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Brooklyn Film Studio Larger Than Real Life

By Cindy Adams

New York, New York. If you make it here and you're into film production, you can't make it anywhere else.

Brooklyn's Steiner Studios, largest soundstage in the East, is 15 acres, 310,000 square feet. Five soundstages geared to state-of-the-art digital film and hi-def TV. One stage, with its 200 tons of air conditioning, is larger than Elmira - 27,000 square feet, 45 high, enough to build several stories for any script needing an apartment building. Plus there's support space - dressing rooms, makeup rooms, hairdressing rooms, wardrobe rooms, prop lockups, construction sites, screening rooms, food services, lighting equipment, furniture storage, on-site parking for 1,000 cars.

Being the old Brooklyn Navy Yard, Steiner's back lot is a waterfront, Manhattan's skyline, and buildings preserved from the Civil War. I schlepped out with Katherine Oliver, commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Film, Theatre & Broadcasting, to watch Glenn Close shooting Show 1 of her new TV series "Damages."

Doug Steiner, who himself gets lost in the place, waltzed us past a familiar bronze-y object. "The Dakota apartment building door for Jared Leto and Lindsay Lohan's 'Chapter 17,' which is about the Beatle John Lennon shooting." Past Stage 1, "where we do short-term stuff like for the Gap, Big Mac. Victoria's Secret just did a commercial here." Past 2 and 3, "where director Julie Taymor shot 'Across the Universe,' which comes out in September. They just chopped up all the sets so nobody could ever use them again." Inside some area where Steven Seagal did special effects for what somebody said "will go straight to DVD," around another section where Tina Fey and Amy Poehler, now on location, will shoot the feature "Baby Mama" in July. Through the place Richard Gere filmed "The Hoax" into another space where HBO's "Flight of the Conchords" did its six-month shoot.

Standing on her set, inside her "New York apartment's kitchen," Glenn told me: "One reason I'm willing to do a series is because I'm doing it here. I did one before in '05 called 'The Shield,' but I don't want to transfer myself to L.A. I live here. Ted Danson and I just started shooting a week ago but, depending on traffic and what time of day or night, it's 40 minutes from my house. Look, a series means long hours. Seems it's getting longer and longer. Supposedly, it's a 14-hour day and overtime pay when it goes more, but sometimes we're here until 1:30 in the morning with a 12-hour turnaround. Nice to at least be in your own home. And I bring my two dogs to work."

This FX show, about high-powered N.Y.C. lawyers, is a go for 13 episodes and airs in July. "I love this character because I'm rich and successful," she grinned, looking at her "apartment" which, with the authentically created backdrop out her windows, is SoHo. Lafayette Street. A large duplex. Terrace with trees. Each leaf hand-stitched on. A working elevator opens into her hallway. Classy modern furnishings. Sculptures, works of art. Large-size doggy bed. Wood-burning fireplace. If we're talking real, we're talking \$15 mil to buy, \$15,000-a-month maintenance. Glenn ain't playing no small-time ambulance chaser.

Danson's two-bedroom flat was masculine, smaller, more utilitarian, less fancy. I walked through his bathroom, which had no ceiling.

Her office set, huge, also downtown, has legal billing forms, fax, Brown U artifacts, a row of 24 cactus plants. Ted's smaller uptownish-in-the-50s office has diplomas on the wall. Much of the pilot was shot on location to minimize expense. Once the pilot was OK'd, the sets were built. From inside an on-site construction area, start to finish, sketches to completion, it takes the crew, known to be the best in the business, three months to build. (Please, they should only live to come to my apartment. I'm waiting six months just for my contractors to start a tiny guest john.)

Surrounding this "Damages" world, a whole other world. Second floor, dressing rooms. Third floor, production offices. Private stairs so stars needn't leave their environs for any reason or use the communal halls and maybe bump into some pest like a me. Offstage a rack bore the sign "Law Office Wardrobe." On it in plastic, a shirt, "bloodstained." And there's the prop room with dishes, pillows, 20 assorted clocks, Cuisinart.

The director shouted, "Quiet!" They were ready to roll a scene. But the sound guy said, "We still hear the air conditioning. Give it a second to cycle down, guys." Two hundred tons of air conditioning I figured might take more than a second to cycle down, so I left. En route out, we passed a full-scale restaurant with an upscale menu. Cafe Isabel. Why's it called Isabel, I asked. Grinned Doug Steiner: "It's my daughter's name."

Hooray for Hollywood? Not anymore.