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ON LOCATION

Lights, camera, plenty of action at downtown Los Angeles Center Studios

Productions that might have gone elsewhere are keeping the sprawling film complex busy, with shooting of TV pilots up 50% from a year ago.



Grip Louie Escobar prepares lighting equipment at Los Angeles Center Studios, which has hosted more than a dozen pilots this spring. (Barbara Davidson / Los Angeles Times / April 6, 2010)

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By Richard Verrier
April 7, 2010

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The TBS pilot "In Security" tells the story of two sisters who run a private security firm in New York City. Producers had considered shooting the pilot in Montreal or Toronto to take advantage of those cities' film tax credits (anywhere but New York, apparently).

Instead, they concluded they could save money by shooting the pilot locally at a sprawling film complex in the heart of downtown at Los Angeles Center Studios.

"The soundstages are state-of-the-art, and everything we needed to screen was within a few blocks of the studio," said Kevin Cremin, a producer on the pilot.

Los Angeles Center Studios, which occupies what was once the headquarters of the now-defunct Unocal Oil Co., has hosted more than a dozen pilots this spring at its 20-acre campus, and is benefiting from a recent upswing in television production.

Located on the west side of the Harbor Freeway, at 5th and Bixel streets, the studio has the amenities of a full-scale Hollywood studio, complete with six soundstages, a 400-seat theater, production office space and even a commissary. The centerpiece is a 12-story office tower built in 1958 that is used for production offices and filming, including the scene in which Angelina Jolie's character rappelled down the tower during production of "Mr. and Mrs. Smith."

Fox has three pilots filming at the studio and recently shot the "24" series finale there, using four locations around the lot, which also is home to the CBS series "Numb3rs" and -- its largest tenant -- AMC's "Mad Men," which occupies three soundstages.

Last week, as workers were prepping sets for the fourth season of "Mad Men," and as "In Security" was filming on the second floor of the tower, a crew from the ABC drama "Private Practice" had taken over the building's lobby, converting it into a Los Angeles courthouse.

Pilot activity is up 50% this year over last year, said Samuel Nicassio, president of Los Angeles Center Studios.

"We offer them the flexibility they need to make their shows," said Nicassio, who gave up his office this week so CBS could use it for a TV pilot called "Defenders." "The way our model is set up we are a hotel for the entertainment industry."

The increase is a welcome boost for the studio, which opened in 1999 after its new owners, led by San Francisco-based real estate investor Bristol Group, invested more than \$40 million in improvements.

Like other studios in the area, LACS has been buffeted by a sharp decline in production over the last two years, triggered by labor unrest, recession and the migration of movies and TV shows to other locales. Production of major features such as "Charlie's Angels" and "Mission: Impossible 2," both filmed at the studio, has become increasingly rare in L.A.

The studio lost one of its major tenants last year when ReelzChannel, a movie news cable channel and website, moved to New Mexico, lured by that state's film tax rebate program. The space is now occupied by Al Gore's media company, Current TV.

The studios' six soundstages are fully booked and 83% of the office space is leased, up from 60% three years ago, Nicassio said. Revenue, about \$16 million a year, has been flat since 2008 but is expected to improve this year.

Still, the studio has managed to keep its business from falling further by forging long-term leases with nonfilm tenants such as Calvin Klein, which has an office in the tower, and is cultivating relationships with studios such as Fox and Lionsgate, which produces "Mad Men."

The 1960s-era drama about a New York ad agency frequently shoots scenes not only in the soundstages but also in the Unocal tower. Because the show films heavily on location downtown and in Pasadena, the site was ideal, said Scott Hornbacher, an executive producer on "Mad Men."

"There's a flexibility and a freedom here," Hornbacher said. "It's like you're off the beaten path."

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