



OU Film and Media Studies alumni return to the Sooner State and launch a production studio inside a former convention center.

The call to California is hard not to heed. With its ample opportunities for hopeful artists, writers and actors, millions of creatives have long headed to the West Coast in search of inspiration, connections and the fulfillment of dreams.

Oklahomans Matt Payne and Rachel Cannon embarked on this familiar rite of passage after college. The two longtime friends met in a screenwriting class at the University of Oklahoma in the late 1990s. Even then they possessed the penchant for recognizing opportunities. When Oscar-winning film producer and Oklahoma Hall of Famer Gray Fredrickson returned home to set up an office in Oklahoma City, Payne and Cannon asked for unpaid internships before he had finished unpacking. They saw a way to complement the creative aspect of their studies with the business side of the industry.



Rachel Cannon and Matt Payne, co-chief executive officers of Prairie Surf Media, take questions during a press conference at the groundbreaking ceremony of their multi-media production company in April.

After earning their degrees in film and media studies, both ended up heading west to cast their nets—Payne as a screenwriter and Cannon as an actress.

During his 15 years in Los Angeles, Payne worked on such episodic television shows as *Vegas*, *Defenders* and *Memphis Beat*, as well as being on the production team for *24* and *Without a Trace*. He returned to Oklahoma in 2015.

“Although I had been writing network procedural shows for years, I got stuck in this fixed writing circle of getting a job and then having the show I was working on get canceled,” Payne says. “The creative environment in Oklahoma had changed while I was gone. There was a lot of energy and, rather than seeing it as a place I had to leave, I decided I could tell stories from anywhere and make things happen here.”

So, Payne focused his creative energy on travel writing, editing and photography. He has also produced and directed

programs for Oklahoma City television stations, including documentaries for the OETA Foundation.

Cannon has more than 80 network television credits from her 20 years in the film industry, most recently as Diedre, a cast regular on *Fresh Off the Boat*. She also has appeared in *Mad Men*, *Big Bang Theory* and *Two and a Half Men*. Two years ago, she felt the pull of her native state after having a child and wanted to be closer to family. She bought a house online, moved her family and, for the past two years, has made Oklahoma her home base.

“At the time I came home, I was still doing *Fresh Off the Boat* and going back and forth to LA,” she says. “I also began to notice that projects coming across my desk were being shot in locations like Atlanta, New Mexico and Vancouver. So, I realized I could live anywhere and work.”

As they forged their way in Hollywood the native



Rachel Cannon and Matt Payne spent years in Los Angeles in successful writing and acting careers before returning to Oklahoma to launch their own production studio.

Oklahomans had kept in touch and reconnected soon after Cannon returned. Both recognized an opportunity and began to formulate a plan to turn their home state into a film and television production hub. At the beginning of this year, that dream became real.

Together they are co-chief executive officers of Prairie Surf Media, a multi-media production company that converted the former Cox Convention Center in downtown Oklahoma City into Prairie Surf Studios, housing the largest clear-span (no pillars or beams) soundstage in the region.

“A few years after I returned, I realized that I could also make films here and thought there is no reason why Oklahoma can’t be turned into a film-industry state,” Payne says. “We have the heart and passion to do it. When Rachel reached out, this idea just exploded. I was missing that like mindset and found it in her.”

The Sooner State is appealing for many reasons. With its position in the middle of the country, no destination feels too far. The types of professionals and craftspeople needed to scale a production studio of this projected size are already here. Many are graduates of OU. The cost of living is attractive. And decision-makers, like local and state officials, are easy to reach.

“Accessibility to our leadership is one of the beautiful things about being here,” Cannon says. “For the two years we have worked to put this together, Matt and I have had conversations with people I could not have imagined reaching, let alone meeting with, in Los Angeles. I forgot how collaborative and wonderful Oklahoma is in this way. It’s a ‘yes’ state. When you present this big, fancy dream you have, instead of people saying, ‘You are out of your mind,’ you get people saying, ‘That’s a great idea. How can I help?’”

While there has been a film industry in Oklahoma for a long time, productions typically come to the state, shoot and leave. Payne and Cannon want to transform this enterprise into a more sustainable model. By creating a space for consis-

“**... there is no reason why Oklahoma can’t be turned into a film-industry state.**”

tent jobs, industry professionals can make a career here.

For months, Payne and Cannon scoured the Oklahoma City area in search of a space big enough to match their vision. After touring hundreds of warehouses and even an airport hangar, they met with Oklahoma City Assistant City Manager Aubrey McDermid to see if city buildings might be available to fit their considerable needs. There were not many, except for the former Cox Convention Center.

Spanning 1.3 million square feet, the facility opened in 1972 and features exhibit halls, meeting rooms, ballrooms, a 13,500-seat arena, and an underground parking structure. It is designed for massive events. Now, multiple soundstages, one as big as 80,000 clear-span square feet, are featured inside. There is an existing commercial kitchen, shop area, truck loading docks, and spaces for production staff and crew.

While the building was not officially closed, operations were scheduled to wind down in late 2021 as a new convention center and hotel opened a few blocks away. This situation presented a challenge to the city.

“We were scratching our heads about what to do with the building itself,” McDermid says. “It sits on an amazing piece of property with incredible synergy all around. We were not looking to keep it, but we also did not want to board it up and leave it vacant. Taking it down has its challenges. In working with Matt and Rachel, we weren’t specifically pitching the Cox Center, but we kept coming back to it as a potential location for their facility.”

In January, a five-year lease for the four-square-block property was finalized. Situated between Bricktown, Myriad Botanical Gardens and Chesapeake Arena, the site is prime downtown real estate that will be attractive to future development. It’s a win for everyone as Payne and Cannon expect to grow out of the space and build a campus elsewhere in the metro in the future.

“What Matt and Rachel are doing is fascinating,” McDermid says. “They are widespread in their reach and invested in this city and its economy. There is so much talent here and they want to create a place where that talent can live and earn a living.”

For their part, Payne and Cannon say they want to put Oklahoma on the film production map. They envision an entire film industry growing in their space, from construction to catering, to costume and hair design, casting agencies and accounting personnel.

“On the first floor are the soundstages and production spaces, as well as the arena, which is a huge bonus,” Payne says. “We can do pretty much anything here. We can build an entire film ecosystem and attract and retain talent.”

Oklahoma City Mayor David Holt has been supportive of

the team from the start and applauds their ambition.

“Rachel and Matt did not have to return to Oklahoma, they certainly didn’t have to partner with us to create the Prairie Surf Studios, and they definitely didn’t have to cast a vision that lifts the entire Oklahoma film industry,” he says. “But they have chosen to do all those things. Their goals are ambitious, but I think the pieces are in place, and their creativity and dynamic style are big reasons why we believe this can really happen.”

“By creating this studio, they’re not just opening a location for an individual film to be shot. The scale of the studio matches the scale of their vision, which is to jumpstart an industry here. Rachel and Matt envision many productions using this facility, and local crew members moving consistently from job to job, realizing a film career right here in Oklahoma City. That’s a big step forward for the industry here, and obviously a welcome step forward for our economy.”

One of the driving forces behind building this infrastructure is the way video content is consumed. The birth of streaming services has drastically changed the industry. Binge watching has overtaken the week-by-week episodic format of many television programs. Developers can’t create content fast enough. This presents an opportunity.

“In 2017 there was \$14 billion spent on original programming,” Cannon says. “By 2019 that figure was \$36 billion. We know more is coming, but soundstages have only grown 15 percent in the last 10 years. We can create soundstages and a film studio environment in Oklahoma and be confident the work will come.”

Although the coronavirus pandemic shut down the world one day after their initial meeting with city leaders in March 2020, the co-CEOs did not slow down. They have met with industry leaders, shared their vision and brought in executives to see what their company has to offer. *American Underdog: The Kurt Warner Story* was just shot in Prairie Surf Studios, with more projects waiting in the wings until pandemic restrictions are lifted.

“The pandemic exacerbated what the next iteration of film production is going to be,” Cannon says. “Everything is shut down now, but people are desperate to ramp back up. There is going to be an explosion in production and we are having those conversations with producers and content streamers. We are looking at 2022. The industry is not stopping. It is just on pause.”

Not only do they see the opportunity for growth, but also a training ground for aspiring filmmakers. Conversations are under way with several departments at OU to introduce students to the many aspects of a television and film career.

“The next generation of filmmakers is very important,” Payne says. “It used to be so difficult to find a way into the in-



Matt Payne

Prairie Surf Media is already collaborating with film industry professionals and film schools from around Oklahoma. The new production studio hosted a Film Education Institute of Oklahoma workshop at the end of December 2020.

dustry while in Oklahoma. We have OU right here—teaching filmmaking and screenwriting—and we can offer opportunities for film students to get internships and apprenticeships, not only with Prairie Surf Media, but with productions that will film on our stages. This kind of hands-on training is key to building a creative base.”

Given the enormous endeavor they are undertaking, both laugh when asked if they have time to practice their craft. Each is dedicated to building a place where the film industry can thrive in the center of the country and both are introspective and excited about this chapter of the lives.

“The pandemic offered a natural pause for me creatively after wrapping *Fresh Off the Boat* early in 2020, so my focus has been on launching this studio and raising my little boy. This is a passion project, an opportunity to make a bigger impact. It is changing our lives and those of others.” While Cannon may

have pushed pause, it certainly isn’t forever. “The dream is to be writing, producing and acting in the studio we have built in the city that I love with my family in the live audience. It just doesn’t get any better than that.”

Adds Payne, “We both have had fulfilling careers and the next iteration of my life is creating a space for others to do the same. And I don’t want people to have to leave Oklahoma to do it. If out of this experience I get to return to writing, I will be writing that script about a writer who returns home and builds a film studio.”

The resulting film might just be shot in the studio that Payne and Cannon built.

Susan Grossman is editorial manager for Myriad Botanical Gardens and Scissortail Park in Oklahoma City and a freelance writer who lives in Norman, Okla.