

BUSINESS

Hollywood Braces for Production Logjam Post-Virus: "There's Going to Be So Much Jockeying"

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A growing queue of film and TV projects awaits now-empty soundstages as productions that couldn't wrap filming before the mid-March shutdown may be prioritized.

Within days in mid-March, soundstages in the U.S. went from bustling hubs to abandoned ghost towns as the novel coronavirus forced studios to shut down filming. "There is nothing like being the only person on a movie lot," says Mark Nicholas, one of few people able to keep working at Manhattan Beach Studios in Southern California in order to assist in the live-streaming of local mayor and sheriff news addresses. "It's deathly quiet and feels very much like *The Walking Dead*."

While most lots sit empty for the foreseeable future, the question atop industry insiders' minds is how the executives in charge of them plan to handle a production logjam that's likely to await them on the other side of this crisis. Dozens of films and TV series that had to pack up mid-shoot are expected to compete with previously scheduled projects for limited studio space at a time when production was already at all-time highs — not to mention the scripts writers have been able to safely churn out during the quarantine, only adding to the number of projects that will be ready to jump into production. Notes one insider, "There's going to be so much jockeying."

Many in the filming community are bracing for a post-COVID-19 traffic jam. "It's like a horse race — you're waiting for the gates to open and everybody's going to rush out at the same time," says Claudio Ruben, the head of New Mexico's Garson Studios. Among the projects at his studio that had to suspend production was Netflix's Idris Elba-fronted Western film *The Harder They Fall*. (Elba tested positive for COVID-19 on March 16.) As for how it will all play out, Ruben is cautiously optimistic. "I think most people are going to be patient and respectful, but I can't imagine there won't be some jostling in the mix."

Another New Mexican production site, **Santa Fe Studios**, is fielding already requests from producers anticipating a space crunch. "In the midst of this all, I'm getting phone calls for people who are preparing for the future and want to rent the space," says Octavio Marin, an executive at the studio that's home to The CW's *Roswell, New Mexico*. With three projects in line now, they are trying to double the size of the facility in the next 12 months to help accommodate the additional productions.

SANTA FE § STUDIOS

In an effort to manage the unprecedented situation in the fairest way possible, production executives tell *The Hollywood Reporter* they plan to slide their master filming schedules back however many months the coronavirus outbreak lasts. That would mean prioritizing the projects that couldn't wrap in time and having other previously slotted productions wait their turn.

It's currently the plan at Pinewood Studios in Atlanta, a 700-acre facility known for housing tentpole movies and big-budget shows. "What's happening is everyone is just shifting the production down and, generally speaking, we're targeting a June 1 return," says the studio's president, Frank Patterson, who warns that the date is highly tentative and will depend on when the CDC deems it safe. "At the end of the day, essentially what we're doing is pushing the industry back a few months."

But it's not only a matter of when productions can rev back up again — it's also a question of how they can do so safely. Patterson predicts it is likely they'll need to implement stricter health and safety standards — something the highly secure facility may be more easily equipped to do than other smaller studios. "We're in collaboration with our studio partners and internal task forces to try to determine what these new protocols will be," says Patterson, who works with major studios including Disney, Warner Bros. and Universal. "What I'm expecting pre-vaccine is something in the form of real-time testing, increased sanitation processes and higher standards for air handling."

Meanwhile, at Santa Clarita Studios in California, all 27 soundstages were booked ahead of the virus, in large part by broadcast shows. One, CBS' *SWAT*,

was on its penultimate episode when it had to call it quits. The facility's president, Mike DeLorenzo, who does business with places like Fox, Sony and ABC, says that his stages are booked out anywhere from six to 18 months from now — but that he'll do his best to accommodate by pushing dates back: "Whatever time we're shut down, we will just add that to extend their contract."

Those contract extensions will only make it harder for newer projects to find available soundstages in the coming months. "Studio space was so tight anyhow, even before the pandemic, that I can only imagine with this shift of schedule that it is going to be a very, very big challenge — one that will need to be met with a lot of creativity and coordination," says California Film Commissioner Colleen Bell, noting there are multiple new studios being built from Los Angeles to the Bay Area.

She adds, "I will have a lot of smart people in the room trying to figure out all of these logistics and operations in order to get everybody back to work and in production as soon as possible."