

Seoul's rising cinematic profile



American actor Chris Evans, in the role of Captain America, talks with a staff member during the filming of the “Avengers: Age of Ultron” in Seoul earlier this month. / Yonhap



Cameron Bailey,
Toronto
International Film
Festival's
artistic director and
co-programmer
/ Courtesy of TIFF

By Jason Bechervaise

Seoul has recently come under the cinematic spotlight.

The upcoming Marvel blockbuster, “Avengers: Age of Ultron,” just wrapped up its shoot in the Korean capital. The Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) announced last month that Seoul will become the focus of its “City to City” program for this year’s event in September.

While these developments took some by surprise, it could be argued that they represent a natural progression of Seoul’s growing influence in cinema.

In an interview with The Korea Times, Cameron Bailey, TIFF’s artistic director and co-programmer of the City to City section, said Seoul is significant as the heart of the Korean movie sector that has been producing a “ vast range of exciting, innovative films for decades now.” What’s equally important is that such progress has manifested into box office receipts.

“One of the most impressive things about South Korea as a film nation has been how its insisted on maintaining a strong audience for Korean films. Whether through film education, government policy or the sheer strength of the films, the Korean film industry has kept drawing Koreans to movie theaters,” said Bailey.

Last year, the local film industry exceeded even the more ambitious expectations to become the most successful year on record, with the tickets for Korean films surpassing 200 million admissions. While Hollywood films were forced to the sidelines, Korea proved a lucrative market for certain American films such as “Iron Man 3,” which amassed 9 million sales.

The fact that numerous Hollywood icons came to Seoul last year to promote their films reflects this conscious endeavor by the studios to capitalize on Korea’s remunerative box office market. Although this didn’t necessarily always pay dividends, visits by Robert Downey Jr., Leonardo DiCaprio, Matt Damon and other stars appeared to convey Korea’s increasing stature.

Last year also signified Korea’s growing influence in other ways with three of the country’s most prolific directors — Park Chan-wook, Kim Jee-woon and Bong Joon-ho — who released their respective English-language film debuts and, while they met varying degrees of commercial success, they all demonstrated that they could expand their scope into international projects.

Of course, it’s not just Korea Hollywood studios are playing closer attention to, but Asia as a whole, especially China. But if there was ever a confirmation of Korea and, more specifically, Seoul’s increasingly palpable place in the world in terms of its film industry, it came when Marvel decided to shoot “significant elements” for the highly anticipated Avengers sequel.

Incentives, no doubt, played a part: the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism reimbursed up to 30 percent of the total cost of the production in Korea, which is estimated at around 10 billion won (\$9.37 million). However, this is true of any of foreign location shoot where tax breaks are crucial in attracting major studio productions.

Kevin Feige, president of Marvel Studios and producer of the film, said in a news release “South Korea is the perfect location for a movie of this magnitude because it features cutting edge technology, beautiful landscapes and spectacular architecture,” reflecting Seoul’s technical prowess.

Needless to say, with the first Avengers film having amassed over 7 million admissions in Korea in 2012, an almost certain boost in box office revenue was undoubtedly another factor in the decision to shoot in the capital.

“We can all see the enthusiasm, the sophistication and the buying power of the Korean film audience, so I wouldn’t be surprised to see many more foreign productions looking to film in Seoul,” said Bailey from TIFF.

Bailey who announced in March that Seoul will become the focus of this year’s City to City program said, “We’ve always looked for cities where the quality of production is high, and where we can find new innovations in cinema. Seoul has all that.”

The program now in its sixth edition — which has concentrated on cities such as Tel Aviv, Istanbul and Mumbai in previous years — is an opportunity for festival goers, journalists and industry personnel to see a range of Korean films at this year’s festival.

“We’re looking for eight feature-length films — mostly fiction, but we’re also interested in feature documentaries,” said Bailey.

“The films can be commercial or independent, so long as they have a strong filmmaking voice; we’re looking for great filmmaking with distinctive perspectives.

“Compared to previous editions, the difference this year is the depth of production. There are so many well-made, interesting films from Seoul’s filmmakers every year. It’s simply a bigger industry than anyplace we’ve been with City to City, except Mumbai.

“Even with Mumbai, the independent sector is gaining new footing now, while in Seoul it’s been thriving for years. This should give us the luxury of choice.”

While it is unclear what films are to feature in this year’s program that takes place from Sept. 4 to 14, it seems certain that Seoul is set to be put in the spotlight even further.

And with the new Avengers film due for release in May 2015, the portrayed capital will likely signify its technological advancement and growing cinematic influence.

Jason Bechervaise is a movie columnist of The Korea Times. — ED.