

SMALL TOWN, BIG SCREEN

BY JANE PORTER

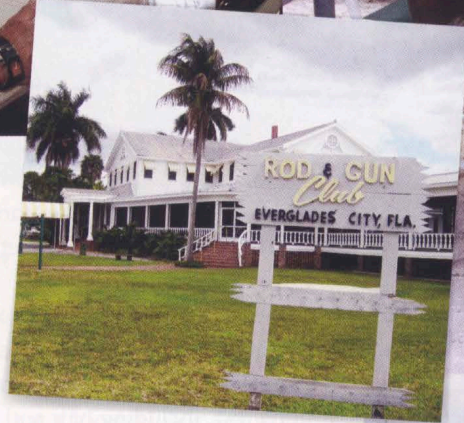
NAPLES MARCO ISLAND EVERGLADES CVB

MILA BRIDGER





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: FILMMAKER K.C. SCHULBERG; SCREENWRITER BUDD SCHULBERG, LEFT, WITH ACTOR CHRISTOPHER PLUMMER FILMING *WIND ACROSS THE EVERGLADES* IN 1958; ACTORS CHANA EDEN AND EMMETT KELLY ON SET AT EVERGLADES NATIONAL PARK; EVERGLADES ROD AND GUN CLUB SERVED AS A BASE OF OPERATIONS FOR THE FILM.



Filmmakers place Southwest Florida in the Hollywood spotlight

K.C. Schulberg was five years old when his father shot the film *Wind Across the Everglades*. It was 1958. He remembers dressing up in buckled shoes, leggings and britches as an extra on the set. He remembers running around the Everglades Rod and Gun Club, a hunting and fishing lodge in Everglades City that served as a base of operations for the film. He remembers the marshes and hardwood hammocks where trees grow so thick they resemble a rain forest. Fifty-six years later, Schulberg is back—this time to produce his own film, *A Dream Last Night*, which he is working on with Vilmos Zsigmond, named one of the 10 most influential cinematographers by the International Cinematographers Guild.

“It’s sort of coming full circle,” says Schulberg, who expects to begin filming later this year with Academy Award-winning actors Christopher Plummer and Linda Hunt. The Everglades and Ten Thousand Islands will serve as the backdrop. Filmmaking runs in Schulberg’s family. His grandfather B.P. Schulberg produced more than 50 films and ran Paramount Studios in the 1920s and ’30s. His father, Stuart Schulberg, was an independent producer and director, as well as executive producer of NBC’s *Today* show for more than two decades dating back to the 1950s. His uncle Budd Schulberg wrote various screenplays, including *On The Waterfront*, a film that won eight Academy Awards. *A Dream Last Night* is an adaptation of a short story Budd wrote. Much of the film will be shot in the Rod and Gun Club that Schulberg remembers so well.



STATE ARCHIVES OF FLORIDA, FLORIDA MEMORY

“The Keys are beautiful, but they are a bit overbuilt,” says Schulberg. “I wanted a place that was lost in time. You can find that here.”

Echoing that sentiment, a growing number of filmmakers are discovering Southwest Florida. The area has become more welcoming to the movie industry, says Maggie McCarty, director of the Film Commission for Southwest Florida. In 2013, film, print and television generated \$2.3 million in revenue for the local economy, a bump up from the usual \$1 million to \$1.5 million in revenue that held steady over previous years, says McCarty. “It used to be that years ago you’d have to explain where Naples was. Now when I’m out and about, people know it,” she says. “It’s become a much more sophisticated, larger town. It’s had a lot more exposure.”

BEYOND THE EVERGLADES

Historically, filmmakers have been drawn to the area for the many scenic landscapes in the Everglades, which have been used as a backdrop in films such as *Just Cause* in 1995, starring Sean Connery, and *Adaptation* in 2002, starring Meryl Streep and Nicholas Cage. In recent years, however, the draw has been more than just the aesthetic value.

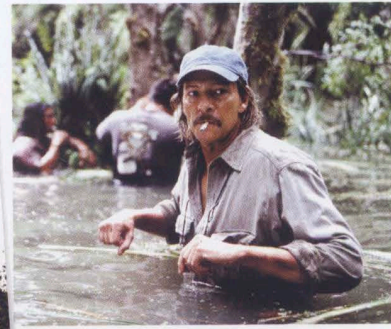
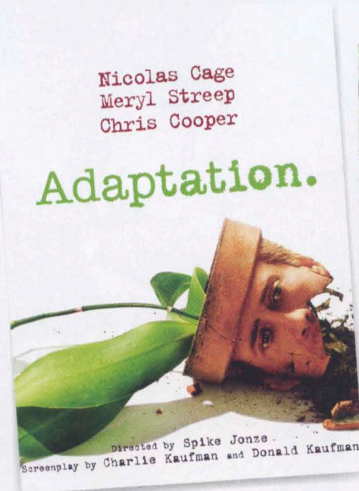
In 2010, the Florida Film Incentive made Southwest Florida a more attractive place to film from a financial perspective, offering tax credits up to 30 percent to filmmakers, says McCarty. "There's that financial incentive to come here along with the location," she says. Senator Nancy Detert of Sarasota drafted a bill this spring to continue providing those tax rebates to filmmakers but the proposed legislation did not pass the Senate. The plan is to try again next year.

Filmmaker and Naples resident Jonathan Tomhave decided to film his political comedy, *25*, in the area because the manicured wealth of Naples offered the ideal setting. "It has so many landscaped streets. You can portray wealth and beauty extremely easily," Tomhave says. "You don't have to pick one location. You can just travel down Livingston Road."

Tomhave will begin filming in December with actor Danny Trejo signed to play the leading role of the U.S. president. Tomhave, who moved to Naples 10 years ago, knew he wanted to make a movie in the area, not simply because of the "presidential feel" of the neighborhoods and the financial incentive, but also because of the community. "Naples has a population that is actually interested in film and not put off by the idea of having a street closed or a home used for a film," he says. "It is relatively unused by the film industry. It's kind of hidden."

A TOWN AS A BACK LOT

For writer and director Tony Schweikle, Ave Maria seemed like a natural choice when deciding where to shoot his film, *Hybrids*, a family-friendly horror-movie spoof starring actors Paul Sorvino and Carolyn Hennesy. Thirty-five miles west of Naples and removed from



ACTOR CHRIS COOPER IN A SCENE FROM *ADAPTATION*, ONE OF SEVERAL FILMS THAT FEATURE THE EVERGLADES AS A BACKDROP

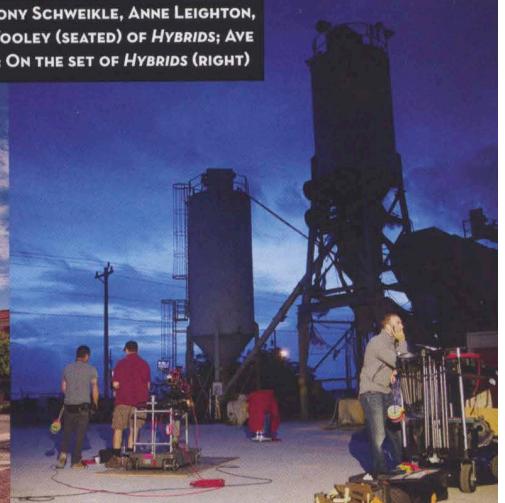
nearby noisy city life, the town makes for a quiet place to film. Since it was founded in 2005, Ave Maria is still being developed, which means it offers more flexibility for set construction. "It was almost like a back lot for us," says Schweikle.

Two of the film's main sets were built in an unoccupied building in Ave Maria, and Schweikle was able to house his production company there. He rented eight condominiums in the center of the town for the film crew, including hair and makeup. "That made it so much easier and cheaper than trying to transport them from the motel in town," he says.

Schweikle, who served as film commissioner of southwest Colorado in the early '90s, knows firsthand how important the film industry is to the economic development of a region. For *Hybrids*, which is in the post-production stage of editing, 90 percent of the crew was from



PHILLIP WILLINGHAM, TONY SCHWEIKLE, ANNE LEIGHTON, TONY RANDEL, PETER WOOLEY (SEATED) OF *HYBRIDS*; AVE MARIA ORATORY (LEFT); ON THE SET OF *HYBRIDS* (RIGHT)





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: INFOMERCIAL FILMED IN FRONT OF SEA SALT, NAPLES; INSIDE ITZ STUDIOS IN NAPLES; CAR COMMERCIAL SHOT ON SANIBEL ISLAND



the area and filming lasted three months. “We created 50 jobs and did business with 34-plus businesses,” he says.

Schweikle already has plans to shoot a second film along the water in Collier and Lee counties. He hopes that it too will help boost the local film industry and build out resources, such as camera, sound and wardrobe crews available to filmmakers in the future. “We trained a lot of people in different departments, but we need a lot more,” he says.

BUILDING A SUPPORT SYSTEM

Developing a more robust infrastructure that includes a trained crew and production equipment is an important step in attracting more filmmakers to the region.

“All it takes is two or three movies and it can get going,” says Schulberg. “A lot of people would love to leave Miami and move to Naples.” But there’s still the challenge of underdeveloped resources, he says.

This very development is what Chuck Ardezzone focuses on. In February, Ardezzone opened ITZ Studios in Naples, a 4,000-square-foot space equipped with a green screen, high-definition cameras, sound and edit booths, lighting systems and a 200-inch projector screen. Ardezzone offers out-of-town crews a local studio to handle post-production needs.

“Naples has tourism and real estate and that’s what really keeps this economy going,” he says. “But the TV business has so much money in it. There’s a lot of money to be made.”

Ardezzone, who also works as a stuntman and was an associate producer for *Hybrids* and *25*, recently started a community group called the Invest in Films & TV Club to help bring together scriptwriters and investors in Naples through monthly meetings held at ITZ studios. The group, which is free and open to the public, met for the first time in March as a way to help encourage the growth of the local film business. “Local investors might want to put funding into local projects here,” he says. “There’s a chance for them to really be part of it.”

While Ardezzone is interested in building ITZ’s reach to attract more filmmakers, television remains an important piece of the puzzle when it comes to economic development, says McCarty. Though a



film might bring a crew to the area for six to eight weeks, a television show requires a more permanent infrastructure, including production facilities for editing. Once that infrastructure is in place, it tends to encourage more shows to arrive.

“Florida is looking to bring in some of those high-impact shows,” McCarty says.

ITZ Studios is part of the parent company ITZ Media Group, which Ardezzone founded in 1999 in New York before moving to Naples. Over the years, the company has focused on television production, including commercials and reality TV, producing pilots for networks like A&E, Discovery and TLC. This year, Ardezzone says he’ll shoot four reality TV pilots in the Naples area. “In the event that one of them gets picked up, it could be a huge boost to the economy,” he says.

As filmmakers and producers continue to find their way to Naples, more and more people will be drawn to it, says McCarty.

“A lot of this stuff goes on and the community doesn’t even realize it,” she says. “It’s always making the place look great.” ◀◀