ON LOCATION

Kwame Amouko discusses his path to city's film office director, from photo lab to ‘Chicago Fire’ locations manager

By Nina Metz

Last October, as Richard Moskal was preparing to retire after 23 years as head of the Chicago Film Office, I asked about the wildest request he received during his tenure. He told me about an idea floated (and then later abandoned) by Michael Bay during the making of “Transformers: Dark of the Moon” that would have required a stunt from the 1980s Berto McCarthy movie “The Huntress” in which a car zooms off the parking deck of one of the Marina City towers into the river.

Bay wanted to do it with multiple cars — on fire. When I told the story to Kwame Amouko, who was overseeing the director of the city film office at the time, he promptly laughed.

“Just that what you have to do,” he said. “You have to take those requests and think them all the way through and figuring out ‘Is there a way to possibly do this?’ And sometimes the answer is no. But you’ve got to be at least 15 feet deep, the sheer logistics of making sure that’s going to work inside of a working city is a daunting task.”

All of that became even more complicated when the number of projects in town increases, as it has on the TV side over the past few years. With Film Prize-scriptor shows available on one format or another each year, studios are in need of shooting locations that have available studio space and offer film incentives (Illinois offers a 30% tax credit) and try to possible Chicago could see an even higher uptick in series-based high-budget shows. While the state film office focuses on job creation by helping to bring TV and movie productions to Illinois, the city film office has a different mandate: Primarily as the on-the-ground liaison between productions and the city itself — everything from street closure permits to coordinating extraordinary requests (cars falling off a Marina City skycraper) that involves aligning with various city agencies.

“Getting buy-in from those agencies can be a challenge. You have to navigate around the city-hall running and anything that looks like it can stop that, they’re going to push up against, absolutely,” Amouko said.

“But it’s not my job to tell them see, yes, this could be an inconvenience, but we can make it work.”

Jim Lemliah, the chief marketing officer for the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events, was present during our interview Monday. Amouko comes to the job with a number of years experience on the other side of that equation, in the locations manager for NBC’s “Chicago P.D.” and “Chicago Fire.”

The seventh season (which wrapped this past spring) was my last,”

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Kwame Amouko is the new director of the Chicago Film Office under Mayor Lori Lightfoot. When Amouko was a locations manager, he handled high-pressure tasks.
you're the work we've done has spoken for itself and it has been exciting.

He's an interesting guy. Kelly told me he was a foodie but not a person who was knowledgeable about food or restaurant business. He used to do the ABC series called "Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives" as an administrator at Film Office. Also, he has a history as an executive producer, so he's known for his role in the organization of the cultural content of the city.

He has met the new mayor, Lori Lightfoot, and he has been a very cool guy. He's been through many different public relations issues in life. For example, it was given to Derrick Graslie, then-WTTW consultant on the series. It was given to Derrick Graslie, the former director Moskal when he was a human quilt of various people, including Studs Terkel, who had learned very much (at the university), so behind-the-scenes, it was a human quilt of various people, including Studs Terkel, who had...