

## Stepping Out

### On the Cutting Edge: Manhattan Beach visual effects studio mixes business with art

By Michael Hixon

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Hollywood set its sights on the beach cities when Raleigh Studios opened eight years ago. Besides being the home for many television shows for David E. Kelley Productions, smaller entertainment businesses have grown over the years.

Blue Room Visual FX, the only state-of-the-art high-definition post and visual effects studio in the South Bay, is one of those businesses. Manhattan Beach resident Francis Mohajerin and John Harris relocated their editing/DVD studio, Directorsite, from Santa Monica to Raleigh Studios in 1999. Since then, it has evolved into a high-definition post-production facility called Blue Room. The company provides visual effects and finishing services for television shows like "Boston Legal," which is filmed in Manhattan Beach, and to motion picture and television producers and distributors as well as advertising agencies.



Manhattan Beach artist Rita Slotteroy and Blue Room Visual FX partners Francis Mohajerin, John Harris and David Mueller are pictured at the opening of her art exhibit at Blue Room, located at Raleigh Studios in Manhattan Beach. (photo by Chris Miller)

Blue Room also recently expanded into the art world with the first solo United States exhibit, "Nordic Impressions," by Norwegian artist and Manhattan Beach resident Rita Slotteroy. The exhibit is being displayed in the Blue Room offices on the studio lot, and can be seen by appointment only. Slotteroy's work will be exhibited through June 15. Blue Room's owners plan to exhibit art every four to six months. Slotteroy teaches ceramics and painting at the Manhattan Beach Creative Arts Center and the Palos Verdes Art Center.

"The bottom line is we hope it's a draw for art directors, creative directors from agencies and producers who would appreciate young emerging artists," said Blue Room partner David Mueller. "We're looking at artists who are up and coming, have something to say and their art has been acknowledged in some way. I don't know of any post house that does that. Certainly they have art on the walls but the idea of making it more like a gallery space where people can come in and look, that'll be something new."

About a year ago, Blue Room expanded to handle visual effects with state-of-the-art software and staff technical expertise.

"When we were doing production work in Santa Monica and they were building the lot - Frances lives in Manhattan Beach and I lived in Westchester - we thought it would be nice to work closer to home," Harris said.

He added, "It feels very un-Hollywood, people say. There's a lower key atmosphere. The weather is nice. We all love working in Manhattan Beach. We know there's a lot of people who live in the South

Bay who feel the same way who work in the industry who would rather stay down here than make the trek up the 405 anytime of the day basically."

Mohajerin said that Raleigh Studios was a "ghost town" when they first moved there but the last five years "there's been no space for anyone." As most television shows and films move from the standard 35 mm film to high-definition tape and video in the future, Mohajerin feels Hollywood will be looking to companies like Blue Room. It is currently in transition to offer Blue-Ray and high definition-DVD authoring.

"Most of our clients are still from Hollywood and Santa Monica but we're starting to do a lot more on the lot with the television shows," Mohajerin said. "Some of our clients are next to huge post houses but they chose to come here because they want to deal with smaller companies. That is why we are in Manhattan Beach. It's the feeling, a different type of lifestyle, a different type of working environment than in Hollywood."

Harris said that Blue Room is also expanding its relationship with independent filmmakers and local college filmmakers by offering DVD services.

"We're interested in working with not just studio-level clients but independent filmmakers and creative people and artists that we can provide editorial services and digital tech services and things to help them finish their project," Harris said. "So we're definitely interested in working with independent producers, directors. We do a lot of work with USC, AFI and also with UCLA. A lot of the student films that come out of there we've created their DVDs for them, do some remastering for them."

Raleigh Studios has gone through a few owners after Shamrock Holdings of California Inc., a private investment company for the Roy E. Disney family, began developing the more than 22 acres of TRW property. Shamrock reportedly sold the studios for more than \$100 million to Oaktree Capital Management Co., a firm involved in inefficient markets and alternative investments, several years ago. It was reported in the Los Angeles Business Journal in March that Oaktree was on the verge of selling the studios to The Carlyle Group, one of the largest private investment firms in the world, according to the publication, for more than \$155 million. Throughout the studio's history, Raleigh Studios has managed the property and reportedly will continue to do so after the sale is finalized. Hit shows "Boston Legal," "CSI: Miami" and "Medium" continue to film there while blockbuster films like "Pirates of the Caribbean," among many others, were filmed, in part, at the studios.

"There's a lot of production down here that people don't realize," Mueller said. "Most people when they come down here say they had no idea that this was here, no idea all these shows were being shot down here. Not only the television shows but occasionally there's a feature that's being shot here or commercials. It's sort of a little secret in Manhattan Beach that there's this unbelievable production hub."

Harris added, "Up until this point, Raleigh's been here, we've been here, but we've actually expanded our services. You have this great production area but you don't have post to support it. Now we have the postproduction to support the tech production that's been coming down here so it doesn't have to leave the South Bay. It can stay here in Manhattan Beach and not just when the production's done shooting but also all the people who are coming here do the work, the producers, the directors, people who have to supervise it."

"Nordic Impressions" will be on view by appointment only through June 15 on weekdays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. The Blue Room is located at the studio's lot at 1600 Rosecrans Ave. in Manhattan Beach.

For more information, call Mueller at (310) 727-2600 or visit [www.blueroomfx.com](http://www.blueroomfx.com).