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PRODUCTION DESIGN: MAKING A SCENE

Top Production Designers who have been responsible for building the worlds of films and TV series including *The Crown*, *Saltburn*, *The Long Shadow* and *It's a Sin* explain how they transform scripts into physical reality. Jon Creamer reports

MARTIN CHILDS

The Crown; Shakespeare in Love; Parade's End, Mrs Brown, Quills; The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas



I usually start a project gratifyingly early which offers me a lot of the director's time and attention. Then a few weeks later along

comes the director of photography and for a day or so it's as though your brief marriage has been disrupted by a mistress, until you all realise that a ménage à trois is the only way forward. It's a kind of alchemy, and each time the analogy is different – you often get perfect harmony as we did on *The Crown* and in the more distant past I've been like Charlie Watts to the director and DOP's Mick and Keith and that's worked too. It's never the same.

Simply put, inspiration comes from the way the script tells the story. If it sends me to the DVD library to re-watch *Double Indemnity*,

say, or *Chinatown*, to unpick them, then I know I'm hungry to help tell this story. Weeks are spent looking at pictures, photos, films, documentaries. I also watch films not for their storytelling but for their period detail. For *The Crown* I watched every film made by Basil Dearden in order to soak up the look of the period.

No two directors are the same, so spending time with them is key. One of the best ways to spend time is to be trapped in a car travelling from location to location. The conversation doesn't have to be about problem solving – it can be about the book you read last night and through that conversation something will evolve and reveal itself. It's hard to force those conversations to happen with busy schedules so to be prisoners in a car is a surprising advantage.

I never go on a recce with a pre-conceived idea of how I want something to look. I'll brief a location scout but never with too much of a prescription. The best scouts are creative people and I want them to surprise me. If I'm looking for somewhere to create a Commonwealth Conference in Nassau, for example, I'm very happy for a location scout to show me a car showroom in Surrey – as happened on *The Crown*.

Is it easier to work with locations or build from scratch? Neither. Or both. What I do know is the trick is in linking them – in *The Crown* at least twenty separate ingredients for Buckingham Palace had to look like one on the screen, likewise seven for the Ritz in Paris. A third of each were built from scratch, two thirds found on location. The ones you build are those that can't be found on location, those where you want to sustain

continuity over sixty episodes. The ones you find on location are those where you need the kind of scale an Elstree sound-stage – or your budget – can't run to.

The biggest challenge on any project is to avoid confinement, to have the audience believe not just in the space you've created but to imagine there's a world beyond it, where things happened before, things are happening now, and things will continue to happen beyond the story you are telling. You're not creating a box, you're creating a world.

In no particular order I'd say the most important skills for a production designer are communication, a knowledge of cinema history, an understanding of space, colour and light, and a sense of humour. Not all those are skills but they're all things that I can't work without.



My starting point depends on the project. After getting as much information from production – time, money and intentions – I'll delve into research whether it's a period piece or a contemporary piece and start collating a folder of images and thoughts. I'll discuss with the director what their hopes and dreams are, and we'll work out between us whether it's studio or location based.

How the director communicates what they want varies. Some have very clear visual ideas, others less so. Both routes are interesting for me. Either way I try to keep the storytelling nature of the director's vision front and centre. **Projects need different skill sets** and building an art department to fit a specific job is great as the dynamics can

Saltburn; Mr Turner; Peterloo; Conclave; The Electric Life of Louis Wain; Life After Life; On Chesil Beach

SUZIE DAVIES

change and alter with different crews. When I'm abroad usually the teams are completely new to me, and I enjoy seeing how different countries achieve the same end goal.

I try to be as communicative as possible, share as much as possible and encourage the team to be part of the creative decision-making processes. Art departments obviously build the world for the storytelling to take place, but another part of the department is the creative trouble shooting – we often need to collaborate with other departments to 'fix,' 'hide,' 'alter,' 'augment' locations or spaces to facilitate a shoot too. **I get inspired by all sorts of art** – whether its traditional paintings or contemporary performance art, music, films etc – the more the merrier.

Locations often inform the design especially if it's more of a location-based

shoot. The idiosyncrasies found in a real location can often spark a thought or idea, so I try to keep an open mind when on scouts and recces.

By the time we get to building the sets, I have a great team who oversee the nuts and bolts of it all – a Supervising Art Director and a Construction Manager keep the builds going and schedule the works so that all the trades work in an efficient and effective sequence. Then the Set Decorator and Propmaster schedule the dressing of the sets in a similarly efficient way.

On the whole, I'm a day or three ahead of the shoot, prepping the next sets and or locations. I have a fabulous standby team who are my eyes and ears on the set. I try to see the shooting teams into any new builds and locations and walk the director and standby crew around the sets to make sure

everything is what they expected and anticipated. Often, I'll catch up with the AD team and production too before I head off to either dress the next day's sets or recce a future location.

Virtual production will have its place. I think it's a constant learning curve at the moment. I'm keen to understand what it can and can't do which hopefully will all go into the mix of making the correct decisions about when to use it and when not to.

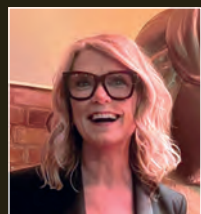
The biggest challenge on any project is finding the sweet spot between the ambition and desire of the project with the logistics of time and money.

The most important skill for a production designer is to have an open mind.



ANNA HIGGINSON

The Long Shadow; Sherwood; Time; Des; White House Farm; Hatton Garden; David Brent: Life on the Road



What attracts me to a project is a script with a strong, original storyline with diverse, interesting characters - both period and modern day. I'm very character-led and love getting into the finer detail of their lives, peeling back the layers and developing a back story to who people are, beyond what's written on the page. A script that I can strongly visualise coming to life on screen with its own identity, this is what excites me. **At the start of production, I like to delve heavily into research,** whether that's for a specific period of a drama, a true story or modern day to discover minute and interesting detail. The fine detail is of the utmost importance to me to create

atmosphere and layers to a set. I then produce mood boards for each character and the main sets, this will also include a colour palette for the entire series or film and how the individual colour tones from that palette will work individually to reflect the actors' separate personalities or spaces. I share the boards with the director who generally also share their own boards with me which include movie stills, lighting and framing references. Between us we settle on an overall look for the project. The boards are then shared to all of my department as their go-to reference for what we are to achieve. **I have a very talented loyal team,** most of whom have worked with me for many years and, when on a super-busy large project, that helps with the shorthand for how I work.

I like to have tight communication and teamwork from all areas of my department, sharing prop references, construction material references, graphic design ideas and points of reference such as footage and images. I'm quite old school when it comes to designing - drawing by hand and pencil sketching my design ideas. But I also love my team's knowledge of software, which makes up for my 'lack of'. Once the set builds are elevated it's so useful to use Sketchup interactive 3d models, not only for myself, but also for the director and DoP to see how the set works virtually. **The construction and dressing details of the sets are paramount for me.** A bad scenic job or a dressing prop that's wrong for the character can make that set unbelievable and ruin what you want the viewer to believe is real, so I ensure this never happens. I

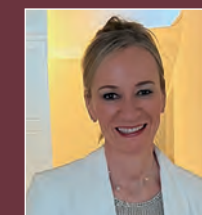
definitely prefer to build a set from scratch and watch the design from paper evolve into 3D but I also enjoy the challenge of transforming what can be a bland and uninteresting location space into a unique, inspiring and characterful set. There is a huge sense of satisfaction when that space is unrecognisable from its original appearance. **Aside from the ability to create unique set design** that has depth and layers and tells the story of characters, one of the other most important skills as a production designer is teamwork - not only within your own department, where you are only as good as the team behind you, but with all HoDs. Keeping the energy and drive for this is key to creating an overall flawless and finished product.



I usually join a project during pre-prep, about four to six weeks before pre-production begins, once the director, producer, and often the location manager are on board. This time is crucial for immersing myself in the script, exploring the characters and potential locations. It's also when I sketch initial set designs for possible builds, laying the foundation for the world in which our drama will unfold. **I am drawn to projects with original scripts** - stories that captivate me both visually and emotionally, transporting me into the worlds they create and forging a connection to the characters. Equally important are the director, DOP, and production company; it's vital for all HODs to align in their vision. When that harmony exists, the magic truly begins. **The script and its characters serve as**

It's a Sin; Flowers; Everyone Else Burns; Stay Close; Last Tango in Halifax; Secret Diary of a Call Girl

LUANA HANSON



my essential starting point. I meticulously break it down to analyse its structure, pinpoint key locations, and draw a "character tree" that maps relationships, connections, and settings, all of which contribute to shaping the tone. From there, I curate reference images and assemble a comprehensive, chronological mood book in Canva to bring the show's vision to life. Each page focuses on key scenes, presenting concepts for sets, locations, tone, graphics, props, lighting, and the use of colour to amplify the script's emotional arc. Early in the process, I evaluate the budget and set requirements to establish parameters, allocate resources, and determine which sets are best suited for construction and which can be filmed on location. **I approach research meticulously,** gathering references and adding my unique perspective.

Inspiration comes from exhibitions, evocative photographs, and insightful texts, while the internet connects me to fresh ideas and influences. If the set is based on a real-world location, I prioritise visiting it to fully immerse myself in its atmosphere. Nature also plays a vital role, offering unparalleled lessons in how colours interact and blend harmoniously. Once connected with the script, inspiration is everywhere. A simple walk to the bus stop might reveal a building, texture, or play of light that sparks an idea. I draw extensively from my photography library, built over years of travel and exploration, while cultural institutions and museums continually expand my creative vision. **The design process is fluid,** with changes happening daily. Locations may change, scripts are often revised up to the day before shooting—and sometimes on the day itself!

Adaptability is key, as we constantly adjust to meet demands, ensuring the design evolves dynamically. **The most crucial skill for a production designer** is keeping all the plates spinning with a smile. Clear communication and organisation are essential to conveying ideas effectively while staying within a time frame and budget. I believe in fostering an open-door policy in the art department, where everyone feels empowered to contribute. This inclusivity enhances the creative process and ensures the team takes pride in their work. Given the long hours and hard work, it's vital to cultivate a positive, fun atmosphere that keeps the team inspired and happy.