

Soundstage, more film projects coming to Louisiana

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Louisiana will play a "major role" in an upcoming independent movie, "Instant Karma," whose production will likely use a New Roads soundstage built out of a former cottonseed mill and a backlot in East Feliciana Parish.

Louisiana Capital Area Economic Development Allies, said Digital Domain, the second-largest special effects house, is working with Emerald Bayou Studios, which is developing a 40,000-square-foot soundstage in Pointe Coupee Parish.

The news came out of a West Coast film marketing conference attended by state officials, who said there are up to \$200 million in projects -- including two feature films and a television pilot -- coming Louisiana's way.

"Instant Karma" is an \$80 million, live-action production about a petty thief who dies and must climb the karmic ladder by being reincarnated as a series of animals -- a fly, a cockroach, a crawfish, a frog, a raccoon and a dog -- and performing a series of good deeds.

According to a news release, Digital Domain "will use the latest CGI technology to bring the creatures of the bayou to life like never before. A far cry from using trained animals or cartoons, this photo-realistic animation will allow our hero to truly embody the creatures he becomes and allow us to identify with his plight -- even as a talking crawfish."

Digital Domain could not be reached for comment.

Linda Thurman, one of Emerald Bayou's founders, said the film has attracted strong interest from A-list actors, but that there is as yet no announcement about who will star in the film.

Digital Domain is best known for its visual effects work in "Titanic," "Apollo 13," "The Fifth Element," "The Day After Tomorrow" and "I, Robot."

For "Instant Karma," it will team writers Terry Rossio and Ted Elliot of Scheherazade Productions, which is responsible for "Shrek," the "Pirates of the Caribbean" trilogy, "Aladdin" and the upcoming Denzel Washington film, "Déjà vu."

The original script was written by □FILM□ Paul Hernandez.

According to LaCAEDA, an 11-acre site has been selected for the construction of the Louisiana Film Center backlot in East Feliciana Parish that will represent the French Quarter, small town America and other popular filming locales required by many productions, including "Instant Karma."

Other sites within the capital area parishes have been targeted for additional production services, LaCAEDA said.

Linda Thurman and partner Marquetta Cheeks formed Emerald Bayou two years ago and began looking for a facility to house their studio.

"We recognized that Louisiana is in need of facilities that are comparable to those available in Hollywood," she said. "And as of now we don't have very much that meets that criteria."

Thurman and Cheeks looked at many potential facilities, but all lacked the requisite 35-foot ceiling height.

Then, a couple of months ago, they heard about an old cottonseed mill in New Roads, Cheeks' hometown.

"My jaw dropped and I was just in love," she said of her first visit to the 40,000-square-foot building.

The ceiling was 85-feet high.

"For me, it was heaven on a clamshell," she said.

The building is still being readied and Thurman said cost estimates are still in the works. But she said basic use of the building can happen quite quickly; as soon as it is secured and weatherproofed.

She said it could be used for some small work before being built out according to the needs of its first major production, which would most likely be "Instant Karma."

Thurman said it would take a couple of years before the facility becomes state of the art, and that Emerald Bayou is working with Louisiana Technical College on training students to work in the film industry.

Thurman got involved with the project after she scouted locations with Digital Domain President Scott Ross. She said the project got bogged down, but credited LaCAEDA's help getting things moving in time for the announcement with the American Film Market Conference, going on now in Santa Monica, Calif.

LaCAEDA is a sponsor of the conference, and Larry Thomas, chairman of LaCAEDA's film commission, said Friday that the conference is a good opportunity to let Hollywood know that Louisiana is still in the film business after Hurricane Katrina.

State Sen. Jay Dardenne, R-Baton Rouge, whose office issued the announcement about the \$200 million in production work, credited the state's tax breaks with stimulating film industry investment here.

LaCAEDA, a regional economic development group, comprises the nine capital area parishes including: Ascension, East Baton Rouge, East Feliciana, Iberville, Livingston, Pointe Coupee, St. Helena, West Baton Rouge and West Feliciana. As part of the economic development mission, Louisiana Capital Area is committed to expanding film production through its nine parishes.

Hurricane Katrina brought the state and production to a brief halt, though officials contend it is up and running again. Warner Brothers' "The Reaping," starring Hillary Swank, has resumed production and is shooting in two capital area parishes.