

Made in Louisiana

location report



Louisiana Purchase

Productions continue their spending sprees in the Bayou State

By Todd Longwell



Besides taking down a couple of street signs, little had to be done to transform New Orleans' French Quarter into a 1920s setting for "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" shoot.

The bar at the Hilton Shreveport was buzzing with Hollywood players in the early months of 2008. Samuel L. Jackson and the late Bernie Mac were in town to shoot Dimension Films' "Soul Men," and Michael Cera and Olivia Wilde were there for the prehistoric comedy "The Year One" (Sony). That's not exactly on a par with Morton's on past Oscar nights, but it's pretty impressive for a nondescript watering hole in a medium-sized Louisiana burg that many industryites have considered part of "fly-over country" in years past.

"It was sort of like the studio commissary," says "Soul Men" producer David Friendly of the scene in the Hilton bar. "Everybody was in there, all the time." On the streets, he'd bump into Oliver Stone scouting Lionsgate's "W" or cast and crew working on MGM's "The Longshots," starring Ice Cube.

Friendly's story may not bring cheer to film workers based in Los Angeles, but it illustrates how film and TV production have continued to flourish in Louisiana in spite of stiff competition from states that have recently enacted competing incentive programs.

As of October, productions have created more

than 2,000 positions in Shreveport and northwest Louisiana in 2008. New Orleans has also been hopping, hosting Universal's "Cirque du Freak," New Line's "Final Destination 4," the indie "I Love You Phillip Morris," starring Jim Carrey, and the new Disney Channel series "Imagination Movers" (with 97% of the cast and crew made up of New Orleans residents).

"We have seen an exponential increase in productions (statewide)," observes Christopher Stelly, director of film and television for the Louisiana Office of Entertainment Industry Development.

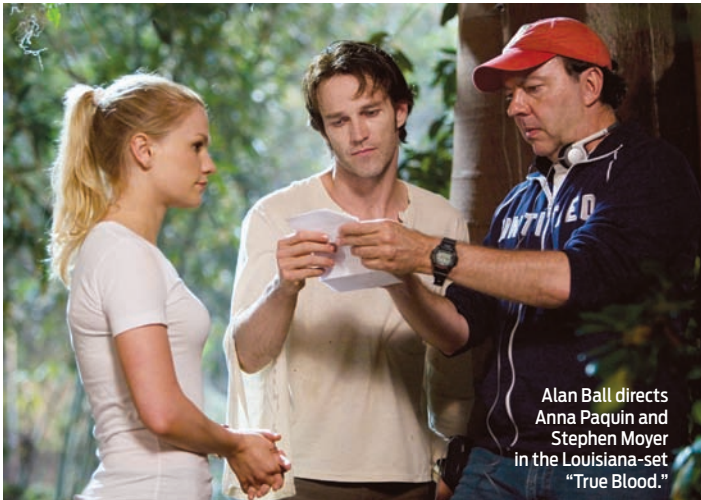
Stelly estimates that, as of September, the state had hosted 60-70 film and TV productions in 2008, whereas in 2007 the state had 53 for the entire year.

The reason for the success? Louisiana's 25% tax credit is not the most generous in the country, but the state got into the incentive game early (2002) and has displayed a bankable consistency.

"People have been successful in getting their money back from the state in a timely manner," says Joseph D. Chianese, vp business development for Entertainment Partners, a leading provider of payroll

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Alan Ball directs Anna Paquin and Stephen Moyer in the Louisiana-set "True Blood."

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Christopher Stelly,
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and production management services. "And because of the sheer volume of productions that have been going into the state, it has been able to develop a local crew base, which is important when you're bringing a production somewhere."

Stelly says the number of skilled crew members in Louisiana has

grown 400% since 2002, and it now has enough local crew to staff eight or nine productions.

Another draw is the state's mushrooming physical infrastructure, which is arguably one of the largest in the country outside of New York and California.

In Shreveport, there are three major soundstage complexes up and running (StageWorks, Stage West and Mansfield Studios) and another under construction (Millennium Studios), while just outside New Orleans, there's the Nims Center. In Baton Rouge, there's the Celtic Media Centre, the first studio complex in the state designed and built from the ground up for motion picture production.

It can be argued that a similarly attractive mix of incentives, crew and infrastructure can be found elsewhere (e.g., New York), but the people of Louisiana hold a trump card that is uniquely theirs,

and its name is New Orleans.

"You can still shoot in New Orleans for the 1800s and the early 1900s and barely change a thing," says Ceán Chaffin, producer of Paramount's "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button," which shot in and around the city.

It's no secret that beauty can come with a price. The devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 has inspired filmmakers to steer clear of New Orleans during the peak of hurricane season or simply base their productions in cities to the north like Shreveport, which has effectively diversified and expanded the state's film production economy. It has also made the state more eager to court film production and related businesses, according to Jason Sciacvico, founder of Horizon Entertainment, who produces "docu-reality" sports series "Two-a-days" (MTV) and "Varsity, Inc." (ESPN).



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The Shreveport-Bossier Film Office will make your productions easy with city support and ease of doing business. Come see for yourself why Movie Maker Magazine (Jan. '08) ranked Shreveport-Bossier the #3 city in the U.S. for best places to live, work & make movies.

List of productions that have been shot in the Shreveport-Bossier area.

- Thief
- Factory Girl
- The Guardian
- Ruffian
- Premonition
- Mr. Brooks
- Initiation of Sarah
- My Mom's New Boyfriend
- Blonde Ambition
- Last Lullaby
- Harold & Kumar II
- Cleaner
- The Mist
- Welcome Home Roscoe Jenkins
- For Sale by Owner
- Mad Money
- The Pardon
- The Great Debaters
- Major Movie Star
- Pulse: Afterlife
- Pulse: Invasion
- Cheerleader Camp
- Wonderful World
- Queen Sized
- Feast:
 - Sloppy Seconds
 - The Happy Finish
- The Killing Room
- The Year One
- The Longshots
- Soul Men
- Tekken
- Sordid Lives
- Beyond a Reasonable Doubt
- Billy The Exterminator
- Disaster Movie
- W.
- Streets of Blood
- I Hope They Serve Beer In Hell
- True Blood
- Front of the Class
- Leaves of Grass

For more information:

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PRODUCTION INCENTIVES

Nothing stays the same, not even Louisiana's wildly successful film and TV production incentives.

Currently, Louisiana offers a 25% tax credit on in-state production spend, an additional 10% for Louisiana resident production hires, and a 40% infrastructure tax credit.

"As a business person, it's amazing," says Alabama-based writer-director Tonya S. Holly of the incentives. Holly not only plans to shoot portions of her next film, "The Story of Bonnie and Clyde," in the state, she's also looking to open a satellite office of her company Cypress Moon Prods. there.

But Holly better hurry if she wants to get the infrastructure credit: It sunsets on Jan. 1, 2009 (projects that have spent 50% of their proposed budget can continue earning credits

on the full, initially certified budget). Louisiana's 10%-20% tax credit for digital interactive media productions and 25% tax credit on sound recording productions and infrastructure will be around a little longer — currently they are scheduled to sunset in 2010.

One company that's getting in under the wire is Seven Arts Pictures, which utilized the infrastructure tax credit to convert a building in New Orleans into a production and postproduction facility. "We've been doing a bunch of movies down there, and the availability of the film production credit makes it all the more sensible for us to take advantage of the infrastructure credit," says Seven Arts CEO Peter Hoffman.

— Todd Longwell



"I've been to a lot of different states, and I don't think there's another in the country that is more aggressive in wanting to help films," says Sciavicco, who recently formed a joint venture with Louisiana Media Co. to move Horizon from Atlanta to New Orleans. "I think that's because they need the help right now."

As far as film and production goes, it couldn't be progressing much better for Louisiana, save for one area: postproduction.

"After production wraps, in most cases, studio-driven and higher independent projects usually end up going back to the coast, be it New York or L.A., to complete their projects," says

Sergio Lopez, executive producer of New Orleans-based production and post facility Storyville.

Stelly says that, with current technology, directors can stay at home and communicate in real time with an editor working in Louisiana. It may seem an unlikely scenario, but then again, 10 years ago, no one foresaw Louisiana becoming a film production center. If it takes another 10 years to establish the state as a post hotbed, so be it.

"We approach it like we're not doing it for a return on our investment in terms of years," Stelly says. "We're looking at it in terms of decades. We really want to build an industry, and we're doing it." **THR**

THR.com To check out filming incentives across the country, go to THR.com/madeinusa.

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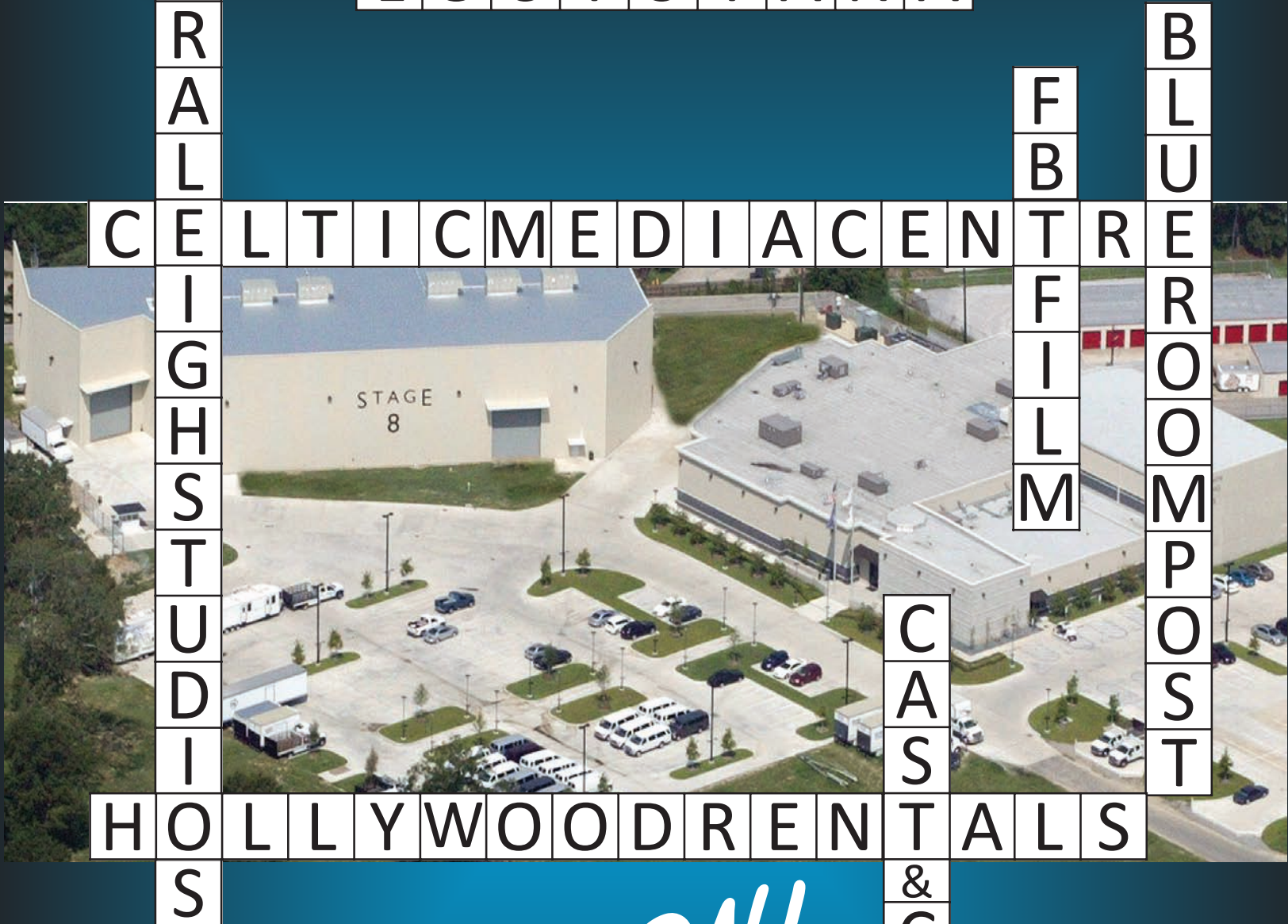
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