

Viva Vancouver!

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Moviemakers love Nevada ... provided they can film somewhere else; a fragmentary local film industry is trying to change that

By David McKee

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Earlier this month, CBS carpet-bombed the airwaves with promos for its tent-pole Fall series, Viva Laughlin, starring Hugh Jackman, Melanie Griffith and Maedchen Amick. As with any good Nevada saga, it's filmed in ... Los Angeles, of course. Like CSI, NBC's Las Vegas and ESPN's mercifully short-lived Tilt, it will feature the obligatory drive-bys and other atmospheric shots of its casino-centric setting. But if the oil wells in Las Vegas or the lushly leafy suburbs on CSI are any indication, most of it will leave locals saying, "Looks like SoCal to me!"

Asks Nevada Film Office Resource Coordinator Ed Harran, "If you were a writer or producer in L.A., where would you want to work?" Never mind the cost of bunking the cast and crew in local hotels, issuing per diems, etc. "That's the biggest cost of putting a TV series on the road," adds NFO Director Charles Geocarlis. Still, "you want 100 percent of the business. You don't want bits and pieces."

That's part of what irks Tom Lewis, a gaffer/key grip looking for work in a city where live entertainment trumps filmmaking. True, the NFO has announced year after year of \$100 million-plus in film-related investment. But what that means to Lewis, who relocated here when he saw the Chicago film industry collapse in the late 1990s, is that ancillary filming is being done in Nevada and the principal photography somewhere else. "When they say 40 films (shot locally) that's probably 80 days because they do two days of background," he contends.

(Don't) Blame Canada

The facts bear Lewis out. Bits of Sean Pean's Reno-set The Pledge were shot in Nevada but the bulk of lensing took place in British Columbia. Much the same was true of cable staple 3,000 Miles to Graceland. Most of Tilt was shot in Toronto. Lewis bears the Canadians, with their raft of financial incentives and studio facilities, no ill will. "You can't blame Canada because they had the foresight to build the facilities," he says, noting that much the same is happening in New Mexico.

Brandishing 25 percent tax rebates and other inducements, Gov. Bill Richardson has lured Sony and Lions Gate to the Land of Enchantment, where a growing cluster of sound stages has been dubbed 'Tamalewood.' "If they're getting the big guys there, what can Las Vegas do," Lewis wonders.

Don't look for government-sponsored enticements: A tax-abatement bill by state Sen. Bob Coffin expired in the 2007 Legislature. But some infrastructure help has arrived, in the form of DreamVision. The \$12 million, 11,000-square-foot-plus soundstage, with accompanying support facilities, recently opened on Eastern Avenue, just southeast of McCarran International Airport. It received its certificate of occupancy June 1 and, a week later, was scheduled to host *The Return*, a contemporary war-veteran drama starring Rachel McAdams and Tim Robbins.

While this isn't the first film studio in Las Vegas, it may be the most impressive. Marilee Lear once promised to do great things with a converted refrigeration facility at Charleston Boulevard and Mojave Road that held a standing casino set. But the building has recently gone through revolving-door ownership, and Lear has moved on to other projects.

Action Stage, on Polaris Avenue, isn't fully soundproofed and Las Vegas Video & Sound, which Lewis describes as a tin-roofed soundstage near The Palms (and now owned by Sun Media, part of the Greenspun empire), has hosted no moviemaking of note ... unless you count Fred Williamson's 2003 *Vegas Vampires*. Action Stage owner William White says he's also seeing no activity at present but has hosted "some WB" shoots and other TV work, including Penn & Teller's *Bullshit* series.

For want of a gallon of paint ...

DreamVision co-owner Phyllis Taie says she'd like to see more competition in town, actually. "CineLease did me a huge favor by coming out here in 2000," bringing its contacts in the industry, she says of the equipment supplier. "We're the first ones to say, 'Go to CineLease; go to JR (Lighting). We don't have strobes.' You don't want to be a shopping mall with only one store," Taie adds, citing the time shooting of a Toyota commercial, starring George Clooney, was disrupted so that a production assistant could be flown to Los Angeles and back to obtain one gallon of blue chroma-key paint. "That's now what won't happen," she says.

NFO Director Charles Geocar is, like Tom Lewis, a veteran of the Chicago film scene and recalls that the production infrastructure there took a long time to reach critical mass and, in some respects, never did. "For us (in Nevada), it's been frustrating," he said of repeating the process. "Being so close to Los Angeles is a double-edged sword."

Why rent 35 mm cameras here when so many equipment houses are just down I-15 or when an HD camera package can be owned outright for \$6,500 to \$17,000? Such shifting market conditions are why DreamVision doesn't buy its own camera packages. Explains co-owner Guillaume Guy, "By the time you get them paid off ..."

"... they're obsolete," Taie says, finishing his thought. She adds that the number-one need isn't for hardware but education. But to train, she says, you need a facility and jobs. Red Bull, General Motors and Cox Communications are announced to sponsor stunt clinics at DreamVision, and Cirque du Soleil veteran Guy will have classes that teach how to make and then use breakaway props.

"We've got outstanding crew here," says the NFO's Harran, some of them driven out of Southern California by the rising cost of living. But, he allows, "this is a relationship business," and filmmakers like to work within a comfort zone of familiar personnel.

Still, DreamVision presents a slim reed of hope, having "good timing insight" and the potential to host moderately budgeted productions, according to former NFO spokeswoman Jeanne Corcoran, now film commissioner for Sarasota County, in Florida.

"It's taken me five or six years to get to this point," says Taie, who tried to launch a similar facility on Procyon Road, back in 2000, having tried two years earlier in Pahrump. "We have marble floors, granite counters. We've tried to make this something Las Vegas can be proud of, like a Bellagio environment."

But she has her priorities. One of DreamVision's guardian angels was then-Lt. Gov. Lorraine Hunt, who — like Geocar — would occasionally stop by to see what was taking shape at 6705 S. Eastern Ave. So Taie shows off the very first room built by studio architect/co-owner Blake Ferry: a bathroom. After all, it wouldn't do to have Geocar or Hunt pay a visit and be subjected to the indignity of using a Portalet. This is the glamour business, after all.