

## MOVIEMAKERS

### Two Louisiana women return home to open their own movie studio

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Linda Thurman, left, and Marquetta Cheeks, presidents of Emerald Bayou Studios, sit in directors' chairs on a set at a Baton Rouge production studio they have used while getting their own facilities ready.

For two Louisiana natives, becoming successful in the movie business in California has allowed them to bring some Hollywood magic and opportunities home.

Marquetta Cheeks and Linda Thurman are converting an old cottonseed-oil mill in New Roads into a movie soundstage.

By creating Emerald Bayou Studios, they hope to take advantage of the state's new and thriving film industry.

Statistics from the Louisiana Office of Entertainment Industry Development show more than \$2 billion in productions have chosen to film in Louisiana since 2002. And Louisiana is the No. 3 location to shoot films, outside of the traditional production centers of California and New York.

Both Cheeks and Thurman understand the possibilities here.

"We are definitely Louisiana girls," Cheeks said, "but our adult lives and our careers have been molded by the big-city thinking of a hugely successful industry.

“We’re hoping to create this environment where people who have made a way for themselves can come home,” she added.

Cheeks, originally from New Roads, got her start in the movie business as actor Richard Pryor’s personal assistant.

As a 3-year-old, she told her mother she was going to move to Hollywood. She had just watched her first film.

“I had no idea what that meant. I just knew I loved the movies,” she said. “When I got there, I was like a kid in the candy store.”

She was 24 years old when she accepted the job with Pryor.

“I handled his life, his scheduling. I spoke to all the studio executives, agents, actors,” she said. “My call list started with Bill Cosby and went from there.”

In her early days on the job, Pryor told Cheeks he needed some gold dust.

She laughs.

“Nobody says no,” she said. “Hollywood was a place where dreams come true and there were no limits.”

She later learned he planned to give the gift, in a silk pouch no less, to an actress he wanted to date.

Although she studied broadcast journalism at Southern University and is a trained pianist, Cheeks wanted no role in front of an audience.

She liked the business angle — not only of making movies but music too.

Her musical experience allowed her during her career to work for Columbia, Epic, Arista and other record labels in promotion and personal management. She has worked with artists such as Prince, Quincy Jones, Paul Simon, Madonna and Whitney Houston.

During her 29-year career, Cheeks went on to work for Warner Bros. and Interscope Films.

The partnership with Thurman began in 2004. Thurman had returned home from California to care for her father during an illness. She was just completing a study on the film industry in Louisiana as a private consultant.

Cheeks happened to be visiting Louisiana at the same time, and both women were part of a small group of California residents to visit New Orleans to learn about the blossoming film industry.

“We had lunch together and discovered we had mutual friends in California,” Thurman said.

The plan for Emerald Bayou Studios was hatched during the following year.

At the new business, Cheeks is president of production while Thurman is president of business development. The two jobs take advantage of each of the women’s different experiences in the industry.

“While Marquetta has been in on the creative side, I’ve been on the business side,” Thurman said.

A lifetime ago, as Thurman says, she was an opera singer in Hammond, where she had grown up.

She did theater lighting design in New Orleans before moving to New York City to do similar work.

But her career shifted to negotiating deals and worker contracts.

In New York and Los Angeles Thurman worked for HBO, handling deals for such movies as “Fried Green Tomatoes” with Jessica Tandy and Kathy Bates and “Sweet Dreams” with Jessica Lange and Ed Harris.

Then she worked for United Artists handling business and legal affairs. She learned plenty, sitting in on meetings with the chairmen of the studio, she said.

It was that experience that made her comfortable with the idea of starting her own studio.

“When we got here, we saw this tremendous opportunity to create jobs and give people an opportunity to pursue a career in something we had to leave to pursue,” Cheeks said.

Emerald Bayou Studios’ commitment is 10 to 20 movies a year. Five are planned so far for 2008.

The former mill site, which includes a 40,000-square-foot building, will house movie sets, offices and plenty of outdoor space for equipment and stars’ trailers.

The women also have been amazed at the different choices of scenery in many of Louisiana’s parishes and have shared that message with those in California.

A boxcar they discovered in a backyard became one set for a short film, “The Glass Chord,” starring Grammy-nominated blues pianist Henry Gray.

Filming of that movie ended a year ago and it has been in editing for months. A trailer is available online and the movie should be ready for screening by April, the women said.

On a recent scouting trip through the Atchafalaya Basin, the two women sat in an airboat thinking how glad they were to be back home in Louisiana.

“Louisiana has so many wonderful things to offer,” Cheeks said. “We’re now seeing it through the eyes of the other states we’ve been to.”