

Long Beach studio CEO launches indie film-funding program, calls for submissions

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Inspired by his love of films and driven by his savvy business sense, an Australian-born entrepreneur is bringing a bit of thunder from down under to jolt the independent film industry in Long Beach.

“It’s a common refrain: For young filmmakers, their No. 1 problem is funding. There’s reasons for that and that’s the question we ultimately want to address,” said Rodric David, 44, as he sat in his office at his sprawling Long Beach complex called Thunder Studios.

The six-acre facility on Santa Fe Avenue has been a busy filming spot for music videos, films and reality shows, but the studio founder and CEO is now planning on making it — and Long Beach — a central filming location for independent filmmakers with a new multimillion dollar independent film-funding initiative called Thunder Funder.

Through Thunder Funder, David and his partners — including Pace Pictures, Red Digital Cinema and producer Cassian Elwes (“Lee Daniels’ *The Butler*,” “*The Paperboy*,” “*Blue Valentine*”) — will invest up to \$12 million annually to create, market and distribute up to 12 independent films, with as much as \$1 million allocated for each project.

The chosen filmmakers, who must pay a \$300 submission fee and scripts to be considered, don’t get a \$1 million check if they’re selected. Instead, they get help with the nuts and bolts of filmmaking with services like the use of Thunder Studios for filming; equipment like cameras, lighting, green screens, props and sets; postproduction work; and marketing. Though in some cases it may also include monetary help.

“We’re interested in projects that have a reasonable use of our offer in terms of what you can do on a soundstage and can predominantly be filmed on location in Long Beach,” David said.

And the \$300 application fee isn’t to make a profit off someone’s dreams but to weed out frivolous proposals, he said. The real money will come with the end product since Thunder Studios would become producers in the film, thus sharing the financial rewards of a successful project that otherwise may have never made it to the screen.

“We make no apologies at all that we’re in this to make a profit,” David said. “We’re partnering with these filmmakers and I have an obligation to ensure to all of my partners/investors that the

risks are lowered as much as possible and that everyone can actually make a profit at the end of the day. This business is not a charity.”

Though it could still be a steppingstone for newer filmmakers who are chosen.

“The entry gate to Hollywood has always been fairly well-guarded. This is an opportunity for anyone in the world to submit something and have it evaluated and get their film off the ground,” said Heath Ryan, CEO and founder of Pace Pictures. “I’ve seen so many projects that are really solid projects that require investment and they can’t get them off the ground.”

As part of the Thunder Funder initiative, Pace Pictures would provide services such as color correction, sound mixing and special effects. These are jobs that at a minimum, say for a film going straight to DVD, could require more than a dozen people working for about 16 weeks at a cost of approximately \$250,000 to the filmmaker and investors, Heath said.

Jerry Mosher, chair of Film and Electronic Arts at Cal State Long Beach, where there are 600 film majors currently enrolled, said that while modern technology allows filmmakers to do a lot for very little, getting a film noticed and seen beyond social media sites like YouTube requires more professionalism, technology and funds — so \$1 million in resources could go a long way in the right hands.

“Independent filmmakers need all the help they can get. This sounds like a great opportunity,” he said.

The initiative was launched six weeks ago and so far 25 scripts have been submitted and reviewed by Thunder Studios while another 40 are going through the process to score one of the first spots. There is no set timeline on when the first films may be completed, but David hopes to have films submitted on the festival circuit next year. The selection process will be broken down into two rounds per year. Submission deadline for the first round is Aug. 30.

Those selected will have access to the Long Beach facility, which includes 20 soundstages, a back lot, a mill where sets are built, lighting equipment including built-in light boxes and massive green screens.

“To make a film, to make any project, you need a lot of equipment and we have all of that available,” David said.

The studio is already busy and has been used to film shows like the first season of “The Spoils of Babylon,” “Motor City Masters” and music videos for artists like Daft Punk, Justin Bieber and Rihanna. Beyonce filmed a commercial for Toyota for the Chinese market and recently a crew from BET was filming promos at the studio.

“To have the resources available right here at home is rare and wonderful,” said Logan Crow, executive director of the nonprofit Long Beach Cinematheque, which presents films at various venues throughout the city.

“I think it’s a great program. It’s great to see an independent studio give back to its community of artists and filmmakers. It’s fantastic that film is being talked about in Long Beach.”

Tasha Day, the city's film commissioner, said Long Beach has teamed up with Thunder Studios to get the word out about the Thunder Funder project and encourage talented filmmakers to apply.

"We do our fair share of filming in Long Beach," she said. "And to have the independents coming and filming here is great for the city."

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