

a look at the life & work of
albuquerqueans who deserve a toast

PERSONALITY



CENTER STAGES

As chief operating officer of the newly opened Albuquerque Studios, Nick Smerigan is bringing big-time movie productions to deluxe, fully equipped soundstages—some of the largest in the country.

When Nick Smerigan has a vision, he thinks big. Really big. With eight soundstages on its 50 acres, Albuquerque Studios at Mesa del Sol are “some of the largest purpose-built sound stages in the United States,” says Jeremy Hariton, the company’s executive director. Those stages—with 500,000 square feet of indoor space and 78,000 square feet of office space—include full production and support facilities for location shooting, editing, and digital animation for major film production, television, music videos and commercials. Welcome to Hollywood—er, Albuquerque.

Filmmakers and movie types are no longer “making a left turn at Albuquerque.” Now, the city has become the destination. In fact, Albuquerque was recently ranked fourth best city in the United States for movie production and living in *MovieMaker* magazine. That has a lot to do with Smerigan and the manifestation of his vision.

Photos by Liz Lopez/ATM



Albuquerque Studios won't actually produce the movies made in its sound stages, but it will provide everything else needed to bring those movies to life.

While sitting in Smerigan's office, visitors are faced with a laughing Buddha statue. Sitting atop a table and smiling over its round, "lucky" belly, it's one of the first things to help put you at ease around Smerigan, the chief operating officer of the Studios. Smerigan says that Zen Buddhism puts things in perspective.

"It relieves the tension when I find myself saying, 'You're getting caught in the drag. All you're thinking about is business and construction,'" he says.

Smerigan's road to Albuquerque Studios started in Los Angeles. After taking nearly

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a year away from work, in search of "another bigger, nicer mountain," Smerigan was approached by one of his partners who'd spoken with an architect from Los Angeles about the New Mexico film incentive program. Smerigan says his colleague asked, "Do you want to do this project? This is really cool."

Cool is important to Smerigan.

"For me, it's all about heart and soul. I think that if you love what you're doing and it's the right thing to do, it's easy to get up in the morning and go to work. When I'm not working and don't have a real direction, that's when it gets hard for me."

It helps to have a charismatic crew. Hariton has been charged with hashing out the details of studio operations and functionality, coincidentally modeling them after Smerigan's work before the two ever met. Now teammates, they banter like athletic cohorts, arguing over who looks more like Brad Pitt (they'll let you be the judge). Hariton says that he wanted to print "Head of Lettuce" and "Head of Cabbage" on their business cards for titles. Who wouldn't enjoy collaborating with a partner of genius and passion, yet the modesty of a leafy green vegetable?

In the 1970s, Smerigan experienced an

epiphany while working at a recording studio in Los Angeles with famed producer and engineer, Andy Johns.

"Every major artist in the world came through," Smerigan says. "It was an incredible time intellectually, politically, and creatively. It made me want to do better, be more, see it bigger. When you see people who you idolize and realize they're human beings just like you, that they just apply themselves to what they want to do—the important part for me was seeing how much they loved what they were doing and it wasn't their job. It was their life. They integrated it into what they became. I was having all those revelations that help you ultimately grow and go in the right direction."

For Smerigan, that direction was the film studio business: building, managing, operating and eventually owning them.

Even with grand business successes, Smerigan has maintained a matter-of-fact approach to daily life and how he affects it.

"I go home at night and know the day is just a day. It's already passed and what the next day is going to be is totally up to me," he says.

Lately, a typical day for Smerigan brings a complexity of tasks and a lot of time on the phone. With most of the details of the design phase resolved, his focus is on budget logistics and personnel issues.

"We took time to find the crew we're hiring for the facility," he says. "And we're working on relationships with the community here and how we fit into the entire landscape of the community because ultimately, that's what we're going to be: part of that landscape."

Initially harboring big-city caution, Smerigan has come to appreciate the hospitality of the Albuquerque population.

"The unique thing about Albuquerque in particular and New Mexico in general for me is, 'No, it's not California.' The people have time for you and they share. They want you to know that you're welcome here. At first I was a little confused, wondering, 'What do they want?' I suddenly realized, that's just the way they are."

His current vision not quite manifested, Smerigan has the glint of imagination in his eyes. As he scans the mesa, he's obviously "seeing it bigger." He points to the future locations of town homes, a park, restaurants, retail, and a coffeehouse, all combining for a town center and creating a campus environment where Smerigan says production crews and the general public will live and mingle. And it's easy to believe him.

—By Sonya Ewan