

MONEY TALKS\$:

An Interview with FBT's James Brooke

by Danielle Nelson

Louisiana ranks third nationally in film and television production. But to be a truly self-sustaining, competitive industry, we must grow the amount of development, pre-production and post-production done in the state. FBT Film and Entertainment is one of the groups working to diversify the scope of the film industry in Louisiana.

James Brooke is a partner at FBT Film and Entertainment in New Orleans, which has fostered projects such as *Battle: Los Angeles* for Sony, *The Hungry Rabbit Jumps* for Endgame, *The Last Exorcism* for Lionsgate and *Yellow Handkerchief* for Arthur Cohn Productions. With a background rooted in production, Brooke's television producing credits include work for HBO, BBC, CBS, NBC and ABC, and he has produced feature films for Nu Entertainment and Cinemavault Releasing.

NOVAC's outreach director Danielle Nelson sat down with him to discuss how FBT is helping to change the landscape of pre-production services offered in Louisiana.

Q: First, tell me about FBT Film and Entertainment.

A: We offer full service production company support. We are not solely focused on selling Louisiana film tax credits. As a subsidiary of First Bank and Trust, we combine the strength and expertise of our affiliates while showing production companies how to enhance their "Louisiana budgets" (and tax credits) while getting better pricing on most line items.

Q: How does working with First Bank and Trust set you apart from other Louisiana film incentive programs?

A: Our association with First Bank and Trust allows us to combine the trust and security of a bank along with the flexibility and oversight of an investment firm. We offer production insurance through our subsidiary First Insurance Agency and also act as general agents for completion bond providers. These factors combine to make us [a] "turn-key production partner."

Q: Turn-key production partner? I like the sound of it, but what does it really mean?

A: Our goal is to work with producers at the earliest stages of pre-production to help the producer understand the "Louisiana advantages." Producers are evaluating production incentives nationwide – we work with the producer to show that FBT is not just about incentives – and that Louisiana has a first-class production infrastructure encompassing experienced crews, equipment vendors and production facilities.

Q: You have so much experience as a producer- this obviously makes you an asset to FBT. What is your

specific role within the company?

A: My job is to call on the film community worldwide to market and promote FBT's services and to bring projects to FBT for the purchase of tax credits. Of course, this means I'm also promoting the state of Louisiana and the generous production incentives. I work closely with Lenny Alsfeld, President of FBT Investments.

Most queries that come to FBT from producers who are seeking information about filming in Louisiana are referred to me. Obviously, the initial conversation is about budget: does the project meet the minimum threshold of \$300,000 spent in Louisiana? We'll then discuss the incentives: thirty percent for Louisiana production expenditures plus five percent for hiring resident labor and how the incentives are applied to earn tax credits.

Customarily, I will ask to see the screenplay, the production budget detail, finance plan and background information on the production team. These are essential elements that will give me an idea of what stage the producer is at in the pre-production process – and, of course, how well they understand the process of accessing the tax credits. If a producer has done a tax credit analysis, I will review and corroborate – and look for expenditures the producer may not have included or didn't realize qualified for a tax credit. If an analysis has not been completed, I'll work with the producer to create one.

Q: Why is it important to remain involved in the creative development of a project?

A: Reading the screenplay helps me understand the specific production elements needed to lift the story from the page to the screen: practical and/or exotic locations, a sound stage facility, special visual effects, post-production. We work with the producer to find ways to secure all these elements in Louisiana. To optimize the production expenditures and maximize the value of the tax credits.

Of course, I'm not waiting for the phone to ring – no matter how many potential projects flow through our "Louisiana pipeline." I try to pursue projects at their earliest development stage: a screenplay purchased for production, a television pilot announced for series, a book optioned for movie adaptation. We understand the development process and know the steps a producer has to take to get into pre-production. Most finance plans now include a tax credit rebate integrated into the business model.

Q: You're based mostly out of Los Angeles, where the entertainment industry does a large amount of development work. What are some of the reasons we aren't seeing more development done here in Louisiana?

A: The development process includes shaping a concept, idea, screenplay, book, manuscript, or magazine article



Danielle Nelson, James Brooke, Lenny Alsfeld and New Orleans film commissioner Jennifer Day

into a “pitch” or presentation that will essentially attract a buyer. The buyers (studios, networks, cable companies, film financiers) are in Los Angeles and New York.

The evolution of motion picture project starts with the major considerations of costs, return on investment, and a project’s potential in the global market – to the particulars of story selection, development, financing, pre-production, principal photography, post production and distribution. At each stage of a picture’s evolution, the economic, business, legal, creative, and practical issues are examined. Decisions and choices are made by producers in consultation with agents, lawyers, talent, rights holders, distributors, and studio or network executives. Filmmakers and storytellers in Louisiana need to find ways to network into the executives responsible for a “project greenlight.”

Q: For those storytellers and filmmakers reading this article, where would you recommend they start?

A: As I stated before, the buyers are in New York and Los Angeles. However, one needs to reach out to those buyers. One method is through an agent, be it a literary or talent agent. But again, that networking doesn’t really exist here. I don’t know if we’re going to build that community up, I have a desire to see that occur, but again it comes back to knowing the producers and filmmakers that can help young filmmakers here. With technology being what it is, you can sit anywhere in the world and pitch a project. That said, the issue of how to get the project in front of a buyer is the age-old dilemma in our industry.

Q: Physical production is something that we’re doing with regularity but what about post-production work? We’re far from operating at full capacity and that’s where so much of the really lucrative job market lies in filmmaking. What do you identify as the “next steps” for attracting and retaining meaningful post-production work in our region?


A: Essential to building post-production services in Louisiana is the ability to provide skilled, creative film editors. [Special Effects (SFX)] has strong growth potential in Louisiana. SFX is expensive and labor intensive, producers seek ways to reduce the costs of this increasingly important element in many films – a thirty percent discount will be very attractive. Pixel Magic, a major digital visual effects company based in Los Angeles, has set up a facility in Lafayette. We’re working with Pixel Magic to train editors in New Orleans.

Q: Part of your job is selling New Orleans as a destination for filmmakers, producers and investors. Undoubtedly much of your pitch has to do with tax incentives, how do our incentives compete nationally?

A: With incentives of thirty percent on the production spend and five percent on hiring resident labor, Louisiana is competitive with other states – and has proven experience in successfully providing tax credits to producers. Louisiana’s skilled crewbase has grown by over 400 percent since the start of the tax incentive program, and infrastructure continues to develop to answer the demand from film and television producers.

In 2008, Louisiana set a production record with more than eighty major film and television projects, representing more than \$800 million in production budgets, including about \$500 million spent in-state. The state’s previous mark was fifty-six projects, set in 2007.

Q: Finally, what resources would you recommend to those looking for more information about the business of film financing and film development?

A: Attending sales markets. Attending film festivals. Reading the trades and online blogs [such as] *Daily Variety*, *Hollywood Reporter*, *Screen International*, and *Deadline Hollywood Daily*. 

For more information about FBT, visit www.fbtfilm.com. For course listings and more information about NOVAC, visit www.novacvideo.org.