

Quiet on the set

SW Florida
film industry
is gradually
finding its
own niche

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Film and video production in Southwest Florida is a shadow of its booming competitors to the east and north.

Although Southwest Florida has drawn two major film productions, "Just Cause" and "Gone Fishin'," and the smaller homegrown project "Captiva" since 1994, the area still lacks the production trappings of Miami and Orlando.

Naples and Fort Myers don't have the infrastructure such as sound stages or the name recognition that those two cities have offered to major Hollywood studios for years.

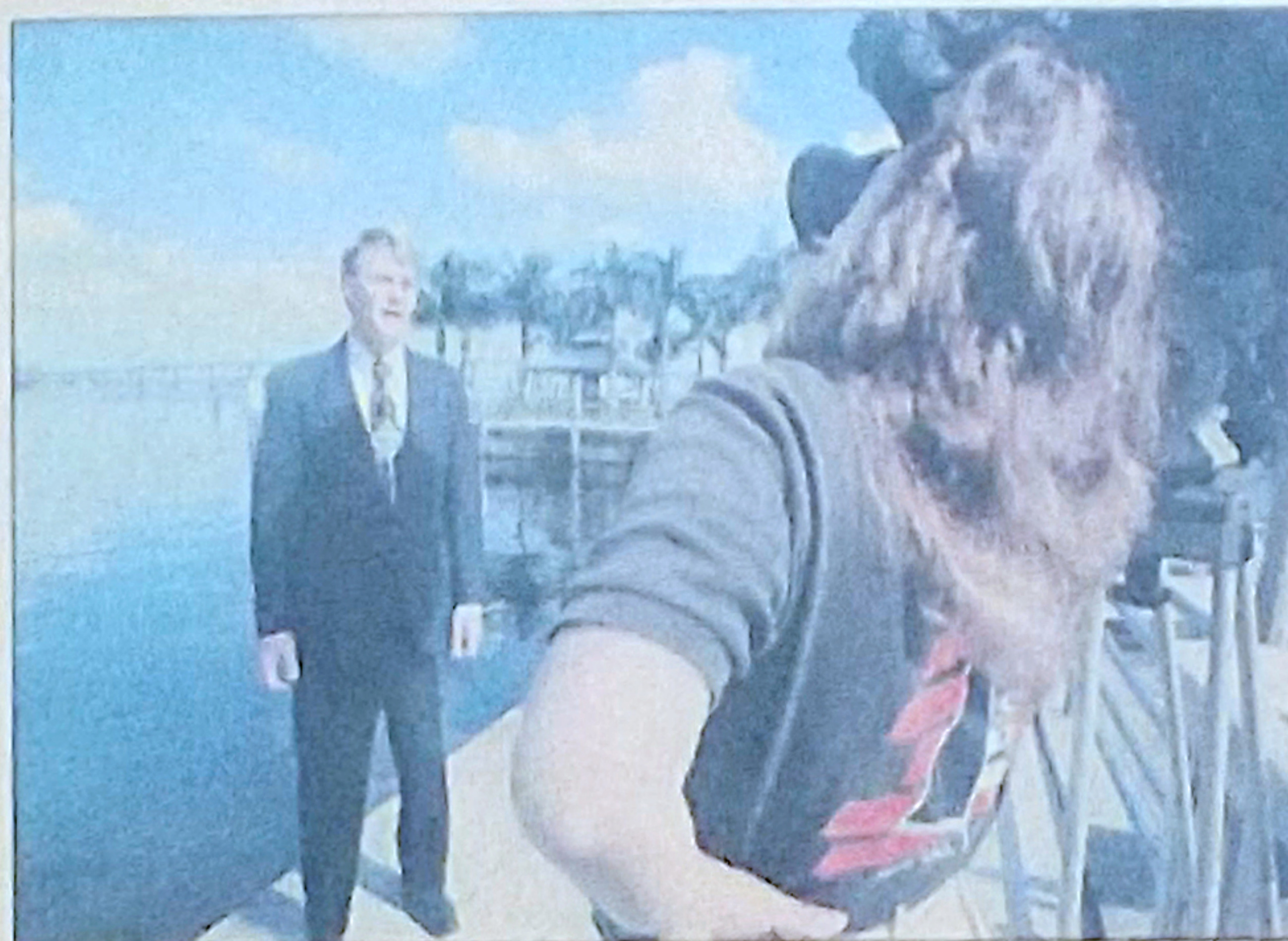
But Southwest Florida is far from being devoid of film and production capabilities. The business of making commercials, promotional videos and smaller films is happening here.

Even though the Southwest Florida Film Commission

doesn't have exact figures on how much money local film and video companies bring to the area, commission director Beverly Fox said their smaller-scale projects are the nuts and bolts of production in Naples and Fort Myers.

And companies have their niches. Some focus on tourism, shooting promotional segments and videos for area businesses and county governments.

Others produce instructional videos for the region's medical community and rent their studios to freelance producers who don't have their own editing or production equipment. Still others are branching out to film documentaries, feature films and international cable shows.



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ON THE WATERFRONT: Ilene Safron of Main Sail Productions shoots a commercial video featuring Don Paight at the Fort Myers Yacht Basin.

"They are the primary source of jobs and business source for local people," Fox said. "They are the basis of the industry here. They are what actually makes up the film and television industry of Southwest Florida."

Here is a glimpse at some of the people who make up Southwest Florida's film and production community.

On a recent morning, Ilene Safron set up her video camera behind Exhibition Hall in downtown Fort Myers. The setting was perfect for the message Safron and her client, Don Paight, wanted to convey. The sun's rays glistened on the

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GETTING READY: Debbie Smythe of Uptown Hair Design does make-up for Don Paight.

SET: First-class video production in area

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waves that rippled a placid Caloosahatchee River. A boat would cruise by Lofton Island every now and then.

Safron, Paight, her assistant Jon Mariotti and make-up artist Debbie Smythe gathered to shoot scenes of downtown Fort Myers to update the promotional video "First Street Entertainment District."

Smythe dabbed on Paight's make-up; then he and Safron began the shoot.

"Did you memorize your lines?" Safron asked.

"I'm working on it," Paightsaid.

A few minutes later, the camera started to roll.

"Hello, I'm Don Paight, the city of Fort Myers Downtown Redevelopment Authority's executive director. So many new projects have been undertaken in Fort Myers in recent months, not just because of this beautiful year-round weather, but because of the city consistently ranking as one of the top five best places to live in the United States."

"Let me bring you up to date with a quick tour."

The shoot was over after eight to 10 takes.

Safron, founder of Main Sail Video Productions, has worked on the video for five years, reshooting areas of downtown Fort Myers as they've been transformed into thriving shops, cafes and clubs. The video has been distributed to about 100 businesses in Orlando, Miami, Fort Lauderdale and elsewhere, businesses that might be interested in investing here.

The video is the kind of work Safron has been doing more of since the former TV news camerawoman started her company in 1989. Her client list has boomed from five to 75, filming for such organizations as the Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau and the redevelopment authority.

She also has shot educational videos for the Imaginarium Hands-on Museum and promotional pieces for clients as far away as Germany.

"This place has continuously maintained a level of excitement because it never sits still," Safron said. "There's always something happening. Therefore, there's always something to shoot a picture of and shoot videos for."