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Made in Louisiana

By Todd Longwell

May 27, 2010, 06:14 PM ET

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It was the movie everybody wanted.

From Canada to Mexico, from Shreveport to Sydney, governments and film commissions were angling for Warner Bros. to shoot its new superhero movie "The Green Lantern" on their land -- and spend some of the film's roughly \$150 million budget there, too.

For a time, "Lantern" was scheduled to shoot at Fox Studios in Australia, then it was rumored to go north of the border, then south. Finally, the film landed in Louisiana, where it's lensing at Second Line Stages, a new state-of-the-art, LEED-certified studio facility in New Orleans' Garden District.

It's as if Second Line slipped on the glowing emerald ring that gives the film's protagonist his super-human powers.

"(Second Line) is the center of the industry in New Orleans right now," says Sergio Lopez, owner of the New Orleans post facility Storyville, which has a satellite office at Second Line. "There's so much robust activity that it just kind of vibrates from that area. The places around it are being bought up by the film and video industry, from rental space to warehouses; even Sandra Bullock bought a warehouse next door to it."

It doesn't hurt that Second Line boasts three soundstages, 73,000 square feet of warehouse space and a five-floor office tower. Nor does it hurt that Louisiana's film and TV production tax credit was bumped from 25% to 30% in July.

Since launching its production incentive program in 2002, Louisiana has become the third-largest film and TV production center in the U.S., behind California and New York, and it shows no sign of relinquishing that title any time soon.

"They were initial leaders with the tax incentives and they have the program down pat," says Ed Spiegel, president of the payroll company Cast & Crew



*New Orleans'
Second Line Stages*

services, which provides tax-incentive consulting services. "They have soundstages and a lot of support facilities. It's easy to do business there, and people like helping out Louisiana. Even right after Hurricane Katrina, people still wanted to go straight back there and film."

In the first quarter, Louisiana hosted 25 productions across the state, including the HBO series "Treme," which last month was picked up for a second season. Current productions include the films "Jeff Who Lives at Home," starring Jason Segel and Ed Helms, in New Orleans; and "Butter," starring Jennifer Garner, in Shreveport.

Things were not so rosy this time last year.

"It was extremely slow in the first half of 2009," says Diego Martinez, president of Studio Operations for Nu Image/ Millennium Films, which has shot 14 films in Louisiana in recent years, including the upcoming Sylvester Stallone actioner "The Expendables" and the recently completed "Drive Angry," starring Nicolas Cage. "You had the WGA strike, a threatened SAG strike and the economic downturn. Then Georgia passed a better incentive (featuring a 30% tax credit) so a lot of people went there."

To make matters worse, the Louisiana credit was scheduled to be scaled back from 25% to 20% in 2010, and then to 15% in 2012.

Because of that, "There was some hesitancy in budgeting things for Louisiana early in '09," says Christopher Stelly, director of film and television for the Louisiana Entertainment Office. Before the change in the law, which upped the credit and eliminated its sunset date, "We had 20 (tax credit) applications for the first six or seven months of '09. After that, we saw 89 applications."

The incentive boost saved the year -- especially for Baton Rouge.

"Shortly after the tax credit was upped, we had HBO's 'True Blood' come through to shoot exteriors for its Main Street-type square in a town just north of Baton Rouge called Clinton, La.," says Amy Mitchell-Smith, executive director of the Baton Rouge Film Commission. "We ended having 26 film and television projects that filmed in our market with a direct spend that was estimated at \$72 million, with an economic impact of well over \$130 million. It was a big year."

A substantial portion of that came from Sony's apocalyptic sci-fi/action film "Battle: Los Angeles." Budgeted at about \$70 million, it shot from September-December at Raleigh Studios' Celtic Media Center in Baton Rouge and on location in Shreveport, where it shut down a freeway overpass for five weeks.

"That would be pretty difficult to do in the Los Angeles area," says "Battle" art director Chris Spellman. "Here people aren't jaded about having to go five minutes out of their way because a film is shooting."

That Southern hospitality is also apparent in other neighborhoods. When executive producer Grant Scharbo approached the developers of upscale gated community Southern Trace, outside Shreveport, about using it as the setting for the ABC supernatural drama "The Gates," he received approval from the club's board before the day was out. And the goodwill continued once production was rolling.

"They all come out to watch us shoot. We shoot there at night and they don't care," Scharbo says. "It's one of the most film-friendly places I've been in my life."

The welcome mat was also put out by David and Margo Myatt, owners of StageWorks of Louisiana in downtown Shreveport, where the production offices and interior sets of "The Gates" are housed. The couple let the show shoot several days of exteriors on their 26-acre estate free of charge, and let them board a cast of wolves on their farm.

If there has been one downside for "The Gates," it's the lack of available local crew.

"They're about one or two crews deep in Shreveport, and by the time we arrived two other movies had crewed up," Scharbo says. "You can pull from nearby cities, but both New Orleans and Shreveport were extremely busy, so we had to import a lot of crew from North Carolina, Atlanta and Los Angeles."



A computer rendering of Shreveport's long-awaited Millennium Studios

That meant a double whammy for Louisiana, with extra money spent on per diems and lodging and fewer tax credits earned for local hires.

Spellman had better luck with "Battle," which was able to hire its entire art department locally, and he was impressed with what he found.

"Every time films come here, the more experienced the local crews become," says Spellman, a New Orleans native who moved to Los Angeles after graduating from LSU.

Of course, the crew members can pick up and follow productions anywhere. Proper soundstages are harder to come by, and they're something most incentive states lack.

"It's not like you can just snap your fingers and warehouses across the city are appropriate for filming," says Jennifer Day, director of the New Orleans Office of Film & Video. "You need sound proofing, air conditioning, etc."

During the past eight years, Louisiana has built an impressive collection of studio facilities which, in addition to Second Line, StageWorks and the Celtic Media Center, include the Nims Center and Beven Street Film Studio, both in Harahan (a suburb of New Orleans), as well as the Louisiana Wave Studio in Shreveport, with an automated 750,000-gallon tank programmed to generate 13 kinds of waves up to 8 feet high.

Millennium Studios will soon be added to that list. Delayed 18 months because of financing difficulties, it finally began construction in Shreveport's Ledbetter Heights in December, and it is scheduled to be completed this year. It will boast two soundstages with two floors of offices and a separate building with a special effects mill, as well as a 10,000-square-foot facility housing Millennium's visual effects company, Worldwide FX.

Stelly is proud to point out the trickle-down effect of all this production, which has impacted not only local hotels and restaurants but also smaller vendors having their first encounters with the entertainment industry.

"A man from a local glass company called me just buzzing," says Stelly, "saying he serviced a motion picture for three or four weeks and made more money than he had servicing some of his higher-end clients for 10 years."

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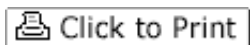
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