

# Film industry soars within Haiti's bleak economy

## The movie industry in Haiti is booming, with film production rising 300 percent in the last five years.

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ARIANA CUBILLOS/AP

Haitian actors Nice Simon, left, and Antonio Cherammy film 'I Love You Anne' in Port-au-Prince in June. Haiti has seen its film industry boom recently.

PORT-AU-PRINCE --

Even in hard times, Haitians go to the movies. Now they're also making them in record numbers -- about 10 feature films a year -- rivaling Cuba as the Caribbean's biggest movie producer and often outselling better-financed imports.

The ultimate dream? To transform the impoverished, politically volatile country of 8 million into a cinema powerhouse -- Haitiwood -- following the lead of India and Nigeria.

While most Haitian industries are stagnant, show business is booming, driven by plunging production costs and an appetite among Haitians at home and abroad for movies shot in their own Creole language.

"Movies are becoming Haiti's most popular art form after music," said Arnold Antonin, a director and president of the Haitian Filmmakers Association.

He estimates Haitian film production has risen 300 percent in the last five years, including an explosion in straight-to-DVD releases shot in Haitian migrant communities in the United States.

The country's first Creole-language film was released in 1980 -- Rassoul Labuchin's *Anita*, about a peasant girl who becomes a servant for a wealthy family.

Today Haiti still does not have a national film commission to finance local production. But cameras have continued to roll, even after a bloody 2004 revolt that toppled President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and plunged the country into tumult.

"Despite all the political chaos and economic problems, Haitian cinema keeps growing," said Richard Senecal, another Haitian director whose 2006 film *Cousins* was featured in several international film festivals.

The arrival of inexpensive digital video cameras and editing equipment opened the door to budding Haitian filmmakers, lowering production cost from hundreds of thousands of dollars or more to about \$40,000 -- money that typically comes from private sponsors or local investors.

While lacking technical polish, Haitian films are exploring weighty social issues.

Last year's hit *The President Has AIDS* explored the virus's stigma in Haitian society, while *Cousins* dealt with prostitution.

There also are love stories inspired by soap operas.

Haitians can't get enough, shelling out \$2.70 per ticket -- about twice what most Haitians earn in a day -- at decaying cineplexes.

A small number of Haitian films have received limited releases in U.S. theaters, but most people rent them in stores or buy pirated copies in a thriving underground market in Haitian-American communities in the United States.

"I like the fact that they use Haitian actors. They're very elegant in the use of our language," said Charles Roudo, a 53-year-old janitor at Capitol Theater in downtown Port-au-Prince.

But some are not so optimistic about the industry's future. Piracy robs filmmakers of earnings. And the Haitian Filmmakers Association is calling for improved professional standards, warning that bad lighting and stiff acting will eventually turn off moviegoers.

"Unless we start making better movies technically . . . Haiti's film industry could die in the womb," said Antonin, who would like to see a film school open in Haiti to train filmmakers. "We have the talent, we just need the tools."