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Ashley Lapin/MEDILL

More than 1,500 people lined up at Cinespace Chicago Film Studios in early February in hopes of being cast as an extra in the film, "Divergent."

Local film studio brings a dystopian Chicago to life

by **ASHLEY LAPIN**

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More than 1,500 tattooed, pierced and martial-arts trained extras lined up for more than two blocks near West 16th and South Rockwell Streets on a Saturday in early February. An open casting call for the Lionsgate/Summit Entertainment film "Divergent" had the normally quiet North Lawndale neighborhood abuzz as early as 3 a.m.

"Divergent" is set in a future dystopian Chicago where society is divided into five factions, each dedicated to a particular virtue: honesty, selflessness, bravery, peacefulness or intelligence. Its protagonist Beatrice (Tris) can only choose one.

The acquisition of this Hollywood project, based on the novel by Chicago-area author Veronica Roth, is a big coup for Cinespace Chicago; it is its first feature film which will begin filming in April.

Cinespace Chicago Film Studios, which opened in May 2011, is the second studio complex to be built by Cinespace Studios Corp. owner Nick Mirkopoulos. Mirkopoulos, who emigrated from Greece to Canada in the 1960s, started the Toronto-based company 25 years ago.

Chicago was chosen for the second Cinespace location because it is one of the greatest cities in the world, according to Alex Pissios, Mirkopoulos' nephew and president of Cinespace Chicago. The company currently has the largest soundstage facility in Chicago. According to a release from the Illinois Film Office, "when fully built out at 1.5 million feet, Cinespace is expected to rank as the largest soundstage outside of Hollywood in the U.S."

Mirkopoulos built the 50 acre studio complex on the site of the former Ryerson Steel factory campus. He received a \$5 million grant from Gov. Quinn's Illinois Jobs Now! Capital construction program. It has been reported that the estimated total cost was \$80 million.

Since its opening, Cinespace Chicago has been successful in attracting projects, particularly in the television sector. It is currently home to the set of popular NBC TV series "Chicago Fire."

Cinespace has experienced a few setbacks, including the 2011 cancelation of Fox's "The Chicago Code" starring Jennifer Beals and the 2012 cancelation of Starz's "Boss" starring Kelsey Grammer.

In addition to bringing recognition to Chicago, Cinespace Chicago is creating jobs locally. Governor Quinn projects that "Divergent" will bring 1,000 jobs and more than \$30 million in spending to Illinois.

"Success breeds success," said director of the Chicago Film Office, Rich Moskal, referring to the fact that "Divergent" will be the first project to make the largest use of Cinespace Chicago's space. "It may be the start of a trend to come."

While Illinois is competitive with other states in offering a 30 percent tax credit to production companies to film here, the previous lack of studio space may have led to lost business.

Chicago natives Andy and Lana Wachowski, most famous for writing and directing "The Matrix" trilogy, initially wanted to set the films in Chicago. Lana Wachowski has previously said that they did not pick Chicago for a shooting location due to a lack of proper filming resources.

However, Pissios said Cinespace Chicago is currently being considered by the Wachowskis for their upcoming film trilogy "Jupiter Ascending" as well as by producers for "Transformers 4."

To become an active part of the community, Pissios and Mirkopoulos partnered with former alderman of the 28th Ward Ed Smith to implement outreach programs and scholarships for children in the neighborhood.

Former Ald. Smith said that they worked together to provide employment to people who can be taught skills such as painting and carpentry. He went door-to-door to get resumes from people who could be eligible.

"It's all about sharing with the people and taking the kids in this neighborhood and showing them that there is more," Pissios said. "Nick says he wants the kids to shoot nail guns, not handguns."

Pissios said that Mirkopoulos' final goal for the film studio is to be a job incubator.

"It has been such a blessed year and a half," Pissios said describing how they have been able to put people to work and help college kids find their dreams with \$10,000 scholarships.

"Divergent" is expected to open in theaters in March 2014.