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Movies, Shmovies – TV's Taking Over L.A.

By Richard Verrier

In a makeshift jungle, Richard Jacobs is helping transform a Burbank soundstage into the Florida Everglades.

The 47-year-old special-effects technician, his arms caked with mud he had just smeared on a dog, is readying a scene for ABC's upcoming mystery series "Invasion" shooting on the Warner Bros. lot. Jacobs was offered film jobs in Louisiana and New Mexico that would have paid well but ended after a few months. Given the steady work a television series offered, less than half an hour's drive from his Tujunga home, it was an easy call.

"I love this stuff," Jacobs said. "It gives me a sense of security when things are busy like this."

Jacobs is among the estimated 132,000 workers riding the biggest boom ever in Los Angeles television production, one that is rapidly turning Tinseltown into a TV town. While Hollywood's nomadic film business has gravitated toward cheaper U.S. and foreign locales, television production has become the bedrock of the Los Angeles entertainment economy.

Producers are responding to a demand for original programs from broadcast networks and a mushrooming number of cable channels. Reruns are being shunned in favor of fresh shows that continue to earn money for years when shown again or sold on DVD.

With its production infrastructure and proximity to talent, Los Angeles is the location of choice. Stars working on a regular series prefer to stay close to home, and producers want to be near writers who may be needed for quick rewriters.

Television's role as the driving job creator in Hollywood will be underscored today when local film officials release a study showing a near-tripling in on-location TV activity over the last decade.

According to the Entertainment Industry Development Corp., roughly 100 of the 134 scripted and reality series in prime time are shot in Los Angeles. Thirty-one of the 71 primetime cable programs surveyed are shot here as well. By contrast, film shooting in Los Angeles peaked in 1996, falling 38% since then.

"There is no question TV is driving an increasingly large share of our production activity," said Steve MacDonald, president of the nonprofit corporation. "The growth in television has been explosive."

In Burbank, all but five of the 34 soundstages on the Warner Bros. lot and at its production facility a few blocks away are devoted to television.

The lot where the film classics "Casablanca" and "My Fair Lady" were shot now produces such TV shows as NBC's "ER," ABC's "George Lopez," CBS' "Without a Trace" and the WB's "Gilmore Girls." Hollywood's largest collection of soundstages is so packed with TV work that some senior Warner executives were forced to give up their prized parking spots to make room for crews from NBC's "The West Wing." "I'm amazed that each year we seemed to produce even more than the last," said Warner Senior Vice President Lisa Rawlins.

At Los Angeles Center Studios west of downtown, 12 TV pilots were shot this year, double the number of a year ago, including "Bones" and "Head Cases" for Fox and "Threshold" for CBS. The 20-acre studio and its six soundstages already are home to CBS drama "Numb3rs."

"We just don't see a slow-down." Said Sam Nicassio, the studio's president. The 132,000 workers, more than twice the number of people in Los Angeles working in film, is a record, according to the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corp. Hiring is so brisk that some of Hollywood's blue-collar unions have exhausted their roster of eligible members, forcing producers to scramble to find workers.

At Local 728 of the Studio Electrical Technicians in Panorama City, more than 800 workers were hired this year from outside the local's rolls. In three years, permanent union membership has swelled from 1,800 to 2,200 mostly because of TV.

George Palazzo, business agent for Local 729 of the Motion Picture Set Painters and Sign Writers in Burbank, said many of his members won't even take the union's calls because they are so booked with work.

The 2,653-member Local 80 of the Motion Picture Studio Grips and Crafts Services in Burbank has gone "off roster" half a dozen times this year, meaning that producers have to search for other workers.

"With the increase in TV production, it's kept us pretty well fully employed," business agent Thom Davis said. "Every year, it just goes up, up and up."

This time last year, Al Mendenhall, 60, of Canoga Park, was painting houses in Valencia, Chatsworth and Tarzana. Mendenhall recently wrapped up eight weeks of work on the upcoming UPN series "Sex, Love and Secrets."

He also worked on FX's "The Shield," putting in nearly 12-hour days while earning \$2,000 a week. Beyond money, he also accumulated the hours of work needed to retain union health insurance for himself and his wife, a former nurse who is on disability leave.

"Her medicine alone is \$1,500 a month," Mendenhall said. "This is like a godsend for me."

Television work in Los Angeles began climbing slowly in the early 1990's, exploding in 2002 as it soared ahead of feature films as the area's primary production activity. Last year the Entertainment Industry Development Corp. issued permits for 18,257

television production days in Los Angeles – one production day representing work by a single crew at one location for more than 24 hours – up from 6,535 days in 1994. During the time TV work was exploding, feature film activity mostly sagged. Studios tightened their movie slates to trim costs, smaller producers were consolidated into larger companies and productions were lured by financial incentives to cheaper states and foreign countries.

TV production is on pace for another record this year. Scripted dramas are hot again, thanks to such shows as the ABC hits “Desperate Housewives” and “Lost.” Reality programs have generated new work. More important, however, is the demand for programs to fill time on cable outlets such as Food Network, ESPN and HGTV.

“It used to be that production was limited to a handful of broadcast networks,” MacDonald said. “Now you’ve got hundreds of cable networks, many of them doing original programs.”

The activity is beginning to strain the TV infrastructure of Los Angeles, with soundstages and equipment in hot demand.

Last week bobby Ivener, a 48-year-old best boy grip, scrambled to find 25 sandbags, each weighing 35 pounds, for an “Invasion” hurricane scene. All the sandbags at Warner Bros. were in use by other productions, so he had to order what he needed from a rental supply house.

“I’ve never had that happen before,” said Ivener, whose work includes moving cameras and rigging lightning. “It’s nuts right now.”

Like movies, TV shows sometimes are lured outside L.A. by lower costs. The Warner Bros. pilots for Fox’s “Reunion” and the WB’s “Supernatural” were both filmed in Los Angeles. But when the shows were picked up, the productions went to Vancouver, Canada.

“We can’t be complacent and assume that all production is going to remain here,” MacDonald said.

But with television less vulnerable to poaching than movies, many workers are taking advantage of the boom to get jobs giving them more stability and time with their families.

Lloyd Moriarity, a key grip for the hit Fox series “24” spent 18 years working in movies, including “True Lies,” “Titanic” and “Charlie’s Angels: Full Throttle,” before switching to TV two years ago.

The pay is typically less – about \$34 an hour for TV compared with \$40 to \$45 for features. But the 47-year-old Moriarity, father of three boys, is happy with the steady paycheck, benefits and proximity to home that television provides him.

“My wife says I can’t quit,” Moriarity joked. “I can’t go back to doing films.”