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Dress the Set With Tears: It's a Wrap



Marissa Roth for The New York Times

A sign of the recession: 20th Century Props is set to close. [More Photos >](#)

By BROOKS BARNES
Published: June 17, 2009

NORTH HOLLYWOOD, Calif. — The rattan sofa from “The Golden Girls” awaits its next role from a shelf deep inside the 20th Century Props warehouse here. Nearby is the futuristic shower [Tom Cruise](#) used in “[Minority Report](#)” and an armchair that starred with [Marilyn Monroe](#) in multiple films. Overhead: Art Deco chandeliers from “[The Aviator](#).”

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On Tuesday, Harvey Schwartz stood amid it all, in tears, wondering how his prop shop, which offers a vast inventory of items to be used in film and television productions, became the latest victim of a rapidly changing Hollywood.

Mr. Schwartz, the owner of 20th Century Props, plans to go out of business next month and auction the inventory. Battered by the surge in out-of-state movie production and the demise of scripted programming on network

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Marissa Roth for The New York Times
20th Century Props serves Hollywood with items like the alien from "The X-Files." [More Photos »](#)

television, the once-thriving business — one of a handful of its type remaining — is failing.

"I ran out of money three months ago, and I don't know what else to do," he said softly. "It's terrifying. I've devoted my entire life to something that is over."

Set decorators are equally upset. "The closing of 20th Century is a disaster for us," said Melinda Ritz, who won three Emmy Awards for her work on "Will & Grace." "Harvey is a great person, and it's one fewer place that offers one-stop shopping." She added, "The fabric of Hollywood is fraying so fast that it's scary."

Not long ago all movie and television studios operated their own prop houses. A dozen independent companies did a brisk business filling in the gaps — an unusual medical device here, a 1960s-era radio there. Outside prop suppliers like 20th Century also handled commercials and period needs (Mr. Schwartz has a large inventory of Art Deco items) along with special events like lavishly decorated premiere parties.

Studios started gutting their prop departments in the 1990s to free space on their lots. Mr. Schwartz's inventory — at last count 93,752 items, ranging from teacups to a life-size submarine — includes the former holdings of 20th Century Fox, for instance. Walt Disney and Paramount have also jettisoned their props divisions. (Sony, Universal and [Warner Brothers](#) are the holdouts, and they're open to outside clients.)

Independents like Mr. Schwartz and Omega Cinema Props stayed healthy — despite runaway production and the rise of reality television — largely because of special-events divisions. Such events made up a third of the revenue at 20th Century Props just two years ago, Mr. Schwartz said.

But the recession has turned off that spigot. Add in a strike last year by movie and television writers and a continued slowdown in production caused by a threatened actors' strike, and 20th Century Props could no longer stay afloat.

Mr. Schwartz said annual revenue was off by 30 percent last year; so far this year the figure is closer to 50 percent. He said he has been seeking a way to keep the collection together — via an investor or a sale to another prop company — but has so far come up short. The business had 28 employees at the beginning of the year; now it has 7.

"I'm a dinosaur, I guess," Mr. Schwartz said.

Great American Group will liquidate the company's inventory during the last week of July. The holdings are insured for about \$8 million, but the value of many of the props is difficult to pin down because of the premium that memorabilia collectors will likely pay for better-known items.

"He's got a collector's eye and has developed an inventory unlike anybody else's," Ms. Ritz said of Mr. Schwartz. "He's got quirky, interesting pieces."

Mr. Schwartz is a bit quirky himself. Trained as an aerospace engineer, he decided to go into the furniture business in the early 1970s, opening a small store near Beverly Hills and CBS Television City, a cluster of studios that is now home to shows like "[American Idol](#)."



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He developed a fondness for rattan (“Among other reasons, it was furniture I could lift by myself,” he said) and became an expert. He was an author of a 1999 book titled “Rattan Furniture: Tropical Comfort Throughout the House.” He favors his shirts unbuttoned to about midchest and has a habit of hanging his reading glasses there.

“I’m a little bit bananas, I know,” he said.

Walking through the 200,000-square-foot warehouse, which is hunkered amid a smattering of auto repair shops and porno stores in this seedy San Fernando Valley suburb, Mr. Schwartz comes off as the curator of a museum that just happens to rent out its treasures.

“[Beyoncé](#) has danced in this,” he said, motioning to a giant plastic Champagne glass. “See that chair way back there? [Claudette Colbert](#) sat in that in ‘Cleopatra,’ the 1934 version.” He paused to point out curved desks used at Ewing Oil on “[Dallas](#)” — he’s not certain if J. R. sat at one of them — and led a visitor through a maze of macabre items (jars filled with pickled piglets) to the spot where the morgue from “[The X-Files](#)” awaits another adventure.

Some of 20th Century’s holdings are antiques with famous provenances outside of the movies. For instance Mr. Schwartz claims to have [Merv Griffin](#)’s office chair and a giant Art Deco desk once owned by Howard Hughes (and subsequently used in “The Aviator”).

What are the most frequently rented items? Certain dining room chairs have gone out more than 500 times, Mr. Schwartz said. Also popular: a heart-shaped bed, which rents about twice a month. “We don’t ask too many questions with that one,” he said.

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A version of this article appeared in print on June 18, 2009, on page C1 of the New York edition.

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