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On Location: ‘Criminal Minds’ among shows filming in hospitals

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Photo: "Criminal Minds" shoots an episode of the

CBS show at the former Sherman Way campus of Northridge Hospital Medical Center, which is now closed.

Credit: Kirk McKoy/Los Angeles Times

On the second floor of a hospital, a criminal profiler is strolling down a hallway with a colleague when an alarm goes off. Several doctors and nurses sprint past him to an intensive care unit where a child and potential witness to a crime is being treated.

The scene, for an upcoming episode of the CBS crime drama “Criminal Minds,” actually unfolded last week on the former Sherman Way campus of Northridge Hospital Medical Center, which solely serves as a location backdrop for shows that have included such dramas such as TNT’s “Rizzoli & Isles” and "Hawthorne."

The Northridge facility is among a dozen current and onetime medical centers and hospitals represented by Real to Reel Inc., a 30-year-old Van Nuys location agency that has built a successful niche supplying location managers with something they frequently seek: film-ready hospital settings.

“Hospitals are a staple of crime dramas. Someone’s always getting shot, so we’re always going to the hospitals,” said Jeffrey Spellman, location manager for “Criminal Minds,” which plans to shoot its next episode at another closed hospital, St. Luke Medical Center in Pasadena. “To have a facility like this makes our job much easier.”

Though Real to Reel books productions for a variety of commercial properties, including the popular Hollywood & Highland Center, at least 40% of its business comes from steering movies and TV shows to hospitals.

Some productions film in hospital buildings for a few days, while others such as the now canceled “Scrubs” sign long-term leases. Film companies pay \$5,000 to \$12,000 a day to rent hospital space.

Real to Reel handles about 100 hospital productions a year, receiving a percentage of rental income. Film bookings for its hospital properties totaled \$2.2 million in 2011, up 11% from \$1.97 million in 2010, the company says. Most of the business was at the former Northridge medical center, which hosted the Comedy Central medical drama “Children’s Hospital” and the now-canceled TNT series “Hawthorne,” starring Jada Pinkett Smith.

Despite the loss of such a big customer, Gary Onyshko, Real to Reel’s president and chief executive, is optimistic that other shows will fill the void.

“We see a lot of pilots on the horizon for new medical shows,” Onyshko said. “We’ve seen a serious uptick.”

Real to Reel’s clients include St. Luke Medical Center in Pasadena, used in Clint Eastwood’s Oscar-winning boxing drama “Million Dollar Baby” and HBO’s vampire series “True Blood,” and St. Vincent Medical Center, the working hospital in downtown Los Angeles often used by crime dramas such as “CSI,” “The Closer” and “Southland.”

“Over the years we’ve become experts in hospital representations,” Onyshko said. “By making these properties available to filming that would have otherwise been boarded-up, we’re able to keep productions in Los Angeles.”

Hospitals permitted by the city and Los Angeles County generated 385 production days in 2011, double the level over the prior year, according to data from FilmL.A. Inc., the nonprofit group that handles permits for the area.

“These facilities play a significant role in the infrastructure that’s available to filmmakers in the L.A. region,” said FilmL.A. spokesman Todd Lindgren. “With the popularity of these crime and medical TV shows, we’re glad that we have so many facilities that cater to that need.”

The busiest hospitals last year were Linda Vista Community Hospital in Boyle Heights, routinely one of L.A.’s most popular film locations and which recently hosted Travel Channel’s “Ghost Adventures” and Rob Zombie’s film “The Lords of Salem,” as well as Northridge and St. Vincent Medical Center.

St. Vincent, which rents out unoccupied wings of the historic hospital to film crews, takes in more than \$100,000 a year from film rentals. “It generates extra revenue for us,” said Jody Spector, director of guest relations at St. Vincent. “They use extra space and apart from the trucks outside often our patients don’t even know they’re here.”

Apart from the setting, hospitals are also attractive to Hollywood because they typically have lots of parking to accommodate crews. And, Real to Reel works with property owners to make the facilities film friendly. The former Northridge medical center, for example, has gimbal windows that can swing open to make it easier to shoot inside rooms. The nurse’s station table was lowered to improve camera angles.

"These properties are affordable, they’re turn-key and they’re ready to go and directors love them because they offer a variety of looks," Onyshko said.



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