

Cameras roll again in Lake

BY DIANNE COPELON

Lake County, especially Mount Dora, has always attracted filmmakers, both large and small. The latest project, an independent film called "This Man's Life," brought stars from Hollywood and extras from as far away as Jacksonville to participate on a train ride out of town last month.

The film writer and director was Todd Thompson, an Orlando filmmaker from Stars North, an award-winning film production company he co-founded in 1999.

"Don't we know you?" asked some onlookers standing in front of the Chamber of Commerce office, a former train station in Mount Dora.

Thompson nodded —yes. He was attracted to the town five years ago, when his company shot "Time & Again," a short film featuring veteran actor Seymour Cassel, in Clockmaker Roy Gress,



old shop on Baker Street. That film, based on an original story by Thompson, who co-produced and directed it, swept the film festival circuit in 2002 and won several awards, including Best Short.

Thompson is an "indie— an independent filmmaker who works apart from the large Hollywood studios and on a tight budget. He often uses established stars who are willing to participate on a pro bono basis. Most think it important to support upcoming independent filmmakers such as Thompson.

Thompson credits much of his success to the cooperation he gets from his colleagues as well as local people who help and donate their services. When he set "This Man's Life" on a train, he was aided by Neil Bagaus and his team of train conductors. Bagaus, who operates the Inland Railway in Mount Dora, Eustis and Tavares, didn't think twice about offering his engine, train cars and time, even after Thompson told him they needed to travel up and down the tracks for three consecutive 12-hour days, in order to tell the story they were trying to tell. Bagaus later said he was

thrilled with the exposure and the attention his company received participating in the project. A similar thing occurred in Orlando at its downtown Amtrak Station. Marcia Kostival, the station's lead agent, was equally willing to help.

"This Man's Life" is the third in a series of four short films from Stars North. Written and directed by Thompson, the film tells the magical tale of a man traveling home to claim his estranged father's inheritance when he encounters a peculiar stranger who seems to know everything about his life. The film stars Michael Rooker ("Days of Thunder," "JFK"), Bill Cobbs ("Night at the Museum," "That Thing You Do!") and Betsy Brantley ("The Princess Bride," "Deep Impact").

"This Man's Life" was filmed over a period of five days in early December in and around the Mount Dora/Orlando area. Upon completion, it will be distributed on the international film festival circuit.

Thompson said that Stars North is committed to developing and producing projects in Florida that employ local cast and crew for worldwide distribution.

"Creativity, Collaboration, Celebrity and a whole lot of Community Support are what makes independent filmmaking 'Stars North Style' work," said Thompson.

