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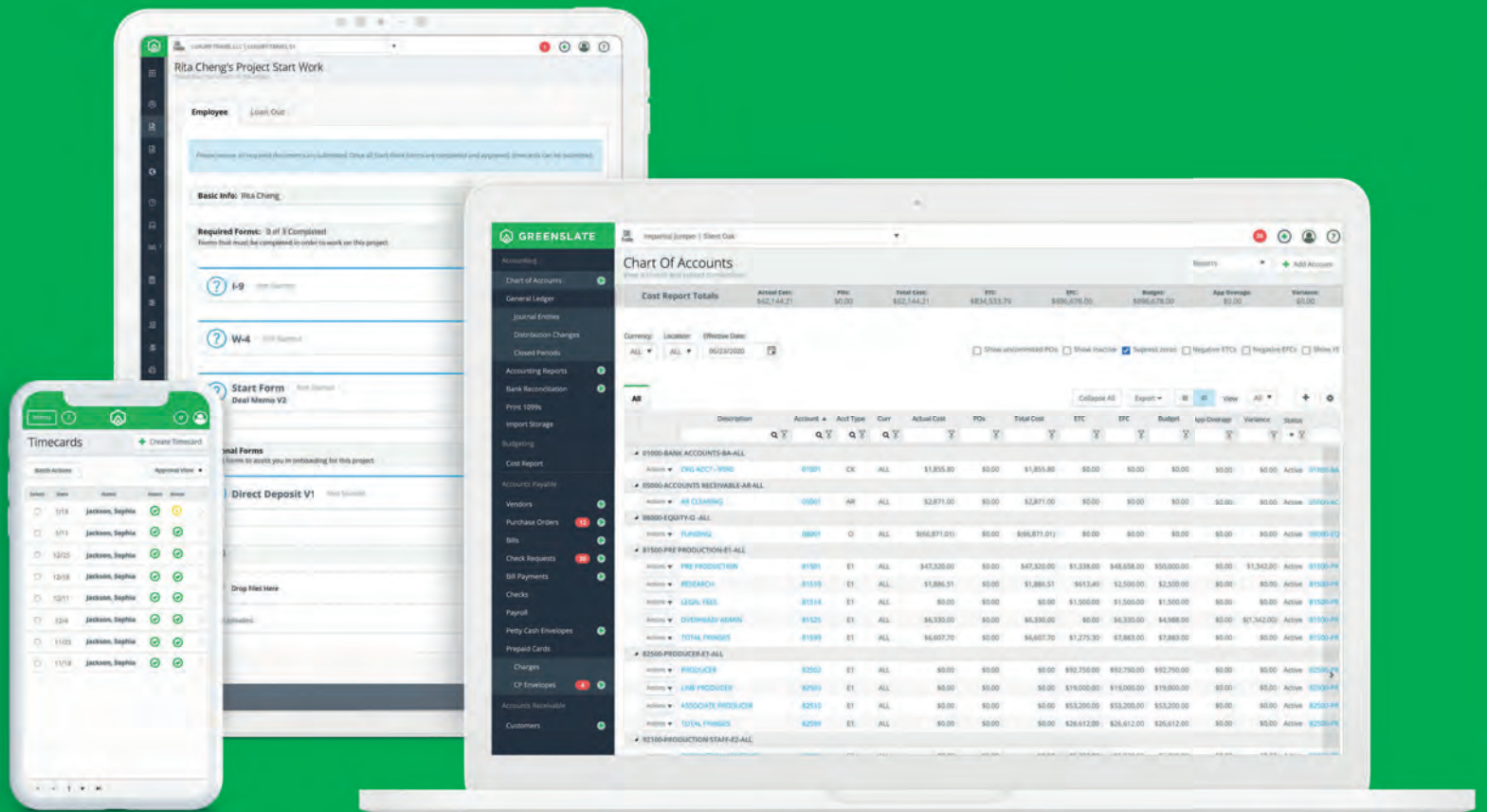
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● Numerous shoots have used this location, including *Patriot Games* (1992) and *We Were Soldiers* (2002).

Photo courtesy Ehrin Davis

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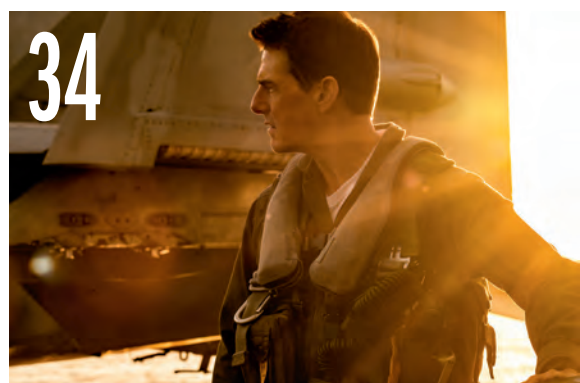
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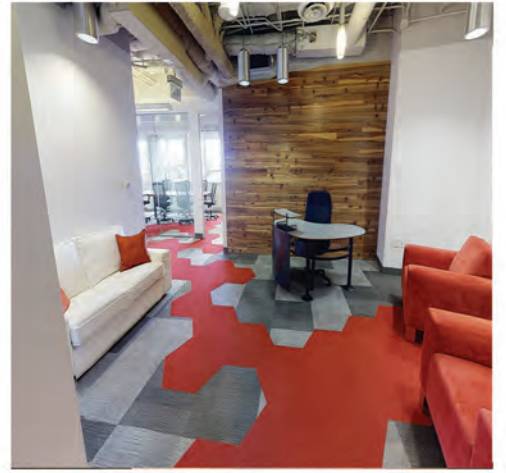


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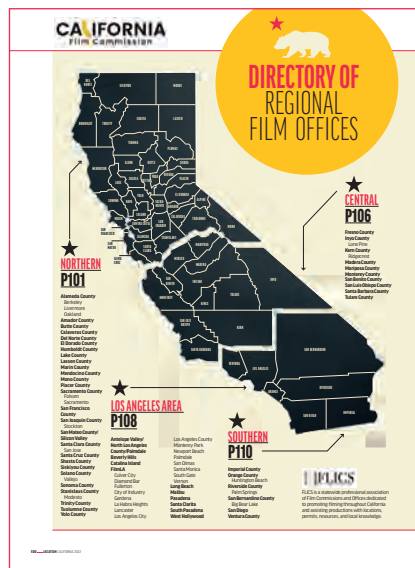
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MAKING A SCENE KING RICHARD

Will Smith as Richard Williams,
Demi Singleton as Serena
Williams and Saniyya Sidney as
Venus Williams in Warner Bros.
Pictures' *King Richard*



WELCOME TO THE WILLIAMS SHOW!

AUTHENTICITY WAS KEY TO THE LOCATIONS FOR KING RICHARD, WHICH TELLS THE STORY OF THE WILLIAMS SISTERS AND HOW THEIR FATHER AND COACH PLOTTED THEIR RISE. AS **JULIAN NEWBY** REPORTS, RESEARCH STARTED AT THE ACTUAL HOUSE WHERE THE SISTERS WERE RAISED





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A **S** **A**SPIRING tennis professionals, the Williams sisters were spared the sufferings of so many young players, after their father and coach Richard Williams took them off the Junior tour.

Why did Venus and Serena skip this crucial stage in most tennis player's development? The answer is that their father observed firsthand that it is a cruel place to be for young players. Also: "I told them that they would not be going professional until they could beat me," Williams told me some years back. "That happened when they reached the age of 14." Quite a feat for any child; he's a big man. Add to that the huge gap between men and women tennis players and you realize what an achievement that was for his girls. But they did it, early on the path to becoming Olympic gold medalists, multiple grand-slam singles champions and a formidable doubles team: two of the game's biggest stars of all time, who together with their father changed the game forever.

Their early story is told in Warner Bros. Pictures' *King Richard*, the film that stars newcomers Saniyya Sidney and Demi Singleton as Venus and Serena — alongside Will Smith, whose role as the sisters' star-maker father won him a Golden Globe and an Oscar nomination.

And echoing their father's challenge to his daughters all those years ago, the two women announced early on that the movie wouldn't get their endorsement until they'd seen it — and approved it. Thankfully for Warner Bros., director Reinaldo 'Rei' Marcus Green, and everyone else involved in the production, the joint holders of 60 Grand Slam titles did eventually give the film their blessing, even coming on board late in the process as executive producers. Venus said that the film showed that everyone "really cared about telling a story that was authentic" and didn't just follow a formula, while Serena described *King Richard* as "a brilliant piece of work".

Richard Williams had a clear vision for his daughters and the film shows how he engaged the power that can come from strong family ties, coupled with total belief, in order to achieve the impossible — taking two young girls from the tough streets of Compton, to sporting excellence, extraordinary wealth, and global stardom.

The choice of director — a keen baseball player — helped to achieve the

successful telling of the Williams' story, as the film's location manager David Park explains. "When I first met Rei, it was clear that he had a connection to this story, as an athlete growing up with a strong sports father. He had the conviction to make an honest and heartfelt movie that was not overdramatized," Park says. "This conviction led the way for much of the writing, performances, and even the locations."

"I wanted to make a movie that my mum could see," Green says. "She'd never seen a tennis match before, but she understands winning and losing, she understands what family is, she understands what love is, and she understands what struggle is. And there were things that were relatable to folks like my mother, who could see this movie and enjoy it

and still understand what's happening and not get lost in the technical aspects of the sport. So we always kept that in mind while we were building the tennis scenes."

Early thoughts on the film came from producers Tim and Trevor White and writer Zach Baylin. The White brothers came up with the idea after seeing an image of Richard Williams at the 1999 Lipton Championships holding up a sign in the stands just after Venus had won the title. The sign read: 'I told you so'. It was the same tournament where Richard had held up a sign saying 'Welcome to the Wililams show!!' as Venus and Serena warmed up to play each other in the final.

"We kind of thought that this could be maybe the greatest coaching story in the history of sport," Tim says. "And what



The Williams family's former home in Compton, southern Los Angeles County, as it is today. Photo: David Park

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WOULD NOT BE GOING
PROFESSIONAL UNTIL
THEY COULD BEAT ME**

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STAGE 01

- 1ST FLOOR**
- Approximately 10,000 square feet
 - L: 107' W: 99' H: 19.4"
 - Sprinklers
 - Kitchenette
 - Dedicated ADA Restrooms
 - Elevator to 2nd floor
 - Close to dressing rooms, offices
 - On stage room with viewing window

- 2ND FLOOR**
- 20 offices
 - Large open space for cubicle offices, files, pipe & drape dressing rooms, or filming.
 - Dedicated ADA restrooms
 - Coffee bar & refrigerator
 - Large room with window overlooking the stage below, for a second master control or client viewing lounge.

STAGE 02

- 1ST FLOOR**
- Approximately 7,850 square feet
 - L: 77' 2" W: 101' 8" H: 15' 4"
 - Close proximity to Stage #3 if needed for additional backstage space.
 - Access to two load in doors and wide hallway
 - Close to prop storage, green room and dressing rooms

STAGE 03

- 1ST FLOOR**
- Approximately 5,000 square feet
 - 59' 11" W: 62' 6" H: 15' 4"
 - Large load in door and hallway
 - On stage viewing or audio room with window
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made it really exciting was when we started to dive into their story, it was far more than a coaching story; it was about a family — and a story about love and how that keeps the drive alive. It was very inspiring for us. And once Zach came in, we said, that’s the shape to the movie.”

“It wasn’t just going to be a sports-centered package about the great moments that we all know about,” Baylin added. “If we were really going to get to know the family, we needed the intimate moments.”

“Everyone had a hand in wanting to get it right and tell this real hero story of my Dad and what he was able to do,” says Isha Price, Venus and Serena’s half-sister and executive producer, and on-set advisor for the film. “But also to understand the foundation that my mum was actually able to lay, and make sure that the heart of the family was there. That is the part that we wanted to make sure was right. And for

Aunjanue [Aunjanue Ellis who played the sisters’ mother, Oracene Williams], there are no words for how she got it. How she really got the voice of my Mum and made sure her presence was known and felt. So it was a journey, and it wasn’t always an easy, direct one. But I think that sometimes the best things come from a lot of people working hard and digging in to get it right.”

Price says she felt she had a responsibility to her family to make sure the story was properly told, and for that reason she attended every day of filming. “I might have gotten on some people’s nerves on set; but it was important for me because I had a responsibility to my family, to make sure that the story was told right,” Price says. “And to have willing participants in that journey, with this entire cast and the entire production team, and everybody wanting to do it right, is why I think the

product ends up being what it is and the story ends up being what it is.”

An authentic depiction of the family’s early home life was crucial, Price says. So finding the right house in the right neighborhood was key to the telling of the story.

“We started off by packing into a minivan and going to look at the actual Williams’ family home in Compton. Not only were we all personally excited to see this house, it felt like the perfect jumping-off point,” David Park says. “Luckily the people who live there today were extremely friendly and welcoming of our group to tour their home. They were excited that we were making this film and felt invested to see the story come to life. That became a common theme as we scouted locations in Compton and other parts of Southern California. Everyone had their own story of Venus and Serena Williams, seeing them practice at the court by their house, hear-



David Park: “Many scenes involved the parents and the five girls plus our huge crew.” Photo: Warner Bros. Pictures

**IF WE WERE REALLY GOING TO GET TO KNOW THE FAMILY,
WE NEEDED THE INTIMATE MOMENTS**

ZACH BAYLIN

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ing stories of them winning and how they got there. People were so excited to share their memories and couldn't wait to see it all on the big screen."

"Rei was about authenticity across the board," Park says. "I think that he first and foremost wanted to make this movie not just about Richard, Venus, and Serena. That's why it was important to have so many scenes in the house and their van that involved the whole family. That family authenticity needed to be the groundwork for any of the tennis scenes to hit home."

The actual Williams' childhood home is small. "The rooms are tiny and do not leave a lot of space for a full crew and equipment. It's not uncommon for a replica set to be built on stage to provide flexibility to the crew and more control to be able to create specific shots and lighting," Park says. "But Rei did not want to build the house on

a sound stage. He wanted to find a house that felt real and had all of the elements he was looking for and was clear that he was going to make that work."

Eventually three houses were used. Park and the team scoured Compton and other areas of South Los Angeles with the

IT WASN'T JUST GOING TO BE A SPORTS-CENTERED PACKAGE ABOUT THE GREAT MOMENTS THAT WE ALL KNOW ABOUT

DAVID PARK

tough task of finding somewhere that had the compact feel of the Williams' house, but with the capacity to shoot scenes with up to seven or eight actors at one time.

"Many scenes involved the parents and the five girls [Venus, Serena, and their three sisters Yetunde, Lyndrea, and Isha] plus our huge crew," Park says. "The exterior of the home needed to have the perfect street which felt gritty and appropriate to the late 1980s and 1990s. And the story required scenes that included the house across the street and the neighboring homes in wide angle, so not only did we need the perfect Williams' house, but we also needed it to be surrounded with similar houses — and the texture of the street, the power lines, sidewalk, and vegetation had to be period-correct."

Park's team eventually found all these elements and then set about the task of piecing them together. "For the interi-



Dignity Health Sports Park, the location for Venus' first-ever professional game, which she won 6-3, 6-4 against then world N°59 Shaun Stafford

or we used a home off 42nd Place near Leimert Park and Vermont Square; the indoor scenes took up most of the work and were the first priority. The front of this home looked perfect as well, but it didn't have the perfect street and neighbors. We found that look on East Piru Street in the unincorporated area of Compton. This use of the two locations would just require the art department, construction department, and set dressing department to build out the front facade of the 42nd Place home on top of the front of the Piru Street home. Initially we planned to film backyard scenes at the 42nd Place home, but due to COVID altering our schedule, we ultimately had to find a third venue for the backyard scenes."

Compton is an important piece of the story and Park says he felt a responsibility to research the area thoroughly. "We definitely met many wonderful people who had their Williams stories to share and who were so proud of the family and the city," he says. But the team didn't ever take the hospitality they received for granted. "It's never a waste of time to listen to the community where you want to enter and film. Actually it's vital to try to include as

many people as possible, not just the hero locations and directly adjacent neighbors. We filmed a night-time sequence on Rosecrans Avenue in Compton which involved a drive-by shooting at a donut store. So, in that situation for example, we needed to make sure the City Council was comfortable with the activity and script — as well as the people who ran the businesses on Rosecrans where we were closing several blocks of major roads."

Finding the right tennis locations brought different problems. "The pandemic hit and shut our production down before we began filming any of the tennis tournaments and club scenes. We were one

of the last feature-film productions to shut down and one of the first to begin filming again," Park says. "During the pandemic outdoor sports became increasingly popular as a safe COVID activity. Tennis was on the rise and the cost to shut down these tennis centers and tennis clubs would have been too high for our budget and too much of a burden on the properties and their members at that point in time." So key venues remained open while filming was taking place.

The Racquet Club of Irvine in South Orange County — an "amazing gem of a location" according to Park — proved the perfect setting for Rick Macci's Tennis Academy in Florida, where Venus and Serena did much of their early training. "Our greens department added some more tropical plants and our set dressers brought in some period-correct furniture and signage and the set was staged."

But "to coexist a film production with members of a tennis club requires great communication and planning," Park says. "We had a great amount of support, communication and trust with the Racquet Club of Irvine. The management was motivated to help make this a smooth

**WE DEFINITELY MET
MANY WONDERFUL
PEOPLE WHO HAD
THEIR WILLIAMS
STORIES TO SHARE**

DAVID PARK



Saniyya Sidney as Venus Williams in her first professional tournament, the Bank of the West Classic. Photo: Warner Bros. Pictures

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operation for the film and their members and they were extremely professional in their adaptation to our changing schedule and daily requests and needs for production. Especially during a pandemic. I bow down to the support and co-operation we received from the Club and the Orange County Film Commission. And Janice Arrington, the Orange County Film Commissioner, was our N°1 supporter from the get-go. She helped connect the dots and used her resources to continually keep us on path. I cannot over-emphasize a film production's need for strong support from a film commission. It can be our N°1 asset and make the difference in setting the foundation and the right environment for a crew to do its job."

Dignity Health Sports Park, on the campus of California State University, Dominguez Hills in Carson, California, played a vital role in the film's final two matches. It was during Venus's first professional WTA appearance, at the age of 14, in the Bank of the West Classic. "We had many scenes in the tunnels and locker rooms of the facility. It would be the first time we see Venus' hair in beads, and they were her biggest matches to date," Park says. "The actual Bank of the West Classic was played indoors at the Oakland Coliseum Arena, but creative liberty was taken

**TO COEXIST A
FILM PRODUCTION
WITH MEMBERS
OF A TENNIS CLUB
REQUIRES GREAT
COMMUNICATION
AND PLANNING**

DAVID PARK

to move the scenes to an outdoor stadium as it helped our show's schedule, budget, and overall creative vision."

Venus won the first match, beating then world N°59 Shaun Stafford; and lost the second — the final match of the film — to world N°2 Arantxa Sanches Vicario. But she had proved King Richard right and left the audience and professional tennis in no doubt to where she was ultimately headed. —



On the practice court: Demi Singleton as Serena Williams, Will Smith as Richard Williams and Saniyya Sidney as Venus Williams. Photo: Warner Bros. Pictures

**Never work with
children, animals...
or sports**

A CORRUPTION of the famous remark by W.C. Fields — no he didn't mention sports, but they are equally problematic; how many sports movies actually succeed in their authenticity? Boxing works well, golf too — tennis rarely does. But *King Richard* is an exception. "Rei was about authenticity across the board. More than any director I've seen, he really took a lot of one-on-one time to rehearse with all of the actors," location manager David Park says. "Rei and the cinematographer, Robert Elswitt, were constantly watching tennis scenes from movies to learn and compare. And the girls, Saniyya and Demi, practiced tennis for months and months."

"Saniyya and Demi had to learn how to play tennis like two of the greatest tennis players of all time," Will Smith says. "It's like, I had to try to learn how to play Muhammad Ali and so I know how daunting that was. There are professional fighters that don't know how to move like Muhammad Ali; and there are professional tennis players that can't play like Venus and Serena. And I was watching Saniyya and I just want the world to know: not only did Saniyya have to learn how to play like Venus... Saniya is left handed. She learned how to play with her off hand! She learned how to play like one of the greatest tennis players of all time, with her off hand!"

Carrie-Anne Moss as Trinity and Keanu Reeves as Neo/Thomas Anderson in Warner Bros. Pictures, Village Roadshow Pictures and Venus Castina Productions' *The Matrix Resurrections*.
Photo: Warner Bros. Pictures



BACK IN ACTION!



FILMING RESTARTED EARLY IN CALIFORNIA AFTER
LOCKDOWNS HIT THE INDUSTRY NATIONWIDE –
AND WORLDWIDE. AND ITS FAMOUS PRODUCTION
INFRASTRUCTURE WAS READY AND WAITING.
ANDY FRY SURVEYS THE GOLDEN STATE TO SEE
WHAT IT HAS TO OFFER THE INDUSTRY

NOWHERE in the world has escaped the damaging health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. But some regions and industries have undoubtedly recovered more quickly than others. Among the most resilient has been the California film and TV business, which roared back into action just a few months after the first COVID-19 wave hit in early 2020.

California Film Commission executive director Colleen Bell says: “Film and TV production in California supports over 700,000 jobs and \$70bn in wages, so it was important for us to find a way to get people back to work quickly and safely. Fortunately, the state’s entertainment industry has a well-earned reputation for being problem-solvers; and they delivered some of the most robust health and safety protocols in the world.”

In some respects, California got lucky. For example, the fact that Los Angeles’ vast army of A-list on-screen talent was unable to travel during the pandemic meant there was a presumption in favor of staying within the state. But in other ways, the pandemic served as a reminder of why the Golden State remains such a sought-after production base. “One of the big draws to California has always been the wide range of looks you can find in such close proximity,” Bell says. “At a time when productions were looking to minimize their travel footprint, they could come to California and get deserts, mountains, lakes, forests and spectacular coastlines. Equally, if they needed to double for other locations or achieve that sought after ‘anytown America’ look, California was able to deliver.”

The COVID-19 emergency also highlighted other key attributes that make California stand out from rival production hubs. “California’s ranch, studio, and backlot network is unlike anything in the world,” Bell says. “Productions have always been attracted to them because of the controlled environment they offer. During COVID-19, that became even more valuable because they made it possible to minimize the risk of spreading infection during filming. California is also blessed with such a large pool of expertise that if a member of the production team, crew, or vendor was forced to pull out because of COVID-19 there would invariably be a replacement.”

WE GOT LUCKY WHEN CALIFORNIA EXPERIENCED TWO DAYS OF OVERCAST WEATHER – WHICH WAS PERFECT FOR RECREATING MICHIGAN”
GREG ALPERT

Then, of course, there’s the state incentive that has played such a significant role in bringing production back to California. “At a time when everyone has been facing economic pressure, it must have been tempting for some jurisdictions to suspend their tax rebates, but that was the precise moment that our state legislature stepped up,” Bell says. “Not only did they unanimously approve an upgraded version of California’s tax incentive, but we were also able to reassure productions they would not lose their existing tax credit allocation if they were unable to film on their agreed schedule because of COVID-19.”

California’s bounce back from COVID is evident in several respects. One is the sheer volume of work being done by

global streaming platform Netflix. Speaking to Bell as part of her Spotlight California interview series, Netflix co-CEO Ted Sarandos estimated that the global streaming platform had produced “over 100 films, TV series and comedy specials in California during 2021, the equivalent of 7,000 cast and crew jobs”. Explaining why Netflix has ploughed so much of its content investment into the West Coast state, he said: “It’s the place that people in the entertainment business dream of working. Aside from the diverse landscapes, the weather, the infrastructure, the equipment, it’s an incredible advantage to be where the actors, directors, and composers want to be.”

Another key factor has been the sharp recovery in location shooting around Los Angeles, the entertainment capital. Paul Audley, president of Greater Los Angeles film office FilmLA, says his jurisdiction hosted 10,127 shoot days in Q3 2021, the third-strongest quarter in 26 years. Boosted by demand from both broadcasters and streamers, FilmLA has hosted TV series including CBS’ *SEAL Team* (2017-), ABC’s *The Rookie* (2018), and NBC’s *Mr. Mayor* (2021-). Also prominent have been Showtime’s *Super Pumped* (2022-), Netflix’s *Monster* (2018) and HBO’s as yet untitled L.A. Lakers project.

Greg Alpert, location manager on the big-budget, 10-part L.A. Lakers project, says his work on this has really underlined the versatility of California. “I’ve always said that any location manager worth their salt can find everything they are looking for within the confines of California. For this project, we spent some time in downtown L.A., but also ventured out into the adjacent counties to get the range of looks we needed.”

The story focuses on the iconic L.A. Lakers NBA basketball team from the 1980s, with its star player Magic Johnson. “We had a couple of major challenges,” Alpert says. “One was the fact it was a period piece, with multiple timelines, which meant we needed locations that could reflect different eras. The other was the fact that the Lakers would go on the road throughout the season, playing at venues across the US. In the initial plan, we would have traveled out of California to find the right locations. But COVID meant we had to recreate Boston and Philadelphia venues close to home.”

Alpert says the production looked at high school and college gyms all over Southern California “but we did have one stroke of luck. We found some corridors and locker rooms in the basement of LA Center Studios which the art and construction team did a great job of transforming into various venues.”

Alpert says the production leaned heavily on “an amazing digital tool called Matterport, which allowed us to look at incredibly accurate 3D models of locations from our desk. Obviously that helped during the COVID restrictions, but longer term it will save a lot of time by allowing productions to narrow down the number of locations they physically need to visit.”

One challenge that Alpert recalls is having to recreate Magic Johnson’s home town in California. “He was from Lansing, Michigan, which has a very different climate to California. But we got lucky when California experienced two days of overcast weather — which was perfect for recreating Michigan.”

He’s excited for audiences to see the end result “because I think it will be a watercooler show. It makes really clever use of different film and video formats, from Super8 to 35mm, as well as utilizing some of the actual game footage. I think it has a gritty, authentic feel that will really appeal to HBO audiences.”

While the big story in recent years has been an increase in the volume of TV production, Central L.A. and its surrounding counties have also hosted some prestigious movie projects since

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Matthew Perry as Perry Mason in "gritty 1930s L.A." Photo: Merrick Morton/HBO

COVID first struck. Orange County film commissioner Janice Arrington says: "One of the real strengths of the California system is our network of film offices, which stretches across the state. We work very collaboratively to make sure we keep production in California. So, if a location manager wants a range of looks, they might come to me for certain cityscapes and coastline, and match that up with FilmLA's unique downtown settings."

It's evident in TV productions like *Perry Mason*, for example, where HBO wanted to achieve a gritty 1930s look. Location manager Alexander Georges describes how he and Jonathan Jansen (senior LM) "did a lot of digging and brushing away to find L.A.'s gems. It was a location-heavy show, with 250-300 locations. And it required a lot of conversations with vfx, to understand what elements they needed to work with."

Similarly, the remarkable set build in *For All Mankind* (2019), a series for Apple TV+ which imagines an alternate reality in which the Russians land on the moon before the Americans. Here, the surface of the moon was recreated in a disused aircraft hangar in Long Beach. Location manager Steve Woroniecki says that "shows are getting so massive now, that every episode feels like a feature film. We looked at a lot of stages but the former Boeing Plant in Long Beach gave us the height needed to be able to film down onto the moon, and to create the effect of the sun moving across the surface." L.A.-based studios were used to recreate Houston, Texas.

Evan Thomason, economic development associate at the city of Santa Clarita, also has figures that demonstrate the resurgence in filming activity. "For the Fiscal Year 20/21, our Film Office issued 462 permits, which led to 1,369 film days and a record \$34.72m in estimated economic impact. I think the speed of our recovery is partly down to the pent-up demand caused by the pandemic, but also a return to business-as-usual. California has been on an upward trajectory for a number of years because of the rising demand from streamers and the return of the feature films."

Thomason says Santa Clarita's popularity is down to the 360-degree nature of its proposition: "Right now, we're home to

CALIFORNIA HAS BEEN ON AN UPWARD TRAJECTORY FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS BECAUSE OF THE RISING DEMAND FROM STREAMERS AND THE RETURN OF THE FEATURE FILMS

EVAN THOMASON

more than 40 sound stages, 10 movie ranches and a multitude of ancillary film-related businesses. We're set up to host everything from high-end TV series including *Westworld* (2016), *Mayan's MC* (2018), and *Star Trek Picard* (2020-), through to films including *Space Jam: A New Legacy* (2021). On top of that, we've hosted dozens of commercials, and music videos featuring Lady Gaga, T-Pain and Justin Bieber."

Key hubs include Santa Clarita Studios, which is home 32 sound stages — ranging from 12,000 to 40,000 sq. ft. — capable of hosting both film and TV.

LA North Studios has been an important recent addition to Santa Clarita. Opened in 2019 and expanded in 2021, the business now has eight sound stages across three sites — ranging from 22,000 to 55,000 sq. ft. At time of writing, a water tank is under construction and there are plans to get a backlot up and running within the next year or so.

The studio was co-founded by Anthony Syracuse and John Prabhu, both born and raised in California. Syracuse, a feature-film construction manager by trade, says LA North was born out of demand for additional studio space. "I did over five years on the road, with productions based abroad or in incentive states, before moving my construction business back to California. I was working on a project with the client who told me that their next job would have to go out of state because of lack of studio space. So working with John, who has a real-estate background, we decided to do something about that. We constructed our first



Zoe Kazan as Pia Brewer and Kate Lister as Jeannine Murphy in episode 103 of *Clickbait*, whose locations include the city of Oakland, in Alameda County. Photo: Ben King/Netflix. ©2021

stages on a former vitamin distribution centre and they were occupied immediately. We've now got stages across three sites and are under contract to start a new expansion phase."

While clients have included Netflix, Apple TV+, Amazon and Showtime, a particular strength is LA North's ability to host feature films — which reflects Syracuse's own specialism. Aside from *Space Jam: A New Legacy*, recent projects to have been based there include 2021's *King Richard*, *Snake Eyes*, *The Little Things* and *The Forever Purge*. "Servicing TV series is a key part of our strategy," Syracuse says, "but what we've been able to do is bring more high-profile feature films into Santa Clarita. We have two of the biggest sound stages on the West Coast, which gives us the ability to capitalize on the California film rebate."

Syracuse and Prabhu describe themselves as "huge advocates" of keeping film in California. "We do everything we can to keep productions from going out of state," Prabhu says. "We'll look at discounts to persuade them to stay, because we know how important it is for crews to work near their families."

While the nature of global incentive policies means that some productions find other locations irresistible, Syracuse says the big risk that productions take when they leave California is that they won't get the same levels of support from ancillary businesses. "California crews are the best in the world and our vendors are like a concierge service. They completely get what it means when a forklift goes down and a production ends up with 100 crew standing around. What you get in California is not just great equipment but great customer service."

The surge in demand for stages, locations, and ranches has led to new filming hubs coalescing around the edge of Los

Angeles' famous thirty-mile zone (TMZ). The Simi Valley is now well established as a thriving filming hub, while the area around Antelope Valley and Palmdale has become busier since the creation of a secondary studio zone in 2015 — which effectively extends the thirty mile zone by 10 miles. Although the Palmdale area has a long tradition of filming, the extension — combined with the state incentive — has led to a surge in productions. Palmdale film liaison David Halver and Antelope Valley Film Commissioner Pauline East are now working aggressively to develop the region's reputation as a film-friendly hub.

While the majority of filming activity takes place in the L.A. vicinity, one of the best indicators of the state's popularity is the growing volume of production taking place across the state. Firmly established as a second hub, for example, is San Francisco and the Bay Area, some 380 miles North of L.A.

Historically, San Francisco was regarded as a tough place to shoot for logistical reasons. But the success of large-scale productions, including Transformers movie *Bumblebee* (2018) and *Venom* (2018) has reminded the production community of the region's potential. Mega-projects to have taken full advantage of the city's backdrop in the last year have included Disney blockbuster *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021), *The Matrix Resurrections* (2021) and *Venom: Let There Be Carnage* (2021). On the latter project, which shot around San Francisco for three weeks in 2020, locations included maximum security prison San Quentin and Grace Cathedral.

Shang-Chi, meanwhile, is a character of Asian ethnicity, so it would have been an easy call for director Destin Daniel Cretton to fall back on San Francisco's iconic Chinatown. Instead, he introduces the movie's audience to Richmond, a district that has some similar characteristics and a population that is 40% Asian descent. One of the most impressive aspects of this production is a sequence in which a bus careers out of control, wrecking more than a dozen vehicles before flipping over. Shot across five days and at various locations, it's a great example of how San Francisco's public agencies and neighborhoods have opened their doors to big-budget production in recent years.

**WHAT YOU GET IN CALIFORNIA IS NOT
JUST GREAT EQUIPMENT BUT GREAT
CUSTOMER SERVICE"** JOHN PRABHU

San Francisco's stunning skyline was also on show in *The Matrix Resurrections*, which filmed around the city for approximately 21 days (both ahead of the pandemic and in the period soon afterwards). Location manager Doug Dresser says he was impressed with the support that the production received from the city's authorities: "The film was a great partnership between the film crew, the police, the fire service, and the film office. Without their help we wouldn't have been able to pull this off. We were closing off eight to 10 blocks of the city almost every weekend, triggering explosions and doing all kinds of crazy stuff. In one sequence, we had two stunt people on a rig between two 50-story buildings. That was shot at sunrise with a helicopter circling round the buildings filming."

In the first half of 2021, production in San Francisco increased 68% compared to the previous year, with 161 permits between January and June 2021, compared to 96 in the same time period of 2020. Shoot days also increased by 51%, with 329 shoot days from January to June 2021, compared with 218 in 2020.

Highlights included the fact that *Nash Bridges* (2021) returned to San Francisco, shooting a film for USA Network. This stars Don Johnson and Cheech Marin and pays homage to the *Nash Bridges* (1996-2001) show that shot in San Francisco for six seasons.

The production took advantage of the Scene in San Francisco Rebate Programme which rebates up to \$600,000 per film.

Other key projects have included *Super Pumped*, a Showtime TV series about the founding of Uber, that shot for eight days around San Francisco, starring Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Kyle Chandler, and Uma Thurman.

Cinelease has brought a new dimension to the Bay Area's offering in terms of equipment rental and studio space. "We saw an opportunity to invest in the Bay Area for a couple of reasons," says Cinelease director of studio development Mark Walter. "The first was the stable support provided by the state tax incentive. The second was the clear potential for the Bay Area to grow as a filming hub if someone could put the right studio/equipment infrastructure in place."

Cinelease has anchored its activities on Solano County's Mare Island, a former Naval base that acts as an equipment store, studio space, and a period location. Productions based here included *Bumblebee* and *13 Reasons Why* (2017-20), and there are now reports that Christopher Nolan's pre-WW2 epic *Oppenheimer* — expected in 2023 — will be located there, presumably to take advantage of the site's historic military architecture.

Alongside Mare Island, Walter has been hunting down spaces that can be temporarily converted into stages for major productions. An example is Treasure Island, which was used to host blockbuster productions including *Ant-Man* (2015), *Shang-Chi*, and *Venom*. "Sites like this are also a great place for hosting or testing complex scenes, such as explosions and collisions," Walter says. "*Shang-Chi* only had one shot at flipping their bus in the streets of San Francisco, so they practiced the stunt here first."

Treasure Island was also used as the backdrop for *Goodbye Mr Chips*, an innovative independent production that is a hybrid between a movie and a musical-theatre production. "The owners of Treasure Island are now developing the site for a different use," Walter says, "but we have good relationships with developers across the Bay Area and expecting to be in a position to offer productions alternative spaces."

Walter's ambition is to build a permanent sound stage complex for the Bay Area, a move which he believes would take the region to the next level as a production hub. At time of writing, it looked like Cinelease was going to be able to build a studio space on a development site called Solano360 — the former Solano County Fairgrounds. Current plans envisage a studio complex sitting at the heart of a multiple-purpose site including homes, shops, offices, and hospitality venues.

With San Francisco's film-friendly attitude and an expanding infrastructure typified by Cinelease, the ring of counties around the Bay Area have also come into play as potential locations. Blessed with their own unique attributes, but also capable of playing 'anytown America', counties including Solano, Marin, Sonoma and San Mateo have become popular. Netflix hit series *13 Reasons Why*, for example, recently wrapped its fourth and final season after shooting in Solano and Marin, leaning heavily on the cities of Vallejo and San Rafael. San Mateo, with its Silicon Valley links, has been a natural backdrop for big budget movies including *The Internship* (2013) and *Jobs* (2013).

The city of Oakland, in Alameda County, has also established itself as a great backdrop for film and TV. In 2020, Netflix series *Clickbait* (2021) filmed here. Meanwhile, a TV spin-off series based on the 2018 movie *Blindspotting* also placed the city at the heart of the action. Co-written by Rafael Casal and Daveed Diggs, the eight-part comedy drama airs on Starz, and showcases the same cultural dynamism and diversity as its movie predecessor.

With a population of 1.4 million, the Southern city of San Diego is the second biggest city in the state and has many of the

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raw attributes required to make a great filming hub — climate, crew, varied locations, diversity, for example. Now, there is also a clear sense of urgency to attract productions.

The City of San Diego, for example, opened a new film office in 2016. Brandy Shimabukuro, filming program manager for the city of San Diego’s Special Events & Filming Department, says: “In 2015, Mayor Faulconer and the city council advocated for the re-emergence of the San Diego film office. Part of that was

THE INTENT HAS BEEN TO TRULY MARKET AND PROMOTE SAN DIEGO AS A FILMING DESTINATION BRANDY SHIMABUKURO

the creation of my role. The intent has been to truly market and promote San Diego as a filming destination.”

COVID-19 has meant recent projects have tended to be smaller shoots, such as commercials and non-scripted content, but Shimabukuro says the city has ambitions to bring a steady stream of larger productions to the area. These efforts, she says, will be boosted by new plans for the creation of a San Diego Regional Film Office — which would operate at a county level. The initiative is spearheaded by Nathan Fletcher, chair of the San Diego County Board of Supervisors, who says: “Creating an independent, regional film office will help bring an infusion of new dollars into our local economy. The Office will market our region to filmmakers and studios and help to generate jobs as camera operators, stage-hands, lighting technicians, and set builders. It will also support restaurants, hotels and caterers.”

Fletcher says San Diego is a great location for filmmakers “because of our fair climate, beautiful and diverse landscapes, and our talented workforce.” He adds that the regional film office “can serve as a one-stop-shop for the industry. By cutting the red tape of co-ordinating permits with multiple jurisdictions, creating a centralized marketing message, and having dedicated staff to champion San Diego as a destination for filmmakers and production studios, we can lift our local economy.”

One area that stands to benefit is the Port of San Diego, according to Board of Port Commissioners chairman Michael Zucchet. “Many on-the-water and waterfront locations on and along San Diego Bay are popular with filmmakers. Everything from the Rady Shell at Jacobs Park to the aircraft carrier USS

Midway, Seaport Village, the Embarcadero, the iconic Imperial Beach Pier, the South Bay, the industrial sites from Barrio Logan to National City, and more. Having a regional film office elevates our ability to market the region for TV and film.”

Alongside his job at LA North Studios, Syracuse continues to work across the state on movie construction jobs. He says: “I did *Bumblebee* in the Bay Area, and *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022) down around San Diego. I got to work with crews and vendors in both area and they were great, welcoming these productions with open arms. I think we’re going to see a lot more work in those areas, which is great news for the California industry.”

While it is natural for productions to base themselves in urban hubs, where the crew, equipment, studio and accommodation infrastructures are most robust, the network of 60 local film offices provides pain-free access to a mind-blowing array of locations. Sabrina Jurisich, head of the Shasta County Film Commission in Northern California, says “we are a very collaborative group. While each film office tries to secure production for its own area, we are also in constant dialogue to make sure we keep work in California. What this means for location managers is that the film offices act as a gateway to a wide range of landscapes. If we don’t have what they’re looking for in Shasta, it’s likely that another of my colleagues will.”

Two-and-a-half hours from state capital Sacramento, Shasta’s appeal is its natural beauty, Jurisich says. With 550 film-friendly locations in easy reach of each other, “we’re popular with commercials and music video producers. Recent visitors have included Donny Osmond and Andy Grammer, while we had Prudential and ServiceMaster in 2020. There’s tons of diversity here from prairie land and meadows to snow-capped mountains; as well as rivers and lakes. In terms of architecture we can offer the full gamut from Victorian homes to classic Western ranches.”

A big coup this year has been the arrival of *Peter Five Eight* (2022), “a modern day technicolor film noir starring Kevin Spacey in his comeback cinema role,” Jurisich says. “Shot on location in Shasta County and Dunsmuir, during the summer of 2021, the film was written and directed by Michael Zaiko and also stars Jet Jandreau, Rebecca Demornay, and Jake Weber.”

As part of her efforts to encourage production, Jurisich is also developing an expanded proposition that encompasses neighboring Tehama County. “Tehama is easily accessible from our capital city Redding, and opens up a range of beautiful, untapped locations. The plan is to promote the region’s offer via a new Upstate California Film Commission website.”

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Malcolm & Marie, starring Zendaya and John David Washington – filmed at night in a single location, the Caterpillar House in Carmel

Other auspicious developments include the launch of direct flights from California movie hotspot Burbank to Redding, and a renewed effort by Sacramento City film commissioner Jennifer West to attract production to Northern California. West is keen to build on the momentum created by Greta Gerwig’s *Ladybird* in 2017. She has launched a pilot programme that would offer local grants to both large and small productions, in an attempt to support both economic and community goals.

The region around Lake Tahoe can be accessed via two film offices, Placer-Lake Tahoe and El Dorado Lake Tahoe. *Top Gun: Maverick*, starring Tom Cruise, was mainly shot around San Diego — but key sequences were filmed in Washoe Meadows State Park and Lake Tahoe Airport. Location manager Mike Fantasia reports how the airport was used to double for an Eastern European-style airbase.

Mandi Dillin, location manager of prestigious projects including HBO’s *Westworld*, says a lot of her time is spent filming

around “the hectic but life-affirming” city of L.A. “But I also love, love, love working in Northern California. Mendocino County will always hold a special place in my heart, ever since filming *Need For Speed* in 2013. I try to visit Mendocino at least once a year.” Other projects to have enjoyed Mendocino hospitality include Jean-Marc Vallée’s HBO series, *Sharp Objects* (2018).

Also at the Northern end of the state, Humboldt and Del Norte Counties offer filmmakers a combination of rugged coastline, raging rivers, majestic Redwoods and quaint Victorian towns

MENDOCINO COUNTY WILL ALWAYS HOLD A SPECIAL PLACE IN MY HEART, EVER SINCE FILMING NEED FOR SPEED IN 2013 MANDY DILLIN

like Eureka. The pandemic briefly shut down access to the iconic Redwoods, but since April 2021 it has been open access — with filming now possible on an impressive sky walk. To make the region even more appealing, the two counties recently stopped charging production permit application fees.

The wildness of Northern California has had a magnetic attraction for producers, with big-budget productions including *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (1997), *After Earth* (2013), *A Wrinkle In Time* (2018), and *Bird Box* (2018). But Eureka also has its charm. This year, it was the backdrop for *The Sky Is Everywhere*, an Apple TV+ adaptation of the young adult novel by Jandy Nelson.

Cassandra Hesseltine, head of Humboldt-Del Norte Film Commission, says: “*The Sky Is Everywhere* filmed throughout Humboldt County during the autumn of 2020. The entire feature film took 38 days to shoot. The script called for a northern California small-town vibe. In addition, the producers loved how rural we were, which enabled them to achieve safety on set more easily. It was fun to watch the locals embrace the production. It featured over 500 extras, many doing more than the usual ‘walk across the street’ movement since it involved musical numbers.”

Filmmakers keen to explore California’s spectacular locations can also check in with Mono County, up in the state’s Eastern Sierra. Although the county has been relatively untapped since feature film *Oblivion* dropped in on Mammoth in 2012, it boasts some of the most impressive landscapes in the world. Dramatic



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Katy (Awkwafina) and Shang-Chi (Simu Liu) — just ahead of the memorable bus-flipping scene in Marvel Studios' *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*. Photo: ©Marvel Studios 2021

mountain backdrops, lakes and waterfalls, high desert, authentic ghost towns, bubbling hot springs, moon-like rock formations, and log cabins are all in Mono's wheelhouse. While the Southern and Northern sections of California have much to recommend them, any survey of California would be remiss if it didn't reference the stunning array of locations in the central stretch between L.A. and San Francisco. San Luis Obispo County's beaches have featured many times on screen while aerial shots were used in Netflix series *You* (2018-). Elsewhere, Santa Barbara, 90 minutes North of L.A., offers vineyards, ranches, evocative roads, sand dunes, beaches, forests, mountains, and Spanish architecture. Capable of doubling for the old South, the Mediterranean, the Middle East, or a 1950s version of 'Main Street USA', the county also offers its own small production incentive, which can be combined with state incentives.

Kern County has also joined in the *Top Gun: Maverick* circus, hosting part of the production at the Naval Air Weapons Station in China Lake. Approximately two hours north of L.A., Kern's appeal has grown as the California production boom has gathered pace. Excluding the COVID year, it hands out around 150 filming permits a year, and is working hard to position itself as a film-friendly location. Home to locations such as Tejon Ranch, Red Rock Canyon, Trona Pinnacles, Lake Isabella, and the Edwards Air Force Base, it has featured in classic movies including *Thelma & Louise* (1991), *Jurassic Park* (1993), and *Captain Marvel* (2019).

Another popular filming spot is Monterey, which has hosted hit series including HBO's *Big Little Lies* (2017-19) and Netflix's *Ratched* (2020-). Particularly in demand is the county's awe-inspiring coastline, but that is only one part of the attraction, says Jere Newton, a location manager who does a lot of work in the region. Citing the rolling golden hills, vineyards, beach towns, and architecture, as well as the coast, she says: "Monterey has a wonderful history and is filled with majestic locations."

Newton recently worked on *Malcolm & Marie* (2021), a romantic drama starring Zendaya and John David Washington. That was a novel project because it was all filmed at night and took place in a single location. "The location was so important on this project. We found a wonderful, clean, mid-Century property and shot there for 14 days." The house in question was the

Caterpillar House in Carmel. Its remote location meant it was the perfect spot for COVID-era filming, while the house's innovative glass walls allowed for dramatic night-time shots.

As the CFC's Bell noted at the start of this story, California's appeal is not just its unique locations, but its ability to masquerade as other cities and regions. Through a combination of locations, studios, ranches and VFX magic dust, the Golden State has doubled for the Middle East, Hong Kong, Vietnam and parts of Europe. Tasha Day, who is in charge of film liaison at Long Beach, a city in L.A. County, says her home has proved especially adept at doubling for other US cities. Florida has been recreated for *CSI: Miami* (2002-12), *Nip/Tuck* (2003-10), and *Dexter* (2006-13), while Boston and Chicago have also been conjured up by locations and design magicians. Another interesting example of Southern California's versatility saw it double for Austin, Texas in Fox's *9-1-1 Lone Star* (2020-), a spin-off from first-responder series *9-1-1* (2018-).

Location manager Mandi Dillin says: "Even with all the commercial development happening in L.A., the City can double for so many places. Creating 1980s New York in Downtown L.A. was very fun and unusual for me. I've been focused on science fiction for the last several years. We found some great gems in Downtown Los Angeles that literally felt like you were stepping into the 1970s and 1980s. A great location that comes to mind is one we stumbled on randomly — a Chinese restaurant that had fantastic yellow subway tiling inside, a plastic menu with marquee style letters in various states of being misspelled or missing, a pass-through window to the sidewalk and so many dirty, greasy mirrors. It needed almost zero set dressing."

One of the challenges on that project, *The Shrink Next Door* (2021), was re-creating New York-style basketball courts. "Almost all of our basketball courts in Downtown Los Angeles are interior or are on building rooftops whereas in New York they are on the street level, nestled in between high-rise buildings and apartments. We converted a parking lot into our Manhattan basketball court. This sounds like a simple solution but finding the right parking lot, surrounded by the buildings that didn't have loads of modern details, located adjacent to the right kind of street and sidewalk was not as simple as you might think." —



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MAKING A SCENE MAVERICK



'NOBODY WORKS HARDER THAN TOM'

Tom Cruise plays Capt. Pete 'Maverick' Mitchell in *Top Gun: Maverick* from Paramount Pictures, Skydance and Jerry Bruckheimer Films. Photo: Scott Garfield. ©2019 Paramount Pictures Corporation

AFTER 36 YEARS TOM CRUISE IS BACK IN THE ROLE THAT PUT HIM ON THE A-LIST. IN THE WORDS OF THE FILM'S PRODUCER JERRY BRUCKHEIMER, TOP GUN: MAVERICK IS "A LOVE LETTER TO AVIATION". **JULIAN NEWBY** REPORTS

IT'S FOUR years since work started on *Top Gun: Maverick*, the sequel to 1986 blockbuster *Top Gun*. It was originally set for a 2019 release, but the complexities of some of the film's more ambitious aviation scenes — coupled with the COVID-19 outbreak — meant that filming, and the release date, were put back... and back, and back.

A commitment finally to give the film a theatrical release in May 2022 echoes that of the also much-anticipated and much-delayed Bond movie, *No Time to Die*. All involved were insistent that, given both films' extraordinarily high production values, they both had to be seen first on the big screen. No confinement to streaming services for Bond or *Maverick*. Only the unique experience of the cinema was good enough for these, arguably the best examples of their genre.



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In *Top Gun: Maverick*, some 36 years have passed and Pete Mitchell is back where he belongs, pushing himself to the edge as a test pilot and dodging any of the much deserved promotions that would confine him to a desk. While training a detachment of graduates of the Top Gun school — the US Navy Strike Fighter Tactics Instructor program — Pete ‘Maverick’ Mitchell comes across Lt. Bradley Bradshaw (Miles Teller), aka Rooster, the son of Maverick’s late buddy Goose, who was killed in the original movie. Memories of his friend grow strong again and start to affect Maverick’s decision-making, as happened when he had to confront his loss the first time around.

That’s one of the human elements of this story. And then there’s the action, which the filmmakers decided had to be authentic, technically accurate, and devoid — where possible — of special effects. Sophisticated camera set-ups, the intense training of the actors who had to fly in some of the world’s most advanced fighter jets, and the deep involvement of the military, combined with Tom Cruise’s passionate, perfectionist approach to create a cinematic tour de force — the likes of which, according to producer Jerry Bruckheimer, is unlikely to “ever be done again”.

First things first: the crew actually had to go up in the planes. Nothing less would satisfy director Joseph Kosinski, producer Bruckheimer, and producer and star Tom Cruise. “You just can’t create this kind of experience unless you shoot it live,” says Cruise, who designed a training course to help his fellow actors acclimatize to the sensation of flying in F-18 fighter jets. “It is aggressive. You can’t act that, the distortion in the face. They’re pulling 7.5/8Gs. That’s 1,600 pounds of force.”

And if you’re going to put actors through that kind of experience, then you’ve got to make sure you catch it all properly on camera. The team worked with “a brand-new camera system that allows us to put six IMAX-quality cameras in the cockpit with the actors”, director Kosinski says. “Flying one of these fighter jets is an absolute thrill ride. We wanted to make sure that the audience has the same experience.”

“Putting us up in these jets, it’s very serious. That’s why everybody thought it would be impossible,” Miles Teller, who plays Rooster, adds. “And when Tom hears that something’s impossible or can’t be done, that’s when he gets to work.”

“It’s amazing what we see in the cockpit, what the audience is going to

experience,” Bruckheimer says. “Thanks to Tom all the actors are becoming used to the G-forces with all the training that they are doing.”

“Nobody works harder than Tom,” the film’s location manager Mike Fantasia says. “He was meticulous as far as the planning of all the missions was concerned.

“After all, he’s a pilot, an actor, and a producer — and he’s aware that there’s a lot to be concerned about. And we’re making a sequel to a classic film.”

Fantasia got the call to work on the film in March 2018, at the earliest stages of production. “It was quite an honor,” Fantasia says. “I’ve always loved military aviation; my father worked out of a base in England during WWII. To work on this movie was every location manager’s dream.”

WHEN TOM HEARS THAT SOMETHING’S IMPOSSIBLE OR CAN’T BE DONE, THAT’S WHEN HE GETS TO WORK

MILES TELLER



A CineJet L-39, filming the mid-air action for *Top Gun: Maverick*



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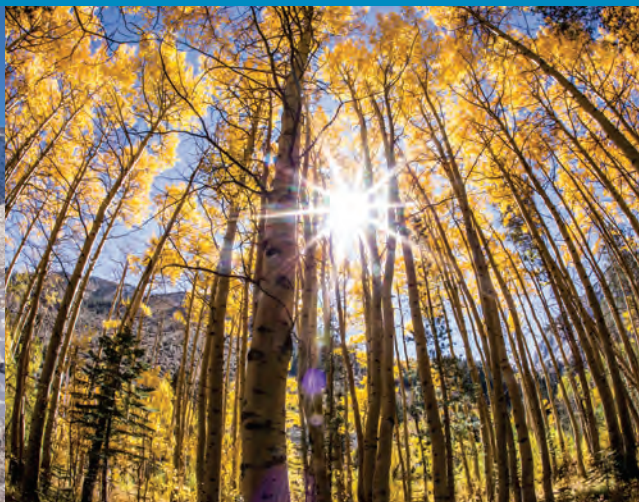
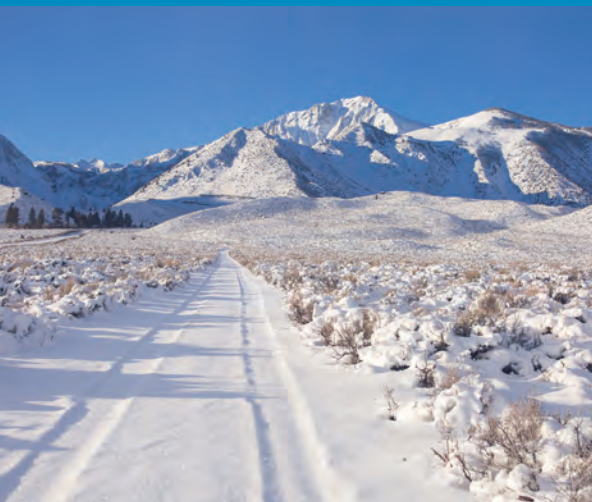
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Monica Barbaro as Phoenix and Tom Cruise as Pete 'Maverick' Mitchell on the set of *Top Gun: Maverick*, from Paramount Pictures, Skydance and Jerry Bruckheimer Films.
Photo: Scott Garfield. ©2019 Paramount Pictures Corporation

Work started in early April, beginning with an initial meeting with the Navy, Bruckheimer and executive producer Tommy Harper. “There was a whole bunch of Navy people we met, just sort of laying the groundwork. Jerry was talking about the first movie and what he hoped to do in the second — and the Navy folks were voicing their support, and letting us know what the ground rules were,” Fantasia says. “With the military, at least here in The States, if they decide the script is appropriate, and they want to work with us in an official capacity, they will basically give us people and equipment for free if it fits in with their training. And if it doesn’t fit in with their training, but they can accommodate it, then we pay. So, what we tried to do early on was identify what our needs were in terms of naval facilities, ships, planes, bases, that kind of stuff — and personnel.”

The crew worked with the Navy on various bases — in Washington, Nevada, and California — constantly working out when a ship was going to be in port and when it would be at sea, and planning scenes accordingly.

“So, it was like, do we need 12 F-18s in San Diego on this day? Or do we need four F-18s and two two-seaters in China Lake for these days? A key Naval liaison

was Captain Brian ‘Ferg’ Ferguson. He was fantastic. He knows everybody in the Navy and he was able to secure most of our equipment for us — jets mainly. So, when we thought it was impossible to find 10 jets in San Diego for just one scene, we flew six in from here and three in from there — and then you got five or six from the shed that were being worked on that don’t have a nose or a tail. You wheel them into place and put them in the background and you make it work. It was sort of an amazing juggling act between the Navy and us — it was a great partnership.”

However, the fact that many of the jets used in the film were also in active service did cause a few headaches. “Every hour that a jet flies, there’s a certain amount of maintenance that has to be done. So, if we’ve got a jet for three days, in the air maybe five or six hours each day, that jet might then be down for a couple of days for maintenance,” Fantasia says. “Also, like a car has a 20,000 miles tune-up or 50,000 miles tune-up, jets have similar, but measured in hours. And so that was hard to juggle. We’ve got this jet that can be with us for three days but then it’s got to go to the shed for two weeks to have the engine pulled out. So, they’re always swapping jets — we were changing numbers on the sides of the jets, all the time.”

Maverick’s jet is a different color from the others, of course, and that caused a whole new set of problems. “All the other jets look the same, but Maverick has to have his own color jet. But we had to use those that were available at the time — and for Maverick it had to be one that we could paint. And that takes time — you’ve got to strip the paint, you’ve got to clean the body, you’ve got to put a special paint on and then when the scene is done, you’ve got to take all that paint off again. So that was a massive juggling effort.”

There would be other continuity issues too: often a jet would be swapped mid-shot for reasons already mentioned, and this is where VFX might be employed: “You’d just call the visual effects guy and say, ‘Hey, number 422 should be number 118’. That kind of thing sometimes had to be sorted out in post-production.”

Captain Ferguson wasn’t only on hand for the big decisions on hardware: “Ferg was with the crew for pretty well every day of filming — and when he couldn’t, there would always be somebody in his place. He would make himself available in the ‘ready room’ [a trailer-type construction that could seat 100 people and which was used for daily production planning meetings with cast and crew]. He would make sure that when those guys walk into the room,

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their military attire was correct. That would be where we talked about the missions, to make sure that what we're doing is correct. Protocols, all that kind of stuff. Ferg would take any questions we had; we were hammering this guy — on costumes, props, locations, and set decoration. And he'd be coming back saying, 'Call this person for the wardrobe, call this person for the correct language'. If he didn't have the answer, he'd find the person who did."

Of course, the main priority above all others was safety. "One thing that Ferg always stressed is, 'You know what you're capable of, and you know what your equipment's capable of, and you know — as in the heat of battle — in the heat of filming, don't do anything stupid'," Fantasia says. "Don't do the things you're not supposed to do. Don't do things that your jet can't do. I'm not sure what the F-18 can handle, how many Gs, let's say it's eight. So, these guys were told you can't go more than 6.8 or seven. So, there was a buffer there. And if you go over it, you're not coming back."

"Tom always stressed safety too. You know, these are actors in the back seats of these fighter jets. They're not pilots. Yeah, they all had to go through all that dunker training, and the parachute training, but if they couldn't hack it, they wouldn't be in the back of that plane — there's just no way. So everybody's concerned about safety and I can't think of any safety problems that we had. Every day we had jets in the air and we were doing things on, say, a military plane flying at low level, pushing the limits — but I didn't ever hear the word 'safety' brought up in a negative manner."

YOU KNOW, THESE ARE ACTORS IN THE BACK SEAT OF THESE FIGHTER JETS. THEY'RE NOT PILOTS

MIKE FANTASIA

As well as the Top Gun School at the Naval Air Station Fallon, Nevada, the production was also based a lot of the time at Naval Air Station Lemoore (NAS Lemoore) in Kings County and Fresno County, California; and the Naval Weapons Station, China Lake, Ridgecrest, California. These bases afforded the production access to the ocean and desert areas for aerial shooting, as well as hangars and other on-the-ground sites.



Mike Fantasia, with Maintenance Officer Borden, at Naval Air Station Lemoore. Photo: George Alvarez

The film also shot at North Island Naval Air Station in San Diego: "We filmed on board aircraft carriers when they were docked, undergoing maintenance — we squeezed filming in between their maintenance work," Fantasia says. "We also shot various hangars, office buildings, tarmac areas, streets, things like that on the base. And we built sets inside a couple of the hangars as well as outside by the ocean."

Those sets included the bar where navy base staff hang out, which was built on the beach at the Naval Air Station — one of the more straightforward projects for a location manager and team on this otherwise turbo-charged movie.

You would have thought...

"So, we've got this whole beach, there's miles of beach — choose your spot. So, we did, and it just so happened that the place we chose was a nesting area for a breed of endangered birds. So, I had to deal with all of the environmental stuff. We've got to keep the Navy environmental people happy, and the California Coastal Commission happy. So we had to go through the environmental assessment process and I kept


the production at bay while we did that. We change our schedule, we push the scenes to later on — we do all the work we had to do to make sure we're out of the nesting areas."

Night-time shooting was also a problem because the lights would confuse the birds into thinking it was daytime: "So, you have to put covers over the lights, and you can only go so many hours with the lights on."

As well as the Navy, film commissions were also on-hand to help out when the production came across particular hurdles. "We had some scenes where we were flying jets at wave-top level, from the ocean to the land. That took us over Highway One, the beautiful coastline highway that you always see in California car commercials," Fantasia says. "The state did a great job helping to get intermittent traffic closures on that highway during times that were not always the most advantageous for them. But they did it. Everybody knew it was Top Gun, so everybody knew what we were trying to do. They knew it was a love letter home to the Navy. Everybody wanted to help us out." —

Aaron Paul stars as Caleb Nichols in *Westworld*, which returned to Melody Ranch for season four.
Photo: John P. Johnson/HBO

OTHER WORLDS

A man with short brown hair and a beard, wearing a black jacket and black pants, stands in a desert landscape. He is looking back over his right shoulder towards the camera. The background shows a vast, arid landscape with dry vegetation and distant mountains under a clear sky. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

IF SOMEONE TOLD YOU IT WAS POSSIBLE
TO FILM IN THE WILD WEST, A MIDDLE-
EASTERN VILLAGE, A PARIS BOULEVARD,
A NEW YORK BUSINESS DISTRICT, A
JUNGLE SWAMP AND A WESTERN-ERA
SALOON – ALL WITHIN 30 MILES OF EACH
OTHER – YOU’D PROBABLY THINK THEY
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THE KEY to California's movie ranch and backlot infrastructure, which has been built up over the course of the last century, is the variety it has to offer.

Born out of Hollywood's fabled studio system, California's ranches and backlots combine with the state's spectacular locations and world-class studio complexes to create a filming

proposition that is unmatched anywhere in the world. During the pandemic, backlots and ranches took on a new significance, enabling film and TV productions to seal themselves off from public places, thus minimizing the risk of spreading the virus.

With a few exceptions, California's backlots are run by the major Hollywood players and sit adjacent to iconic studios in central L.A. A case in point is Universal Studios, which is spread over some 400 acres. "It has 29 sound stages, and more than 30 backlot locations," says Aaron Rogers, senior director, marketing and communications at NBC Universal. "Backlot locations include New York Street, European Street, suburban neighborhoods, water features, and Courthouse Square. In 2022 we are opening eight new sound stages on the eastern side of the lot. These will be 18,000 sq. ft. each and will bring the number of sound stages on the property to 37."

In addition to studios and backlots, Universal offers "full-service production departments such as set lighting and grip, property, costume, and transportation, along with specialty services, including graphic design. NBCUniversal StudioPost provides post-production services on-lot and remotely."

With stages, backlot, production services, and post services at one location, "Universal makes the production process

easier, more efficient, and more creative," Rogers says. "As content production gets more complex and challenging, we give productions options and flexibility in a controlled environment. Need a couch ASAP? We have one of the largest property departments in L.A. Need urban and park-like locations? We have lakes, quiet country roads, office buildings, parking structures, brownstones, and more. Only have talent for a day and need ADR? StudioPost is ready and available. Anything a production needs is here."

This kind of controlled backlot environment also lends itself to productions that have a heavy VFX component — an increasingly important consideration. "A practical backlot complements VFX," Rogers says.

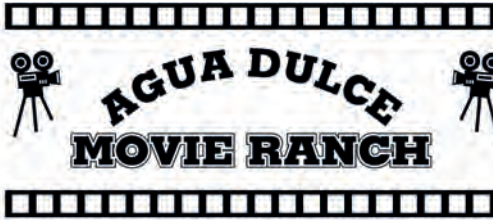
Although the primary function of the major studio/backlot complexes is to service in-house production, a steady stream of third-party projects also passes through their gates each year. At Universal, features, TV, commercials, independents, music videos, events and streaming projects all utilize the stages and backlot, with recent projects including *Rutherford Falls* (2021), *Kenan* (2021-), and *Mr. Mayor* (2021-). "We strive to make Universal a welcoming home for productions," says Jamie Crosbie, senior vice-president of Studio Services at Universal Studios. "We have the stages, locations, and customer-service-oriented departments to achieve any creative vision."

Warner Bros.' Burbank-based backlot is another popular choice, offering a wide range of looks from a Midwest American town center to a jungle lagoon. Supported by an on-site production services team, sets can be dressed to resemble any time period. Recent productions based there include *You* (2018), a hit Netflix series that relocated from New York.

While many of *You's* exteriors and establishing shots



Chris O'Shea as Andrew, Shalita Grant as Sherry, Shannon Chan-Kent as Kiki, and Victoria Pedretti as Love, in Netflix dark comedy series, *You*. Photo: John P. Fleenor/Netflix



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The Post-Apocalyptic Level at La Tuna Canyon Movie Ranch, an eerie area which includes mudslides, burnt remains, abandoned vehicles, a firewood stockpile, and much more. Photo: La Tuna Locations

were generated on location — including an aerial shot of a neighborhood in San Luis Obispo — several key backdrops from the series can be found on the Warner Bros.' lot.

One of the most prominent is the bakery run by central character Love. Called A Fresh Tart in the show, both the interior and exterior of the bakery were shot on the backlot's French Street. Meanwhile, supporting character Dante's house can be found on Blondie Street, an exterior set that is located on a second Warner lot about a mile away. In a neat twist at the end of the show, the Eiffel Tower is dropped into the back of Warner's Hennessy Street to create the illusion that Joe (played by Penn Badgley) has now relocated to Paris.

Melrose Avenue-based Paramount Studios backlot is also a thriving production hub, offering a variety of looks, from plush central plazas to The Alley, a forbidding backstreet which is exactly the kind of place central characters go to get beaten up by thugs in movies. One of the biggest draws is the New York backlot. At a time when California is pushing hard to persuade productions to relocate from other parts of the US, the NY backlot offers eight NY districts across a five-acre site. Without having to go through the hassle of permits, fees, traffic control and community diplomacy, productions including *CSI* (2000-15), *Daredevil* (2003), *Glee* (2009-15), and *Bridesmaids* (2011), have secured access to Brownstones and financial district sets, as well as replicas of Brooklyn, Greenwich Village, and the Upper East Side. There's even a Chicago set, if projects need a taste of the Mid-West.

A major shake-up in the Hollywood studio business came in 2019, when Disney acquired the majority of 21st Century Fox's entertainment assets for \$71bn. Not included in the deal was

the Fox Studio Lot, which now forms an important element of the Fox Corp — the company formed with the assets not sold to Disney. In Fox Corp's most recent annual report, CEO Lachlan Murdoch said the 50-acre site will predominantly be occupied by Disney productions until 2026. But there is capacity for other third-party productions. Post 2026, that may expand — unless Fox Corp is tempted to sell up, with the Pico Boulevard site estimated to be worth in the region of \$1.5bn.

In its current form, the Fox lot has 15 sound stages, two broadcast studios, and numerous theaters and screening rooms, editing rooms, and other television and film production facilities. In addition, the backlot features a historic New York Street backdrop, as well as the flexibility to create different locales varying from San Francisco's Chinatown to urban L.A.

Other exciting shifts in L.A.'s studio landscape include the re-emergence of Culver City as a central production hub. Just seven miles from Paramount Studios, Culver City is home to Sony Pictures Studios — the site of the original MGM Studios from 1924-1986. In 2017, Amazon added its weight to the Culver City transformation when it moved its own studio division into the historic Culver Studios complex, owned by Hackman Capital Partners. This location has now been expanded and will be home to Amazon Studios, IMDb and other associated businesses. Subsequently, both HBO and Apple have decided to set up shop in the Culver City area, with a new building under construction set to house Apple's fast-growing content production division.

California's movie ranches are located away from the centre of L.A., but still close enough to offer easy access — most are within L.A.'s thirty-mile zone. The ranches vary



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enormously in size — some up to 1,000 acres — and what they have to offer varies considerably, too. La Tuna Canyon Movie Ranch, for example, prides itself on being the closest ranch to key locations including Hollywood and Burbank. A 10-acre gated compound, it offers a range of architecture — for example, an art barn, outbuildings, pool, hot tubs and patios — as well as a variety of natural looks. By contrast, Antelope Valley’s Blayne Ranch offers 160 acres of unspoiled desert wilderness, with unusual rock formations, dirt roads, canyons, dry river beds, and evocative Joshua trees.

While backlots tend to focus on compact urban/suburban areas, ranches generally offer larger nature-based canvases. Alongside Western towns and Middle-Eastern villages, producers can access barns, lakes, meadows, and wide-open vistas. Often well-removed from residential zones, ranches are the perfect place to conduct noisy and hazardous stunts — and to base construction-heavy scenes. In the era of greenscreen, they are also useful backdrops for VFX.

The biggest group of ranches in California is located close to the city of Santa Clarita, while Simi Valley is also home to some major sites. Arguably the best-known of the Santa Clarita ranches is Disney-owned Golden Oak, though this is probably better described as a hybrid ranch/backlot. Alongside an array of natural settings, the 890-acre site now has business and residential districts. As with the Central L.A. sites, the Golden Oak diary is often busy with in-house productions, but there is flexibility to accommodate third-party projects. “One of the great things about the ranches is that they are big enough to host more than one production at the same time, while still maintaining privacy,” says Brenda Ferrell, owner of Scout Monster, a location scouting and management firm specializing in photography shoots and commercials.

THE RANCHES ARE BIG ENOUGH TO HOST MORE THAN ONE PRODUCTION AT THE SAME TIME, WHILE STILL MAINTAINING PRIVACY

BRENDA FERRELL

Privacy is a critical consideration for Ferrell, who works with instantly recognizable A-list celebrities. “Ranches mean that you don’t have to deal with the kind of crowds that are drawn to location shoots. And they also make it possible to protect the integrity of the job you are working on. If you are handling a big-budget magazine shoot involving an A-list celebrity, you don’t want sensitive images leaking out in advance. That’s a bigger issue than ever now that we are in the era of drones.”


Ferrell is a regular visitor to Golden Oak and is a big fan: “With fashion shoots you need to be very focused on comfort and convenience — it’s like building a village. The Disney team is so accommodating, even when we turn up with 200 or 300 people. They make you feel like you have everything you need.”

With the exception of Golden Oak, the ranch ecosystem is generally independently owned. One of the most famous locations is Melody Ranch, which opened for business in 1915 and has been expanding its offer ever since. While it is best known for its Western town, it is also home to a farmhouse, ranch house, Victorian home, Spanish hacienda, and Middle-Eastern town. Underlining a growing trend towards full-service, one-stop-shop provision, it also houses sound stages ranging in size from 11,200-22,000 sq. ft. — and numerous storage rooms.

Melody belongs to the Veluzat family, which also owns a second ranch — Veluzat Ranch — and an ancillary business, Veluzat Army Rentals. Over the years, the Veluzats have built up one of the largest collections of military and movie vehicles in the world, which often appear in movies, TV shows, and commercials.

Recent productions to have filmed at Melody include Quentin Tarantino’s *Once Upon A Time in Hollywood* (2019) and HBO’s *Westworld* (2016-), back on the ranch for season four in 2021. “Melody is kind of a one-stop-shop for filming,” Melody Ranch owner/manager Daniel Veluzat says. “An entire production can move onto the ranch. They can be filming in an exterior and interior, plus they’ve got access to open space to do whatever, from picnics to campsites to Civil War, or we can build whatever set someone may be looking for.”

Still within the Santa Clarita network, there is also Blue Cloud Movie Ranch, recently renovated by owner Dylan Lewis; and Santa Clarita-based Rancho Deluxe. Steve Arklin, owner of Rancho Deluxe, says business has been booming since the




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Daniel Radcliffe and Karan Soni in *Miracle Workers*, much of which shot at Sable Ranch and Rancho Maria. Photo: Stanislav Honzik/TBS

industry came back from its 2020 lockdown. “It’s as busy as I’ve ever seen it,” he says, “which I guess is down to the backlog caused by COVID and the growing demand from streamers.”

Set in 200 acres of rolling California countryside, Rancho Deluxe boasts a range of natural exteriors and fully functional sets, suitable for films, TV series, reality shows, photo shoots, and commercials. Highlights include a military base, a Western town, and a saloon bar. “The Palace Saloon is the newest addition to our property,” Arklin says. With its farmhouse barn exterior and sumptuously decorated interior, “the Saloon can accommodate film and television productions both on the exterior and in the interior of the building. Productions are particularly impressed by the high ceilings.”

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For Arklin, one of the strengths of the Santa Clarita movie ranch business is that there are so many leading players in close proximity to each other. “We’re just next door to Sable Ranch,” he says. “So we collaborate quite often — and that’s something you’ll see across the ranches. If we don’t have quite the right landscape, maybe Sable will. Or if a production needs additional parking or storage maybe the other can help out.”

Sable Ranch is actually under the same ownership as a second site, Rancho Maria. The two share about a mile of

contiguous boundary and, combined, offer 400 acres of land. Surrounding the two ranches on three sides is the Angeles National Forest, which gives producers the seclusion they crave. In addition to meadows, canyons and forest, there are two large water reservoirs, a vintage two-story ranch house, a red barn, a hacienda, and a green-screen facility. Productions to have visited range from gameshow *Wipeout* (2021-) to the Billie Eilish video for *Happy Ever After*, shot earlier this year. Pre-COVID, Western-era TV series *Miracle Workers* (2019-), starring Daniel Radcliffe and Steve Buscemi, recreated Oregon at the ranches.

Santa Clarita also has its own studio/backlot scene — which neatly complements the ranches. Santa Clarita Studios, for example, recently unveiled a \$5m redesign and expansion of its backlot streets including over 600 ft. of facades, multiple streets and angles, several buildings with interiors, and an alleyway. LA North Studios is also planning the construction of two backlots.

Simi Valley, around 30 miles South West of Santa Clarita, is another key filming location — and is benefiting from the current boom in production in California.

The area has a long tradition of filming, thanks to the iconic Corriganville Ranch, which opened for business in the 1930s. The ranch was destroyed by fires in the 1970s, and was then acquired for use as a recreational park in the 1980s. This is still its function today, but it is also available as a location — thanks to the the Rancho Simi Recreation and Park District management. Tarrantino’s *Once Upon A Time in Hollywood* also shot here.

Simi is also home to Allied Studios, Hummingbird



Nest Ranch and Big Sky Ranch, which between them offer filmmakers a range of options. Allied, which opened for business in 2003, now has 78,000 sq. ft. of stages and a business district backlot. It also recently secured control of a 1,000-acre site around 10 miles from its studio hub, which it has converted into a working movie ranch called 76 Ranch. Recent projects to have utilized Allied include the reboot of adventure game show *Legends Of The Hidden Temple* (2021), and the Zack Snyder movie *Army of the Dead* (2021), starring Dave Bautista.

Hummingbird Nest Ranch is not solely a movie ranch, but it hosts scores of productions every year. Spread across 130 acres, the ranch has various looks including a Spanish Colonial

Villa, brick ranch house, horse barn, and lake. It is well-known for having hosted the Diane Keaton movie *The Book Club* (2018); and in 2020 it also featured prominently in the ABC series *Rebel*, which is based on the life of activist lawyer Erin Brockovich. In the pilot episode, *Rebel*, played by Katey Sagal, gatecrashes the annual general meeting of a firm called Stonemore Medical, during which there is a polo match and lavish outdoor dining event.

Another key element of the Simi offering is Big Sky Movie Ranch, a 7,000-acre site that has been used for film, TV, and commercials since the 1950s. Highlights have included *Little House on the Prairie* (1974-83), *Men in Black* (1997), and *Hail, Caesar!* (2016). The Ranch was recently taken over by veteran

location manager and producer Robert Frank, whose credits include *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017), and *Baywatch* (2017). Recent Big Sky credits include HBO's *Westworld*.

Location manager Brian Bird established his credentials with a number of high-profile movies including *Meet the Fockers* (2004), before switching to commercials. Bird enjoys the rapid turnover of jobs: "I can achieve 90% of what I want within the vicinity of L.A. The crews, climate, and infrastructure are exceptional for producers of commercials. I'm a heavy user of ranches and backlots because they offer such a variety, without having to worry about the practicalities of location shooting — police and permits for example."

Recent tasks have taken him to Paramount (Coors Light) and Warner Bros., where the New York backlot was used for a Nissan spot. Like Ferrell, he also has a lot of affection for Golden Oak: "One time, we needed to dig a very large pit for a Snickers campaign, and they were very accommodating."

Bird says the opening up of Simi Valley has been an important development for location managers "with Big Sky and 76 offering some new options in terms of wide-open spaces, farmhouses, studios, and backlots. Occasionally, we might even want to go further afield to Tejon Ranch in Kern County, which is a popular choice for car commercials because of its roads."

Away from Santa Clarita and Simi, another filming hotspot is the area surrounding the Conejo Valley, which is home to the attractive city of Thousand Oaks and Sherwood Country Club, which featured in *Bridesmaids*.

Canyon Ranch Studio is a 100-acre site that has hosted critically acclaimed productions including *True Detective* (2014-19), and *Promising Young Woman* (2020). In the latter, the ranch hosted a beautiful outdoor wedding sequence in one of its colorful meadows. The site, which has a variety of barns and facades — a farmhouse and a vintage service station, for example — is also popular with commercials, having welcomed the likes of Nike, Jim Beam and Jeep.

As well as providers of dramatic landscapes, many ranches are also home to a lot of featureless and non-distinctive terrain. This is useful when it comes to doubling, because film and TV audiences are more likely to spot the cheat when productions use distinctive topography.

Agua Dulce Movie Ranch, around halfway between Santa Clarita and Palmdale, has some distinctive features including

canyons, ponds and rock formations, but it also has some anonymous backdrops that are popular with filmmakers, says Corin Fix, whose father founded the business 30 years ago: "One of the biggest requests we get is for open space," she says. "Producers might want to do driving scenes or drone shooting, for example — or build sets. Last year, a couple of sets were built out here for Jordan Peele's new movie. Our locations are far enough away from population centres that they are perfect for things like live fire and pyrotechnics."

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CORIN FIX

Fix's family lives on Long Look Ranch, which is just one part of the overall Agua Dulce Movie Ranch offering. "Agua Dulce Movie Ranch is a location-services business, repping around 350 locations," she says. "These range from small locations of around five acres to Mystery Mesa and SOS Filmworks, which are hundreds of acres in size. A lot of locations are owned by private individuals — ranch owners — but some belong to corporations."

Agua Dulce also has "a lot of locations that aren't easy to find in LA County. We're growing a pine forest that eventually will enable us to replicate a Northern California look. And we're planning on opening a better-access road to the three sisters, three crazy huge boulders that have been popular with car commercials." There is also a full-size jet fuselage with a vintage 1974 interior, and a biker bar interior — which was used at the start of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991).

Agua Dulce greets all kinds of productions, Fix says, "and we help out indies and students where we can. And as long as it's not too busy, we'll look to arrange preferential rates for them." Post-COVID, Fix confirms that California has bounced back. "The year 2021 was about three times busier than we'd have expected as the industry played catch-up. And the order book for 2022 already looks really strong." —

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RANCHO DELUXE, SANTA CLARITA

- The newest addition to the Rancho Deluxe movie ranch is The Palace Saloon, which has original 19th-century interior features, including tall ceilings, grand rustic chandeliers, and polished floors. The barn has a massive open space that can be used as a stage, as well as a large saloon and bar.

- A number of major productions have used this facility over recent years.

Photo courtesy Rancho Deluxe



MAMMOTH LAKES, MONO COUNTY

● This location features a glorious alpine landscape, with dramatic mountain peaks, open sage-covered meadows, brilliant lakes, streams, and forests of aspen and pine. Accessible year-round, all four seasons are distinctly beautiful and photogenic. The natural landscape is within a five-minute drive from the town of Mammoth Lakes, which offers a wide range of lodging, restaurants, cafés, nightclubs, retail shops, and many film-production amenities and services.

● Countless commercials, films, music videos, documentaries and TV series have been shot in the Mammoth Lakes region, including *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), *The Last Place on Earth* (1985), *Star Trek IX: Insurrection* (1998), *True Grit* (2010), *The Bear Whisperer* (2010-2013), *Running Wild with Bear Grylls* (2014-), *Hotel Impossible* (2012-2017), and *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (2014-).

Photo courtesy Christian Pondella





EASTERN COLUMBIA BUILDING, DOWNTOWN L.A.

● Considered the greatest surviving example of Art Deco architecture in L.A., and located at 849 S. Broadway, this blue and turquoise terracotta residential high-rise features vertical columns, copper panels, and a distinctive four-sided clock tower that casts a blue-gold tint on the facade at night. Built in 1930, the 13-story building was constructed in the Broadway Theater District and is one of the city's most photographed buildings.

● The Eastern Columbia Building featured in TV shows *Moonlighting* (1985-1989) and *iCarly* (2007 - 2012), radio's *The Jack Benny Program* (1950- 1965), and several movies, including *Predator 2* (1990).

Photo courtesy Mark Indig



NORTH PALM SPRINGS, RIVERSIDE COUNTY

● This location is near the corner of Worsley Road and Pierson Boulevard in the Desert Hot Springs area. From right in the middle of the iconic Palm Springs wind farms there are incredible views of the desert mountains. This area has very easy access and is quick to permit.

● A popular spot for car commercials, Aston Martin recently shot here for the company's DB11 model.

Photo courtesy Marc Hlavaty,
Location Manager & Scout,
Teamsters Local



**BIG SUR
COASTLINE,
HIGHWAY ONE,
MONTEREY
COUNTY**

● This iconic, majestic view is toward the south from the northern turnout at Bixby Bridge, featuring the rugged coastline and rock-studded Pacific Ocean. Big Sur's Highway One is a California Scenic Highway, an honor reserved for highways so distinctive they are destinations themselves. Big Sur refers to a 90-mile stretch of coastline between Carmel to the north and San Simeon to the south.

● The Big Sur coastline has attracted numerous movies, television shows, commercials, fashion shoots and music videos, recently *Dog* (2022), TV series *Big Little Lies* (2017-2019), and commercials for Corona Beer.

Photo courtesy Karen Nordstrand, Monterey County Film Commission

CASCADE THEATRE, REDDING, SHASTA COUNTY

● Redding lies on the Sacramento River, 120 miles south of California's northern border. The economy of the town has roller-coasted depending on the boom and decline of various industries, but recently the downtown area has undergone significant revitalization. The Cascade cinema opened in 1935, and inside and out it is an impressive example of Art Deco, with an interior described on opening as having 'a Byzantine grandeur gone modernistic'. The historic theatre has been lovingly restored to its former glory and now runs as a non-profit for events, concerts and films.







BOMBAY BEACH, IMPERIAL COUNTY

● Bombay Beach — at 223 ft below sea level, the lowest community in the US — was once a popular getaway for beachgoers until the 1980s, when increasing salinity and the draining of the Salton Sea destroyed the lake's ecosystem, driving businesses and private landowners out of the area. Left as a virtual ghost town, by 2018 a number of people had moved into the area, and the town's many abandoned structures, drawing visitors back to the town.

● The documentary film *Bombay Beach* (2011) was shot here, among many other productions.

Photo, courtesy Peter Harris



OAKLAND BAY BRIDGE, SAN FRANCISCO

- The Western Span of the San Francisco – Oakland Bay Bridge is known locally as the Bay Bridge. Built only six months after the Golden Gate in 1936, this toll bridge serves as an important conduit between the city by the Bay and Oakland. It now features a permanent art installation that includes 25,000 LED lights on the bridge's cables. The bridge provides epic views, including the approach to the city of San Francisco, and is closer to the downtown area than the Golden Gate.

- Many productions have used this area, including *The Graduate* (1967), *Bullitt* (1968), *The Game* (1997), and *Venom: Let There Be Carnage* (2021).

Photo courtesy Ehrin Davis





MOUNT SHASTA, SISKIYOU COUNTY

- Mount Shasta reaches nearly 10,000 feet and is made up of four overlapping dormant volcanic cones. This imposing mountain can be seen from great distances and from many directions, and is just one of the natural attractions of the Shasta-Trinity National Forest. Siskiyou County, and neighboring Shasta County, boast an abundance of natural resources including mountains, meadows, rivers, and lakes, and offer over 300 days of sunshine a year.

- Many productions have shot here, including: TV productions *Climb an Angry Mountain* (1972), and *Outside the Lens* (2019-).

Photo courtesy Mark Indig

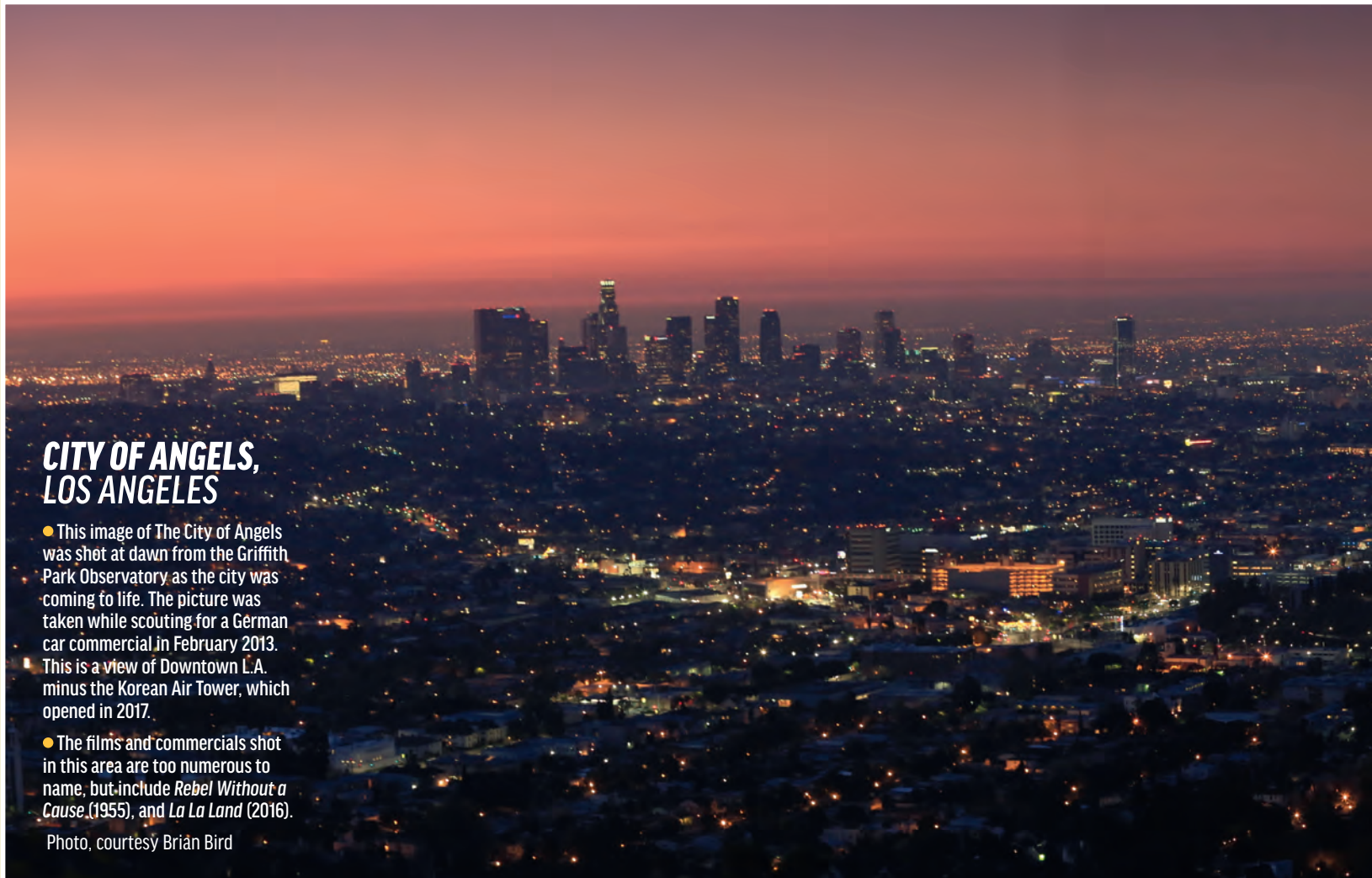


DEATH VALLEY NATIONAL PARK, MOJAVE DESERT

- Death Valley is in the northern Mojave Desert in Eastern California, bordering the Great Basin Desert. In this below-sea-level basin, steady drought and record heat make Death Valley a land of extremes – during the summer season it is one of the hottest places on Earth. However, there are striking contrasts: towering peaks can be frosted with winter snow, rare rainstorms bring vast fields of wildflowers, and lush oases offer refuge for wildlife and humans. Despite its morbid name, a great diversity of life survives in Death Valley.

- Productions shot in this unique location include: *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope* (1977), *Star Wars: Episode VI - Return of the Jedi* (1983), *Blade* (1998), and *War for the Planet of the Apes* (2017).

Photo courtesy Mark Indig



CITY OF ANGELS, LOS ANGELES

● This image of The City of Angels was shot at dawn from the Griffith Park Observatory as the city was coming to life. The picture was taken while scouting for a German car commercial in February 2013. This is a view of Downtown L.A. minus the Korean Air Tower, which opened in 2017.

● The films and commercials shot in this area are too numerous to name, but include *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), and *La La Land* (2016).

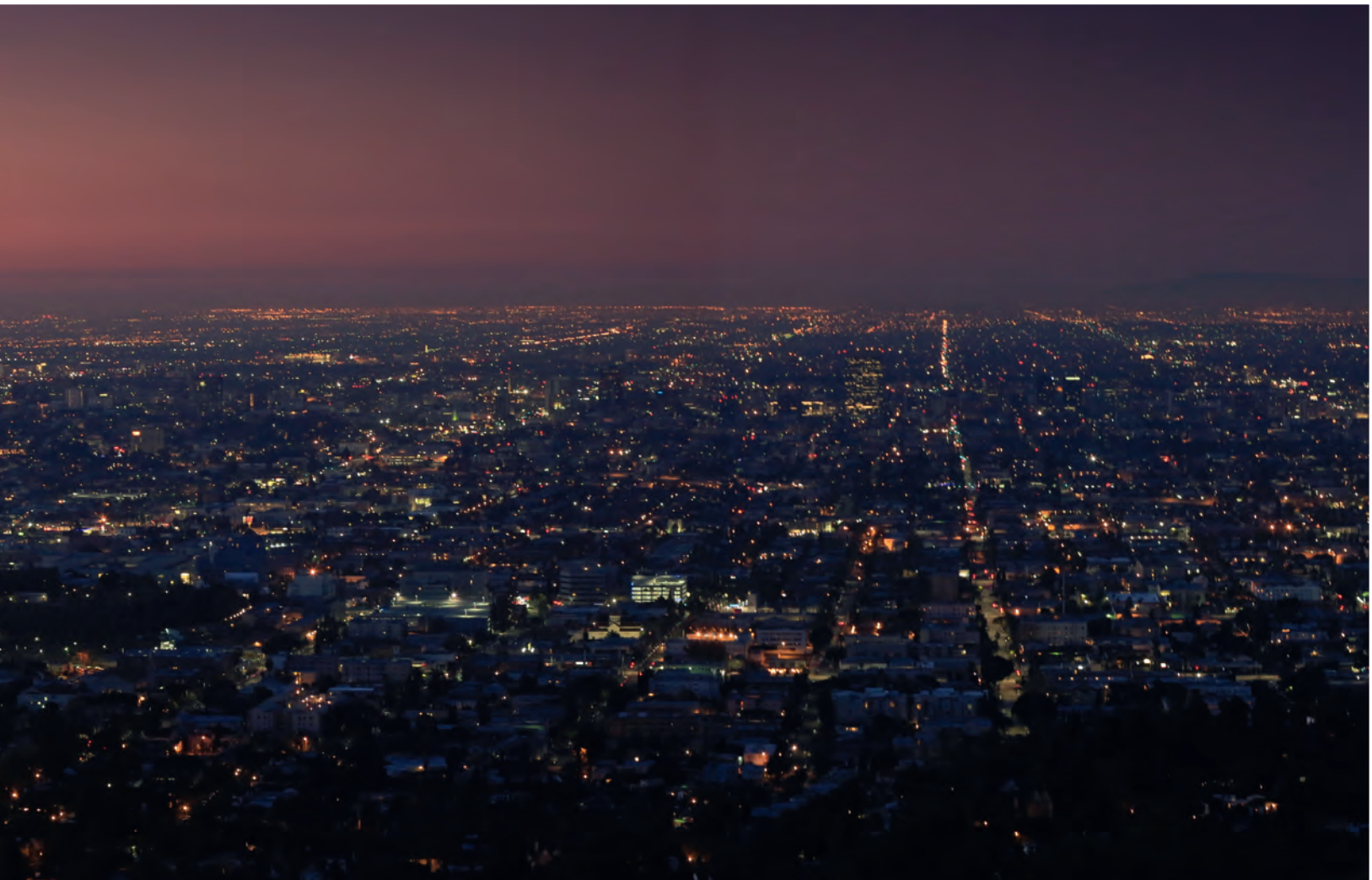
Photo, courtesy Brian Bird



NUBIEBER, LASSEN COUNTY

● Nubieber, in Lassen County, Northern California, is three miles southwest of the town of Bieber. This middle-of-nowhere location can provide endless possibilities for scenes that require stretches of desolate roads with beautiful, snow-capped mountains in the distance.

Photo courtesy Ehrin Davis



PFEIFFER BEACH, BIG SUR

● The purple sand of Pfeiffer Beach is a famous and unique attraction in Big Sur, along with the beautiful Keyhole Arch rock formation, through which the waves rush and splash with mesmerizing regularity. Between November and January the sunset lines up with the archway creating a beautiful glow of light, an otherworldly sight.

● Films shot here include iconic 1960s movies *One-Eyed Jacks* (1961) and *The Sandpiper* (1965)

Photo courtesy Jeff Sullivan







LOCKE, SACRAMENTO

● Also known as Locke Historic District, the town of Locke grew alongside the railroad in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. Chinese immigrants populated the town in the early 1900s and Locke is known for being the only town in the US built by Chinese people for Chinese dwellers. This location offers a schoolhouse, boarding house, a saloon, a gambling hall, and store fronts along Main Street. Filmmakers often choose Locke Historic District because it is the largest and most complete example of a rural, agricultural Chinese American community. Main Street can also be dressed as any small town in the US, or elsewhere.

● Most notably, Locke served as the Mississippi shanty town in the movie *Life on the Line* (2015) with John Travolta.

Photo, courtesy Michael Fleming



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BURNEY FALLS, SHASTA COUNTY

● This spectacular location features the 129-ft twin waterfall Burney Falls, in McArthur-Burney Falls Memorial State Park. Surrounded by forest, moss- and fern-covered rock, the falls descend into a clear blue pool below. The Park has long been a cool getaway from hot Northern California summer days, and the water temperature can be very cold, even in the summer. But although the surrounding area can see snowfall, the falls do not fully freeze.

● This location has provided a picturesque backdrop for several movies, including Willow (1988), as well as television commercials. The railroad bridge scene from Stand by Me (1986) was shot at nearby Lake Britton.

Photo courtesy Ehrin Davis

PACIFICA, SAN MATEO COUNTY

● Pacifica is a city in San Mateo County, on the coast of the Pacific Ocean between San Francisco and Half Moon Bay. This shot was taken from the Pacifica Municipal Pier, and this small, charming seaside town provides multiple surf breaks with great accessibility, as well as opportunities for filming along the Pacifica Promenade, making the most of views of the water. All this is just 15 minutes from San Francisco International Airport.

● Productions shot here include *Harold and Maude* (1971), *Savages* (2012), *Chasing Mavericks* (2012), and *House of Sand and Fog* (2003), among many others. A scene from the TV series *13 Reasons Why* (2017-2020) was filmed at the water tank inside Anderson's Scuba Diving in Pacifica.

Photo courtesy Ehrin Davis



REDONDO BEACH, LOS ANGELES COUNTY

- Redondo Beach is over a-mile-and-a-half long and it runs south from the Redondo Beach Pier to Torrance Beach. It is known for its history, vibrant harbor, world-famous horseshoe-shaped pier, endless sand and stunning sunsets. This laid-back beach city is less than seven miles south of Los Angeles International Airport, 18 miles from downtown Los Angeles and easily accessible from major freeways.

- Films shot here include: *Cannonball Run* (1981), *Point Break* (1991), *She's All That* (1999), *Pirates of The Caribbean: At World's End* (2007), *Gone in 60 Seconds* (2000), *Transformers* (2017), as well as iconic TV show *The O.C.* (2003-2007).

Photo courtesy Mark Indig





MAKING A SCENE DOG



A MAN'S BEST FRIEND

A-LIST ACTOR CHANNING TATUM AND HIS LONG-TIME CREATIVE PARTNER REID CAROLIN CHOSE DOG AS THEIR DIRECTORIAL DEBUT. IT'S A ROAD MOVIE THAT CROSSES THE US, BUT WHICH WAS ABLE TO SHOOT ALMOST ENTIRELY IN CALIFORNIA. **ANDY FRY** REPORTS





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NOT CONTENT with putting their careers in the paws of a Belgian Malinois whose character is suffering from PTSD, Channing Tatum and Reid Carolin also decided to ratchet up the complexity of the production by making *Dog* a location-rich road movie. And they shot it at the height of COVID-19. “Logistically, it was incredibly complex to pull off,” says supervising location manager Justin Hill, “but I think the end result is a great movie.”

Released in February 2022, the MGM feature is a buddy comedy that tells the story of Briggs, a military veteran played by Tatum, and Lulu, his troubled canine companion — “a story that’s been growing in our lives for years” Tatum says, referring to himself and co-director Carolin. At the start of the film Briggs is living alone in the snowy outbacks of Montana, unable to re-acclimatize after his experience in Afghanistan. But then he is called on to take charge of military dog Lulu — also a frontline veteran of the war in Central Asia — and deliver her to the funeral of her recently-deceased handler.

Sounds simple, but there’s a catch. Lulu is confined at Fort Lewis in Washington state and needs to be transported to New Mexico. But her propensity for aggression, brought on by PTSD, means she can’t travel by plane. As a result, Briggs is required to drive her 2,000 miles to the handler’s resting place. The two start out as fierce antagonists, with Lulu caged, muzzled, and determined to be a nuisance. But eventually they reconcile and become key to each other’s recovery.

According to Hill, the story tracks a course from Montana over to the Pacific Northwest states of Washington and Oregon, then down through California, and on to Arizona and New Mexico. “It really runs the gamut in terms of topography and climate, from snowy mountains to remote deserts,” he says. “But, fortunately, we were able to shoot 99% of it in California.”

The wild majesty of Montana, for example, was recreated around Mammoth in Northern California, while Randsberg, a couple of hours northeast of Los Angeles, doubled for a New Mexico town and open highway. “We had a lot of fun turning an empty site in Lancaster (one hour north of Los Angeles) into a cemetery in rural Arizona for one of the key scenes. Identifying unmarked parcels of land required quite a bit of detective work — tracking down and convincing owners to sign a rental agree-

ment in order to be able to film there.”

One of the most impressive examples of smoke-and-mirrors magic was the creation of Fort Lewis in Pomona, on a vast used site that eventually will be transformed into facilities for Cal Poly university. “It’s a great location, because the site has a lot of distinctive looks and you are able to control the roads in and out. The art department did a great job, creating everything from a dog pound to a military checkpoint, from scratch. At the start there was nothing but a gravel lot.”

While the reality of road trips is that they tend to pass through large swathes of unexciting terrain, Hill and his team were keen to include spectacular vistas to the screen. “We really wanted to showcase the beauty of the Pacific Coast through the choice of locations — everything from ocean to mountains to Redwoods. Everywhere we filmed, we shot as much as we could. Aside from Mammoth, we spent time around Big Sur and Santa Cruz, which were both new locations for me. We sent a small unit out for a couple of weeks to get as much diversity on screen as possible.”

COVID, inevitably, presented a major challenge for a film that was attempting to cover so many locations. “We were fortunate in the sense that one of the two main characters was a dog,” Hill says. “But inevitably the pandemic impacted on the logistics. We were doing a lot of prep work in June 2020, but most of it was simply working out what was feasible — because of things like the restrictions on the number of people you could put in a vehicle, for example.”

One of the rare benefits of the pandemic was that parking became easier, “because places that would usually be open, like schools, were closed. But we had to be flexible in our dealings with bars and restaurants. They didn’t always know if they would be open or closed at a given time. So we would have to negotiate different rates with them — depending on whether or not it was business as usual.”

Another consequence of the virus was that “some sequences had to be combined or rewritten to accommodate last-minute changes,” Hill says. “We had to get the same feel and look by using fewer locations in closer proximity. It forced us to be tighter and smarter. For example, we found a great area in Highland Park where we shot one exterior and two interiors in the same block.”

Hill spent around six months on the production — three months of prep, and then just under three months of filming from September to November 2020. “It all started when I read the script with the pro-

duction designer and the two directors, to understand their vision. Then the production designer and I would take photos to see if we understood what they wanted, or needed to pivot. It meant a lot of flying backwards and forwards to places like Big Sur and Mammoth to try and capture the right architectural and physical attributes for the movie.”

One good indicator of how labor-intensive the film was for Hill and his team is that only two days of the entire schedule took place on stage. “And that was only for dialogue-heavy driving scenes where it would be too dangerous to be filming out on the open road. So then the production team would shoot the road they wanted and use rear-screen projection in a stage context.”

Aside from COVID restrictions, the biggest challenge facing the production was caused by a sudden change in the weather. “For reasons beyond our control, we had to shift a section of filming at Arrowhead Lake from summer to early November,” Hill says. “And then we got unlucky because the location was hit by an unexpected snowfall. As the snow piled up, we had drivers chasing every auto store in L.A. for snowchains.”

Snow makes everything “exponentially” more difficult, Hill says, “because we’re like the circus, rolling into town with everything on wheels. Moving crew and equipment is harder and you have to find ways to stop everything freezing up. That was especially true up at Mammoth, where we were trying to move around different areas to get as many distinctive looks as possible. You’re relying heavily on snowcat and gondola operators to help keep the production moving.”

One idiosyncratic challenge posed by the movie was the height differential between the diminutive Lulu and the six-foot-tall Tatum. “You have to be thinking about the dog’s perspective when choosing locations,” Hill says. “Is the dog on the ground, or the hood of the car? If you shoot from a low angle, does that show off more of the sky, or does it expose things you wouldn’t usually see.”

Hill was named Location Manager of the Year for an Independent Feature at the 2021 COLA (California on Location) Awards. Asked why he thinks the film appealed to the judges, Hill says: “I think it’s partly because we touched so many of the local film commissions. It generated so much time and effort from everyone across California that it created a real buzz. I also think it’s a really touching story about the way Briggs and Lulu put each other back together.”

HAPPY CAST, BETTER PRODUCT

*COUNTRIES AND REGIONS ALL OVER THE WORLD USE TAX INCENTIVES TO LURE FILM AND TV PRODUCTION TO THEIR JURISDICTION, BUT FEW CAN CLAIM TO HAVE HAD CALIFORNIA'S SUCCESS. **ANDY FRY** REPORTS*



SINCE the Golden State's Tax Incentive Program was introduced in 2009 to stem the tide of runaway production, it has helped generate billions of dollars of business for the local industry.

CFC executive director Colleen Bell puts the success of the program down to a number of key factors. "Our state tax incentive isn't the biggest in the world, but it's backed up by superb infrastructure and crews. Productions that base themselves here know that they are getting the benefits of an attractive tax rebate, as well as the best crews in the world, and first-class service." At the same time, Bell says it has been carefully targeted. "Right from the start, the architects of the tax credit knew what they wanted to achieve, and designed the program accordingly. It's now into its third edition and continues to evolve in line with the industry's core priorities, while at the same time creating jobs and driving economic development for the citizens of California."

Also important is its longevity and consistency. "Program 3.0 was introduced in July 2020 and runs through 2025," Bell says. "By that time, the program will be 16 years old — which goes to show the level of political support for it. That stability feeds into the industry's decision-making — both in terms of where to base productions and where to build infrastructure."

The current program is worth \$330m a year and is reckoned to have generated \$2.6bn in production spending in its first year. "Amid the disruption and uncertainty caused by the pandemic, the program continues to work as intended," Bell says, "creating jobs and opportunity across our state."

One project that has benefited from the tax credit is Netflix's much anticipated action movie *The Gray Man* (2022), starring Ryan Gosling. Speaking to CFC executive director Colleen Bell, as part of her Spotlight California series, Netflix co-CEO Ted Sarandos estimated that the film would represent "\$100m in below-the-line spending in California". With approximately 400 crew members involved in the production, Sarandos says the tax credit doesn't just improve the bottom line: "I count the stars and crews of shows among my closest friends, and there is a real benefit in not breaking up families for six months to go chasing better economics around the globe. I'm a big believer that a happy cast and crew produces a better product."

That assessment is backed by location manager Mandi



Samsara Leela Yett, Kaley Cuoco and Alyssa Cheatham in *The Flight Attendant*. Photo: Phil Caruso

Dillin: “Stages are popping up everywhere. My current office, at the Warner Bros. Ranch, will be razed and converted into 16 stages within the next few years. This is an obvious response to the incentive. I have also noticed that movie ranches are building more standing sets or giving a facelift to existing sets.”

In its current incarnation, around 57% of the incentive budget is geared towards television. Of this, approximately one third of this is reserved specifically for TV series relocating from other production hubs. This aspect of the program has been particularly successful with more than 25 series to date relocating from Canada, Ireland, and other parts of the US. Such is the importance of this goal that California has increased the money it targets at relocating series. It has also relaxed its criteria so series that filmed their pilot episode out-of-state can qualify as a relocating TV series — the program previously required relocating series to film an entire season out-of-state.

Long-running series like *American Horror Story* (2011-), *Veep* (2012-19), *Ballers* (2015-19), and *Lucifer* (2016-21), have been

particularly valuable, while Netflix dark comedy/thriller *You* (2018-) — previously located in New York — is poised to shoot its third season in the state.

For the 2020-2021 period, five series agreed to locate to California — *Miracle Workers*, *The Flight Attendant*, *Hunters*, *Chad*, and *In Treatment* — worth around \$174m in wages. More recently, it was confirmed that Disney+’s *The Mysterious Benedict Society* (2021-) is relocating from Vancouver, while ABC series about Latino families vying for power in California, *Promised Land* (2022-) is leaving Georgia for the West Coast. *Promised Land* showrunner Matt Lopez says: “For over a hundred years, the Golden State has been the promised land for content creators in the film and TV industries. It is a privilege to tell this quintessentially American story in California, home to the most diverse and talented crews in the world.”

While the primary rationale for relocation is the tax rebate, it’s clear that in many situations the shift to California also enables producers to re-invigorate their creative concept. In

You, the cerebral world of New York bookstores was swapped for a West Coast wonderland of health food, yoga, and mindfulness.

Similarly, HBO Max's reboot of *In Treatment* involved an overhaul of both cast and design. Brooke, the therapist at the heart of the show is a black woman, played by Uzo Aduba, and she lives in the affluent black L.A. community of Baldwin Hills. Her predecessor in the series, played by Gabriel Byrne, was an older man living in a cluttered New York-style apartment.

The house where Brooke conducts her practice looks like something out of an upmarket design magazine (which is no surprise given that the character's father was an architect). The exterior was discovered in Baldwin Hills, while the interiors were built on stage. Furniture, clothes, and interior design were all carefully configured to give the impression of an empowered, aspirational woman, different in style and tone to Byrne's

“THE CALIFORNIA TAX CREDIT WILL ALLOW ME TO UTILIZE THE AMAZING CREW MEMBERS AND LOCATIONS OFFERED HERE FOR MY NEXT TWO PROJECTS”
JONAH HILL

therapist in seasons one to three.

Having said all this, the beauty of relocating to California is that it is usually possible to double for the original location — if integral to the narrative. When political comedy *Veep* shifted to California in season five, Paramount Studios provided the backdrop for what is essentially a Washington DC-based show. Season three of *Ballers* also used locations around Long Beach to double as Florida, the backdrop for seasons one and two.

While TV has been a major priority, the tax incentive has also had a lot of success bringing movie production into California. With around \$140m a year allocated to feature films and indie films, 2020/21 saw 31 projects secure funding. Of these, seven have budgets of more than \$60m including upcoming

productions *Ashley's War* (produced by Reese Witherspoon), *Scarface* (written by Joel and Ethan Coen), and *Here Comes The Flood* (produced and directed by Jason Bateman). This is an important benchmark for California, which was losing a lot of big-budget film production before the tax incentive started to reverse the flow.

Leading filmmakers who have been persuaded to keep their projects in California include Jonah Hill, who was spotted shooting an untitled project in Los Angeles at the end of September. He says: “We are so thankful for The California Tax Credit because it will allow me to utilize the amazing crew members and locations offered here for my next two projects.”

The predictability of California's tax incentive has been one of the key factors in the state's production boom over the last decade, adds Evan Thomason, economic development associate at the city of Santa Clarita — one of the most dynamic production hubs in Southern California. “What was especially noticeable to me was the fact that businesses kept investing in the long-term future of the industry even when COVID-19 was causing such widespread disruption. In Santa Clarita, we had ranches using their downtime to expand operations. And as the industry has recovered, we have seen players like LA North Studios expanding to meet the resurgent demand.”

While the core priority of the tax incentive has been to bring production home, it has been calibrated to achieve a number of other goals, Bell adds, one of the most important of which is to encourage productions to shoot outside the City of Los Angeles 30-mile zone. “There is a 5-10% uplift in tax credits for productions which shoot outside the TMZ,” she says, “For the first year of program 3.0 we're anticipating production across counties such as San Bernardino, San Luis Obispo, San Diego, and Siskiyou. When productions film on location outside the L.A. area, our data suggests they are typically spending \$50,000-\$150,000 per day, which is a significant boost.”

Productions to have ventured outside the TMZ in recent times include *The Forever Purge* (2021), which was spied filming in the San Bernardino city of Ontario. Meanwhile actor Patrick Stewart could be found wandering through the vineyards near Santa Barbara, for CBS's *Star Trek Picard* (2020-).

Some 23 films were admitted to the tax incentive program in



Uzo Aduba, John Benjamin Hickey and Madeline Zima in season four of the HBO Max series, *In Treatment*. Photo: Suzanne Tenner/HBO

August 2021, with the CFC forecasting that 25% of the estimated shoot days would take place outside the TMZ, including Ventura, Riverside, and Palm Springs. One project certain to attract a lot of interest is a new film from Jean-Marc Vallée, who had such a positive impact on the state's production scene with *Big Little Lies* (2017-19) and *Sharp Objects* (2018).

Other key aspects of the tax incentive agenda include a push for greater diversity in the industry, Bell says. "Every project in Program 3.0 is required to submit a diversity summary on completion to indicate their efforts toward increasing the representation of women and minorities." Hand in hand with this initiative is the Pilot Skills Career Pathways Program, which targets individuals from underrepresented areas for training.

California's progressive attitude to content creation is underlined by recent projects like *Moonshadow*, which qualified for a tax credit. The story of a transgender teen sent to 'conversion' camp, the production employs a trans creative team, cast and crew. "As a project with many trans and other gender non-confirming creative team members, it was essential for *Moonshadow* to be based in a progressive state," says Jude Harris, an executive producer on the film. "California's tax credit program is making it possible for us to generate jobs here while working in a supportive environment."

One interesting consequence of the statewide tax incentive is that it also seems to have given regions within California the confidence to introduce their own additional top-up incentives. Santa Clarita's Thomason, for example, says the city has refunded \$525,000 to productions under its Film Incentive Program, which launched in 2009. Elsewhere, several film offices offer free permits — for example Kern and Humboldt-Del Norte — while state capital Sacramento is also now offering local grants.

San Francisco's Scene in San Francisco Rebate Program, combined with the state incentive, is making the city increasingly attractive to visiting productions.

Another upside of the incentive is that it has encouraged non-incentive productions to consider California. This might seem counter-intuitive — but Bell says there are various reasons why this makes sense. The first is Sarandos' point, which is that major content studios have realised crews and cast are more positive and productive when they are able to go home at the end of long working days. The second is that non-incentive productions still get to benefit from investments made on the back of incentive productions — new equipment, upgraded studios and enhanced ranch backdrops. A recent CFC survey found that this was often a compelling reason for independent feature films to stay in California — because a smooth shooting process is probably just as valuable to them as the tax credits. There's also a growing recognition, according to Bell, that chasing the highest tax credit can be a false economy — with few jurisdictions able to match California's speed or quality.

One potential downside of the scripted production boom, true for all major filming hubs, is shortage of studio space. In part this is caused by accelerating demand from the streamers, but there is also a growing trend for companies to reserve sound stages even when they are not using them to avoid missing out.

To some extent, this demand is being met by space conversion. Bodies like FilmLA, for example, are always on the lookout for warehouses or closed motels that can temporarily be used as production spaces. A good example of how temporary space conversion can plug the gap is Campus South in Pomona, to the east of L.A. "There's a lot of filming taking place over there, California-based location manager,



PRODUCTIONS THAT BASE THEMSELVES HERE KNOW THAT THEY ARE GETTING THE DOUBLE BENEFIT OF AN ATTRACTIVE TAX REBATE AND A FIRST-CLASS SERVICE"

CFC EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR COLLEEN BELL

Brian Bird, says. "It has some interesting backdrops, such as old hospital facilities and a gymnasium."

Campus South is a large area of land that has been given to California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, which is planning a major redevelopment. To cover the costs of maintaining the site, the space has opened up to filming. Locations are managed by RSI Locations, which says that there is also "plenty of space for set builds, as well as ample base camp, parking, catering areas, and production office space".

One recent production which showcases Campus South's versatility is Oscar winner *Promising Young Woman* (2020), starring Carey Mulligan. Key sequences were filmed on the site — including two home interiors and exteriors, a hospital waiting-room scene, and

one of the film's most memorable scenes, when Mulligan stops her car near a dismal-looking rail underpass and smashes up another driver's truck.

Space conversion can only provide a partial solution, however. Speaking to the CFC's Bell, for example, Netflix's Sarandos suggested that California needs to invest in more state-of-the-art studios. "Some places around the world have built new infrastructure, and producers are looking for more of that from California. Large stages with high clearances, studios built with virtual production in mind... California could be at the cutting edge of these developments."

That message has been taken on board by some stakeholders within the state. Alongside the emergence of new players like LA North Studios, Bell says the state "has recently extended the tax credit program, so as to encourage the creation of additional studio space. For example, the Governor recently ratified the new California Soundstage Filming Tax Credit Program. Distinct from the existing program, it allocates \$150m to projects that film in new or renovated soundstages."

To be eligible, alongside the submission of a diversity plan, a production must film within three years of the date of CFC certification of the soundstage. It also needs to film at least 50% of its principal photography on the stage. In addition, the production entity must own more than 50% of the stage where the production is filmed or enter into a contract or lease for 10 years with the owners. If this last requirement sounds onerous, then it's important to clarify that the goal is to secure major players as long-term partners for California. Senator Anthony Portantino says investing in soundstage construction "is a critical addition to our efforts in increasing filming. New stages will yield thousands of jobs, millions of dollars in wages and billions of dollars of economic benefit for California." —

Bridgeport, Mono County.
Photo: Christian Pondella/Mono
County Film Commission



CALIFORNIA IS PEPPERED WITH A RICH VARIETY OF SMALL TOWNS WHICH, FOR MORE THAN 100 YEARS OF FILMMAKING, HAVE PROVIDED LOCATIONS THAT REPRESENT TOWNS AND SUBURBS FROM ALL OVER THE US AND BEYOND.
DEBBIE LINCOLN TOURED THE STATE IN SEARCH OF SMALL-TOWN AMERICA

SMALL-TOWN AMERICA



UNLESS the director or producer has a specific place in mind for their upcoming work, the job of finding the perfect small town in California usually falls to location specialists who amass a wealth of knowledge over their working lives. This is backed up by local film commissions who always curate a library of locations in their area and are always keen to offer a range of opportunities from which to choose. Based in Northern California, and in the business for many years, location manager Rory Enke has some good advice for filmmakers in need of a small town.

First of all, according to Enke, you must plead with producers to give you as much time as possible to get to know the place. “I have always said to my colleagues ‘make friends, and then do business’, and it still holds true,” he says. “Get to know people.”

If you take the time to get to know people in the area you are better able to judge the atmosphere and possible feelings about an approaching production, which may involve many people and considerable disruption. “You go out and do your duty. Hopefully you’ve got some time out there; you’re going to get a better result if, when you’re asking the difficult questions about something that’s come up, they at least know you,” he says.

Enke worked on the 1998 film *Patch Adams*, directed by Tom Shadyac, and starring Robin Williams as a charismatic doctor. Northern California was able to offer a number of small-town possibilities, so narrowing the choice was the challenge. “We needed a diner in the context of a town for a scene that began inside and walked outside. We ended up doing that in Richmond, California,” Enke says. They had scouted several other small towns in the San Francisco Bay region, but one of the factors that tipped the odds for the coastal area of Point Richmond, in the city of Richmond — the historic district of which has been

on the National Register of Historic Places since 1978 — was the downtown geography. “We had some really great choices. But what made Richmond work was that there was a little park close by where we could build up the set of the diner.”

MAKE FRIENDS, AND THEN DO BUSINESS

RORY ENKE

Another experience required different tactics. For Francis Ford Coppola’s *Jack* (1996), which again starred Robin Williams, along with Diane Lane, the town of Ross in Marin County was chosen. According to Enke “Ross is a very affluent little town that really did not need the headache of a movie, and we had a very difficult filming procedure and restraints. Our best strategy was to make a donation to help with the funding of the school system — the director got very involved with that school.” The strategy worked; even a shy town finds it hard to resist a film crew when the local school is improved in the process.

This hard work on the ground can pay dividends, as in another project, a romantic comedy called *Jexi* (2019), starring Adam Devine and Alexandra Shipp, set in the suburbs of San Francisco. In this case the members of the production team worked door-to-door to familiarize themselves with the neighborhood — and the neighborhood with them. And the 30-day shoot employed largely a local crew. San Francisco can in no way be called a small town, however Enke says: “I always joke that San Francisco’s the biggest small town in America, a town of small towns.”

These strategy of ‘making friends and then doing business’ was put to great use in 2001’s *The Majestic*, directed by Frank Darabont. The months and months of doing the groundwork,



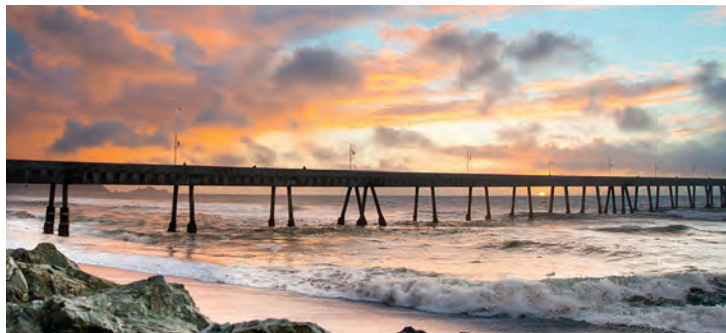
Downtown Red Bluff in Tehama County. Photo: Dan Massie



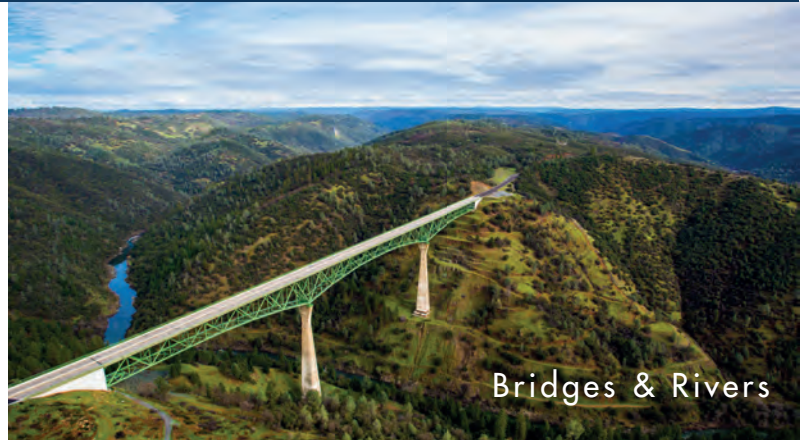
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meeting and negotiating with people, doesn't phase Enke: "The truth is, for me, that's the fun of it. You're in contact with people in a context that doesn't happen often." Set in the 1950s, the film stars Jim Carrey as a blacklisted Hollywood writer who loses his memory after a car accident and moves to a small town where he is believed to be a long-lost son. Ferndale in Humboldt-Del Norte County and its remarkable surrounding natural beauty was able to disguise itself as a 1950s suburban small town, completely and convincingly.

"The reasons that we were up there was because it's an amazingly unique phenomenon. You have the preserved Victorian village with no McDonald's and no Chevron gas stations — it's a step back in time. That was always the big mystery the whole time we were up there: 'Why does this even exist like this?'" Enke says.

The director already knew Ferndale well as it was somewhere he would relax and spend time when not working. However they spent quite some time researching other towns in the area, just in case the production was missing another, better possibility — including up in the high Sierras "where there are a lot of little nooks and crannies. But nothing topped Ferndale." The design brief was to secure a period town that included key sets for the story, including a movie theater, city hall, town square, a diner, and a cemetery. Ferndale fulfilled all the requirements, but this is a town that is proud and protective of its special characteristics. Not everyone wants their home town to be overrun by a film crew — people and transportation — while alerting the rest of the world to what makes their home so special.

So, no surprise that some in Ferndale resisted the movie. "There was a brutal exchange between neighbors. It even got so

bad at one point that kids wouldn't play with certain kids in the playground if their parents were against the film," Enke says. And this problem needed sorting out. "I finally said to the Mayor and the woman who ran the Ferndale newspaper, 'If there is anything I can do to sort that, I'm at your service — whatever it takes.'" One thing Enke did was to visit a local elementary school to give a presentation about working in the movies. And while smoothing over the difficulties and anxieties in Ferndale was a challenge, eventually "the solutions made for great creative alliances embraced between the community and film production company".

Cassandra Roberts Hesseltine, Film Commissioner, Humboldt-Del Norte Film Commission, says: "Ferndale is our number-one small-town America." The charms of Ferndale — which boasts a wealth of well-preserved turn-of-the-century houses and storefronts — have assured regular visits from producers, including for *The Outbreak* in 1995, in which the authorities race against time to find the cure to a deadly virus. Ferndale and its beautiful surrounding natural environment was able to provide the backdrop for this gritty, contemporary story just as well as it does for period shoots.

The production team behind upcoming Apple Original film *The Sky Is Everywhere* — made in partnership with A24 Films — chose to film in this region. Based on a novel by San Franciscan writer Jandy Nelson, the story is set in a fictional Californian town in the book, and locations chosen are around the coastal city of Eureka in Humboldt County. The story centers on teenager Lennie who, after the tragic loss of her sister, grapples with personal problems while living with her grandmother, and her uncle who runs a hot-air balloon company. The story is



Monterey County's Carmel-by-the-Sea has hosted many movies including 1971's *Play Misty for Me*, *Seems Like Old Times* (1980), and *The Forger* (2012). Photo: Visit Carmel



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Californian and the shooting locations exemplify many of the classic Californian small-town looks. The film shot in Eureka, a bustling port city and the principal city of the county, as well as nearby Ferndale.

According to Hesselstine, the Film Commission is constantly receiving enquiries about filming in Ferndale. “The Redwood region is full of small-town America, because it’s so rural that each of our towns are broken up by farms and forest, so each town feels isolated.” And each has its own look: “Arcata is our college town; Scotia is our company town,” and Loleta, the location used by *Halloween III: Season of the Witch* (1982), with its historic atmospheric buildings, has an eerie ambiance.

Crescent City has a late 1960s vibe, as so much of it was rebuilt after a devastating earthquake in 1964 that resulted in four tidal waves engulfing the city. Filming for Netflix film *Bird Box* (2018) took place in Crescent City, Jedidiah Smith State Park, and on the Smith River in the Humboldt-Del Norte area, among other locations in California and other states. The film shot for at least three weeks in the area, and again used local crew.

Karen Nordstrand from the Monterey County Film Commission cites a couple of very well-known small towns in her region that have stellar filmmaking history. “The little village of Carmel-by-the-Sea is a classic example of a charming and quirky one-square-mile town, with some 40 secret passageways and courtyards, unique shops, galleries, restaurants, and homes without mailboxes,” she says.

Carmel provided a memorable atmospheric backdrop to 1971’s *Play Misty for Me*, the directorial debut of Monterey County resident Clint Eastwood — who was to become mayor of Carmel. In 1980 the comedy *Seems Like Old Times*, starring Goldie Hawn and Chevy Chase, filmed there. The town also took centre stage as the location for 2012 film *The Forger*, about a teenage drifter and a gifted artist who is enticed into illegal activity.

More recently Carmel is one of the locations featured in HBO’s hugely successful series *Big Little Lies* — with a line-up of delicious California homes on show — and for the upcoming *All the Old Knives*, directed by Janus Metz for Amazon Studios. This

tense thriller centers on two former CIA operatives — formerly a couple — who agree to meet up in Carmel for an evening. Over the course of a dinner they discuss one of their previous missions involving the hijacking of a plane that resulted in the deaths of all on board — and it becomes clear that one of them may have secrets to reveal. The film stars Chris Pine, Thandiwe Newton, Laurence Fishburne and Jonathan Pryce.

Another popular small-town location in Monterey is the coastal city of Pacific Grove, most notable as the setting for the comic thriller *Turner & Hooch* (1989), in which Tom Hanks plays a bored police detective who has to look after a giant slobbery dog, the only witness to a murder. “Pacific Grove has Victorian-style homes which border a stunning shoreline. It has a sweet downtown street with small boutiques and galleries. And its Lovers Point Park — overlooking the Pacific — was the site for several scenes in HBO’s *Big Little Lies* season one and two. A café set was built for season two, in which Meryl Streep and Reese Witherspoon had many of their conversations,” Nordstrand says.

Some of the buildings in Carmel have half-timbered facades that can look like British, French or other European buildings. “Carmel-by-the-Sea has doubled for England, Ireland, and other coastal settings,” she says. And this ability to double for other places in the US or around the world makes California attractive to filmmakers who are looking beyond the state. *Road House*, the 1989 movie starring Patrick Swayze, was set in a small town in Missouri, but was filmed in locations across California, including Sanger and Reedley in Fresno County, which was able to provide examples of the run-down, rural looks needed. Kristi Johnson, from the Fresno Department of Public Works and Planning, says that the town of Reedley “could be any quaint, historic small town. Reedley can represent a current sleepy town in the US or a landscape from the 1940s-1950s.”

A further example would be three seasons of *13 Reasons Why*, produced by Paramount for Netflix, which shot on Mare Island and in nearby Vallejo. Cinelease’s director of studio development, Mark Walter, responsible for overseeing the expansion of the Mare Island studio complex in California’s Bay Area, says: “In this case,

Historic Old Folsom in Sacramento County. Photo: Michael Flemming





Shailene Woodley (left), Zoe Kravitz, Reese Witherspoon, Nicole Kidman and Laura Dern filmed HBO's *Big Little Lies* in Carmel, Pacific Grove and other locations in the Monterey area. Photo: Jennifer Clasen/HBO



This temporary set for the cafe was built at Lovers Point Park in Pacific Grove for *Big Little Lies* Season 2, for a scene with Meryl Streep and Reese Witherspoon

it's definitely Anytown America rather than the Bay Area that they wanted."

Another area that has been the master of disguise for filmmakers is Marin County, north across the water from San Francisco. "The town of Marshall in West Marin feels like a fishing village in Maine with waterfront cottages belonging to Nick's Cove and numerous oyster farming beds along the coastline of Tomales Bay," Creative Services Director and Marin County Film Liaison, Deborah Albre, says. "The Town of Inverness has a general store, post office, library, two restaurants, and a coffee shop — and that is it! But it could pass for a small town in Cape Cod, since it overlooks Tomales Bay with white picket fences and pastel clapboard houses. One of the eateries is Vladimir's, a Czechoslovakian restaurant with tons of character, where nothing of its interior has changed in 60 years."

Other notable local locations, according to Albre, include the

OUR DELTA RIVER ROADS RESEMBLE THE BAYOUS OF THE SOUTH

JENNIFER WEST

town of Novato which was part of the Rancho de Novato Land Grant issued back in 1839, and still encapsulates the feel of an old Mexican-Spanish ranch with horse corals, stables, alpaca, and chicken farms, and a historic downtown which resembles an old Western cowboy town — including a number of storefront facades dating back to 1899. One of Albre's favorite locations is the small pioneer town of Nicasio, which features St. Mary's Church, built in 1890, a quirky ranch-style restaurant, a general store, post office, a large fenced-in town square, and a volunteer fire department. Nicasio served as a film location for a few movies including *The People* (1972), which stars William Shatner; Alan Parker's *Shoot the Moon* (1982), which features Albert Finney and Diane Keaton; and John Carpenter's horror thriller *Village of the Damned* (1995). "The latter features the Nicasio School as well as multiple homes and landmarks in the area," she says.

Other films shot in this area include John Carpenter's *The Fog* (1980), filmed entirely in West Marin; Barry Levinson's *Bandits* (2001), with scenes in Marshall and Tomales; and Wes Craven's 1996 thriller *Scream*, which used parts of Tomales Bay. In Novato, *Star Trek VI: Undiscovered Country* (1991) filmed at Novato's Fireman's Fund; and *Gattaca* (1997) filmed in the Frank Lloyd Wright Civic Center in San Rafael, a town which also featured in George Lucas' 1973 movie *American Graffiti* and the first season of *13 Reasons Why*. Travis Knight's *Bumblebee* (2018) also filmed scenic roads and a number of neighborhoods in San Rafael and the Marin headlands.

But small towns aren't all about the Main Streets; so many stories unfold in the suburbs and suburban looks can be indistinguishable enough to pass for locations across the US, and even the rest of the world. The 2017 Greta Gerwig-directed *Lady Bird* was set and filmed largely in Sacramento, but the residential roads of the city could represent many other places. The roads in question are known as the Fab Forties, an area of upscale mansions — including *Lady Bird*'s favorite Blue House — in East Sacramento, the historic end of a streetcar network. Sacramento Film Commissioner Jennifer West says: "Without ever leaving Sacramento County you can be in 'anytown America' in any time period. From our Delta river roads that resemble the bayous of the

south; the small towns surrounded by agriculture; the well-to-do polish of the Fab 40s; Historic Old Sacramento Waterfront and Old Folsom; the cozy-quiet ‘Stepford’ neighborhood of McKinley Park; or the urban concrete jungles of South Sac and Oak Park – we have it all.”

When it comes to finding untouched Fifties America, there are shining examples in the movies: the line of cookie-cutter, single-story homes that appeared in 1990’s Johnny Depp-starrer *Edward Scissorhands*, was found in Florida; the Fifties perfection of Hill Valley in Robert Zemeckis’ 1980s trilogy *Back to the Future*, on the other hand, was principally a set created at Universal Studios in Los Angeles.

For *Suburbicon*, the 2017 movie from the Coen Brothers, directed by George Clooney and starring Matt Damon, Oscar Isaac, Julianne Moore and Woody Harrelson, a similar look and feel to the aforementioned movies, was required. Location manager Michael Burmeister had worked on *Edward Scissorhands* as well as two episodes of the time-travel trilogy, and so he knew all about the main problem associated with recreating this photogenic period of America: we all know what it looks like, but where do you find it?

Suburbicon is a crime mystery set in a quiet, American family town in 1957. For the people involved, the American dream has been shattered, but the film still needed neat homes, a peaceful street and clipped lawns, as well as tidy driveways and garages for the all-important shiny family automobile. Location manager Burmeister and his team settled on four principal locations.

The street Burmeister and his colleagues found is in Fullerton, northern Orange County. It had no trees at the time, which made it just right for the movie. The city authorities were about to plant along the roadside but waited until the shoot had finished.

“For *Edward Scissorhands* we found an attractive 50-home street in Florida and painted all 50 homes, cut down all the trees and brought in all these period cars,” Burmeister says. “*Suburbicon* was on a smaller scale. We didn’t need so many

houses. Nowadays, with computer generation and other aspects, you can get the same effect with even fewer homes.”

If you wanted to encapsulate all the atmosphere and look of small-town America it would be difficult to better 1994’s *Little Giants*, the family film about the trials and tribulations of a peewee football team, starring Rick Moranis and Ed O’Neill, and filmed in Arroyo Grande and nearby San Luis Obispo. PR and Communications Manager for Visit SLO CAL, Eric Parker, says in his region “you will find California without the sprawl. From the preserved, classic beach town of Pismo Beach to the working fishing community in the shadow of a jagged mountain peak and the quirky ski-chalet-esque town of Cambria with brilliant blue, icy waters and coastal ranchlands. Inland, SLO CAL is home to over 250 wineries interspersed with the ranching and cowboy community. You can find the feed and grain silo in Templeton and the doors still swinging in the false-front buildings of Santa Margarita.”

The rural communities of Paso Robles, Templeton, and Arroyo Grande, include ranches, wineries, unspoiled oceanfront bluffs, sand dunes, and quaint town squares — as well as historic Spanish missions. Films shot in the area to date include *Commando* (1985), *Arachnophobia* (1990), *We Were Soldiers* (2002) and *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World’s End* (2007).

Two independent feature films that take small towns as the backdrop have filmed in Northern California recently — both helmed by Michael Zaiko Hall. *Hotel Dunsmuir* is a thriller about a young woman with extrasensory perception. She takes up residence in an old hotel after fleeing her abusive partner, and then experiences a sinister presence in the hotel. The production team used several historic buildings in the area, as well as some local talent. Mystery film *Peter Five Eight*, due later this year and starring Kevin Spacey and Jet Jandreau, also filmed in Dunsmuir.

Sabrina Jurisich from the Shasta and Tehama County Film Office says: “We have an ample number of small towns in Shasta and Tehama County, and while downtown Redding

Typical Western locations in Columbia State Historic Park are “fully functioning and is filled with businesses that fit the part”, according to Lisa Mayo, President and CEO of VisitTuolumneCounty. Photo: Menka



AUBURN HAS MAINTAINED ITS RICH FLAVOR, PRESERVING ITS HISTORIC CHARM BY MAINTAINING ITS WESTERN FRONTS, PERIOD LIGHTING, AND SMALL ACCENTS THAT A DISCERNING EYE WILL NOT MISS

JULI M. JOHNSTON

has recently gone through a wonderful revitalization, many of the communities retain their long-standing charm. The town of Cottonwood, with an old Western feel, and the city of Red Bluff, where the downtown boasts a Victorian resemblance, for example, still have horse tethering stations along their main streets. There are many other towns with unique qualities to explore.”

So many of the small towns in these areas are distinguished by their geography, whether they are coastal, riverside or mountainside, such as Lake Tahoe, located at 7,000 feet in Placer County, which is a ski resort in winter and lake resort in summer. “Placer County has a tremendous variety of small-town America locations that could fit a number of filmmaker’s needs,” says Juli M. Johnston, Film Program Liaison, Placer-Lake Tahoe Film Office. “Foothill communities such as Loomis, Newcastle and Auburn are three excellent examples of small-town America. Newcastle is an old train town that has turned into a charming community with a small downtown core featuring a few restaurants located inside a large historic fruit warehouse. Many homes go back 100 years or more.

“We also love to share Colfax with our filmmakers,” Johnston adds. “This gem of a small town, built up around the train station in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, features a historic Western downtown core that is full of operating businesses. The transcontinental railroad is part of the town’s ambience.”

Phenomenon (1996), starring John Travolta, was shot on location in Auburn; *Almost Famous* (2000) replicated middle America at locations in the area; and *Cinema Verite* (2011) also filmed here.

Western and turn-of-the-century looks have always been sought and easily found in California, from the earliest days of the film industry. The history of mining, lumber, and ranching has fuelled storytelling and there are innumerable well-preserved opportunities that filmmakers can utilize.

In Placer County, Auburn traces its roots to the Gold Rush era. “Historic Auburn has maintained its rich flavor through the years, preserving its historic charm by maintaining its Western fronts, period lighting, and hundreds of small accents that a discerning eye will not miss. Auburn is best known for its iconic county courthouse, which was built in 1898 and is still in operation today,” Johnston says. Another good example is Dutch Flat in Placer County. “Dutch flat is an old mining camp founded by two German brothers in the early 1800s. One of the sites in this town is the Dutch Flat Hotel built in 1852 that has the look of the old West. This could be any town in our nation, not just California,” she adds. And for an example of a more down-at-heel version of a frontier look she cites Gold Run, “which used to be a very busy gold-mining town and is now a rest stop along Interstate-80.”

A perfect example of a preserved Gold-Rush town can be found in Columbia State Historic Park. “It is fully functioning and is filled with businesses that fit the part. There is a rich film history in Columbia, it having hosted *High Noon* [1952] and TV series *Little House on the Prairie* [1974-83]. The brick buildings lining Main Street evoke the past, while volunteers and enthusiasts can be found in 1850s’ garb daily in Columbia,” President and CEO of VisitTuolumneCounty, Lisa Mayo, says. Close by, on the route to Yosemite National Park from San Francisco, is Chinese Camp. Originally inhabited by Chinese labourers in the mid-19th century, during the Gold Rush, it is now largely a ghost town. Mayo says that it is now “home to a general store and uninhabited buildings serving as a reminder of the history of those who once lived there”.

Other highlights in the area include: the town of Tuolumne, once a flourishing lumber town, and which now has a quieter atmosphere; Twain Harte, which has a classic Americana charm and is known as The Gateway to the High Sierra, a classic winter and summer mountain destination; and downtown Sonora, with its Courthouse Park, in the middle of downtown, with views of the striking St. James Church, known locally as The Red Church. “Sonora brings the East Coast small-town vibes to the foothills of sunny California,” Mayo says.

Tuolumne County was known for decades for its Western films, including *Unforgiven* (1992), and *Back to the Future Part III* (1990), but in recent years more horror genre and mountain-exploration films have scouted and filmed here. Marvel has also scouted for undisclosed films in Tuolumne County.

Also with a Western vibe, the small, rural town of Bridgeport is the county seat of Mono County, located in east central California. At an elevation of 6,463 feet in the middle of the Bridgeport Valley, Bridgeport is located at the intersection of US Route 395 and State Route 182 and has a population of little over 500.

It is close to Bodie State Historic Park and the old Gold-Rush ghost town of Bodie. A number of the buildings on Main Street in Bridgeport were actually transplanted from Bodie when the mining boom town began its decline towards abandonment in the early 1900s.

“The villages of June Lake and Lee Vining are also wonderful examples of rural, small-town Americana,” Mono County Film Commissioner Alicia Vennos says. “Lee Vining overlooks the vast, beautiful Mono Lake and is only 12 miles from the eastern entrance to Yosemite National Park. June Lake — on SR 158, known as the June Lake Loop — has its own ski area, June Mountain, and four beautiful trout-filled lakes within miles of one another,” she adds. “Both towns are home to classic roadside motels, and diners — including Nicely’s in Lee Vining, which features in numerous commercials and film productions; and iconic hamburger and ice-cream stands, including Lee Vining’s Mono Cone.”

The area also boasts the upscale mountain resort Double Eagle Resort & Spa in June Lake; a museum in the historic schoolhouse in Lee Vining; and both villages host numerous specialty coffee shops, juice bars, restaurants, artisan shops, sporting goods and fishing stores.

Director William Wyler’s movie *Hell’s Heroes* was filmed on location in Bodie and nearby Mono Lake in 1929 — before the great fire of 1932 that destroyed much of Bodie; Clint Eastwood’s *High Plains Drifter* was filmed in the Mono Basin/Lee Vining area near Bodie in 1973; Tom Cruise’s sci-fi thriller *Oblivion* was filmed in June Lake in 2012; and the area regularly features in TV and cinema commercials. —

'IT'S HECTIC, BUT LIFE-AFFIRMING'

FILMING IN BIG CITIES IS NEVER EASY. IN PART THIS IS BECAUSE OF THE COMPLEXITY OF PARKING AND PERMITTING. BUT JUST AS MUCH OF AN ISSUE IS THE PACE OF DEVELOPMENT AND IN L.A. THIS HAS ALWAYS HAPPENED FAST. **ANDY FRY** REPORTS

ALL OF THE challenges associated with city-based filming have not dissuaded producers from using the wonderfully chaotic city of Los Angeles for period projects. Quentin Tarantino, for example, lovingly recreated the end of the 1960s in his acclaimed movie *Once Upon A Time In Hollywood* (2019). Eddie Murphy-starrer *Dolemite is My Name* (2019) was an homage to 1970s L.A. in all its tacky glory; while the F. Gary Gray-directed *Straight Outta Compton* (2015) which recounts the origins of hip-hop band NWA, spectacularly brought the rawness of 1980s L.A. to life — as did Reinaldo Marcus Green's *King Richard* (2021), starring Will Smith, much of which was also set in the tough city of Compton in southern Los Angeles County.

Season one of HBO's 2020 crime drama *Perry Mason*, starring Matthew Rhys, sets out to recreate L.A. in 1932. Inspired by Erle Stanley Gardner's iconic novels, the HBO series — recently recommissioned for a second run — is billed as an origin story for fabled defense attorney Perry Mason. Directed by Tim Van Patten, the project gives L.A. a compelling noirish feel that is reminiscent of classic movies like *Chinatown* (1974) and *L.A. Confidential* (1997). But at the same time, it has a kind of Coen Brothers sensibility — recalling the richness of movies such as *Barton Fink* (1991) and *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994).

Location manager Alexander Georges describes how he and senior location manager Jonathan Jansen “did a lot of digging and brushing away to find L.A.’s gems. It was a location-heavy show, with hundreds of locations. It required a lot of conversations with VFX, to understand what they needed to work with.”

Helping out the location team were University of Southern California professor and historical consultant William Deverell, and production designer John P. Goldsmith. One of Goldsmith’s first tasks was to dig up any images from the time, that might aid him and his colleagues in the job of getting the right look for the show. Valuable resources included LAPD crime-scene archives and waterandpower.org, a website that delivered insights into roads, buildings, signage, fashion, and vehicles during that era.

A key location in season one was the San Pedro area of L.A., which still bears some core similarities to how the city would have looked in the 1930s. Modern had to be stripped out and period features, including billboards and shop displays, had to be created. After a fleet of vintage vehicles was added to the mix, the end result was a meticulous recreation of 1930s L.A.

Iconic locations that helped capture the period included the 1930s Art Deco Warner Grand movie palace; the awe-inspiring Mountain View Mausoleum; Los Angeles City Hall; The Ebell of Los Angeles; and Hollywood Boulevard’s Musso and Frank Grill. For the exterior of Sister Alice McK-

egan’s Radiant Assembly of God Church, the production used the former Second Church of Christ, Scientist in West Adams, constructed in 1910. For the interior, the Embassy Hotel’s Trinity Auditorium was used in scenes where the charismatic Sister Alicia delivered her dynamic sermons.

The location team would typically go scouting with VFX supervisor Justin Ball to devise period solutions. One thing that quickly became apparent was that a lot of L.A. buildings still looked authentic from the second floor upwards. So an ongoing question was whether it was possible to eradicate the modern elements at ground level. Sometimes, the decision would be taken to physically remove anachronistic features — subject to approval from city agencies. On other occasions, it would be a question of camera angles. When neither of those solutions worked, then VFX could be called in to erase items.

This editing of reality was only part of the VFX role. Another great example of VFX/locations integration was the use of the Angel’s Flight funicular railway at Bunker Hill. Out of service for several years and now surrounded by modern architecture, it was decided that the distinctive climbing railway would be the backdrop to a crime committed in the first episode of season one. It took the combined skills of production designer Goldsmith and VFX supervisor Ball to create an illusion of how the railway would have looked almost 100 years ago.

As well as the can-do attitude of L.A.’s city agencies, there are additional benefits of shooting in the city. One is that L.A. and its surrounding area is blessed with great studios. There were some 26 stage builds for season one of *Perry Mason*, some of which were huge construction efforts.

Another is that there are a lot of distinctive non-urban looks close to the city. Open space at Mystery Mesa, for example, was used to recreate a WWI battlefield, complete with trenches. Another key location is the rambling dairy farmhouse where Mason lives. This is actually a 19th-century farmhouse at Thousand Oaks that is still occupied. For the production, the owner agreed to let the crew build a runway, so that a prop plane could be flown in and out.

In 2020, HBO delighted *Perry Mason* fans by announcing plans for a second season, set shortly after season one — circa 1933/34. This time around there is an entirely new creative team, from producers to showrunners and beyond.

Heading the location team for season two is Mandi Dillin, who has recently



Tatiana Maslany as Sister Alice McKeegan, the leader of the Radiant Assembly of God, in season one of HBO's *Perry Mason*.
Photo: Merrick Morton/HBO

**WE ARE MINDFUL
OF THINGS THAT
ARE BLATANTLY NOT
PERIOD-CORRECT.
IF NOBODY NOTICES,
WE DID OUR JOB WELL**

MANDY DILLIN

become a period-piece specialist: “From January 2020 until now, I’ve spanned four time periods with the projects I’ve worked on — Los Angeles in the 1960s, New York in the 1980s (all filmed in Los Angeles), modern-day San Diego (mostly filmed in Los Angeles), and 1930s Los Angeles. I love working in Downtown L.A. It’s hectic but life-affirming.”

For the recreation of 1930s L.A., Dillin says that the biggest challenge has been “modernization. Los Angeles is ever-changing, and we are in the middle of a construction boom right now. A lot of the buildings in L.A.’s historic districts are becoming sandwiched between new apart-

ment buildings. The city itself is upgrading the infrastructure by installing bicycle lanes, rental bikes and extending our Metro system so streets that were once only specked with parking meters and lamp posts are now also dotted with white plastic barricades and painted lines.”

All of this modernization reduces the scope of filming. “Even though we might focus on a period-correct office building that spans a city block, the reverse angle could be of a 1990s-era building, giving only 45° or 180° views of an area. The historic districts are also filmed frequently so avoiding public ennui is important for us. We’re trying to think out of the box and present interior and exterior locations that open up our frames a bit more than last season. This was a direct mandate from the producers — focusing on locations where the camera can look 360° without being relegated to backlots and stages.”

The key to overcoming these challenges is “open mindedness and old-fashioned creativity”, Dillin says. “With our mandate for scope, the design team needs to remain flexible. We’re trying to create a rich world of 1930s L.A. that is not populated with too many newsstands blocking a modern bus stop, or vehicles hiding modern buildings. Having a production designer and

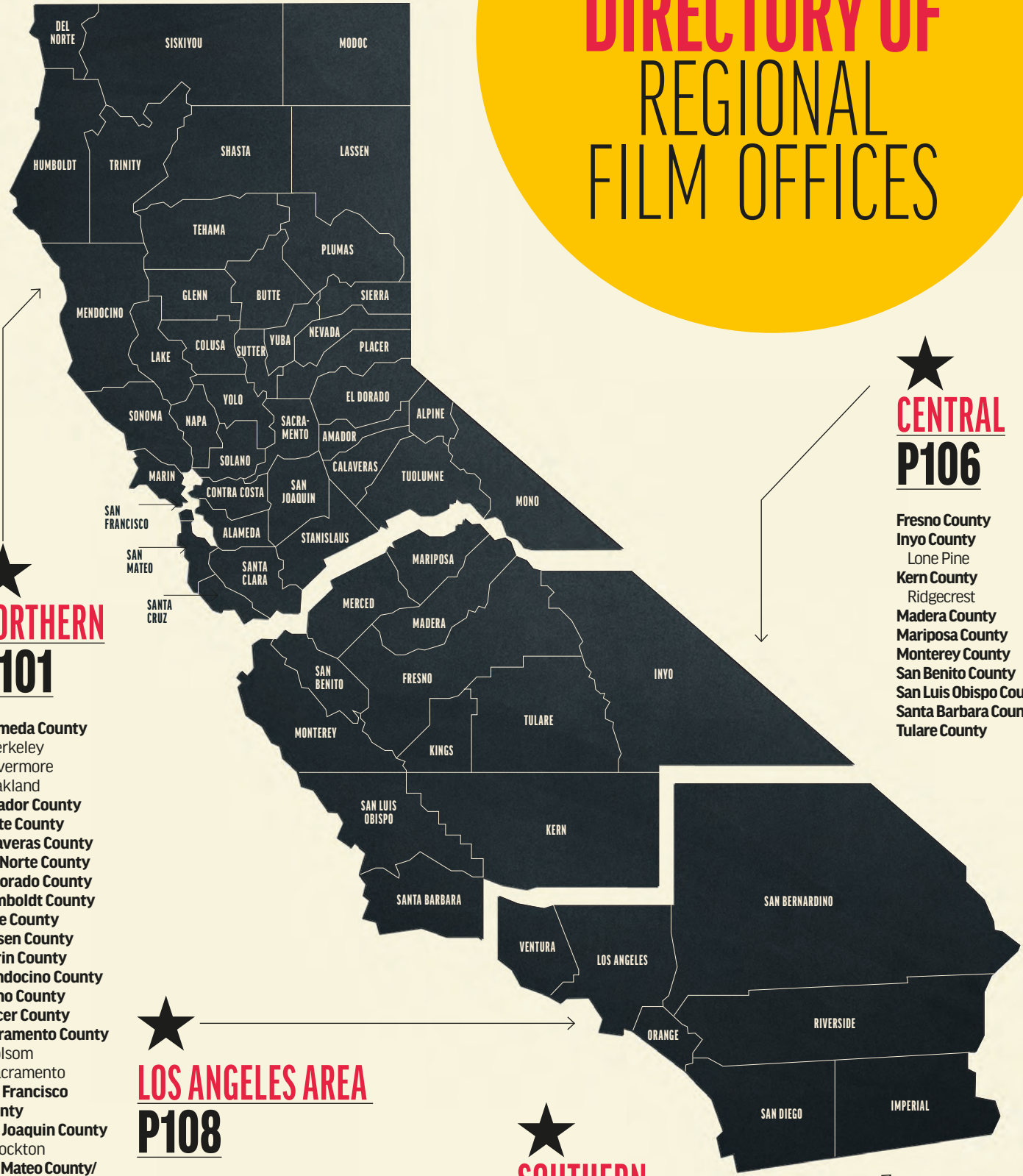
directors of photography who can work in harmony with the location department is key to finding interesting angles that open up the show, but don’t cost a fortune.”

Location selection is a huge part of this, she says: “First we look for the authentic 1930s locations and compare them to the art department’s research photos. Then we see where we can veer from authentic to ‘in the spirit of’. Once you add background actors, and set dressing in the foreground, the entire scene blends together. We do have a visual effects element in season two, but that’s inevitable. We’re filming almost exclusive daytime exteriors this season, so our VFX team has to add in certain vistas and remove others. I’m excited to watch season two to test if I can decipher what is practical and what was added.”

Dillin says the team is “taking a bit more creative license in season two. While season one was impressively historically accurate, with immense amounts of time spent changing minor details on location, we are exercising artistic liberty this season. Of course, we are mindful of things that are blatantly not period-correct, but having a larger date range that extends to pre-war L.A. has opened many more doors for us. If nobody notices, we did our job well.”



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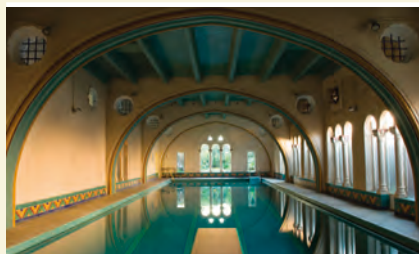
FLICS is a statewide professional association of Film Commissions and Offices dedicated to promoting filming throughout California and assisting productions with locations, permits, resources, and local knowledge.



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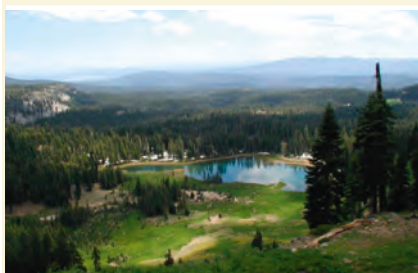
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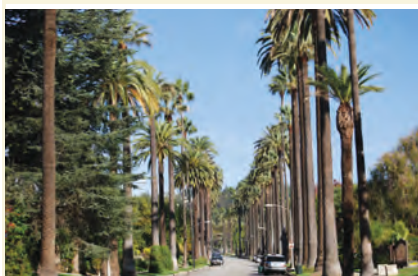




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