

Interviewee: Rick Ferguson

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Abstract:

Daniel Alt interviews Rick Ferguson who discusses the Houston Film Commission, the film industry in Houston, and some of the films that have been shot in the city. Ferguson explains the economics of the film industry in Texas, including the Texas Moving Image Industry Incentive Program, which currently offers filmmakers an incentive rate of 5-20% plus a grant for filming within the state. This includes a mention of the hotel-motel tax, or Hotel Occupancy Tax, which funds this program.

Ferguson also discusses how flexible the city of Houston's appearance is, describing how it has "stood-in" for various cities during productions such as St. Louis, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and even Switzerland. He also details the manner in which cities currently pitch their locales to prospective filmmakers. The history of soundstages in Houston is also briefly discussed. Ferguson also gives a comprehensive history of films shot in the city, dating back to *Wings* which was released in 1927.

DA: Hi, this is Daniel Alt with the University of Houston's oral history project interviewing Rick Ferguson, executive director of the Houston Film Commission. Thank you for taking the time for meeting with me today, sir.

RF: Absolutely, my pleasure.

DA: As we were discussing, the project is "Houston on Film," whether in-story or not and I wanted to know, primarily, I want to find landmarks where the city is identifiable.

RF: Okay.

DA: Or at least would be identifiable to someone who wouldn't know the city well, if not necessarily a general audience member.

RF: Well, there's certainly a lot of examples of that but, again, that would be only recognizable by people outside the city of Houston if the storyline was actually set in Houston. Certainly the ratio is probably about 15% of the projects that have been shot here are actually Houston-specific and the others are all where we are standing in for someone else.

DA: I guess, to narrow the scope of the project a little more, I'm also looking for fiction features. That excludes documentaries and a lot of the reality television shows that have been shot.

RF: Understood. Well, the records have been kept since 1992. There was certainly a lot of production prior to that, though it was admittedly few and far between. The film commission was actually started in 1987 as a secondary division of the Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau. After there was that kind of concentration on the film industry, then the industry really began to grow significantly with a lot more production being not only brought into Houston but

also developed and produced here in Houston. I'm sorry, were you beginning to ask me something?

DA: No, I'm listening with rapt attention.

RF: This is going to be sort of a free-flowing conversation by association, but projects like *Jason's Lyric*, which was a really wonderful film that was shot here, a lot of it in the Fourth and Fifth Wards. It was sort of an urban retelling of *Romero and Juliet*. One of the very first projects that Jada Pinkett ever did, and it was Houston-specific and there were certainly a lot of examples of areas of Houston that would be recognizable if you were from Houston. There's *The Chase*, which we stood in for Washington, D.C., which is actually a television- I'm sorry, no, that was a feature film and it was narrative. I think the next one that I remember that's Houston-specific is *Reality Bites* and *Reality Bites*, a lot of it was shot in downtown Houston, which had Tranquility Park, which had Shell Plaza, the rooftop of Shell Plaza, some apartments over off of Allen Parkway, which is where the main characters lived communally. There's just a lot of examples, obviously *Apollo 13* was Houston-specific. Clear Lake area, at that point not considered the city of Houston, as it is now. There was a television miniseries called *Woman of Independent Means*, which was not Houston-specific at all, but the main character was a woman of means who travelled all over the world. So, Houston, we stood in for St. Louis, New York, Chicago, Switzerland; and that's not an easy task in Houston to pull off Switzerland.

DA: So, when you say "stand-in," is the cityscape being seen?

RF: Yeah. Yes, exactly.

DA: Okay.

RF: For example, her home was supposed to be in St. Louis and there's a really beautiful neighborhood called "Courtlandt Place," which is adjacent to the Montrose area where the houses were built at the turn of the century. So, that was used for her home, her neighborhood, though part of it was supposed to be in St. Louis and part of it was supposed to be in Chicago. There's also a house that use to belong to Rice University which is on Main Street at Sunset, and that home, the exterior of it, the backyard, that actually was supposed to be Switzerland. There are a lot of different locations Houston stood-in for.

DA: As far as I know, there are no movie studios in Houston.

RF: Yeah, there's Houston Studios, which is downtown.

DA: And it's a film production studio?

RF: No, it's a soundstage, it's not a- according to what terminology you're using. If you mean a studio as in a producing entity, no. It's a soundstage. There was- actually, at one point, there were two soundstages. The other one was VT-2 but, subsequently, that has closed. So, if it's a major motion picture where they need studio facility or soundstage facility, at this point we are usually turning to Warehouse Base.

DA: Right. Is that where the soundstage is in the Warehouse Base?

RF: Houston Studios is in the Warehouse District, yes, but it wasn't built from the ground-up as a studio facility or a soundstage. But there are certainly warehouses that are available that have been used in the past, the prerequisites being that it need to be anywhere from 25-30,000 square feet. It needs to have electricity, plumbing, it needs to be soundproof, obviously, and it needs to have at least a 30-foot ceiling to the grid and without support beams. So, wide-open space on the interior.

DA: Wow. Okay, that's good. What would you say is probably the earliest on-record that we have of the city being on film?

RF: There were certainly several that were done in the- This predates me, so I'm not speaking on a firsthand basis.

DA: It predates the Film Commission, too.

RF: By a longshot. There were certainly projects that were shot in the twenties, thirties, forties.

DA: Silent film days.

RF: Fifties. *Wings* being the best example, which is example by urban legend, and also a thing called *Flight*, I believe, which was about one of the first flights of a particular kind of aircraft.

I'm sorry, I can't remember what kind of aircraft that was.

DA: That's fine.

RF: Obviously, there's the old standards which are like *Brewster McCloud*, *Hellfighters*, those films that date back to when there wasn't a film infrastructure here. They came here purely to use Houston as a location and they had to bring everything with them. Which, for a film community, is certainly a major concern is that if you- and I'm switching to Film Commission 101, 2015.

DA: Please.

RF: The most important thing is that- Well, that's not true, things have changed considerably. The most important thing is that if you have a financial incentive, which I am assuming you are aware of the phenomena of film incentives, which are not only something that is domestic, but is something that is international. Where if you come into a state or you come into a country, there's an incentive to where you get part of what you've spent back at the end of production.

DA: Right.

RF: Since the advent of that phenomena, which was about the mid-90s, the criteria has really changed as to what location that production is looking for. It's that incentive component that is number one on the agenda and then, secondarily, it is crew base and support services because having those readily available equates to a cost-savings for the production. If that production has to bring in everybody and everything, that increases the cost of their budget considerably. The crew component of the support services, why that increases the budget and the cost is that when you bring people in, you have to pay them a per diem, you have to house them, you have to have a car for them. All of those things are something that are added to the bottom line and if you have that crew base already here, then you are not having to incur those costs by hiring locally. You are just paying their salaries.

DA: Right. So, this is also part of the services offered by the Film Commission?

RF: In trying to put together the package, yes, that's what we're here for is: first, to tout our incentive program, which is a state incentive program. The fate of that program is in the hand of the legislators in Austin right now since the legislative session is in-session. It's locations; to approve that we have the locations, the aesthetics that are necessary for that particular project and then once it's determined that the financial aspect of it works, the aesthetics work, and then the next step is to put them with local crew, local support services, and try to encourage them to hire or contract as many locals as possible since we are, in many ways, trying to help contribute to the economic engine for the city of Houston and Harris County, so we want them to hire as many people as they conceivably can in Houston. It's a little bit of a schizophrenic situation in that we certainly want them to hire everyone locally, to go to local vendors, but at the same time

we are funded by the hotel-motel tax. So, there's an element of we also want people to come in and stay in hotels. So, it's a balancing act, we want it to be equitable on both sides.

DA: That's so interesting how it's so directly tied to the tax code.

RF: Sure it is. Didn't use to be, but it certainly is now.

DA: It is now?

RF: Yes.

DA: Wow.

RF: With the incentive programs that are offered, actually I just got back from Los Angeles on Sunday night and there's a thing that the Association of Film Commissions International puts on every year and it's called "Location Expo" and it's where there's a- I think the number is now 338 film commissions globally. So, it's an interesting situation I have- one, of 338 jobs on the entire planet, which is a little bizarre. It's like a convention, it's like a conference; convention center where you put up a booth and you stand in a booth and you tout the benefits of filming in your area and certainly for years and years, you were there selling the look of your community and your credits, the film history of what had been produced in your area and now there's one thing and one thing only and that is the tax credit or the rebate. That's the main thing people want to talk about.

DA: Is that specific to the Houston Film Commission, this state?

RF: No, that's everybody.

DA: Okay, it's everyone.

RF: When you look at these booths that have been put together- where, before, it was location photos and touting all the things that you had available in your area. Now, it is a big sign that

says what your incentive program is, whether it's 20% or 25% or 30% or whatever. So, it's an entirely different ballgame. And the field changes every single year. Because the equation changes, because it is a political situation, so in a lot of states whenever there is a new governor or there's a sweep in the legislators whether it's partisan or bipartisan or whatever, there's always a possibility that you could lose what you have or there's the possibility that you can gain something.

DA: It's in flux.

RF: So, it's a continuously vacillating landscape of what the competitive set is. At this point, the two most prominent production centers in the United States are Louisiana and Georgia because they offer 30% plus tax credit for production. Next in line would be New Mexico. From that description, you realize that we have bookends on either side of us that actually have a more lucrative incentive program than we do. "We" meaning the state of Texas, not Houston alone. But Louisiana's tax incentive is in question right now during their legislative session so that may be changing. At the risk of being redundant, it's continuously changing-

DA: In flux.

RF: Absolutely, totally, every year. One- I guess it's according to your perspective- one problem that the state of Texas has is that our legislatures only meet every two years, where most states meet every year. So, the downside of that, if there's any changes, hopefully changes for the better, we have to wait two years. Most states can make a change within twelve months. The beneficial part of that for the state of Texas is if we have a good program, then we know that that's good for two years and that's not going to change. That also is a, sort of a vacillating

situation. This is not at all, I don't think, what we're supposed to be talking about. I sort of steered us in a whole different direction.

DA: No, but it's fascinating, just the mechanics of it, you know? We had an election last year so we have a new governor this year. Have you just started a new- Is it a fresh two years that you've just begun?

RF: No. The legislative session just began in January.

DA: Right.

RF: I guess you could say, in some ways, it's fresh.

DA: Or is the outcome going-

RF: But we won't know what the outcome will be until sometime in August, the latter part of July.

DA: But you said it's every two years, though.

RF: It is, but whatever legislators institute during this legislative session will not go into effect until the end of July 2015. So, at this point, we don't know what we have to work with for the balance of 2015 and 16 and part of 17 until this legislative session is over with.

DA: Oh, I see.

RF: The good thing about the new governor is he did come in and we were all sort of holding our breath to see whether he was going to be supportive of the industry and thankfully he has come in almost immediately being supportive because he did put a very large part of the incentive program in his request for appropriations for his budget. So, that was a good step in the right direction.

DA: That's good.

RF: Yes.

DA: That's good for the film commission.

RF: Well, it's good for the film industry.

DA: And Houston. Well, and Texas.

RF: Well, the entire state of Texas, right.

DA: Wow, okay. What would you say is the most famous film that has been shot in Houston or features Houston?

RF: The one that has gotten the most- Well, I was going to say, actually, up until this year the one that has gotten the most recognition is certainly *Terms of Endearment* because it was an Academy Award-winning film. Certainly was very, very well-received not only financially, but also critically and Aurora Greenway is a character that I think most everybody will remember and remembers today. It's interesting that even today, occasionally, we will get calls that have been transferred to us from the tourist visitor information center or people are wanting to know where the *Terms of Endearment* house is so they can drive by and take photographs. *Apollo 13* is certainly a very iconic film that ties-in with many aspects of Houston, obviously the space program being the main one. I mentioned *Reality Bites*, that is a film that is certainly extremely popular and still is something of a cult classic to a specific age group and that age group is getting older now. But it really is, according to who you're talking with and how old they were when *Reality Bites* came out because if you were a young person during that time period, it's pretty much guaranteed on your list. And *Rushmore*, which is also a cult classic and what adds to its appeal and is important is the fact that Wes Anderson is a Houstonian and chose to bring his project, his very first major studio project, *Bottle Rocket*, which was his first film was actually

shot in Dallas. But that was an independent project, but his first studio film, being *Rushmore* and certainly it's not that old but it's still considered a classic.

DA: Yeah, it is and it will be, definitely.

RF: Yeah, exactly.

DA: Recently, obviously, *Boyhood*.

RF: Well, that's what I was getting ready to say, yes. That's why I said about *Terms of Endearment* up until this year. Certainly *Boyhood* has gotten a tremendous amount of attention and Rick has been very good about speaking very freely about Houston and speaking about Houston very fondly because it plays an important part in his childhood. As a city, we've certainly been able to be a part of that tide that was so positive about Rick and also about the film itself, *Boyhood*.

DA: He had been coming here over the years making that film.

RF: Twelve, to be exact.

DA: Was it every year that he would shoot in Houston?

RF: No, no. It was about the first five years that were shot in Houston, maybe six. The rest of it was shot in Austin.

DA: It was a very small production as I understand it.

RF: Very. Well, small in comparison to a lot. I mean, there was certainly a substantial number of people involved. The crew was 15, 25, something like that, which varied from year to year. I'm assuming that had something to do with the budget each year. It's certainly something we can be extremely proud of and I think that *Boyhood* will be around for a very long time.

DA: Have we ever seen those landmarks in the film, from *Boyhood*, the Hermann Park, Miller Outdoor Theater, have they been featured?

RF: Miller Outdoor Theater has been featured in a lot of different films. There's a wonderful Australian film that was shot here a couple years ago which was called *Mao's Last Dancer*, which was about the Chinese ballet dancer that was doing a performance here and then defected from China to the United States during his tenure with the Chinese ballet. I don't know if you're even familiar with that film, but it's one you should take a look at because it's really interesting.

DA: *Mao's Last Dancer*?

RF: *Mao's Last Dancer*. A very famous case when he did defect to the United States but Miller Outdoor Theater played a huge part in it as did the Wortham Theater. And the Wortham Theater was certainly a very important part all the way back to *Robocop 2*. That's when it was pretty new. The Wortham Theater had only been standing for a couple of years when *Robocop 2* decided to blow it up.

DA: I still have my homework to do as far as the screens of the films go. I've seen a fair amount, but a lot of these films are, obviously, a little older and I have to go into the archives.

RF: Well, there are certainly several really good films that were shot here and unfortunately some of those were not Houston-specific. There's another cult film called *Simple Men* that was shot here in the late 80s, early 90s, I can't remember specifically.

DA: Is that Hal Hartley?

RF: It is.

DA: How do I even know that?

RF: I'm very impressed that you know that, very good.

DA: Yeah, he's an independent film icon. But I didn't know that was shot here, that's good.

RF: Yeah, it was all shot here. But it was shot Houston for New Jersey.

DA: Okay, wow.

RF: It's a really interesting film. Obviously, you're familiar with some of Hal's work.

DA: One of the first film classes I took in high school, we saw- I can't remember the title- but it featured Adrienne- Shelley was her name- who was actually murdered. She made this film, *Waitress*. She was murdered in her apartment in New York City back in 2006 or 7. She was a collaborator of his, and she had done her own film, *Waitress*, with Keri Russell.

RF: Oh, I know what you're talking about. Yes, I do know what you're talking about. She was not in *Simple Men*.

DA: Okay.

RF: It was predominantly- and I'm getting terrible with names at my old age- four of Hal's sort of staple actors. Two women, two men and I can't remember any of their names. Predominantly New York actors, which most of the actors he populates his films with are New York actors. Collectively and individually, they went on to some relatively promising careers. The one girl from- the Parisian actress- I have not heard of her in a long time, but the other three certainly have had life after *Simple Men* in independent features and also television.

DA: That's good.

RF: Especially as all actors- what's the name of the television series that's been on NBC forever? *SVU*. They all, eventually, you see them as a character on *SVU*.

DA: Familiar faces pop up on those shows.

RF: Exactly. Sequel to *Evening Star*- I mean, sequel to *Terms of Endearment*.

DA: *Evening Star* being the sequel to that.

RF: Though, it didn't do nearly as well at the box office nor critically, it still is sort of one of the jewels in the Houston filmmaking crown because it was Shirley MacLaine and that character have become so iconic.

DA: Okay, I need to see all these films. One more I wanted to ask you about is *The Tree of Life*. Were you in contact with-?

RF: Yeah. I worked with Terry for about a month, month and a half, something like that. Once again, from a Film Commission standpoint, Terry's a wonderful person and a really nice guy and obviously brilliant, but he is a very different kind of filmmaker. He wants the day to sort of unfold organically which, in film, you can't really unfold organically because plans have to be made.

DA: Right, because of the way that you're-

RF: So, each day we had to have four or five different options that were totally cleared and orchestrated so if Terry woke up and then, "I think I want to go here," we had to make sure that was one of the options that had already been cleared and all the arrangements had been made. There's a lot of different choices for him during the day, which can kind of make you crazy.

DA: Right, from a producer standpoint.

RF: Right, exactly. Certainly Terry has a very dedicated group of people that he works with continuously and they know his style. He is certainly very gracious, which compensates for some days being extremely difficult.

DA: That's good, that's great. Is he able to do that because he has that renown, you would say?

RF: It certainly doesn't hurt.

DA: Right, because just of all the difficult logistics of it.

RF: It also has to be able to banter around Penn's name and-

DA: Brad Pitt.

RF: Brad Pitt. That helps to open some doors.

DA: That's good. This is all educational for me, for this project, and also in the long-term for myself. So, this is good.

RF: Well, very good, great.

DA: All right, I guess we'll conclude it. I think that you gave me enough to work with and reflect on, and leads to follow-up and the texts as well.

RF: Well, I'm going to also make some other suggestions for you.

DA: Sure.

RF: Let's see here... Not all of these, actually, are feature films. There's a really interesting television movie-of-the-week called *Hope* that was done here that was Goldie Hawn's directorial debut. She wasn't in it. It was shot in Houston, in Fort Bend County and it was actually very, very well-done and very well-received critically. And then there's a really weird film called *The Locusts* that Steven Spielberg produced that was also shot in the nineties, and his wife, whose name I can't remember now, Kate Capshaw and their daughter was in it. It was Vince Vaughn's second feature, I believe, even though his first feature had not been released yet, which was the one that took place in Las Vegas.

DA: *Swingers*.

RF: *Swingers*, right. So, he had not made it big yet when *The Locusts* was shot here. What's her name? Ashley Judd, it was of her first roles, too; very strange, but worth taking a look at.

DA: This film, *Locusts*, are you just recommending it from, like, a story, like a film standpoint or do you think it possibly has some- at least, if I can get an image or a still that features the city and I can say "That's this building."

RF: Okay, that's not it. That's not the one I'm- I'm making these suggestions for you as a potential filmmaker.

DA: Oh, sure! Absolutely, I'm always interested in these strange, interesting stories.

RF: It's pretty weird. Okay, so to be able to get stills from... We got plenty of stills if you want me to-

DA: Do you?

RF: Yeah. It'll take me a while to put some together but I'll probably email them to you, if you'd like.

DA: That would be-

RF: But it has to be feature films...

DA: If you have a good still that's not a feature fiction film but that's a good image nonetheless, I think that that would be very beneficial.

RF: Most of what we have are- Actually, there are some on our website. Have you looked on our website?

DA: You have some featured on the website?

RF: Yeah.

DA: Okay. That'll work. Taken from the movies?

RF: Yeah and there's also clips of a lot of different films that were shot in Houston that are on our- There's a link to YouTube which has a whole collection of scenes from films that were shot here as well, especially commercials. There's a lot of commercials on there.

DA: That's good, that's great. That's exactly what I need from a visual standpoint for the project.

RF: That's a commercial, that's a commercial, commercial, commercial, TV show, TV show, this from a film called- I can't remember what that's called. This is from *Rushmore*, this is from *Robocop*, *Robocop*, *Mao's Last Dancer*, this is from *Pearl Harbor*, this is from a film called *Puncture*, this is from *Evening Star*, this is- what was this called? After twenty some-odd years, they all start running together. What is this called? Well... What the hell was this called? Beats me.

DA: If it's featured on the website, I'm sure I can find it.

RF: It is. But if you'd like, I can send you this link if you wanna pull some of these.

DA: Sure. A lot of them are not just stills but production shots.

RF: Yes. If you want, this a production- most of these are production shots. They're called "production stills." What's your email address?

DA: [Personal email address.]

RF: Okay. There you go.

DA: This is going to help my project, honestly.

RF: Well, good, very good.

DA: Thank you so much for talking to me.

RF: Absolutely.

DA: I'm going to get in contact with you about this.

RF: And you're also going to return this.

DA: I'm going to return it. That's right. Last one. All right, sir. Thank you very much.

End of Interview

