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BUSINESS

IN THE NEWS:

On Location: One of Hollywood's oldest studios gives birth to a new soundstage

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A clutch of city officials and film industry promoters gathered Monday morning on the same lot in East Hollywood where Mary Pickford once worked to celebrate a rare occurrence: the opening of a new soundstage in Los Angeles.

Hollywood-based Occidental Entertainment Group Holdings, which owns a dozen local soundstages and other entertainment businesses, unveiled a 14,000-square-foot, 54-foot high soundstage on the historic Occidental Studios lot, along with 6,000 square feet of hair and makeup facilities, dressing rooms and office space.

That's hardly extraordinary in a city that boasts about 300 soundstages, many of them much larger. But the opening is unusual because so few production facilities have been built from the ground up in L.A. since feature filming activity peaked in the late 1990s -- before production began to take flight from Southern California to cheaper locales.

"We made the decision to build this stage when concerns over runaway production were running rampant," said Craig Darian, chief executive of Occidental Entertainment Group. "But we just have an abiding view that Los Angeles is always going to be the center of the entertainment industry. This is a vote of confidence in our industry."

The company invested \$12 million to finance the new soundstage, which was originally intended to accommodate a former tenant, the Showtime series "United States of Tara." The series taped its pilot and first season at Occidental but later moved to CBS Studio Center on Radford Avenue because Occidental couldn't open the new stage in time.

Though "Tara" was recently canceled, Darian said the experience convinced him that the demand for new soundstages in L.A. remained strong, despite growing competition from such states as Georgia, Michigan, Louisiana and New York that are also vying for the same TV and film business. A recent survey from FilmL.A. Inc. found that L.A.'s share of all pilot production fell to 51% in the most recent season, down from 58% last year and 82% from six years ago.

Occidental hasn't been immune to the slowdown. Executives said the company's entertainment revenues -- about \$20 million a year -- have been virtually flat the last two years. But they predict activity will pick up thanks to an increase in local cable TV production and the effect of California's film tax incentive program, which helped fuel a 15% jump in on-location shoots last year.

"I think it's a good roll of the dice for us," said Ricky Stoutland, president of Occidental Studios. "We're just hoping the California Film Commission is going to start drawing more production."

Sam Nicassio, president of Los Angeles Center Studios, the downtown studio that is home to AMC's series "Mad Men," said demand for soundstage space was tight. "I think you're seeing larger budgets on cable TV networks that didn't have budgets before," he said, adding that all six of the studio's soundstages are booked.

Built in 1913, Occidental Studios is among the oldest continually operating studios in Hollywood, used by pioneering filmmakers Cecil B. De Mille, D.W. Griffith and Pickford, who worked there as an actress and filmmaker in its early years.

The 3 1/2-acre lot on Occidental Boulevard between Beverly and Santa Monica boulevards was acquired by Occidental Entertainment Group's founder, Albert Sweet, in 1990 and includes three other stages and 35,000 square feet of production offices. Occidental owns commercial real estate nationwide as well as office buildings and soundstages in Hollywood and Van Nuys that are frequently used by Disney, NBC, MTV Networks and FX, whose TV series "Sons of Anarchy" is based at another Occidental studio in North Hollywood.

Occidental isn't the only developer trying to capitalize on the uptick in local filming. Triliad Development, a Thousand Oaks real estate group, has submitted plans to develop a state-of-the-art, \$170-million production complex in Moorpark in Ventura County with a dozen stages over the next two years.

"I think there is a lot of talent in the area and building something from the ground up that could accommodate the needs of the new digital age of filmmaking is something that could benefit the industry," said Valerie Draeger, Triliad president.

-- Richard Verrier