

Hollywood on the Hudson

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Actor and Director Mary Stuart Masterson's is bringing big-picture productions to the Hudson River Valley.

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Big change is rumbling in Hudson Valley. With A-list shows such as *Pretty Little Liars: Original Sin* filming at [Upriver Studios](#) in Saugerties, NY and more high-budget productions in the works, a flourishing film industry is blooming in Ulster County, NY—thanks to actress and director Mary Stuart Masterson.

Renowned for its bucolic rolling hills and Gilded-Age Mansions, the Hudson Valley has functioned as an escape for busy New Yorkers for centuries. In contrast to the area's pastoral bliss, however, its local communities have struggled. After the departure of IBM from their Ulster County campus in 1998, the crumbling site has been a serious economic liability and a symbol for the absence of thriving industry in the area. After making a permanent move from New York City to the Hudson Valley in order to raise her family, Masterson

recognized the area's need for economic revitalization. Determined to bring stable, profitable industry back to the Valley, she founded two companies—Stockade Works, a film and television educational nonprofit, and Upriver Studios, a state-of-the-art soundstage.



While directing the film *The Cake Eaters* in the Hudson Valley in 2006, Masterson became keenly aware of how the area was an unusually good place to film. The Valley was easily accessible from New York City, had a plethora of unused industrial buildings from the former IBM campus and beautiful, expansive outdoor spaces. Masterson felt that the Hudson Valley was the logical next frontier for the film and television industry—and for her family. “After I moved, I fell in love not only with the location, but with the people,” explained Masterson. “I wanted to raise my family, I wanted to do my part for my community and I wanted to continue filmmaking.” She knew that she could fill in the economic gaps left by IBM’s departure by bringing more film and television projects to the Hudson Valley.

In the early stages of developing her plan, Masterson was introduced to Beth Davenport, a media strategist. The two instantly recognized their shared desire to revitalize their local community. “I knew that I could help Mary Stuart make her vision a reality,” said Beth. “We set out to provide a new sector of job opportunities to everyone who lived here using the lens of diversity, equity, inclusion, and sustainability to guide us.”

“I knew that in order to make my idea a feasible reality, we would need to build out the ecosystem first. There was already a strong film foundation throughout the Valley, and we just needed to fill in the gaps,” said Masterson. Before bringing in high-level film and television production, the area first needed an extensive and expert local production force. In 2016, Davenport and Masterson founded Stockade Works, a nonprofit dedicated to workforce development in film and television production for local Hudson Valley residents.

“Stockade Works is designed to amplify and add to the industry that was already present in the area,” explained Masterson. “We added a crucial step of the pipeline necessary to support a healthy film and television industry in the Valley.”

Stockade Works’ programs provide not only specialized training for local residents, but also an unusual networking and job placement program that has placed graduates in over 150 productions across the country. “The whole bedrock of what we do is to be in the community. So, we have community partners, from local youth organizations to veterans organizations. We partner with all the local schools, whether it be the SUNYs, Bard, or Vassar,” explained Davenport. “Even though I’ve lived here for fifteen, sixteen years, I’m still not a local,” said Masterson. “We knew that it was crucial for us to spend time and invest in the Hudson Valley community through Stockade Works as a nonprofit. We had to prove that we were here to provide an investment in the future rather than to extract value.”

Following Stockade Works’ incredible success, Masterson, Davenport, and their team embarked on a project in 2020 to develop the actual facilities that movies and television shows would need to film in—Upriver Studios in Saugerties, NY. Upriver is a public benefit LLC that has a synergistic relationship with Stockade Works and shares a portion of its ancillary revenue with the nonprofit. In turn, the graduates of Stockade Works’ programs are able to land high-paying jobs in top-level productions that film at Upriver, without needing to travel for work.

“Upriver is the final link in the production chain,” explained Masterson. Its permanent soundstage studios provide a state-of-the-art location that continues to offer lucrative careers to local workers, even after specific productions and shows finish filming. “In order to actually support your community, you have to be there when the circus leaves town. There’s no way to create a stable economy without reliable employment—if it’s unclear when the next gig will come along, if workers can’t join the union, then they can’t live here,” said Masterson. “The whole concept behind Upriver is to create sustainability of people and of place.”



As a woman-owned public benefit LLC, Upriver has tangible impact baked into its foundation as a business. Its regenerative structure benefits not only its owners and investors, but also—and most importantly—the Hudson Valley community. Though Upriver has been dubbed ‘Hollywood on the Hudson,’ Davenport emphasized that Upriver goes beyond the conventions of Hollywood: “We have structured our business goals around our values—around providing equal opportunity and economic durability.” Masterson added that the film and television industry is “theoretically interested in diversity, equity, and inclusion. But right now, that interest is only demonstrated on a corporate level.” What sets Upriver apart from other film and television studio spaces and companies is its foundational commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion across all levels of its labor and production force.

Construction of the Upriver facilities was scheduled to begin in March of 2020, and the pandemic threatened to shut down the operation altogether. Filming came to a grinding halt and anxious investors pulled out.

“The future of film and television was completely in limbo,” said Masterson. “But we’re scrappy. We’re determined. We were going to make it work.” In some ways, the unforeseeable challenges posed by the pandemic drove the Upriver team to think outside the box, raise new kinds of capital, and finish construction by 2021.

Upstart Co-Labs, a foundation that connects impact investors with creative minds making a difference, helped investors with aligned values to catapult Upriver into reality. “Upriver shows the capacity of artists not only to be creative but to be entrepreneurial. This is exactly what impact investors look for,” said Laura Callanan, a founding partner of Upstart Co-Labs.



The incredible success of Stockade Works’ and Upriver’s mission was proven when *Pretty Little Liars: Original Sin* selected the newly completed Upriver studios as the filming location for its entire first season. Staffed by a local workforce, the lucrative series demonstrated that the Hudson Valley is more than capable of producing top-of-the-line television shows and movies.

“Just that one show was able to bring millions to the Hudson Valley,” said Davenport.

Upriver is just getting started. The current soundstage studio only has room for one production to film at a time, and the Upriver team knows that they can continue to bring even more projects to the Hudson Valley. The next step is an expansion of studio space—at least another 100,000 square feet of soundstage studio space in Kingston, NY.

“Watching my community, my neighbors, grow and thrive—that’s what keeps me going,” said Masterson.