



## WAIT'LL THEY GET A LOAD OF US

December 1988. It was freezing cold in the city. My Dad and I huddled in long coats on the sidewalk, watching a procession of poorly fashioned parade floats lumbering down Gotham Boulevard. Some dangerous looking guys on the floats began tossing money into the crowd. Of *course* we grabbed some – who wouldn't? In less than a minute I'd managed to net \$400 and I think my dad had more than that, but before I was able to compare numbers with him an old lady in front of us tumbled to the ground clutching her throat, a giant rictus grin stretching madly across her face.

Smylex gas. The parade balloons must have been full of the stuff . . . how could we have forgotten that the Joker was out to kill everybody in Gotham?! In a split second we all realized what was happening and en masse began sprinting down the street away from the cloud of green smoke like some mad parody of the annual Wayne Foundation 4th of July Marathon. Panicked, I left my dad behind without a backward glance, but 20 yards into my escape I tripped and took a spill beside an old Packard. A couple of people scooped me to my feet.

We ran like the world was on fire . . . we ran like the Joker was going to kill us . . . we ran until we heard the 1st Assistant Director screaming, "CUT!" over and over on his bullhorn. Our terror dissipated in an instant, and we casually strolled back up the street to where our stampede had started. We were on the set of the movie *Batman* on the back lot at Pinewood Studios outside of London. It was my first BIG movie set, and it was *glorious*.

As a 21-year-old grand prizewinner of a writing competition, I had been flown to London (along with my dad) and put up at the Athenaeum hotel. For two consecutive nights we were driven to Pinewood where we met a lot of bigwigs, saw a bunch of sets and were run through wardrobe to take part in the parade scene. In the shadow of the 007 soundstage a kindly group of older extras explained how it was along this same stretch of tarmac where Elizabeth Taylor had been carried as Caesar's prize during the filming of the movie *Cleopatra*. The place was steeped in cinema history.

By the time I joined the business in 1991 it was disappointing to find out that Georgia didn't have soundstages, at least not proper ones like I'd seen at Pinewood. At best we had a few warehouses featuring cycloramic walls with space enough for a few modest sets, used most often for commercial shoots. At worst we worked out of creaky old commercial buildings with metal roofs and precious little soundproofing. A heavy rainstorm could delay shooting for hours. As my resume grew so did my realization that the relatively low demand for film production in Georgia meant we would never lure investors to build proper sound stages.

And then one day (many years later) somebody *did* build soundstages. That somebody was Tyler Perry. Of course those stages were proprietary to Tyler Perry Studios (TPS) since his company had more projects lined up on the calendar than they had hours to produce them all. But even if the new TPS stages *had* been made open for rental, the word going around town was that they were jammed tightly onto the property. It was said that one badly parked set dressing truck on the back lane could block access to the stage by the rest of the company.

So we still didn't have *commercial* soundstages in Atlanta, which meant that all of the big budget summer blockbusters continued to elude Georgia despite of our awesome tax incentive. The simple fact was that mega-budget flicks like *Iron Man*, *Captain America* and *Green Lantern* all needed large stage facilities, and we just didn't have any. By sticking with the tax incentives the Georgia legislature allowed the business climate to stabilize, and in the last two years we've seen significant growth in the infrastructure of Georgia's motion picture landscape. A wide range of film industry businesses have been opening satellite offices in Georgia, from picture car suppliers to wardrobe storage, specialty print shops to prop rental houses. More significantly, Tyler Perry is no longer the only player with a real stage facility in Atlanta.

Burt Reynolds' decades-old dream of transforming Lakewood Fairgrounds into a vibrant film studio have finally come true, courtesy of EUE/Screen Gems. In-town developers have converted warehouses into functional stages and snagged feature films to shoot in them. Outlying counties have developed stages to lure productions (and more development) in their direction. The company behind the Atlantic Station live/work community made headlines recently with their intention to enter the film business by transforming an industrial complex in southern Gwinnett County into a multi-stage facility. In the "that sounds downright kooky" category, a company with ties to India is soliciting penny stocks, non-union labor, and state grants to construct a "B movie factory" in Savannah. Even Tyler Perry has quietly started his next expansion, farther west of Atlanta.

Depending on who you talk to regarding the most recent spate of new studio announcements we've either won the Super Bowl or been trapped in a dangerous bubble of development fever. So which is it? Some of the developers who've announced their intentions to build studios appear to be newcomers to the motion picture industry, and speculative construction has always borne risks.

Yet most of the "for rent" stages that are currently up and running have been consistently busy. New productions are looking for space, and as television pilots like *Devious Maids* get picked up, they'll be looking for permanent stage space with multi-year contracts, effectively taking existing stages off the open market, which means that proposed developments will be racing to fulfill the demand for true soundstage space. I've seen a wide range of stage types on my visits to Los Angeles, from the giant buildings used by feature films, to more compact facilities suited for television and commercial production, down to converted warehouses like we've always used here in Georgia.

Several of the stages currently operating in Georgia are new to the industry and don't have a "brand name" (studio-owned facilities like Paramount, Universal, Warner Brothers, etc). Of course film and television productions care more about cost than brand names. Remember: these projects are in Georgia due to our tax incentive. However, in the larger context of our place within the motion picture industry there's been a very real desire to break through to the next level.

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## Georgia's film industry has been hungering for a sense of legitimacy that comes with playing home to a big name studio.

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Drew and his dad in wardrobe on the set of *Batman*, on the backlot of Pinewood Studios, Iver Heath, December 1988

So it was in the spring of this year that Georgia's motion picture industry celebrated the announcement that Pinewood Studios would be building a large multi-stage facility south of Atlanta. The shockwave of that announcement has reverberated across the country from coast to coast. The number of vendors announcing their entry into the Georgia market skyrocketed and nearly everyone in the business has at least one LA contact who has announced their intention to move to Georgia.

The significance of the Pinewood announcement to the state of Georgia cannot be overemphasized. The culture of our local film industry is about to change yet again with a new wave of immigrants, this time from Los Angeles. I already miss the small town camaraderie we had in the 1990s, but today's environment is so much richer and more diverse.

Pinewood is an incredible coup for the state and underscores why our legislature made the right decision to stand by our tax incentive, and why they should judiciously continue to do so for the foreseeable future as more announcements are inevitable during this period of transition for the industry as a whole.

I personally can't wait for the day when I set foot on the property at Pinewood Atlanta – it will be as if I've come full-circle from where I first began. Wait'll they get a load of us!