up outside the GTA. Many lower-level crew members move up and can pursue key creative roles within their departments when working outside the densely crowded and more competitive Toronto film labour scene. Respondants stated that local crew multi-tasks both with careers, that involve working a 'day job' and also within the film set, whereby working in multiple departments or multiple roles is a normal part of the filmmaking process. Several comments pointed to the fact that assistants can indeed level up to key positions, and the benefits of gaining production experience and credits in different levels within a department such as production design, camera or directing.

1 <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/article-rogue-horror-film-company-with-six-canadian-screen-award-nominations/>

2 <https://playbackonline.ca/2024/09/26/trio-of-tvo-series-lead-blue-ants-kids-and-family-mipcom-slate/>



Filming the documentary, **JOURNEY OF WATER**, on the shores of a beach near The Blue Mountains. Photo: SGBMA, Tom Strnad

*When working on the feature film, **Pray For Me**, it was a much larger production and crew size than I had previously worked with. I appreciated the access to observe the primarily Toronto based crew and valued their level of expertise. It was also interesting to have the opportunity to work with specialized departments (special f/x, stunts, props, background talent) that I had not previously had the opportunity to work with as an independent filmmaker in Collingwood. Although insightful as to witnessing the production value of a larger budget, it did make me cognizant that higher production value doesn't necessarily mean a better creative end product.*

Rob Chatwin, Director/Writer/Producer, BCGuy Studio, located in Collingwood, Ontario

# 4. Filmmaking Outside the GTA

## Disconnected Models: Disruptive Production Methods

Film companies based or working primarily outside the GTA provided insight into unique production methods and working models for their film and television productions. The term disconnected, as it applies to proximity to the GTA, was introduced and this led to conversations about working in a unique way. Several respondents equated the disconnection offering a freedom in choice and in creating new models in filmmaking in order to remain competitive, profitable and as a necessary means to avoid inflating the budget with travel and transportation fees. These included the following concepts:

- Majority of key creatives and directors are owner/operator filmmakers with production companies and service provider companies
- Multiple roles occupied by one person as a multi-hyphenated key (ie. producer/director/writer/cinematographer/editor combinations)
- Low corporate overhead costs with the use of home offices and shared office space
- Production companies have equipment base assets such as camera, lighting and sound equipment
- Production companies, producers and directors have in-house post-production facilities
- Cross-industry collaborations that utilize film production skill sets outside of traditional film and television formats or services, such as with medical, educational, computer science and technology, and tourism industries
- Non-traditional catering, food and craft services that embrace local restaurant use, food trucks and bakeries
- Embracing locally based key creatives and crew with prior film experience that work in another career now
- Cottage and chalet rentals for cast and crew instead of hotels that provide waterfront or park-land access
- Utilizing existing events and festivals as background for film or television scenes
- Working with multiple local or regional film production companies to secure equipment needed for production instead of bringing equipment from a Toronto rental house
- Working with other related creative industries such as theatre, music, arts and tourism to hire and train creatives and crew for film production
- Experimenting with hybrid models in film and television that blend documentary, immersive technology or new media production techniques
- Bartering systems such as production services for corporate or commercial videos in exchange for products, rentals, or location use



## Disconnected Models: Disruptive Office Space

The majority of respondents outlined rural issues that included high cost office rental space due to supply and demand within tourism based economies, and high speed internet access for file sharing and post-production services.

One of the common themes that came up was the use of local libraries or shared workspaces as production and post-production hubs. Scenarios included producers and editors accessing high-speed internet, desk space, and meeting rooms. There was a greater possibility of collaborating with other filmmakers working on different projects while meeting by chance at these common spaces.

*We've had a few young co-op students who worked their way through the ranks. Our Director of Photography started with us as a production assistant when he was only 18 or 19. We have an animator who lives in Orillia. Our special effects guy is someone who owns an art gallery in Meaford and he's now a Canadian Screen Award-nominated special effects prosthetics technician.*

Jesse Thomas Cook & Liv Collins, Collingwood Film Company, Collingwood, Ontario

## Disconnected Models: Disruptive Crewing

Crew size was also relatively smaller for productions being made by film and television companies with permanent offices outside the GTA. There were several concepts in crew composition and formats for film and television productions made outside the GTA, as follows:

- Working in similar roles in related industries between film work, bringing new knowledge skills to and from that specific job (ie. art department crew working in interior design and staging for real estate and tourism industry, or film technicians working as live music tech crew)
- One crew member takes on multiple roles and comes with experience in these roles from the ongoing necessity to multitask with a finite talent pool in the region
- Trainee positions and internships are more abundant to secure locally based crew from schools, other related industries, and semi-retired film crew requiring skills re-training or updating (multiple trainees, interns within each department)
- Documentary style production crew size (8-10 person crew)
- Accessing larger pools of ambitious interns, co-op students and trainees from local colleges, universities and high schools (less competition for productions with fewer regional productions)
- Travel distances can be larger as the regional-based crew is conditioned to work with larger travel distances as a regular part of rural and regional 'drive to work'
- Collaborative filmmaking models that bring other film companies together to facilitate crew, key roles and knowledge without co-production official status



## Disconnected Models: Historical Disruption and The Future

The film and television industry has had regular eras of disruption in its history. These include the end of the studio era and the rise of film school directors such as Steven Spielberg, George Lucas and Francis Ford Coppola. There was the ultra-low-budget digital democratization era that brought the use of film into question with the success of the no-budget blockbuster, *The Blair Witch Project*. And currently, there is the big tech era that is blurring the lines of windows, formats and digital streaming and bringing technocrats to the wheel of creative decision making.

Hollywood chose Toronto as a new centre for filmmaking in the late 1970s, making it the 3rd largest film production location next to Hollywood and New York in 1979.<sup>1</sup> With Toronto becoming Hollywood North, the growth and expansion would warrant the interprovincial migration for locations seeking other settings across the province and eventually for film industry professionals to seek out new permanent locations to pursue their endeavours. The urban-to-rural sprawl for professionals in the film industry is a good fit as the film industry is based on remote working locations, mobile practices in production and advancing digital technologies to better serve links between creatives across the world. It is not a coincidence that over 76% of respondents had moved from Toronto to outside the GTA between 2014-2024.

The expansion of Ontario production outside the GTA continues, and major epicenters have formed that include the regions of North Bay, Cambridge, and Hamilton. Each region has brought permanent crew, production companies and services to the area. Filming outside of Toronto may seem outside the norm, but from 2018 through to 2022, Ontario film production data shows over a dozen or more major productions filmed outside the GTA annually.<sup>2</sup> Survey data showed a strong link between cost efficiency and moving outside of the GTA, with many of these companies seeking affordable regions to work and live in. Toronto was named the top city to live in as a filmmaker in 2024 by *Moviemaker Magazine*, further cementing its place as the filmmaking capital.<sup>3</sup>

There is always the sense of missing out on the nucleus of the industry in Toronto, but historically, there is a story that outlines just how important it can be to move away from this film industry epicentre. A relative newcomer to the film industry in the 70s, George Lucas created Industrial Light and Magic in 1975.<sup>4</sup> He needed a solution to the problem of finding a company that could deliver the special effects needed for his upcoming film *Star Wars* (1977), as the studio just closed down its own effects facility. Lucas also located ILM in Van Nuys, California, a region outside of Hollywood, to an affordable commercial unit.

ILM eventually became the largest effects company in the world, and the creative minds that travelled from around California and the world led to major new innovations and disruptive technologies. These included the photo editing software known as Photoshop, the computer animation division Pixar, and the computer editing software that is now known as Avid Media Composer. All three of these computer-based technologies, alongside computer-generated imagery by ILM, have forever changed the creative industries in photography, animation, film and post-production.

1 <https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=yv0hAAAAIBAJ&dq=hollywood-north%20canada&pg=4439%2C331425>

2 <https://www.ontariocreates.ca/news-publications/production-in-ontario-yearly-listings>

3 <https://www.moviemaker.com/best-places-moviemaker-2024/>

4 <https://www.wired.com/2015/05/inside-ilm/>

Working outside of the existing studio system in Hollywood and being located in regional California offered the right ingredients and brought together knowledge bases from different people who were also from regional, national and international locations. ILM would have never been created or the resulting innovations that were cross-related by the bringing together of these creative minds if Lucas just worked with the existing studio system and effects facility.

In comparison, the regional film clusters found throughout Ontario also utilize a regional talent pool, remain disconnected from the Toronto 'studio' system and influence, and incorporate larger ingestion of training and apprenticeship positions. Working differently and bringing together the next generation of film and television creatives to that environment will only benefit the greater Ontario film and television industry with innovation and new discoveries. But just as ILM was created outside of Hollywood, it was still a product of a Hollywood studio system that supported George Lucas, who, in turn had a vision for something different. Southern and Northern Ontario film clusters have a reciprocal relationship with Toronto and the GTA in the same manner and are the next phase of film production in Ontario.

***The North Bay and rural Ontario experience is amazing and I have worked on several independent films and series that would not have otherwise been made. This is both because of the locations needed and the access to regional funding and tax credits. Without an indie scene that often works outside the big commercial system, you can't move forward as a creative industry.***

Boris Mojsovski ASC, CSC, Grey Light Pictures, based in Toronto, Ontario

## Disconnected Models: Necessary Ways and Means

In discussing the concept of disconnection further, several film producers mentioned that necessity leads to the ways and means by which the production must happen. This necessity can be caused by limitations in budgets or the availability of equipment or crew. This necessity leads to discovering new production models or new crew formations. Breakthroughs occur when the correct formula leads to a successful production, and at a minimum, that is the completion of the film or series. At a maximum, this success includes a higher elevation of the film or television production that garners attention as something special with film festival selections, award nominations and potential awards, and commercial audience success.

Independent filmmakers are often labelled as 'guerilla filmmakers' or 'rebel filmmakers' when they work outside the established rules, forms and production models. Robert Rodriguez was actually labelled a 'rebel' for his breakthrough feature film *El Mariachi* which was produced for \$7000 on 16mm film.<sup>1</sup> Indie filmmakers have a term for filming without permits and using existing crowds and the general public, which is called 'stealing a shot'.

1 [https://filmmakermagazine.com/archives/issues/winter1993/film\\_for\\_song.php](https://filmmakermagazine.com/archives/issues/winter1993/film_for_song.php)

Sophia Coppola famously brought ‘stealing the shot’ to new levels when she broke the rules to achieve the scenes that her film required during the production of ‘Lost in Translation’ (2003) in Tokyo, Japan. The cinematographer Lance Accord later recounted that filming in Shibuya was the hardest day of the entire film shoot since they worked without the necessary permits. Essentially they could have been arrested or fined if authorities became aware of the filming endeavours.<sup>1</sup>

Coppola later revealed that the visual style of the handheld camera was not just aesthetic since the crew had to move quickly without permits and also with a low budget. The style became improvised and freeform and Tokyo had to be shot spontaneously as it happened since they lacked permits and time.<sup>2</sup>

This example of a medium-budget film with major critical success, using what is often associated with ultra-low-budget film production as a tool and technique for its production, was overcome by creative solutions and embracing the style that was necessary by design.



**Downtown Tokyo, Shibuya crossing, a location featured in Lost In Translation without permits. Photo: Shutterstock**

‘Stealing shots’ was recently exemplified by Collingwood Film Company’s narrative feature film The King of Kings. The production placed actors directly within the Elvis tribute contests at the Collingwood Elvis Festival and used the festival and crowds as the backdrop during filming key scenes.

The 2025 Academy Awards also showcased the first ever four Oscar winner in four categories by Sean Baker, a multi-hyphenated indie filmmaker who won as a Director/Writer/Producer/Editor for his film Anora.<sup>3</sup> Multiple roles are abundant in the film industry outside the GTA, with over 75% of respondents selecting and identifying with more than three key roles in production. The departmentalized Hollywood system, also found in Toronto, has many benefits, but for disruptive independent filmmakers, it can be more of a roadblock than an advantage, as outlined by Sean Baker’s game-changing Anora.

1 <https://black-harpoon.medium.com/lost-in-translation-filming-locations-shibuya-scramble-intersection-dcaa3200345>

2 <https://www.mcgill.ca/night-time-design/article/arch-542/getting-out-getting-lost-formal-analysis-lost-translation-2003>

3 <https://www.vulture.com/article/oscars-2025-sean-baker-anora-history.html>



Disruptive production outside the studio was also found in the best animation winner at the 2025 Academy Awards with the film *Flow* defying industry-standard workflows and using Blender software, a free and open source animation tool.<sup>1</sup> The choice of such software was necessary for the budget but illustrates that such a restriction resulted in making the best-animated film of 2024. Several production companies outside the GTA made reference to working with free software tools, including Blender, alongside a growing talent pool of 3D Blender artists in rural Ontario. The SGBMA hosted several workshops in professional development that included Blender demonstrations and workflows starting 2019 to the present. Georgian College in Barrie includes Blender in its new Game Design and Simulation program.<sup>2</sup> Having access to free software opens up new workflows, and these are transpiring outside the major film centres, with *Flow* being produced in Latvia by an independent studio far disconnected from Hollywood. For independent filmmakers, free software tools are a necessary part of production.

This search for emerging alternative workflows in technology has been embraced outside the GTA in regional film clusters such as South Georgian Bay for over half a decade. Less corporate overhead and more creative freedom encourage and allow for technological experimentation, research, and development. Tom Strnad, a Blue Mountains-based film producer/editor, has worked on several projects in arts virtualization with funding from the Canada Council for the Arts. These projects have incorporated motion capture, 3D animation and augmented reality using low-cost, barrier-free tools for artists.



**Motion capture R&D with violinist Victoria Yeh for the VAMA virtual arts project. Photo: SGBMA**

This innovative independent thinking is occurring regularly in film and television productions outside the GTA due to the lack of infrastructure, access to facilities and other limitations. The necessary ways and means encourage ongoing fresh ideation in the film and television industry throughout Ontario and are thriving outside the GTA due to the disconnection to readily available solutions.

1 <https://www.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/movies/2025/03/02/flow-oscars-2025-best-animated-feature-film/81111164007/>

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## Disconnected Models: One Size Does Not Fit All

The film industry has over 120 years of experience and knowledge in best practices, production methods, film theory and technological innovations. But it has also seen its fair share of upheaval, bankruptcies and ideas or projects that never worked.

One of the models discussed by several film and television professionals was that of repurposed space made into temporary studio space. This type of model requires less investment in a new build, utilizes a vacant or underutilized space, and is customizable to any size within the framework of the existing building.

*For our TVOKids show Trading Skills we found the recently closed down Meaford High School, where I went as a teenager, and it had an auto shop workshop. We could rent the space out and convert it into a studio for the show without having to build a huge set since it already had a perfect backdrop as an old garage.*

Francis Mitchell, Producer, Riverbank Pictures Inc., Toronto and Clarksburg, Ontario

Toronto and the GTA are home to several sound stages, including Pinewood Studios. In March 2024, news broke that the North Bay film studio was closing and suspending its employees.<sup>1</sup> Just two years earlier, it was heralded to become a big draw to the region as its largest studio facility.

In trying to enhance the film industry with a purpose-built stage, and emulating what ‘works’ in Toronto, the North Bay studio instead left 44 employees without a pay cheque. This illustrates how crucial it is to understand the local scene and industry and to undertake a needs assessment. This also reiterates the concept of disconnected models working in a unique manner outside existing systems such as those in Toronto.

Meanwhile, Centennial Pool, a decommissioned pool, an hour outside of Toronto in Oakville, has become a dedicated water tank for aquatic scenes.<sup>2</sup> Once again proving that outside the box thinking with repurposing can provide greater results in today’s filmmaking environment.

**The studio at the old Meaford High School for the series TRADING SKILLS. Photo: SGBMA, Tom Strnad**



- 1 <https://www.northernontariobusiness.com/industry-news/economic-development/26m-private-investment-to-create-regions-largest-film-studio-8397112>
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# 5. Conclusions

## Disconnection and Disruption: Summary

The study has provided an in-depth overview of film industry-related information, production insights, modelling and methodologies as it pertains to the disconnection and disruption found in regional and rural Ontario outside the Toronto and Greater Toronto areas. The following key takeaways provide an overview of this system found outside the GTA:

- Filming outside of the GTA is viewed as generally being an affordable and welcoming experience, with access to cast and crew not being an issue.
- There are creative advantages to filming outside the GTA, with more freedom, less constraints and possibilities.
- Unique production methods and working models are utilized by film companies based or working primarily outside the GTA, including the use of non-traditional spaces for temporary studio space and smaller crew sizes.
- The expansion of Ontario production outside the GTA continues, with major epicentres forming in North Bay, Cambridge, and Hamilton.
- Regional film clusters utilize a regional talent pool, remain disconnected from the Toronto 'studio' system and influence, and incorporate larger ingestion of training and apprenticeship positions.
- Necessity caused by limitations in budgets or the availability of equipment or crew leads to discovering new production models or new crew formations.
- Innovative thinking is more regularly a part of film and television productions outside the GTA due to the lack of infrastructure, access to facilities and other limitations.
- Connecting film clusters throughout Ontario, including the GTA film and television industry, is important for knowledge transfer of both traditional and experimental spheres of thinking.
- Disconnection still incorporates elements of re-connection with the acquired skill sets offered by Toronto transplants from the industry.
- The film and television industry directly reflects the population and interprovincial migration trends as it is mobile and location-based in nature, making it ideal for relocation and remote workers in the service sectors of development and post-production.

## Disconnection and Disruption: Conclusion

Film producers and creatives that are based in or that have relocated outside the GTA have identified more opportunities, personal growth and independent business success in film and television production in the rural and less populated areas of Southern and Northern Ontario. Future interprovincial migration will generally include professionals from the film and television industry due to the nature of its model, which involves remote location filming, bringing together key creative cast and crew from across the province, the country and even the world, and essentially working in a nomadic structure with mobility at its central design. The physical distance away from the GTA also encourages producers and filmmakers to develop new models for production based on the available resources and limitations, often by necessity. The synergy between other institutions and industries included increased access to knowledge transfer while working outside of traditional film and television production systems.

Disruption in rural Ontario is an important part of the overall growth of the Ontario film and television industry. The unique production models employed and crew configurations are necessary but are rarely limited to the productions' overall strength or creative accomplishments. This is illustrated by the equal success of productions made outside the GTA compared to their GTA counterparts. The disconnected environment empowers innovative approaches and thinking and is reflected in the creativity of the final productions. While disconnection from the GTA drives this disruption, there is a mutually beneficial ecosystem and relationship between the epicentre of Toronto filmmaking and the regional satellite filmmaking centers found throughout Southern and Northern Ontario.

This study illustrates that the shift towards filmmaking outside the GTA is disruptive but beneficial. It fosters innovation, provides opportunities for local talent, and can lead to both financial and creative success. The success of Ontario's regional productions emulates the similar success found by international filmmakers working with and embracing limitations and independence on the world stage.

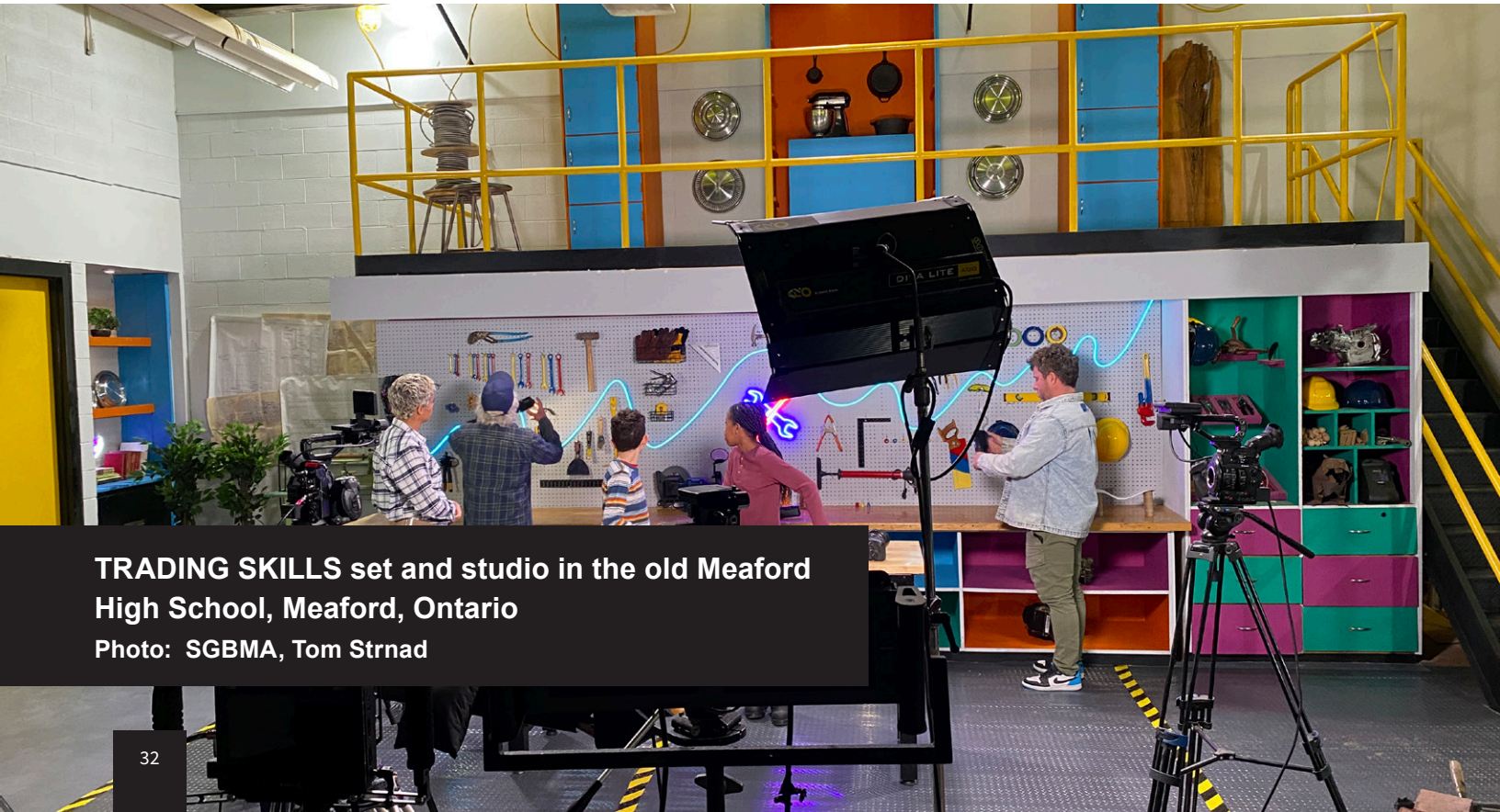
**There is tremendous value in examining, identifying and following these disruptive film movements, such as those found in regional and rural Ontario, since history shows that big ideas start from small shifts and movements outside of existing ecosystems.**





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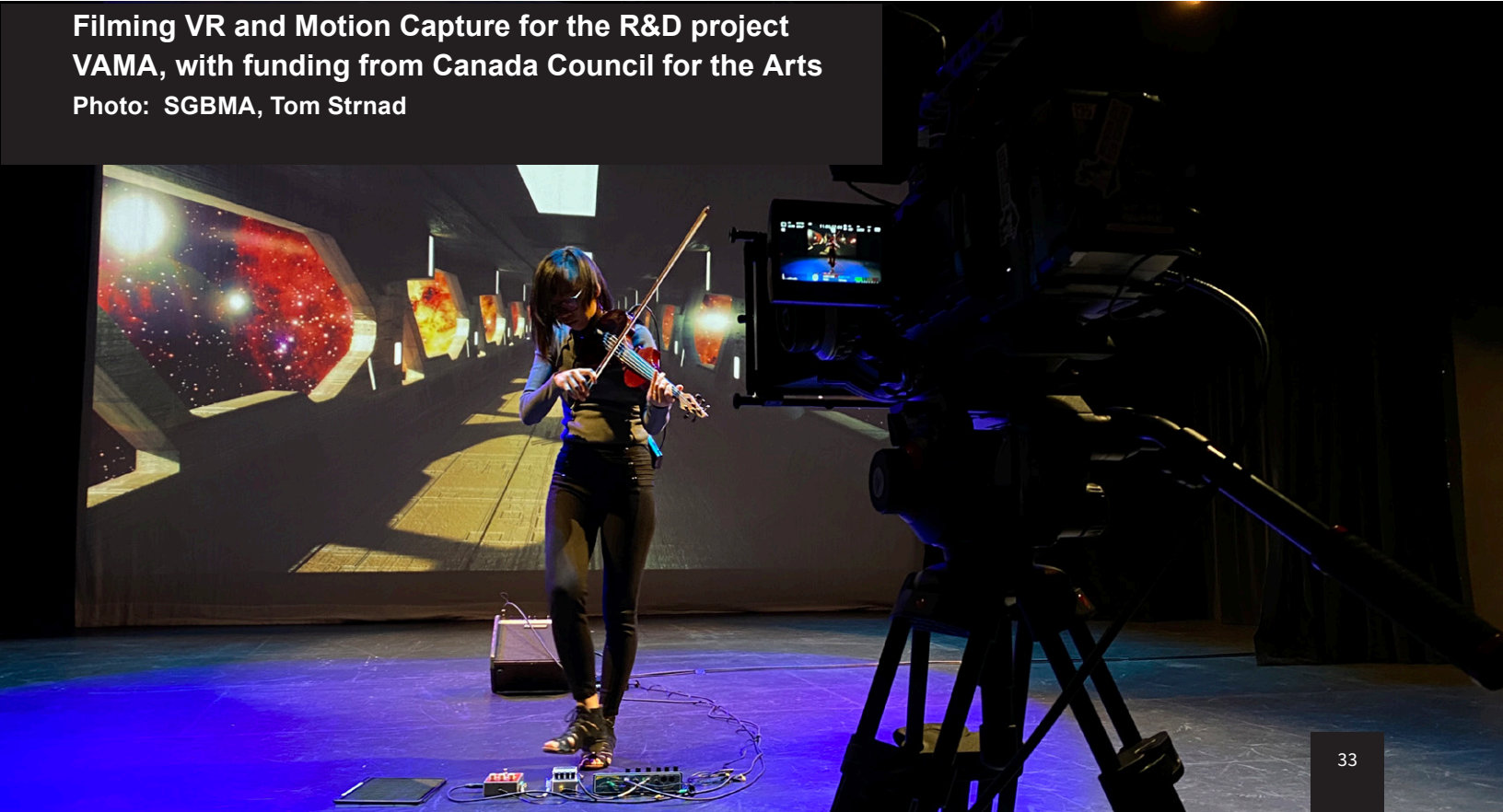


TRADING SKILLS set and studio in the old Meaford High School, Meaford, Ontario  
 Photo: SGBMA, Tom Strnad



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Filming VR and Motion Capture for the R&D project VAMA, with funding from Canada Council for the Arts  
 Photo: SGBMA, Tom Strnad





# Filmmaking Outside the Box: Disconnection and Disruption in Rural Ontario



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