

# ( BIZZ BUZZ )

What Everyone's Talking About Around the Water Cooler

## Lights, Camera, Fort Worth!

Cowtown's drawing more television and film projects despite Texas' lack of competitive incentives for the industry.

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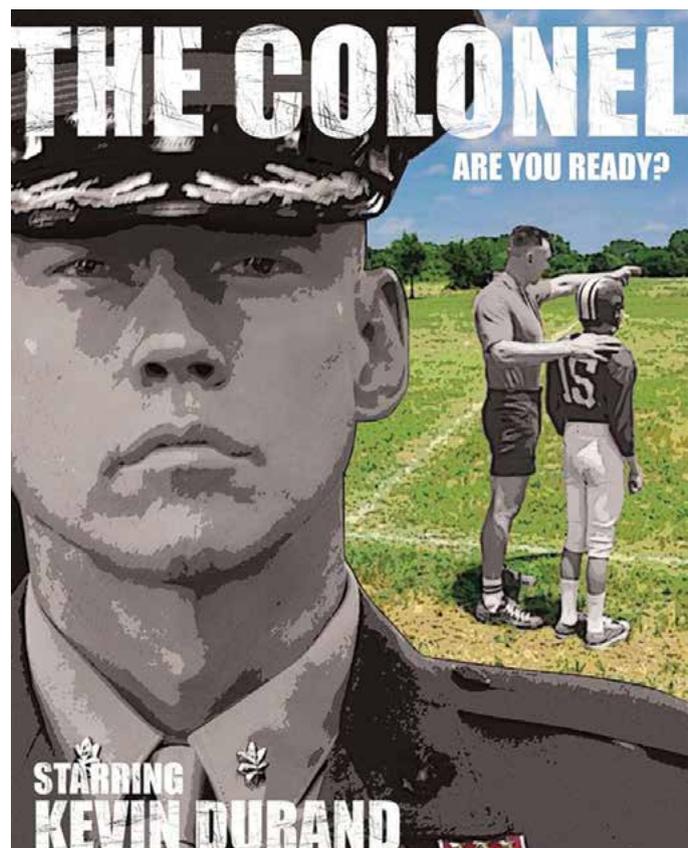
**T**he buzz was evident among alumni in the Fort Worth Country Day School Scott Theater a few weeks ago as the filmmaker and alumnus Tim Williams prepared to show a short feature called "The Colonel," based on the story of the '60s-'70s-era Country Day Coach Ralph Rosacker. Williams, who signed the "X-Men Origins: Wolverine" and "Fruitvale Station" actor Kevin Durand to play the character based on Rosacker and shot the short in Fort Worth, wants to produce a full-length feature on the coach. And he's looking for investors. "I hope I get to do it," Williams told the crowd.

Williams, a 30-year filmmaker whose credits include work as a set dresser for the Tom Cruise-anchored "Born on the Fourth of July," moved to Dallas several years ago from Los Angeles, drawn by the region's authenticity and numerous backdrops. "There are so many great backdrops," Williams says. "You can make your own backlot."

He's not alone. The area's TV and film industry continues to grow. Desert Wind Films, another Los Angeles company, recently moved to Fort Worth's Near Southside and is raising money for television and film projects. The company, which reports it sold 100,000 copies of its faith-based "Brother's Keeper" film in Wal-



Actor Kevin Durand, known for his turn as a cop in "Fruitvale Station," on the Fort Worth set of "The Colonel."





Mart and Target stores during the fourth quarter last year, is raising \$1.4 million for its next project – another faith-based film called “A Broken Bridge.” Executives Steven Camp and Josh Mills – Mills was born in Fort Worth and began his career at NBC 5 in the city – say they’ve raised more than \$300,000 so far for “A Broken Bridge.”

Their draw to Fort Worth: Variety of locations, film-friendly local governments, low costs, and community support for the arts, including the recently formed Fort Worth Film Commission, Camp and Mills say. The drawback, they say: Low financial incentives granted by the state.

“We’re here to stay,” Mills says. “It would be nice if there was a little better incentive for organizations like us that are making the commitment to Fort Worth.” Georgia, for one, has a 30 percent tax credit on eligible expenses and has become a hub for TV and film; Texas has a multi-tiered incentive that ranges between 5 and 20 percent depending on spending and adds 2.5 percent if the production company is using an underutilized or economically distressed location.

No statistics exist for how large the local TV and film industry is or what it contributes to the economy. But the Fort Worth Film Commission, part of the Fort Worth Convention & Visitors Bureau, is assembling the pieces of the picture. The commission’s job is to facilitate projects, including assisting in obtaining public permits. It will also help serve as the industry’s voice.

Jessica Christopherson, the commissioner, estimated in October that the commission had helped 70 projects, including PSAs and commercials, in its first year. Christopherson estimated double that number have inquired about Fort Worth, with country roads and ranch and western-styled homes being the two most requested lo-

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– North Texas filmmaker Tim Williams

cations. The Film Commission also is putting together a local on-line production directory that will include everything from crew to writers, producers, directors, makeup and camera.

At the same time, the commission is collecting information on economic impact, such as room nights and local spending, Christopherson said. The data will help the industry make its case that it contributes economically.

A number of factors are combining to make North Texas an attractive market for TV and film, including Dallas/Fort Worth Airport, local talent, weather, business-friendly environment, interesting architecture, and a variety of “looks,” Christopherson said. “All these things add up,” she said. “There’s a lot of creativity happening in Fort Worth.”

Williams estimates he spent about \$50,000 on the low-budget short, raising it from private equity investors and kicking in personal funds.

He shot much of the film on the grounds of Edwards Ranch, which mimicked the wide-open field Rosacker used to coach football. The Fort Worth legend Rosacker, a World War II and Korean Conflict veteran, found himself at Country Day and ultimately shaped a generation of students.

The short’s executive producers – a lineup of Fort Worth blue bloods – included Craig Kelly, Peter Courtney, Marshall Williams, Mary Williams, Dee Kelly Jr., George M. Young Jr., Kelly Ryan, Scott Nowlin, and John H. Williams. There is a “distinct possibility” some or all of that group, almost all of whom attended Country Day, will participate in the full feature, Williams says.

Fifty children were cast as students, and the shoot took place over three days. Another 150 people, including parents of the students, served in the crew. Durand and several other members of the production stayed at the Omni Hotel Fort Worth downtown. Williams, who wants to shoot the full feature in Fort Worth, is now trying to raise \$5 million for the full feature, paring the budget in half from the original \$10 million in the last few months.

Durand agreed to play the Colonel in the short only if he got the role in the full feature, Williams said. “He’s got the charisma,” Williams says. “While the Colonel is a tough guy, he’s also a big-hearted, big-caring person.”

TV and film projects – no matter how good they sound – carry risks for accredited investors. Desert Wind had a strong box office gross from sales of the award-winning “Brother’s Keeper,” then estimates the fourth-quarter DVD release snared \$1 million. But that money was tied up in the subsequent bankruptcy of the distributor, Camp and Mills say.

“We were money-good,” Mills says. “We were ready to start paying investors when they went bankrupt.” **FWinc**