

ATLANTA'S SIREN SONG



CALL IT “SILICON PEACH” OR CALL IT “THE BLACK MECCA.” BUT WITH ITS OWN PRODUCTION INFRASTRUCTURE, TALENT POOL, AND CULTURAL IMPRINT, THE GEORGIA CAPITAL CAN NO LONGER BE CALLED A HOLLYWOOD SATELLITE.

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Tara, you're gone with the wind. We're Wakanda now. Marvel's latest blockbuster, *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, was largely produced in Georgia, where 20% of Disney's content is filmed. In fact, several full-scale production facilities are located in and around Atlanta, including Tyler Perry Studios, Eagle Rock Studios and Trilith Studios (formerly Pinewood Atlanta).

The direct spend of film and television projects here in 2022 was \$4.4 billion. This burgeoning industry has inspired a media moniker: "Y'allywood." If you just groaned and rolled your eyes, you're in step with the insiders.

"Please, please, please don't call us Y'allywood or 'the Hollywood of the South,'" pleads Suzan Satterfield, a writer, producer and director with Picture Window Prods. who also reps the PGA's Atlanta Chapter. "Those nicknames suggest that we're just a backlot or subsidiary of Hollywood."

The fact is, Atlanta boasts its own sui generis, organically grown movie industry that differs from entertainment hubs on the West and East Coasts. The city has also been home to such acclaimed television series as *Atlanta*, *Ozark* and *Stranger Things*, and is currently hosting several high-profile films, including Francis Ford Coppola's long-anticipated *Megalopolis*, the Kevin Hart Christmas movie *Dashing Through the Snow* and the Nicole Kidman romantic comedy *A Family Affair*.

With thousands of movies to its credit, Georgia was recognized in 2022 by *Business Facilities* magazine as the No. 1 state for motion picture and television production. Even at the height of the pandemic, Atlanta was home to 242 film productions. More and more filmmakers are seduced by the city's vibrant, sultry Southern hospitality, for a variety of reasons.

"Our diversity, our unique history, and our longing to be recognized as our own market sometimes get lost in the flash of big productions and political news," says Satterfield, who was an exec producer-director on HGTV's *Mega Dens*, shot almost entirely in the Atlanta area for five seasons. "Atlanta has a very cooperative spirit, which you don't find everywhere."

NATURALLY DIVERSE

That spirit of cooperation and the contributions of underrepresented voices go hand in hand. "Atlanta has one of the most naturally diverse workforces in our industry," says Melissa Simpson, executive director of Film Impact Georgia, a nonprofit that helps develop and promote independent work. "This goes for both studio and independent films. FIG runs a biannual film grant, and our most recent cycle's demographics include BIPOC filmmakers representing 73% of submissions, while LGBTQ+ filmmakers represented 29%."

Autumn Bailey-Ford, a producer with more than 30 films to her credit, founded Atlanta-based Autumn Bailey Entertainment, one of the few women-owned production companies in the Southeast. "I believe that the Atlanta film community is unique in its own right," she says. "We work together as a family, which has been the cause of our rise to power. There is power in teamwork and numbers, and when Georgia's film community decided to band together, the rest of the world took notice."

The industry's roots date back to the early 1970s, when then-Governor Jimmy Carter established a film office. Its first vehicle? *Deliverance* (1972), which shot primarily in Rabun County in northeastern Georgia and got the ball rolling. Filmmakers who followed found a welcoming locale with a year-round temperate climate, ingratiating locals and varied geography. The state is blessed with photogenic mountains, beaches, quaint small towns and urban-industrial cityscapes to accommodate most location needs. Then came the 2004 biopic *Ray*—a pivotal project about homegrown music legend Ray Charles, who popularized Georgia's state song.

The rub is that the bulk of *Ray* was filmed in Louisiana, "which really irritated and hurt the pride of our legislators," says Lee Thomas, deputy commissioner of the Georgia Film Office in the Georgia Department of Economic Development.

MULTIPLE INCENTIVES

Georgia legislators promptly turned the perceived slight into action. State leaders began experimenting with incentives in 2005 and saw the results in 2007: \$132 million in direct spend. They doubled down in 2008 with the Georgia Entertainment Industry Investment Act, which grants an income tax credit of 20% to qualified productions. Those include feature films, television movies or series, documentaries, commercials and music videos. If the project embeds a Georgia logo and link to ExploreGeorgia.org on its landing page, an extra 10% tax credit applies.

"It always starts and ends with these great tax incentives," says Patrick Markey, executive producer of *Ozark*, the Netflix series that recently aired its season. "But there are additional attractive features."

The so-called "Silicon Peach," Atlanta is an ideal place for starry-eyed dreamers, adds Markey, whose son is a Georgia camera operator. Nightlife is lively and the housing is more affordable than in rival cities. "It's a congenial, cohesive place, where up-and-comers tend to support each other," he says.

The first producer to take advantage of the tax credits was Tyler Perry, who gave Madea one plush lair. Today Tyler Perry Studios comprises a 330-acre lot in the heart of Atlanta, on the historic grounds of the former Fort McPherson army base. The sprawling complex is one of the largest production facilities in the country, with 40 buildings on the National Register of Historic Places, 12 purpose-built soundstages, 200

acres of green space and a diverse backlot.

The major studio is testament to an indigenous talent pool and infrastructure with its own cultural stamp. "The industry leaders have worked to develop our community as originators and creators," says Satterfield, "and not just providers of locations, secondary cast and BTL production talent."

The Georgia Film Office's "Camera Ready Communities" program connects producers with skilled county liaisons who provide resources such as lodging and assistance with local permitting laws. You can locate a gamut of professionals, from hair and makeup artists to traffic control specialists—Traffic Safety Georgia provides services tailored to filming.

RESOURCE RICH

"The geography is a lure," says *Ozark*'s Markey. "We used two lakes, Lanier and Allatoona, to double for the Ozarks region. And transportation is easy, with the international airport." Markey credits tax breaks, talented crews, soundstages and other infrastructure features that made filming locally a no-brainer. "You don't come here and have to reinvent the wheel," he says. "Atlanta really has everything you need to make a good show."

Georgia currently has more than 4 million square feet of stage space with another 3 million under construction, and companies like Gray Television are hard at work creating new state-of-the-art facilities.

Then there are the human resources, so to speak.

"What I really love most about my work is the friendships, the relationships," says Beth Talbert, vice president of studio operations at Eagle Rock Studios, the largest stage complex under one roof in the U.S. "Most of my clients today are more than business associates; they are friends."

Talbert started in the industry more than 20 years ago in Los Angeles as an assistant at 20th Century Fox. She relocated to metro Atlanta about five years ago. "I never dreamed I would end up in Georgia," she says, "but this is where the content is manufactured."

Atlanta is still known as the "Black Mecca," with an entertainment industry that is richly diverse, befitting a place nicknamed "the city too busy to hate."

Cas Sigers Beedles and Terri J. Vaughn launched Nina Holiday Entertainment to create stories for women who look like them, and they have been producing projects for more than a decade. Their first film, *A Cross to Bear* (2012), starred *Euphoria*'s Storm Reid, who was unknown at the time. The two are now coproducing the feature film *Becoming Noble* for Paramount. The feature *Scheme Queens*, which Beedles wrote, directed, and produced, was shot in Atlanta with a local cast and crew. It will debut on BET Her.

"At least 50% of my crew are people of color, and you can't say that in other places," says Beedles, who, along with 19 other Black women, founded Reel Divas—an initiative

to promote Black writers, producers, and directors and to increase awareness of Atlanta as a production hub.

NAVIGABLE INFRASTRUCTURE

The city's film industry is advanced enough to have established infrastructure, she says, but it is new enough, and navigable enough, to feel like an open frontier.

"In our system, a lot gets done just by word of mouth, and it's also easy to reach out and touch someone," Beedles says. "It's easy to get your screenplay read—it definitely isn't in New York or Los Angeles. We all tend to know each other. If you asked me to refer you to some Black female directors, I could rattle off at least four names, and you wouldn't have to go through an agent to reach them. You can just call up a network studio here and say, 'Hey, I have a film.' Again, you can't do that in other places."

At a time when animation and gaming were relatively unknown in Georgia, Asante Bradford, a Los Angeles native, relocated to Atlanta. There he created 3D animation short films that won multiple awards. To showcase his interest in animation and gaming, Bradford founded the Independent Black Film Festival (2003–08), which screened shorts and features highlighting those genres. Today he is the senior industry engagement manager for the Georgia Center of Innovation, which promotes creative media.

"While considering the relationship between film and culture, it is important to keep in mind that the diverse population in Atlanta will form it," he says, "but it is also constantly changing from one period to the next. You will see more and more writers rooms. As more IP is created and greenlit here in Georgia, you will see more stories that reflect our Southern culture and style, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts."

Kathryn Dean has been a producer on Donald Glover's television smash *Atlanta*, which concluded its fourth and final season in November. "I came from New York City and worked there for years," she says. "I love working in Atlanta. It's the best of LA and NYC combined. The best thing in my mind about working here is that you have a truly diverse group of socioeconomic backgrounds coming together. It touches on that magic wish for many walks of life to come together and make something amazing."

Adds Simpson: "We have folks who are still willing to elevate each other knowing that a rising tide lifts all boats."

There are also on-the-ground pipelines of fresh talent. Georgia State University, Clayton State University,

and the Savannah College of Art and Design all have film-oriented majors. The Georgia Film Academy, a collaboration of the University System of Georgia and the Technical College System of Georgia, is a three-semester program with a paid internship for real-world experience. "We're growing the next generation of filmmakers," Thomas says.

And if one of them wants to update *Gone With the Wind*—which was shot on LA backlots—and make it woke, Atlanta still has plenty of petticoat skirts, columned mansions and drawling creatives. Just don't call it Y'allwood. ■

RESOURCES

Georgia Film Office
georgia.org

Film Impact Georgia
filmimpactgeorgia.org

Camera Ready Communities Program
cameraready.georgia.org

Producers Guild Atlanta Chapter
producersguild.org

Office of Film & Entertainment for the City of Atlanta
atlantaga.gov/government/mayor-s-office/executive-offices/office-of-film-entertainment

School of Film, Media & Theatre, Georgia State University
fmt.gsu.edu

Savannah College of Art and Design
scad.edu

Traffic Safety Georgia
trafficsafetyga.com

Georgia Film Academy, Clayton State University
clayton.edu

The Reel Divas
linkedin.com/in/reeldivas

