



Docklands Studios Melbourne.

# A DECADE AT DOCKLANDS

*It's been ten years since Docklands Studios Melbourne opened its doors. Emily Blatchford looks into its history and finds out what's in store for the future.*

Since Docklands Studios Melbourne first opened for business a decade ago, it has housed seven international projects, eight Australian feature films, 120 hours of television drama (and counting), more than 650 hours of audience-based television and numerous television commercials, short films, and music video clips.

It has had two name changes, was bought back by the Victorian government in 2008 and recently enjoyed a \$10 million upgrade.

In short, a lot has happened since 2004, and the tenth anniversary is one Docklands CEO Rod Allan is keen on observing.

"For us here it's something worth celebrating," Allan tells IF from his Melbourne office.

"It's something worth pointing out to the public and the industry that this studio facility is an important piece of infrastructure. We want to get the message out there that we are here to stay and we are here to support the industry."

The first ever production to shoot in Docklands

was Kevin Carlin's *The Extra* (2005), a tale of a movie extra (played by comedian Jimeoin) who aspires to one day land a starring role.

Remembers the film's producer, Stephen Luby: "Because of that story, a lot of it was set in a movie studio. So we were looking for a place which, as a location for the film, would actually look like a Hollywood movie studio... but as

well as that there were a number of very big scenes in the film, scenes in which the 'extra' character, played by Jimeoin, was an extra on the set of a big, epic battle movie.

"So we needed a studio space that was big enough for us to create this gladiator type set in, and for us to put lots of extras in there... we needed the space to hold lots of lots of extras so it looked like he was one of hundreds of them. So we had these two needs in terms of scenes in the film. When the script was written, we wondered how on earth we were going to find these sorts of places, and at about that time the Studios were nearing completion. We became aware they were going to become operational at about the time we needed these things for the film. So how's that for a nice coincidence!"

It also proved handy for the then-named Central City Studios, which, despite having plenty of fanfare surrounding its pending opening, had yet to make a booking.

"It kind of suited them to have a film of any sort using the facility at the time it opened," says Luby. "There was no American film but there was us, and they happily had us on board."

American films were to follow, however, with *Ghost Rider*, starring Nicholas Cage, shooting at the Studios later that opening year.

Though international films had shot previously in Victoria, the fact there was now a studio to accommodate them put the state on the map and in serious competition with Sydney's Fox Studios and Queensland's Village Roadshow Studios.

"The arrival of the studio really changed the production landscape in Victoria permanently," says Allan. "It meant that they were able to

consistently attract international productions for the state. There had been international productions before then but without a proper base. It's difficult to attract those kinds of productions to a particular state if you have to put them in warehouses and things like that."

However, the changing economy and the rise of the Australian dollar made it clear, over the years, that attracting international productions was going to become more and more difficult.

"[At the beginning] the studio was concentrated a lot on attracting international production. The economic conditions favoured that, the exchange rate was lower and in the early years there was quite a bit of international production," says Allan. "But there was also quite a bit of domestic production, but I think it's fair to say the international production was the bigger component of the studio's business in the early years."

"A real obstacle has been the exchange rate because that definitely affects the amount of international production that comes to the country. We have a very supportive state government that is prepared to incentivise international productions but there is definitely an obstacle provided by the strong Australian dollar, there's no question about that.

"So that's something we have to deal with and fortunately in recent years we've been able to attract enough domestic production to the studio for us to be able to, to a large extent, offset the impact of the Australian dollar."

That's not to say international productions have dried up completely. Docklands recently landed Sean McNamara's *The Moon and the Sun* despite stiff competition from other states.

"It was a very competitive tender, all three states really wanted the project – that being Sydney, Queensland and Victoria – and I think it was a combined package from the Victorian government and also Rod [that sealed the deal]," says *The Moon and the Sun* producer Paul Currie. "He was just very user friendly and knows how he is going to make it happen.

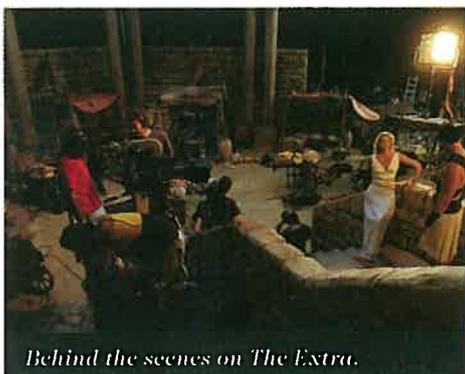
"I think the facilities are really solid, Stage One is a really good size, and with the pit there we're able to do some really interesting things, like we've got a big water set in ours so it's a huge build."

Other notable projects over the years include the acclaimed mini-series *The Pacific* (2010), Alex Proyas' *Knowing* (2009), Troy Nixey's *Don't be Afraid of the Dark* (2010), Michael and Peter Spierig's *Predestination* (2014) and of course, *The Moon and the Sun*, which is currently in pre-production. On top of that are a slew of television productions, both drama and audience-based, such as *Winners and Losers* and *Millionaire Hot Seat*.

Says *Winners and Losers* producer Paul Moloney: "Studio space is very scarce in Melbourne... we've got to make sure we're pencilled in for each series because the thought of not filming there is quite frightening really.

"It's very close to the CBD and, more importantly, it's close to freeways and because our unit vehicles are stored there, it's pretty easy for us to get away in any direction."

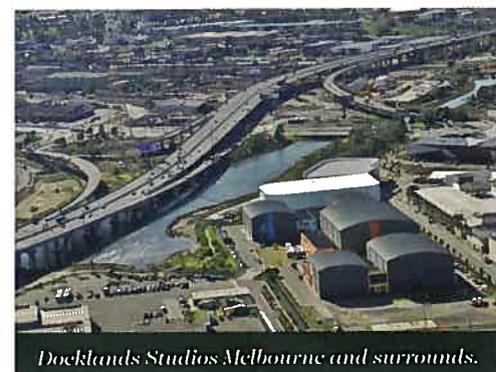
The studio's centrality and therefore the ease of



Behind the scenes on *The Extra*.



Millionaire Hot Seat is currently shot at Docklands.



Docklands Studios Melbourne and surrounds.

getting around is in fact one of its most significant drawcards, with *Predestination* producer Tim McGahn pointing out the advantages to the cast.

"The location is incredible. To be able to shoot there by day and for your cast to be in five star hotels in a major CBD by night is fantastic," he says.

Adds Allan: "The studio's location is a great selling point for us because of its proximity to the city, but also it's very close to freeways, so you can be on a freeway in five minutes and heading out of town or heading to location or wherever. So from that perspective, it's very good selling point for us because it means [if you have an] international star or international producers, they can be staying in town and be at work in five or ten minutes which is a real advantage over other facilities."

"The other thing is the studio is right on the tramline so getting audiences to the Studio is really easy for producers."

The blend of productions using the Studio at any one time is a source of pride for Allan, who is particularly looking forward to 2014.

"A real highlight is when we have a diverse mix of productions happening concurrently and all our sound stages are occupied, and that's going to happen this year," he says. "We're going to have *The Moon and the Sun* filming while we have *Winners and Losers*, we'll have another film in Stage Four and we have Stage Five occupied with *The Footy*

*Show* and *Millionaire Hot Seat*. It's when you get that mix of productions on the lot and people interacting, all doing their respective work, but working in an environment that is there to support all types of production, that's always a highlight."

To continue to service both international and domestic production – but on a larger scale – is just one of the goals Allan has in mind for the Studio in coming years.

"We've got a long-term plan which has two key elements," he says. "One of those elements is the establishment of another big sound stage. We would like to see a big sound stage that would enable us to attract bigger international productions without compromising our ability to service domestic production, that's the key thing. So that's one thing, and the second thing we would like to see established here is a building that could house a number of industry related businesses. A commercial cluster of creative industries.

"Now those two goals are our goals, they're not funded, and we'd be relying on the government for that capital injection to do those things and also, I should point out that the commercial cluster also would probably involve some private investment. Those are the long term objectives. That's where I think I would like to see the studio develop in the future."

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