



Australia Blooms for SF Filmmakers

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SYDNEY, Australia -- Strange-looking aliens, dark cityscapes, mind-bending visuals -- all at good prices!

In this era of "faster, better, cheaper," science fiction and space films are finding a quirky mother ship for production: Australia.

With productions like *Dark City*, *The Matrix* and the Sci-Fi Channel's *Farscape* making their home Down Under, this sun- and surf-kissed land is building a reputation for cutting-edge SF films. But this time around, the high-budget look is a far cry from the make-do car chases that characterized Mel Gibson's mid-1980s post-apocalyptic "Mad Max" film series.

Ground zero for the new wave is the creative and technical infrastructure of Fox Studios in Sydney, which opened in May 1998 with six sound stages.

Australia's reputation as a science fiction film location will be further cemented later this year when the next Star Wars movie starts production. Lucasfilm Ltd. personnel have already started arriving in Sydney, and George Lucas has committed to filming the next two prequels at Fox Studios.

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Making big-budget movies affordable

Although Lucas himself hasn't said so, a major motivator for many productions is cost.

"There's about a 30 percent savings over Los Angeles in producing in Australia," says Matt Carroll, Sydney-based producer of *Farscape*, which shot 22 episodes in Australia and plans to shoot more. "That seems to be the magic number over which we find we can produce efficiently here."

While Australia still can't match the tax breaks of Canada or the low-cost labor of Mexico, it offers a combination of sophisticated sound stages, trained workers, stunning outdoor locations and reasonable wage and production costs that make a good overall package.

Similar dynamics are at work in New Zealand, where *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* have filmed for several years in converted pastures just outside Auckland. In southern New Zealand, meanwhile, a three-part mega-budget movie version of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is in production, set for release sometime in 2001.

In the past, the stunning outdoor scenery was what drew fantasy-oriented productions to the antipodes, with Mad Max leading the way. Much of that particular apocalyptic movie was shot outside the desert mining town of Broken Hill, in New South Wales, and near the South Australian opal town of Coober Pedy.

A long line of productions has used the desert outside [Coober Pedy](#) as backdrop since. *Red Planet*, a film starring Val Kilmer about an ill-fated space mission to Mars, is the latest. It's now in post-production and will be released later this year.

Andrew Mason, Australian producer of *The Matrix*, which was filmed at Fox Studios and on the surrounding Sydney streets, attributes the growing number of high-tech productions in Australia to a sort of "virtuous circle."

"*Babe*, *Dark City* and *Babe: Pig in the City* kind of overlapped into *The Matrix*, which then progressed onto *Mission: Impossible II*," he said, rattling off a few productions that have rolled out of Sydney recently.

In particular, the first three films mentioned all spotlighted locations around the city, such as the neighborhoods of The Rocks, Darling Harbor and Surry Hills. To Mason, Sydney's skyline and streets can be either faceless or distinctive, depending on a film's needs.

"When you're talking about a futuristic version of an American city, or a totally-invented urban environment, the scenery here works well," he said. "Sydney will never be a serious option for making films that have to look just like present-day America. If you want to shoot something that looks like the streets of New York, you need to go to Toronto."

The downside of success

Amidst this plenitude of film productions, some local concerns are being aired *sotto voce*.

Among them: big-ticket foreign movie productions could hit Australia like powerful bacteria from space, wiping out indigenous life forms in the domestic film industry.

At present, the numbers seem to support these concerns. Total film and television production in Australia rose 23 percent to roughly US\$440 million in the year ended June 30, 1999, largely on the back of big foreign productions shot in Australia like *Pitch Black*, another big-budget science fiction film.


Meanwhile, the value of Australian productions shot in Australia fell 27 percent to roughly US\$180 million, according to figures compiled by the Australian Film Commission, an Australian government agency that promotes domestic filmmaking.





If this kind of hothouse environment continues, smaller-budget Australian films could find themselves unable to compete for scarce talent, says Chris Godfrey, visual effects director and co-founder of Animal Logic, a Sydney-based company that has provided special effects work for *The Matrix*, *Face Off* and *Babe: Pig in the City*.


Carroll agrees.




"We're hoping big foreign productions don't completely overshadow smaller Australian ones," Carroll said. "The industry is looking for a happy cohabitation."

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