



The 12-floor El Royale building in L.A.'s Hancock Park neighborhood has 56 apartments.

# Inside Hollywood's of TOWER POWER

*Home to a colorful spectrum of Tinseltown personalities, the El Royale in Los Angeles has seen its share of drama. Now the famously quirky building may be losing its indie appeal*

By Deborah Schoeneman

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about a decade ago, Oscar-winning actor Nicolas Cage and his then-girlfriend, actress Christina Fulton, had a fight in their 10th-floor apartment at the El Royale, an imposing building on Los Angeles' Rossmore Avenue with a neon-green sign on the roof that radiates throughout Hancock

Park at night. As building lore has it, he locked her out on the terrace. She had to smash her hand through the glass door to get back inside, cutting her wrist badly. The cops took him to the station and the paramedics took her to the hospital—but not before she shoved a towel in the kitchen-sink drain and turned on the water.

"When I came in at 6 a.m., the ninth floor had called down to say there was water running out of the ceilings," says Sandy Griffin, the manager of the building for 37 years, who recently retired. She rushed upstairs, encountering a truly wacky, wet sight.

"Over here was a huge aquarium with a huge shark, and it had flipped it over with its tail," Griffin says, miming the action. "There were two hairless cats; they had eaten the pet parakeets and there were feathers everywhere. There was a big prop beetle and heavy red drapes." She takes a deep breath. "Nic Cage was the most challenging to have in the building."

When Griffin, now 71, started working at the El Royale, it was almost like a senior citizens' home, packed with residents who had been there since it was built in the late '20s, primarily to accommodate employees of the nearby Paramount lot. Designed by architect Douglas Lee, the apartments featured ornate moldings and fortress-like walls, making it feel like L.A.'s answer to New York's storied Dakota. During

Griffin's early days, she had the unfortunate experience of finding four longtime residents dead in their apartments.

"I became very close to some of these people and when one would pass away, it was like losing a parent," says Griffin, who also knitted 14 baby blankets for the newest of residents.

About 20 years ago, CAA power agent Kevin Huvane moved into a seventh-floor apartment with a view of the Hollywood sign. A new shiny regime followed, created largely by Huvane placing his inner circle, including his brothers, Stephen, a prominent celebrity publicist, and Chris, a manager and co-owner of Crown Bar, within his midst. (Other CAA power agents in residence have included Bryan Lourd, Jim Toth and Brian Siberell.) Throughout the years, the resident roster has read like the guest list to the *Vanity Fair* Oscar party: Uma Thurman, Cameron Diaz, Ben Stiller, Katie Holmes, Jack Black, Judd Apatow, Ellen Page.

Under the reign of Huvane, the El Royale became a quirky home for industry achievers and strivers, recent divorcees, kids—who often ran free through the halls—and displaced New Yorkers who preferred valet service and 24-hour doormen to a garden and a pool. Akin to a grown-up dorm, it's the kind of place where neighbors lend each other chairs for dinner parties, drain bottles of wine over late-night gossip sessions, give notes on scripts and fling open their doors for building-wide holiday fetes—particularly after the Christmas party in the lobby and the July 4th party on the roof. Both holiday parties were funded by the late Martha Scott, the building's longtime owner, who died at age 98 last summer, leaving residents abuzz about the building's future and prompting Griffin to retire.

"I promised my family that when Martha didn't need me anymore, I would pursue other interests," says Griffin. She's wearing a blue-and-white-striped shirt with embroidered butterflies, and blue pants and blue sneakers, and sitting in the living room of an apartment just off the ornate lobby where she and her husband have lived part-time for the past three years. Before that, she would

LISA ROMEREIN

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commute from her home in the San Gabriel Valley, where she once ensconced four elderly ladies who couldn't take the stairs when the elevator was grounded in the El Royale after a power outage due to the Northridge earthquake of '94. (“Desperate Housewife” Nicollette Sheridan and her mother flew down the stairs wearing negligees, a sight that Griffin says kept the “fellows” happily hanging in the lobby.)

When Scott died, the building's ownership was transferred to a trust owned by her four children, and management was taken over by local company Dolan & Knight, prompting questions about the building's fate.

“Many of the residents would like to have it turned into a condo or co-op, but whether that's feasible would have to be studied with the city,” says Griffin, adding that Scott never explored those opportunities during her life. “I could have postponed retiring forever,” says Griffin. “I so enjoy the people and the staff.”

The feeling is mutual among the building's past and present inhabitants. “El Royale is my favorite place I've lived to date,” says *Paranormal Activity* producer Jason Blum, who now lives in a stunning modern home in the Hollywood Hills. He used to buy Griffin a piece of jewelry for Christmas every year. “It was one big happy family, and Sandy made it that way,” adds Blum.

**T**he cast of characters in that family was colorful enough for John Hamburg, the writer/director of hit movies like *I Love You, Man* and *Along Came Polly* to create a CBS TV show, “Welcome to the Captain” (2008), based on his experience living in the building. He was introduced to the El Royale by Stiller when he was living in the penthouse, which he passed on to Allison Shearmur, now the president of Lionsgate, who gave a toast at Griffin's farewell fete in late February, attended by about 100 people. (Shearmur lived in the penthouse for a decade and started the building tradition of having photocopies of the weekend's box office numbers available in the lobby.)

“The more time I spent at the El Royale, the more I felt like it had a unique, unbelievable cast of characters,” says Hamburg, a born-and-bred New Yorker who now primarily lives in Manhattan. “Strange things became normal on a daily basis. There was this great warm family feeling; some of my favorite TV shows have this—a group of disparate people coming to-



Past residents of the El Royale, from left: CAA agent Bryan Lourd; Uma Thurman; Katie Holmes (with then-boyfriend Tom Cruise), Ben Stiller.

gether because they're thrown together—and that was my experience in L.A., a town so spread out, with everyone in their own pods. You have this oasis in the middle where everyone chooses to live right on top of each other, and somehow it just works. A couple years into living there, I was thinking, ‘This could be a TV show,’ and I just wrote it.”

He didn't have to work too hard for story ideas in a building where it's hardly uncommon to hear professional-level piano playing in the lobby or witness a TV heartthrob sweating it out in the bare-bones basement gym. There's even a cheese impresario who's generous with unpasteurized slices during impromptu picnics on the roof and building-wide sing-alongs led by a musical theater star who, at Christmas, gave everyone jars of wild honey she had harvested herself in Ojai.

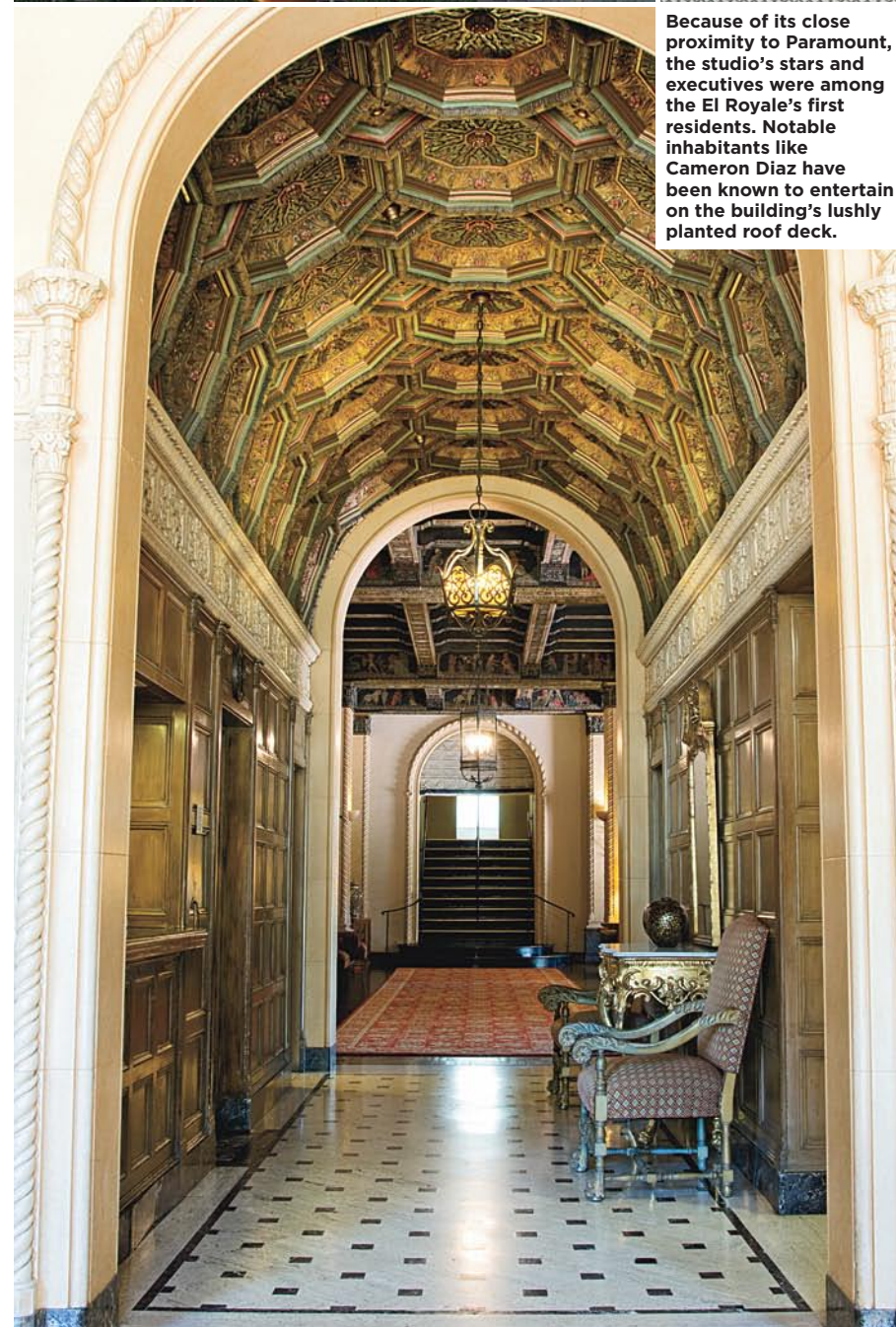
The show, starring Raquel Welch, Chris Klein and Jeffrey Tambor, got tangled up in the writers strike and only aired five episodes (it's now available on iTunes)—but the building has a new carpet in the lobby to show for it, paid for by the location shooting fee.

If the show had gone on, Griffin would have had plenty of material to share. Among her favorite stories are the one about when the night doorman had to go outside at around 2 a.m. and yell at a limo driver for parking in the building's driveway, which leads into the valet parking garage. The driver begged the doorman to leave them be, pleading, “I can't disrupt the people in the back!” After about an hour or two, the doorman went back and insisted the limo be moved. The driver pulled up to a loading zone and out stepped Tom Cruise, who proceeded to walk Katie Holmes to her one-bedroom apartment inside. We all know the next act of that story.

Griffin's other favorite tales: the time when an oil heiress went out of the building wearing only her underwear, a feathered boa and a hat. “I ran out and retrieved her and said, ‘I think you best put a dress on if you're going down Rossmore,’” says Griffin, laughing. And then there was the woman who got evicted and was carried out wearing only a sheet by the cops after getting into a fight with her bookie/chauffeur, back when there was a gambling den run out of the garage.

Through it all, Griffin has smoothed over the wrinkles and made the problems disappear quietly. She's been known to pick a certain tenant up from the police station on more than one occasion. Before she left, she helped a single resident move to a smaller, more affordable apartment after the tenant lost her job so she wouldn't have to

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Because of its close proximity to Paramount, the studio's stars and executives were among the El Royale's first residents. Notable inhabitants like Cameron Diaz have been known to entertain on the building's lushly planted roof deck.

BRYAN LOURD: ERIC CHARBONNEAU/WIREIMAGE; UMA THURMAN: SOUL BROTHER/FILMMAGIC; TOM CRUISE, KATIE HOLMES AND BEN STILLER: FRAZER HARRISON/GETTY IMAGES; INTERIOR: NICHOLAS TRIKONIS; SIGN: CORBIS IMAGES