

iVIVA



M5 Studios (above) partnered with Plural Entertainment to move production of *El capo 2* (opposite), one of Colombia's most popular telenovelas, to Miami. The drama stars Marlon Moreno as a drug trafficker who — with a detective hot on his heels — travels to south Florida to free his wife and daughter from prison.



MIAMI!!

In Spanish and English, the South Florida entertainment community is cheering, "Hooray for Hispanic Hollywood!" as a marked increase in production drives studio expansion in greater Miami. BY LAURA MARTÍNEZ

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEFFREY IRWIN

Late last year, producers at FoxTelecolombia realized they needed to move part of the production of *El capo 2* from Colombia to Miami. The change of location was crucial to the plot of the action series, which is one of Latin America's most popular and costly telenovelas, the serial dramas beloved by Hispanic audiences. The notorious drug trafficker at the heart of the story, Pedro Pablo Jaramillo (Marlon Moreno), had to travel to Miami to accomplish two things: escape the detective on his heels and break his wife and daughter out of prison.

The move was no easy feat — the production had to reschedule shooting more than once due to expected hurricanes. Ultimately, the wait was well worth it. Over fifteen days, a crew of more than 120 worked on land (staging car chases, crashes and shoot-outs), in the air (flying and landing helicopters in downtown Miami) and at sea (navigating some fifteen boats). Thanks to the staff — and infrastructure — of the local M3 Studios, the production was able to secure the needed boats and stunt vehicles as well as plenty of prop weapons.

One day, "we shot 800 rounds of ammunition before noon!" recalls Lyonel Montells, a producer for Miami-based Plural Entertainment, who helped bring *El capo 2* to M3 Studios.

"It was a very challenging project, but [FoxTelecolombia] was more than pleased with our work," adds Raúl Rodríguez, the founder and owner of M3 Studios, who was put into action as stuntman, weapons wrangler and safety coordinator for the duration of the shoot.

El capo 2 is only one in a string of high-profile Spanish-language productions that are flocking to Miami to take advantage of the year-round warm weather, diverse pool of bilingual talent and generous production incentives. One more lure: Florida's status as a right-to-work state, where workers cannot be required to join a union.

Production of *El capo 2* in Miami included car crashes, sea chases, shootouts and helicopters landing in the middle of downtown. Producers also had to contend with unstable weather, as production days were rescheduled more than once due to possible hurricanes.





Telemundo's *Pasión prohibida* (above) is based on a Turkish telenovela set in the 19th century. This production takes place in modern-day Miami, where it's filmed on a daily basis. The network's Florida facility, which boasts more than 160,000 square feet of production space, is home to several popular telenovelas.



"If we didn't have incentives that are competitive with other states, we wouldn't have as much production in south Florida," allows Sandy Lighterman, film and entertainment commissioner of Miami-Dade County. "Of course, it doesn't hurt that we have beautiful weather, beautiful natural light, diverse locations and experienced crews, either."

The best thing about working in Miami, Latin American TV producers like to joke, is that it's very close to the United States. Nicknamed the "Capital of Latin America," Miami is the second-largest U.S. city with a Spanish-speaking majority; sixty-one of every 100 persons in Miami-Dade County are estimated to be of Hispanic origin.

Access to professional bilingual talent has been crucial in establishing Telemundo — a division of NBC Universal — as the U.S. leader in the production of telenovelas. Based in Doral, an industrial-suburban neighborhood northwest of Miami International Airport, Telemundo Studios is the largest filming facility in south Florida. With 160,000 square feet of total space, including 50,000 square feet of stage space over five stages, it is a true telenovela factory.

"We normally produce two or three novelas at a time, but you can see us sometimes working on four," says Joshua Mintz, Telemundo's executive vice-president of scripted programming and general manager of Telemundo Studios. This spring, for example, the studio was in the midst of shooting two productions, *Pasión prohibida* (*Forbidden Passion*) and *Marido en alquiler* (*Husband for Rent*), while in pre-production on two more, *Dama y obrero* (*Lady and the Worker*) and a fourth drama, *La sombra de un pasado* (*Shadow of a Past*).

Each Telemundo telenovela functions with two production units: one at the studios and another on location. Overall, the studio employs between 100 and 120 persons per production.

"This has become a very important factory [of content] for Telemundo," Mintz says of the Miami-based telenovelas, which not only fill Telemundo's entire primetime but are successfully sold worldwide, requiring a complex production schedule. Telenovelas usually comprise some 120 episodes. The network must produce five episodes of each novela every week, each episode runs about forty-five minutes, thirty of which are shot in the studio and the rest on location.

Despite the size of the Miami facility, the production load is such that Telemundo sometime leases additional space elsewhere, including the three stages at Doral's Blue Dolphin Studios, owned by Cristina Saralegui, the talk-show host known as the "Hispanic Oprah." The network was using Blue Dolphin this spring for *Pasión prohibida*, its 8 p.m. telenovela starring Jencarlos Canela and Mónica Spear.





While some Telemundo telenovelas are filmed in Mexico — *El señor de los cielos* and *La patrona*, for example — all postproduction, sound correction and such is done in the network's Miami facility. Even the city's colorful skyscrapers (below) are re-created in a set piece inside the production house.





Venevision Studios is home to a number of popular talk shows, including *Casos de familia* (Family Cases), starring Tere Marín, and *¿Quién tiene la razón?* (Who's Right?, above), hosted by Carmen Iza. In the latter show, couples and families seek to resolve domestic disputes.





Also churning out daily dramas in Miami is Venevision Studios, which occupies approximately 150,000 square feet, consisting of five stages and one backlot, in addition to offices, green rooms, pre-production and post-production areas. This spring, Venevision Studios had wrapped production of its telenovela *Rosario* and was in pre-production for *Cosita Linda* (Pretty Little Thing).

Venevision Productions has produced some of its most successful novelas in Miami, including *Eva Luna*, a 2010 coproduction with Univision starring Blanca Soto and Guy Ecker. According to Peter Tinoco, president and CEO of Venevision Productions, the company produces between 1,200 and 1,500 hours of high-definition programming a year from its Miami facilities. Like Telemundo, it also sells extensively overseas, to markets including Bulgaria, Croatia, Ghana, Israel, Japan, Turkey and many other countries outside Latin America.

Tinoco would not disclose specifics, but says that "our production capacity has increased over the years." The activity is such that Venevision is in the midst of an expansion. Last year it completed construction of a 10,000 square-foot backlot, which was used extensively on *Rosario*, another collaboration with Univision. At press time, the studio was in the final stages of a deal that, according to Tinoco, would dramatically increase production capacity, though he declined to elaborate.

For producers looking to diversify the exterior look of their novelas, the attractions of Miami lie off the lot as well, Tinoco says. "Here you can go from shooting a sexy beach scene to traveling a few minutes across town to produce a scene on a farm — the options seem limitless."

The continued benefit to the local economy also seems limitless. It is estimated that between 2010 and 2012 Miami-based telenovela productions spent approximately \$100 million, compared to \$70 million between 2007 and 2009, according to the Miami-Dade Office of Film and Entertainment, a division of the county Department of Regulatory and Economic Resources.

Still, both Telemundo and Venevision studios produce much more than telenovelas in south Florida. The former produces all of its news and variety shows there, including the super-successful *Caso cerrado* (Case Closed), a court show hosted by Ana María Polo, and *Al rojo vivo* (Red Hot Live), a daily news program anchored by María Celeste Arrarás. Venevision, for its part, generates popular talk shows like *Casos de familia* (Family Cases) and *¿Quién tiene la razón?* (Who's Right?) and the morning variety show *Tu desayuno alegre* (Your Happy Breakfast).

Telenovelas make up a large part of Venevision's production slate, both in and out of the studio. For the love story *Eva Luna*, star Julián Gil (top right) works on set, and on another day, cast and crew take to the sea (near right); the actors (seated from left) are Guy Ecker, Vanessa Villela, Greidy Gil and Julián Gil. For the telenovela *Rosario*, a vine-covered courtyard (middle right) sets a romantic scene.



Univision's *Sábado gigante* (Gigantic Saturday), starring Mario Kreutzberger, a.k.a. Don Francisco, debuted in 1962 in Chile. Production of the current 3-hour show moved to Miami in 1986, where it is filmed in front of a live audience at the city's Doral studios.



Miami's standing as a hub for Latin American television is not entirely new. In fact, since 1986 the city has hosted Univision's *Sábado gigante* (Gigantic Saturday), the longest-running show in the history of television (it debuted in 1962). The variety program airs live from 8 p.m. to 11 p.m. every Saturday from Univision's Doral studios, hosted by popular host Mario Kreutzberger (a.k.a. Don Francisco) and featuring a studio audience.

Over the past few years, the Univision network has increased and improved its Miami facilities, where it now produces all of its entertainment and news shows, including *Despierta América* (Wake Up, America!), *El gordo y la flaca* (The Scoop and the Skinny), *Mira quién baila* (Look Who's Dancing), *Sal y pimienta* (Salt and Pepper), *Al punto* (To the Point), *Primer impacto* (First Impact), *Aquí y ahora* (Here and Now) and the popular beauty pageant *Nuestra belleza latina* (Our Latin Beauty), a talent competition searching for Univision's next TV personality.

Overall, says Luis Fernández, Univision's president of entertainment and studio president, the network produces more than 10,000 hours of original programming annually, which represents about half its total programming (the other half being its primetime telenovelas, which it imports from programming partner Grupo Televisa in Mexico).

Despite the absence of telenovela production at its Miami location, Univision is still expanding its facilities: two new stages opened late last year, and a 150,000 square-foot facility is being built in Doral to house Univision News and its new joint venture with ABC News, Fusion.

"A few years ago, we had to lease other studios, including Greenwich in North Miami or M3 Studios," Fernández recalls. "But now we're pretty much producing everything at home, with very few exceptions, like the music shows we do in bigger venues like the American Airlines Arena [in downtown Miami]."

A major impetus for all this activity is the tax credits and incentives offered to film and television producers by the state and local governments. A state program that began in 2010 and extends through 2016 grants producers a tax rebate equivalent to between 20 percent and 30 percent of their expenditures. To qualify, 60 percent of cast and crew must be Florida residents. There's more. The city of Miami offers a production incentive based on

hotel usage. Miami-Dade County does not charge location fees for buildings and facilities (they do charge, however, for parks), the county also maintains an internet-based list of production-friendly hotels and helps producers scout for locations and talent.

These incentives have been responsible for the county's TV production boom, says commissioner Lighterman, who estimates that "in the past five years we have increased 400 percent the amount of TV shows shot here." Those include English-language primetime entertainment series like Starz's *Magic City*, A&E's *The Glades* and USA's *Burn Notice* and *Graceland*, which is set in southern California but has been shooting in Fort Lauderdale.

But Spanish-language productions are leading the way. In addition to the daily activity coming from Telemundo, Venevision and Univision, independent studios like M3 are seeing their own boom.

M3 Studios, which facilitated the Miami shoot for *El capo 2*, has grown over the years to comprise 122,000 square feet and host up to seven productions simultaneously. Among its recent clients has been Nickelodeon Latin America's 11-11. *En mi cuadra nada cuadra*, a seventy-five-episode teen telenovela about a fourteen-year-old whose family moves into the mysterious Building 11-11, where he wakes up as a twenty-year-old version of himself. The novela has been shot on set and on location around Miami, produced in Spanish and customized to Portuguese for Nickelodeon Brazil.

"People love shooting here," says M3's Raul Rodriguez, a Miami native. "You have this incredibly diverse talent and can do a lot of things for Latin America." Besides, he says, "producing outside the U.S. is no longer as cost-effective as it used to be."

Of course, Miami's cost-effectiveness is due in part to Florida's right-to-work status: unions cannot require employee membership or payment of union dues as a condition of employment. This is not necessarily good for workers — critics say that in "right-to-work-for-less states," as they call them, workers receive lower wages and there is reduced enforcement of health and safety conditions — but it has proved a plus for many producers.

"A lot of people like to shoot here because you can negotiate with the talent," says Plural Entertainment's Lionel Montells. "For years, there had been stories about how Miami production was finally going to take off, but they would get the headlines and nothing else. Today we are seeing a real boom." ☐



Among Univision's popular offerings are (above, clockwise from top left) *Mira quién baila*, a Spanish-language version of *Dancing with the Stars*; *Nuestra Belleza Latina*, a beauty pageant in which young women compete for the chance to become an on-air personality; and *Primer Impacto*, a Spanish-language news program with principal anchors Fredrika Silva Cordero and Maricela Regalado.