

Made in Florida

location report



On the Sunny Side of the Shoot

Florida's film community remains optimistic despite a gloomy economic forecast

By Chris Koseluk

"Burn Notice," as conceived, was set in New Jersey — a gritty drama, with the hero confronting grungy characters in dimly lit back alleys. "Here's this dark fellow, with a dark job — let's see his dark past in this dark place," says series creator Matt Nix, using a comically ominous tone.

So how did the series, now heading into its third season, end up in Miami? Credit USA Network. It loved the idea of a blacklisted spy (Jeffrey Donovan) struggling to put his life back together after being fired from his top-secret agency, but was concerned that it wouldn't work alongside "Monk" and "Psych."

"They said, 'Hey, we like this. Maybe not so dark,'" Nix says. "They kept saying, 'The script is funny, but lighter.'"

Then the idea of Miami came up. Having spent a sum total of 18 hours there waiting for a cruise ship, Nix was less than enthusiastic. But once he embraced the notion, the potential was obvious.

"Oh, here's this dark person in a light place," Nix says. "That's actually really fun, and there's a lot more opportunities."

And like that, Florida nabbed one of its most successful series since "Miami Vice" wrapped in 1990.

With a diversity of locations and an abundance of camera-friendly weather, Florida has been a vibrant production hub for more than a century. In his book "The First Hollywood," Shawn C. Bean contends that Jacksonville was actually the country's original movie capital in the early 1900s. Since then, countless films and television series have called the Sunshine State home, and an aggressive incentive program with 10%-22% cash rebates seemed to presage continued success.

But then the economy went south. Facing a huge budget shortfall, legislators slashed funding across the board. Before you could say "quiet on the set," the 2008-09 fiscal year incentive fund went from \$25 million to \$5 million.

It's too early to see how this will play out, but if anything, this development seems to have mobilized the film community.

"I do feel optimistic that we are getting our message out regarding how this industry can function as



Director David Frankel chose to shoot the upcoming "Marley & Me" in South Florida, where he has resided since the early 1990s.

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Studio execs contemplated shooting the Florida-set "Burn Notice" in Los Angeles, but Florida's incentives lured production to Miami.

part of Florida's economic recovery," says state film commissioner Lucia Fishburne, whose main focus since her February appointment has been fighting the cut. "We really have a chance at increasing our incentive dollar amount."

Fueling her confidence is a recent impact study prepared for the Governor's Office of Film and Entertainment. Figures show the entertainment industry brought in more than \$29.2 billion to Florida's economy in 2007, affecting more than 200,000 jobs. The legislature reconvenes to formulate next year's budget in March.

Fishburne is not alone in her quest. Director David Frankel is another believer.

"Incentives are the only thing that will keep any real film community going here," Frankel says. "There's talk of facilities getting built — and that would be great, but if it doesn't make sense financially, people won't come."

Opening Christmas Day, Frankel's latest film, Fox's "Marley & Me," is one of the recent features to take advantage of Florida's incentives. But another factor influenced the director's decision.

"I live here," says Frankel, a Miami resident since 1991, when he came to shoot an episode of the TV series "Grapevine" and stayed because of his wife's career. "How's that for a reason?"

The stage was a mile from my house."

Fortunately, the best-selling book "Marley & Me" also is set in Florida. Its author, John Grogan, was a South Florida Sun-Sentinel reporter, so it made sense to shoot the family oriented comedy starring Jennifer Aniston and Owen Wilson locally.

With no soundstages in the area, the producers turned to the Coconut Grove Expo Center to house the film's main set. "It's so much bigger than any other facility, and I knew we could do everything we needed to do there," Frankel says.

The feature wasn't the first production to use the vacant center. "Burn Notice" had already set up shop, creating several of its often-used sets on-site, including the lead character's house.

Thanks to incentives, business also has exploded at Orlando's Universal Studios Florida Production Group. With nine soundstages, it was riding an 18-month run, including direct-to-DVD titles "Ace Ventura Jr." and "Beethoven's Big Break," the thriller "Burning Bright," and the Lionsgate comedy "Bait Shop."

"Without a doubt, we've had more feature work than we've had in quite some time," says production group vp and GM Pamela Tuscany Warren. "We're hosting a lot of these \$3 million-\$10 million productions."

GOVERNOR'S OFFICE OF FILM AND ENTERTAINMENT

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PRODUCTION INCENTIVES

Although budget reductions have slashed funds — down from last year's \$25 million incentives budget to just \$5 million this fiscal year — fans of Florida incentives keep multiplying.

Morgan Creek was so pleased with its experience on the comedy "Sydney White" that Florida was the first place it looked to film "Ace Ventura Jr.," a direct-to-DVD continuation of its popular franchise. Crews and facilities were a priority, but the incentives made it a no-brainer.

"It's one of the reasons we went down there," says Morgan Creek senior vp production David Robinson, who is also one of the film's producers. "We'd been there and done it. We got the money on 'Sydney White' and we got it back quickly."

The studio is also looking to grow business for its three broadcast studios. Sitting directly between two Universal theme parks, they are perfectly situated to offer guests the opportunity to attend a taping.

"We've found that park guests really do want to see production," Tuscan Warren says. "We're

filling 800-plus seats a taping"

Recent tapings for shows like Nickelodeon's "My Family's Got Guts" and "The Ellen DeGeneres Show" have proved so successful that a concerted marketing effort is planned to lure more of this type of programming. "The goal is to have audience-based production going all the time,"

Tuscan Warren says.

Florida also remains competitive thanks to 54 local film offices throughout the state.

"I do think it's one of our strengths," Fishburne says. "They're all independent, but pretty well networked. I refer to it as awesome concierge service."

And it's one of the few states to maintain an office in Hollywood. For the past 12 years, Los Angeles liaison Susan Simms has been personally touting the virtues of Florida.

"She's able to go to film festivals or trade events and be our feet on the ground," Fishburne says. "That has been a great competitive advantage." **THR**

Incentives also sealed the deal for USA Network's "Burn Notice." Although the series is set in Miami, Fox Television Studios considered having Los Angeles double for South Florida.

"Had the tax incentives not been in place, we couldn't have afforded to go to Miami," says David Madden, Fox Television Studios executive vp programming. "We're saving roughly about 10% of our budget. And that's been the make-or-break to justify being there. If the incentives went away tomorrow, we would have to relocate the show."

Florida's rebate program responsible for landing these projects is divided into four production categories, offering a cash rebate of 10%-22% on qualified in-state spend.

— Chris Koseluk

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