

# RobotWorx goes Hollywood

## Local robots become stars in 'Knight Rider'

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MARION — If NBC's "Knight Rider" becomes the No. 1-rated show on television, you won't hear Keith Wanner complaining.

While the revival of the 1980s show may not do for his company's robots what the original series did for its star, David Hasselhoff, like most businesses RobotWorx would welcome the extra attention.

"Anything like that the more things we do just gives more credibility to what we do as a company," Wanner said, noting that NBC like the production company that pursued RobotWorx for a History Channel program found RobotWorx on the Web. "When somebody sees us and they know we've done something like 'Modern Marvels' or 'Knight Rider,' it just helps our business."

When NBC Universal Studios needed industrial robots at the end of May, it approached the West Fairground Street business, which buys and sells new and used robots, and by the end of June RobotWorx had shipped two reconditioned industrial Fanuc ArcMate 100i RJ2 robots to California.

"It's a big deal for us," said Amy McKinzie, RobotWorx publicist. "We're just excited to see it on NBC. ... We were actually really pleased at being able to show our robots and our logo."

Wanner said his company negotiated with the studio over ensuring that the RobotWorx name would be visible on the robots, adding that he told the studio that because RobotWorx doesn't make the robots just a shot of the robots was of no marketing use to his company.

"It was critical the name was showing on the robot," he said. "They did more than we asked for, really. There were some pretty neat shots, too. Like in one scene (star Justin Bruening) gives a robot a high-five."

Named Katie and Lisa by NBC, the two robots serve as ultra-modern assistants in the garage where KITT, the car fitted with artificial intelligence, is kept. In the first "Knight Rider" episode, the robots were used to scan KITT for damages.

Robert Edens Jr., a robot technician at RobotWorx in Marion, trained the special effects technician who will program the robotic arms from RobotWorx for the new Knight Rider television series. The robotic arm in this photo is similar to the ones used in the TV show. (Bill Sinden/The Marion Star)



Michael Hall, RobotWorx customer service manager, was pleased that the robots appeared in a number of scenes.

“I was very impressed that they figured so prominently in the story line,” Hall said, adding that he’s heard the show’s producers plan to increase the amount of humanlike interaction the machines have with their human co-stars. “Hopefully, they’ll be a regular feature, and they’ll be in at least one or two scenes per episode. The folks at Universal are going to be the ones that make the final call on that.”

RobotWorx prepared the robots for their debut, technicians reworking, testing, cleaning and painting both to make sure they were camera-ready. Additional cabling was purchased so the controllers could be placed farther from the robots, eliminating the noise emitted by fans inside the controllers, said McKinzie, who declined to reveal the details of compensation RobotWorx is receiving from the show.

NBC also took advantage of the free training that RobotWorx provides for customers, sending a set technician to Marion to learn about robot programming. “We basically set them up here, provided them with a certain amount of training on how to program them once they got them on the set,” Hall said. “As with anything new there’s going to be some bumps in the road.”

Hall, who serves as the first point of contact when NBC calls, can provide the studio with spare parts, technical assistance and hands-on technicians. “Primarily the questions are usually related to programming, things like that, when they hit a tough spot and need help with a procedure,” he said.

Viewers of the first episode saw the robots generated scanning beams across KITT as they inspected the teched-up Ford Mustang, something they don’t do in the real world.

“A lot of what you’re going to see in any type of television show or feature film is going to kind of delve into the realm of science fiction,” Hall said, but added, “The scanning is not too far from the truth. There are robots in the automotive industry that do scan auto parts. Some of it is not really as far removed from reality as we think.”

And the RobotWorx name may be coming to a theater near you next summer when Paramount Pictures’ GI Joe movie, which called for two robots used to operate on the film’s main character, is due for release.

**Reporter John Jarvis: 740-375-5154 or [jjarvis@nncogannett.com](mailto:jjarvis@nncogannett.com)**