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Report by Andrew Steinhauer Toledo, Sunday, December 17, 2006

140 Mayas in Movie



Director Bessette coaching while Executive Producer Khazoyan videotapes

A little taste of Hollywood style movie making is taking place in the rainforest of Toledo. The North American independent film company 10X Productions arrived in Belize last week to begin pre-production work on the film **"The Enemy God"** which will be filmed in the

Cattle Landing and Machaca areas of Toledo District.

The actual filming will start on January 15th and end in early March. The shoot is tentatively scheduled for 56 days, informed Executive Producer Tom Khazoyan. Tom explained that 140 Belizean Mayas from the Toledo villages are now working in various capacities on "The Enemy God". Some have leading roles, some speaking parts, some as extras, and others in auxiliary capacities as carpenters, electricians, set construction and wardrobe. Tom additionally informed that they are in the process of constructing two tribal villages in the area north of Cattle Landing. The budget for the Belize filming is set at one million dollars, though as is typical in making movies, even independent movies, budget over-runs are the rule, not the exception.

The film was originally going to be shot on location in the Amazon jungle area of Venezuela using the indigenous peoples, the Yanamamo who are a semi-nomadic South American people. A number of anthropologists have lived among them and written about the tribe's traditional way of life. According to the anthropological writings (with a definite Euro-Christian perspective) the Yanamamo are a war-like people that have a violent way of dealing with problems. Before the 10 X Productions film crew could start shooting last year Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez put a moratorium on using the Yanamamo lands and people for the movie. Consequently through the wonders of film magic, the Belizean Maya are cast as the Yanamamo and the Toledo rainforest is transformed into the Amazon rainforest.

The movie's screenplay is based on tribal stories told to

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writer-director Christopher Bessette by a leader of the Yanamamo people, Bautista Cajieuwa (Shoefoot). Bautista, who is in his 70s has been lobbying all over the world to get his historical tale told. He believes that the medium of movies is the best way to reach the most people. Now Executive Producer Tom Khazoyan, Producer Matt Dawson, Director Christopher Bessette and Director of Photography John Petrella are making Bautista's wish a reality.

Film Commissioner Emory King facilitated the myriad technical details to get the film company to Belize. The North American producers and director all voiced praises over Emory's reliability and his way of expediting bureaucratic paperwork. He untangled bureaucratic knots with the agility of Houdini. They said thanks to Emory, Belize is on its way to getting a reputation as a country friendly to movie production companies.

To the residents of Toledo \$1,000,000 is a significant windfall, but in the world of filmmaking a million bucks is considered chicken feed. Heck, some bankable stars like J-Lo, Tom Cruise or Leonardo Di Caprio get \$20 million per flick. Maybe, just maybe, after 'The Enemy God' is



Two tribal villages are being built near Punta Gorda

released, Belize might draw more, bigger budgeted films. Ten years ago nobody would have dreamed of the tourism boom we are now experiencing. Ten years down the line, possibly filmmaking could be a major money making enterprise for Belize also. From tourism boom to movie boom.

The Jewel certainly has a plethora of natural beauties - unspoiled wilderness galore; its only an hour and forty-five minute plane flight from the States; no language barrier, the entire population can converse in English and it's a non-strife ridden country- no wars, no armed conflicts as found in Afghanistan, Kosovo or the Sudan. An ideal foreign location for visionary moviemakers.

Right now the idea of Belize as a movie Mecca comes off as something like wishful thinking- a dream. But dreams are what movies are made of. Movies are based on myths which through cinematic techniques create a new hyper-reality. Reel life can impact and redefine real life in highly provocative ways.

The salient point about 'The Enemy God's' presence in Belize is that 140 Mayas are learning first hand by doing, how to make movies- from emoting, to cinematography, to set design and lighting. By the time principal shooting is wrapped up in Toledo, the Maya associated with 10X Productions should have the know-how to produce-direct their own film. When and if the Maya use those skills and rustle up the necessary financing to make their own movie is anybody's guess. If they do, a new, exciting era will

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dawn in Toledo.

The filming of 'The Enemy God' in Belize's "forgotten district" could be the seminal exposure that puts Belize on the international film producers' "A" list for exotic, picturesque movie locales. From tourism boom to movie boom.

And don't forget the mythic bottom line- movies mean money.

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