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Son of a Gun, Hollywood Has Big Fun on the Bayou

By [DAVID CARR](#)



Rex Curry for The New York Times

Nicole Parker of “Disaster Movie,” filming in Shreveport, La.

SHREVEPORT, La. — There is a backlot feel to Shreveport, tucked in “Ark-La-Tex,” the nexus of three states where the piney woods encircle sloughs and bayous. Its post-boom downtown — the oil and gas petered out in the mid-1980s — has plenty of fine old buildings, not many people and, along with a bit of dissipation, an air of expectation, as if the circus might suddenly crest a hill and bring all manner of hoopla.

Look closer and you will see that the circus, or its Hollywood cousin, is already here. A spoof called “Disaster Movie” has closed off a downtown street, turning the Chamber of Commerce building into a natural history museum. All those trucks near Swepeco Park in North Shreveport? That’s the gang from “Microwave Park,” including [Val Kilmer](#), [Sharon Stone](#) and 50 Cent. Not long ago, both Mr. Kilmer and 50 Cent stopped by the Noble Savage, a downtown bar, where they welcomed the director [Oliver Stone](#) and the crew that had just arrived to make “[W](#),” a dark comedy about the 43rd president of the United States.



Rex Curry for The New York Times

The Chamber of Commerce building restaged as a museum for “Disaster Movie.” Shreveport has become a significant destination for TV and film production.

Shreveport, home to about 200,000, equally divided between black and white, has become a kind of Hollywood South. More than 40 mostly independent productions, both television and film, have turned this very Southern city into a location stand-in for New York, Alaska and Maine in movies like [“Blonde Ambition,”](#) [“Factory Girl,”](#) [“The Mist,”](#) [“Harold and Kumar Escape From Guantánamo Bay”](#) and [“The Great Debaters.”](#)

Major film-industry companies like Paskal Lighting, Cinelease and Panavision all have permanent presences here. And last month Nu Image/Millennium Films, a producer and distributor of independent films like [“Mad Money”](#) and [“My Mom’s New Boyfriend,”](#) announced the construction of a 6.7-acre production campus with a planned expansion to a 20-acre full-service studio that will have three sound stages, production offices, a mill and a prop house.

Filmmakers arrive at this unlikely destination first and foremost for the incentives. The state offers a 25 percent tax credit for in-state spending, which bumps to 35 percent when the money goes to Louisiana production crews.

That still does not explain the choice of Shreveport, which has its charms but is close to not much of anywhere. Two evacuations, one caused by market forces and the other created by [Hurricane Katrina](#), help to explain how pictures of the actor [Oliver Platt](#) and the director [Harold Ramis](#) came to hang in the local Starbucks.



Photographs by Rex Curry for The New York Times

A marker of the town's namesake, Capt. Henry Miller Shreve.

When the local economy went bust in the 1980s, a lot of jobs in heavy industry disappeared. But the city was left with a substantial infrastructure, with varied architecture and numerous highways, nice characteristics if you're making a movie. And when Hurricane Katrina came along in 2005, many productions working with state tax

credits in New Orleans had to scramble for both higher ground and a place to finish their films.

And though there are no direct flights to Shreveport from Los Angeles and New York, city officials try to overcome what would seem to be a deal-breaker by doubling down on the hospitality.

Lampton Enochs and Alissa Kantrow are partners in Louisiana Production Consultants, and they manage Mansfield Studios, a converted former Western Electric building with 26-foot-high ceilings and 120,000 square feet of production space.

“Shreveport was not a city I was familiar with,” said Mr. Enochs, whizzing around the space in a golf cart. “But when the storm came, we were in New Orleans and a month away from production on ‘Thief’ for Fox. The crews came up, and then we found this amazing old downtown and all of these great neighborhoods with turn-of-the-century homes. The costs were low, the weather was good, and when you’d shoot in somebody’s home, some of them even bake cookies for the crew.”

Last week Arleena Acree, the city’s liaison with the film industry, was making the rounds and dealing with various frantic requests on her cellphone, including those for potential sets for “Billy the Exterminator,” a reality show from A&E, and a production that was shopping for closed schools. With plenty of parks, cemeteries and public buildings, the city does not charge location or shooting permits and closes streets on very short notice.

“In a city of this size, the economic impact of these film projects is felt by everyone,” said Michael P. Moorhead, who runs StageWorks of Louisiana, a production complex housed in a former convention center. “There is zero degrees of separation, and when you are looking at \$200 million to \$300 million in spending, it becomes very tangible.”

Jason White, a local merchant who runs Foam It, which fabricates architectural elements, can attest to that. When [“Year One,”](#) a coming [Jack Black](#) movie, came to town, the producers ordered 90,000 square feet of manufactured paving stones. Wearing his L.S.U. hat, Mr. White walked around a business on the outskirts of town that has grown to 12,000 square feet from 2,000 square feet.

“Eighty percent of that growth is from the movie business,” he said, mentioning that just that morning, the producers of “W” had come in looking for architectural elements to mimic Kennebunkport, Me., and Crawford, Tex.

It is that economic infusion, the kind that pumps new blood and money into a post-industrial city, that has state and local governments all around the country constantly wooing the entertainment industry. New York, for example, recently announced new incentives, partly to make sure that American productions stay in its state, not Connecticut or Vancouver or, sometimes, Romania. With the dog fight among all the competing locales, there is a chance that it will turn into a zero-sum game.

At Shreveport’s City Hall, Mayor Cedric B. Glover said that while he enjoys bumping into 50 Cent and all, he is more interested in other, more financially material byproducts. “The spending is very significant, they don’t pollute, and almost everything they touch they leave behind better than they found it. What’s not to like about that?” he said.

Shreveport will never be mistaken for SoHo or West Hollywood. But it is not without charms. Herby K’s Shrimp Buster will satisfy crews or fatten up talent; the fried chicken at the Cotton Boll will do the same even quicker; and the Blind Tiger and the Superior Steak House will meet more sophisticated culinary needs. For the moviegoing experience, there’s the gorgeous new \$4.2 million Robinson Film Center, with screening rooms and a restaurant of its own.

“From what I was told to expect, I pulled up looking for a dirt road and a McDonald’s, and it was nothing like that,” said Jerry Jacobs, a producer of “Disaster Movie.” “For our purposes, it is as easy to shoot here as it would be on the backlot of Universal. And the only real culture shock has been adjusting to how unusually friendly people are.”

The producer David Friendly, who made [“Little Miss Sunshine,”](#) recently got back to Los Angeles from Shreveport after producing [“Soul Men”](#) with [Bernie Mac](#) and Mr. Jackson. He did not consider it a hardship tour.

“My two-room suite on the 11th floor of the Hilton, complete with two large plasma TVs, cost about the price of a decent dinner in L.A., about \$159 per night,” he recalled. “The bar was sort of the general congregating spot for folks from any of the six movies either in preproduction or shooting while we were there.”

Last Tuesday, inside Freddy Mac's, a bar downtown, workers were laying tiles on the dance floor when Mr. Stone emerged, having just walked through the scene with [Josh Brolin](#), who is playing [George W. Bush](#).

"I'm used to making movies around here," Mr. Stone said. "I made four movies in Dallas. And where we are right now," he said, gesturing toward the town and the plains beyond, "is Bush country, so it feels right."

"You get something working with extras from here," Mr. Stone added. "Look, these people are gamblers and roughnecks. They know all about boom and bust. This is a second-chance town. I just read that there may be a huge reserve of gas right under the city that was not discovered until very recently."

Mr. Stone is right. Speculators are already moving in on word a few weeks ago that the so-called Hayneville Shale field may be a mother lode of gas deposits. The backlot of Shreveport, already rich in lore, may be picking up a few new characters and a twist in the plot.