

IBEW Members Keep Power-Hungry Hollywood Up and Running

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You won't see them on the big screen. They don't strut down the red carpet. And they rarely sip champagne at glitzy box office premieres. But in a town chock full of big-name stars, big-shot producers and big-budget blockbuster movies, they are the film industry's real-life power brokers.

"We don't need the applause or the attention," said Don Easy, an IBEW electrician who works on movie sets around the world. "But we do need adventure, and this job has plenty of that."

In the movie business, where the lights, the cameras and the action all require one basic thing—electricity—Easy and about 650 other members of Hollywood, Calif., Local 40 are the behind-the-scenes engine powering a multibillion dollar industry. Their work—for Universal, Paramount, Fox, Disney, Warner Brothers and nearly a dozen other studios—keeps the energy flowing and the movies coming to a theater near you. And they do it with none of the fanfare of a big-time Hollywood production.

"People always ask what it's like to rub elbows with the stars," said Bill Brinkmeyer, Local 40's business manager and a former movie studio electrician. "We don't rub elbows. We do all the jobs that keep the studios up and running."

Members of Local 40 are quick to point out that they are bona fide electricians and not the lighting technicians often recognized come Oscar-time. (The work of creating lighting effects on film went to the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees way back in the 1940s.) But IBEW members have a long history—more than 85 years—of doing jobs critical to the movie and TV industries.

At Universal—which combines the world's largest movie studio with a massive theme park—members built and maintain the entire self-contained electric grid, including a switch and substation powering the 420 acres of soundstages, sets and backlots, plus the world-famous studio tour. They are also in charge of audio systems, special effects and pyrotechnics for theme park attractions like "Terminator," "WaterWorld" and "Fear Factor." IBEW members install, maintain and troubleshoot air conditioning and heating systems for soundstages and offices. One electrician is even assigned to the monumental task of monitoring and changing thousands of light bulbs across the studio and theme park. "Anything electrical, we do it," Brinkmeyer said.

On location, IBEW members like Don Easy have a critical role in making a movie happen. Easy—who has worked on movies like "Star Trek," "Pirates of the Caribbean 2 and 3," "Mission: Impossible 3," "Amistad" and "Vegas Vacation"—is in charge of keeping entire base camps rows after rows of trailers and equipment used in movie production—up and running for weeks at a time. That means powering everything, big and small, from the massive camera equipment on set, all the way to the hair dryer inside a movie star's trailer.

Like most people in the industry, Easy—who has worked on five films with legendary director Steven Spielberg—has a list of stories about memorable encounters with celebrities. On one set, John Travolta rode his scooter. On another, a young Jodie Foster defended him to an



Don Easy at work on the set of the "Pirates of the Caribbean" sequels.



Hundreds of electrical cables helped power the multi-million dollar production.



overbearing boss. On yet another, Sir Anthony Hopkins encouraged him to "just call me Tony."

But Easy says the most important part of his job is keeping the producers happy. "We have to push ourselves as hard as we can to do a good job, to uphold the reputation of quality work that the IBEW is known for," he said. "We always have to show them we are the best."

At Warner Brothers, IBEW members have the same commitment to quality. One of their many jobs is running the big electric wind machines that sent a breeze through the outdoor set of "ER" and helped rock George Clooney's boat during the filming of "A Perfect Storm." The machine—basically an airplane propeller with six-foot wooden blades—is called a "ritter" and provides everything from a quiet breeze to a powerful gust of wind. Running them is just one of the many tasks for the studio's unified electrical shop.

"We are a diversified work force at Warner Brothers," said Robert Kelly, foreman of the electric construction department. "We do production, maintenance, construction, high voltage. We really do it all."

At Universal's theme park, some attractions present special challenges for IBEW members, according to Alicia Allen, foreman of the theme park's electric department. Millions of gallons of water constantly pour through the "Jurassic Park" ride, which takes visitors on a white-knuckle boat trip through the land of dinosaurs. "Water and electricity don't mix," she said. "Boxes and conduits get rusty pretty fast. We change out a lot of those."

Universal was also the first Hollywood studio capable of running entirely on emergency generators. When rolling power outages struck California in 2003, Local 40 electricians kept the studio going while many of its competitors were forced to shut down. The continued production saved the studio millions of dollars.

With more than eight decades of Hollywood history, just two Local 40 members have been recognized with the ultimate movie achievement award. In 1997, electricians Bill Masten and Rick Prey won Academy Awards for technical achievement. The pair developed a unique mobile lighting system still used for exterior shooting today.

Still, few other IBEW members ever see their names up in lights. While other unions get on-screen credit at the end of Hollywood films, the IBEW has been satisfied so far to continue its work in anonymity. That could change in upcoming contracts, Brinkmeyer said, as Local 40 prepares to ask studios to put its name and logo in the credit roll of feature films.

"We want people to know the IBEW name," he said. "And we want them to know it stands for quality."

IBEW members operate power systems at all major Hollywood studios, including Warner Brothers.



IBEW members at Warner Brothers work on a generator. During film production, each soundstage requires dozens of the huge machines.

