

# *How ‘Blue Bloods’ and Other Shows Resumed Filming in Pandemic N.Y.C.*

With the city’s economy in a downturn, film production has been a bright spot, with crews again filling the city’s sound stages and, increasingly, the streets.



By Sharon Otterman

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Across from Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan recently, dozens of crew members in yellow safety vests filmed a scene for the TV medical drama, “New Amsterdam,” as real doctors and nurses skirted past them. A few blocks away, the television series “Manifest” wrapped up a morning shoot inside a cozy bar, then set up a crane to light a night shoot at a Midtown playground.

With Broadway dark, concert venues closed and live performances strictly limited, New York’s powerhouse arts and entertainment industry has been devastated by the coronavirus pandemic. But amid the downturn, film production has been a bright spot, with television and streaming series again filling the city’s sound stages and, increasingly, the city’s streets, despite a rise in virus cases in New York and across the nation.

The film and television industry, which brought \$60 billion to the city in the year before the pandemic, is not yet back to its old heights. Of the nearly 80 series that were filming or planning to film in New York City in the 2019-2020 season, 35 were back at work by early November — including popular shows like “Younger and “Blue Bloods” — with another five expected back by the end of the year, according to the Mayor’s Office of Media and Entertainment.

A virus surge could threaten that recovery, particularly if Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo declares New York a “red zone” and orders all nonessential businesses closed again.

Still, in a pandemic-weary Manhattan, whose streetscapes are pockmarked by boarded-up storefronts and “for rent” signs, the sight of dozens of shiny production trucks and the hum of workers rolling equipment on and off film sets is giving the city a glimpse of its former self. It is also getting thousands of people back to work, and burnishing the image of New York as a resilient metropolis to the millions who watch New York-based television shows worldwide.

The city’s major studios — Kaufman Astoria Studios in Queens, Steiner Studios in the Brooklyn Navy Yard and Silvercup Studios in Long Island City — all report that they are full, though each stage can only function at 50 percent of its regular occupancy under state rules.

“It’s a very mobile industry; they don’t have to be in New York,” said Hal Rosenbluth, the president of Kaufman Astoria Studios in Queens, of his studio being full again. “The thing that made me feel good, is that the executives that make these decisions were still confident to come back to New York, and that is the best statement you can say.”



Production crews, such as on the television series “New Amsterdam,” must wear safety gear. Sarah Stacke for The New York Times

The overlapping safety protocols of the industry’s labor unions, the Hollywood parent companies and the New York state and city government have led to robust safety protections, at least for major studio projects. While near daily virus testing is turning up coronavirus cases among the crew and actors, the productions, for the most part, have continued with few delays. To satisfy homebound audiences eager for new content, studios been willing to pay big for safety measures, with production costs ballooning by around 30 percent.

“Just the Covid division alone for each production could be up to 40 people,” said Doug Steiner, the chief executive of Steiner Studios, where seven series, including Amazon’s “The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel” and Showtime’s “City on a Hill,” are back in business.

About one person every week or two test positive somewhere on the lot, Mr. Steiner said. But so far, he said, the productions have managed to isolate cases and their contacts, and continue filming. Studios pay for testing, and their coronavirus teams do their own contact tracing.

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The city said that at least one production had shut down for two weeks because of virus cases, while others have shut down for a day or two.

It's impossible to get a complete picture of how often the coronavirus is appearing on set, as no one is tracking that number fully. Daniel Hank, a New York producer and a member of the Directors Guild of America, cited informal numbers put out by the organization internally, which reported a total of 113 virus "events"— which could include anything from a false positive to multiple positive tests — on film and television sets across North America, 59 of which resulted in a pause in production. The Directors Guild said that those numbers were anecdotal and not intended for public release.

Projects have found a way to keep filming because it is too costly just to stop, said Mr. Hank, who leads a weekly call for producers to share advice on filming during a pandemic. "It adds a level of complexity that's one more challenge to overcome in an industry filled with challenges," he said.

On-location shooting in New York has been slower to return, with the logistical puzzle of filming in a busy city made even more difficult by new social distancing requirements and increased demands on outdoor space. Outdoor dining structures, for example, now cover many sidewalks and parking spots.

(Filming in Los Angeles is also recovering, although permit requests remain at about half the levels analysts would expect in a typical year, according to FilmLA, the partner film office for the city of Los Angeles.)

The interplay between the public and the film crew in the city has also been transformed. Film crews are used to dealing with a mix of curious onlookers and "real New Yorkers" who walk right through the set without noticing.

"Now, I see people do a double take and walk the other way," said Kelly Mahoney, the first assistant director on the set of the NBC series "Manifest," which was back shooting in Manhattan for the first time in mid-November. "It was really strange to me."

On set, the most obvious change is that masks are mandatory, as are face shields for the crew closest to the actors. Portable sinks have become a new must-have street accessory. Color-coded bracelets or lanyards mark what zone a crew member is assigned to, in order to limit contact between workers and those allowed near the action. Actors take off their own masks to film scenes, and then put them on again when a crew member yells cut.

“Manifest” has not yet had a virus case on set, said Harvey Waldman, one of the show’s producers, “but it is a little bit like playing Russian roulette, all the time.” At the same time, he said, “you also feel this comradeship, and you feel that people are watching out for each other.”

The productions have mostly stuck to filming inside sound stages, where they can tightly control the environment. Script writers have also made adjustments, limiting intimate scenes, extras and shifting some shoots to more spacious settings outside the city.

Before the pandemic, the Mayor’s Office of Media and Entertainment generally issued about 1,000 permits per month for outdoor filming on public property. After a complete spring shutdown, the numbers began to rebound in September, when film crews of up to 100 were allowed to work. Last month, 559 permits were granted.

“Slow and steady wins the race, and that’s what we are seeing right now,” said Anne del Castillo, the city’s media and entertainment commissioner. “It’s one of the bright spots in the recovery, and I love talking about it.”

But the return to the city streets in the last few weeks has offered a sometimes worrying level of interaction between the crews and the public, with both sides wary.

On the set of “New Amsterdam” on a recent Tuesday, for example, the large crew found it impossible to perfectly socially distance while setting up for the actors in a small park and traffic lane on First Avenue. Bikers kept rolling through the set, and the lighting crane was temporarily stored right next to the active Citi Bike rental station.

“Please stay at least six feet away — we have all been tested,” one crew member warned a lingering pedestrian.

While all the major New York City studios have been fully booked, location shooting has been slower to pick up. Sarah Stacke for The New York Times

With the extra cost of everything from testing to transportation, many projects, particularly smaller ones or those not yet filming, are pausing until the spring, said Flo Mitchell Brown, the chair of the industry group New York Production Alliance.

Commercials and smaller projects do not have to abide by the same safety protocols agreed to by the major studios, so their virus protections can be more variable. False positives have also caused closures on some sets, to the point where some major studios have stopped using rapid tests, Mr. Hank said.

Inside the city’s live television studios, frequent testing, social distancing and masks have also enabled a return to production, though with huge changes from the pre-pandemic era. Candi Carter, the executive producer of the “Tamron Hall” show, which broadcasts from the Upper West Side, uses an empty green room as her makeshift office, because all the guests and audience on the show are virtual. Everyone who can work from home does.

Though things feel “bizarre, to say the least,” Ms. Carter said, it is an improvement over the many weeks this spring Ms. Hall was filming from her New York City kitchen. Audiences seem to agree, and ratings are up.

“I think people want to see regular TV again,” she said. “Everyone on our staff is completely on board. And that’s how we are able to do it.”