

A Visual Presentation: The World of Art Direction

Q: What does a production designer do?

A: Production design and art direction is --well, we're storytellers. Our purpose is to be the companion on the road to realizing the film--the director's companion, the producer's companion--in a collaborative effort to tell the true story of the script. Though each script is different, some principles are always the same. In this project, we're dealing with true facts, true people, and real events, and, at the same time, we are creating them in the world that is television. So, it's a balance between reality and what we create, which is more an art. Unlike with the documentary, where you present facts and create things as they were, when you present a world in story form, you have to bring to it not only the true facts, but also you have to create an atmosphere that helps move the story along. You have to create an atmosphere that holds us in the story and tells us all the underlying and intimate facts of the characters, the situation, and the time in history --all of those things in a subtle, background sort of way that are true to the time but also true to the "everydayness," the human qualities that exist in the everyday moments of the characters you're presenting.

What was so wonderful about this project was that, in having Esmeralda Santiago's great book--she being such a great writer in terms of the immediacy of the things that she described--you have a whole palate, a whole world of information there to draw upon...in telling the story...

As production designers and art directors, we're like forensic scientists in a way. We're like the... anthropologist who takes the skeleton and, because he understands the structure of a human being's shape and knows historically...what a skeleton is, he can, or she can, literally recreate the face that was once the skeleton. That's kind of an obscure way of describing it. But what we do is...the script for us is like a skeleton, and the best production designers and art directors are those who look deeply into the skeletal shape of the script and, from it, create the flesh, the bones, the color--all of those things that flesh out and tell us all of the things we need to know about this person, about this story. And, that's what we do. We are their helping hands, their visual accompanists and collaborators.

Q: You're a 16 year-old or 17 year-old girl listening to this and watching this, and you think, "What an interesting job!" What do I need to be able to do, how would I qualify, what can I do to learn how to do this job?

A: Well, there are different ways that production designers and art directors come into the field. Some come from architecture, some come from illustration, some come from the fine arts. But, I find that the production designers and art directors that are most in tune with the story-telling process are those that have come from theatre. That's because the whole purpose of theatre is to condense a story, a play, into the confines of a proscenium [the stage]. And so, there's a sense about the abstract, about the very specific and simplified elements that help you tell the story. And, it's a very, very good discipline when you go on to do film or television, I think. I'm sure that other people have different ideas about that, but for me, I think that the time you spend in the theatre, where you have to learn about lighting, drafting, period, furniture--all of those--the way people sit, the way people move--anything and everything about life in all of its aspects--in the country, in the city, rich people, poor people...you have to have an education and a background about how people live and what their world is. And, you can get training in those kinds of things in many different ways.

Still, I think the theatre schools are probably the best place to learn. If you look at the history of art direction, with regards to television, the first art directors in television came from the theatres. Literally, they were drawn from the ranks of Carnegie Tech and other schools --the Art Institute, Goodman Theatre, and places like that. They sought out these people because they felt that they, those designers, would be most able to translate stories on the screen.

Q: In a sense, what everybody in a film does, or what you do especially, is to take the very abstract idea of: here is a place, described in words, and make it very concrete, very specific--this vase, not that vase, this wallpaper, this floor plan. Let's say that you've been handed *Almost A Woman*, and the set you're thinking about is the first Santiago apartment (Santiago 1). If you were to make yourself a checklist--the first ten important things to do in getting to the design of Santiago 1--what would those things be?

A: Well, in fact, what we did...the production designer spent a great deal of time doing research even before I came to the table. When I came on board, we looked at research very carefully and married that with Esmeralda's own experience. Like I said before, you have to balance true history with the character's intimate and personal remembrance, memory, and experience. And, by adding of that memory and personal experience to a story, you take it out of the realm of the documentary...it's not enough to [simply] present this room because it's the correct room. [That] sometimes, being so accurate pulls you out of the story rather than drawing you in. So, you have to think in terms of the abstract, in terms of the emotion of a thing. What does this shape say that...mirrors what this character feels? It's the same in costume. A line, a shape, any of those things help to tell us who these people are in an instinctive, emotional, and unsaid way.

Q: Can you think of any specific examples from *Almost A Woman*?

A: When we [created] the three main sets, other than the home in Puerto Rico, the three main sets were the three homes, the three apartments that the Santiago family lived in. We called them Santiago 1, Santiago 2, and [Tata's] apartment. [Tata's] apartment was first. Each of these three sets was very, very, different, and we talked--Franco and I and all of us talked--very specifically about the differences: what is the same and what is different about each of these apartments? What was going on in the world of these people at that time, and how does that show itself in the rooms they lived in? For example, [Tata's] apartment--where they first came, where the family first arrived in Brooklyn--is all about the world that [Tata] has grown into while living in America. She's lived there for a long time. She's created a world for herself there, and the building is a very old building, a kind of a grand building that's seen a lot of change over time, that's been kind of chopped up and had things added to it, like plumbing, things that weren't there in the beginning. And, this apartment is very much a make-shift apartment, [one] that was adapted for the changing time in Brooklyn, New York, at the turn of the century when plumbing and electricity became available--the building was adapted for that. So, what we see is the addition of the bathtub out there in the middle, not really in the middle of the room, but it's in the main room. So, this is a very utilitarian apartment, and it tells us how many people living in close proximity can find themselves being, out of necessity, very organized and very careful about their surroundings. That's not the case with all people, but it's truly the case with [Tata] and the Santiago family.

Q: How do you make this Tata's apartment...how do you make it specifically hers?

A: Well, you have to understand something about her. You have to understand something about the heritage of the Puerto Rican community. Not only *in* Puerto Rico, but also how it's translated to the American way of life. And, [you have to understand] the Puerto Rican community and also the heritage--there are certain things that they like, that they draw on, things that they remember from their home country, and they also find things in their new surroundings that imitate or remind them of the country that they came from. In Tata's apartment, there are...one of the things Esmeralda told us is that Tata was, like most Puerto Rican women of that period, very interested in figurines, in floral prints--they really did not like geometric patterns as much as floral ones. The Puerto Rican landscape is very tropical and very floral, so there's a lot of love of nature, flowers, and all of that. And so, since they're in a place that's so much the opposite of that, they will bring things into their apartment that remind them. So, we chose really interesting floral wallpaper. Also, the wallpaper in the bedroom is one that very much...[signifies] Tata's feelings and also other Puerto Rican families' feelings about their [world]...the world they came from.

Now, you also have to balance that with the fact that Tata would not necessarily have brought the wallpaper or done the wallpaper--it may have been wallpaper that had been there before. So, you have to balance making an atmosphere that truly [reflects] the person's character...[with one that] tells us something about

the character of the community and...[the] architecture of the period so that you understand what they are up against, how they have to make their own world in a world that seems foreign to them...in an apartment that is not necessarily where they would like to live, but where they have to live, where they need to live.

Q: So, you have three main American sets: Tata's apartment, then Santiago 1 and Santiago 2. What do Santiago 1 and 2...how are they different from each other, and what do they tell us about this family's continuing story?

A: Well, Tata's apartment is the place where they arrive. Esmeralda Santiago and her family have come here, and this is where they first live. But, as time goes on, they need to set up a home of their own. They don't have very much money, so they have to find a tenement they can afford...and they want to be on their own. Negi and her mother and the rest of the children now need to carve out a place for themselves, a world of their own, and start to make a life in this new world. And, the way they are going to approach their life and their surroundings will be different from Tata's, because she is [from] another generation, sees the world in a different way, and has been in this country longer. So, Santiago 1, the first apartment that they move to, is a very, very small, congested apartment, very, very utilitarian. It's an apartment that's newer in its architecture, but it's really bare bones. Although it's much more of an "apartment building" apartment, the building, itself, still has been cut and chipped away to accommodate the growing need for housing for new people. So Santiago 1 may have been, in the very beginning, a series of rooms where people rented a room; then, walls were broken through and kind of an apartment was made where they set up a kitchen and a bathroom, but it is still a very, very utilitarian, bare-bones apartment. It's very, very small, but it [does have] a kitchen, a bathroom, a main living area, and a bedroom in a very, very confined area. So, the family sets about to create the geography for how they're going to live in this place. And so, what you see is they have separated and divided up this room to make it more separate. They put curtains on the archways so that they can make the bedroom more of a bedroom.

Q: What kind of emotional response do you think the viewer will have to this apartment when they see it? And/or, what does it tell us about the family's fortunes?

A: I think what people see...[with] the family moving into this apartment, [allows them to] they learn a lot. They learn about how the family is trying to make it on their own, how they are making the very best--they're trying to make home out of foreign surroundings and they're trying to create nooks and crannies--for themselves [by creating] their own spaces within this very cramped apartment. I think it's stressful for people to live in an environment like this; but...what we learn about the family, how they work together as kind of a team to make things as good as they can for each other in a very confined space--and this apartment gives us the opportunity to see how closely knit and emotionally connected and sensitive they are to each others' needs. Maybe, in a different kind of space, they would not be forced to make these kinds of decisions about each other. But, because they live so intimately together, this gives us an opportunity to see how organized they are. One of the things Esmeralda said when she wrote a letter to Franco, when we were first creating the rooms...[was] how Negi's mother was so concerned about keeping things clean and neat. We had this stereotype about people living in cramped quarters, that somehow, no matter what their cultural background, they are messy, sloppy, or dirty. And that is not, most of the time, the case. One of the things Esmeralda really wanted us to understand about her mother was how hard and difficult a job it was to keep the place clean, shiny and looking good, especially given the fact that this building was falling apart, there was always plumbing going awry and the upkeep was not all that it should have been--holes in the ceiling and all kinds of things. But, it was her desire to make a world that was pleasant, nice, and clean. She writes at length about it, we talked about that at length, and that was really important to us: to show the character. One of the big things that we learn in Santiago 1 is what kind of a person [Negi's] mother is and how much care she takes in giving her family an atmosphere that is conducive to good thoughts about and close-knit emotional connections with each other.

Q: What was it like having Esmeralda available?

A: Well, we all felt it was like being in Heaven. It's one of the great gifts to have the author of the book--the person who lived in this world--there to talk to all of the time, and to [give us] a sense of what her life

was like, how she felt, what her family was like, and how they felt. And, it's not...our purpose was not to create the world absolutely as it appeared...in the geography and all of the other elements that were part of the apartments she lived in. It was our purpose to give the spirit and the emotional baggage that came with living these lives, to bring that to the rooms they lived in.

Q: What kind of guidance did she offer you during the designing process as opposed to during shooting? For example, how did you work with her? How did you communicate to her if she wrote you something you thought was especially evocative but would especially apply to what we're going to see on the screen?

A: Well, I know that Franco-Giacomo Carbone (production designer) talked to her at great length on the phone, and he would send her thumbnails at various times of what he was...as we were looking at the script and as he was reading the script...he would start to get a visual frame of reference to what these rooms looked like. First, [he] tried to understand the geography--without making a floor plan--that was going to be our set. But, first trying to understand the geography, the relation of things, because the relation of one room to another is very important to understanding how the people lived, and what their relation was, then, to each other. [For instance], in Santiago 1, when Negi has to cross into the bathroom and goes through the curtain, and Negi's mother and Francisco are there together, we had to understand the geography that they lived in because it affected her, Negi's, emotional response to the relationship of Francisco and Negi's mother. So, all those things, the geography--the rooms, not necessarily the actual floor plan, but the geography--the relation of one room to another, we needed to understand that. Next, we had other things that we had to consider. We weren't presenting a documentary; we were presenting a story, a play, a screenplay based on a novel. To bring that to life, you not only have to make an apartment that will be true to the spirit, geography, relationships, and emotional context of the characters, but you also have to make sure that the camera, the director, the actors could work in the space. So, you have to balance what's true to the character [with] what's needed--what the camera man needs, what the director needs, what the actors need, and, of course, what the producers need [to keep within their] budget.... So, not only do you have to be true to the story, the characters, and the novel or biography, the production designer must also be true to the confines of the space in terms of how the movie physically and technically will be made.

Q: So, what kind of guidance for making these things more specific did [Esmeralda] provide you?

A: Well, in terms of the emotional context and the relationship of one room to another, that is what we got from her. Then, [the task of] translating that into a workable space for the director, cinematographer, producers, and all of the other things, was something that happened through conversations and round table discussions that we had, looking at the script line by line and seeing what needed to be accomplished. The question of the production designer then becomes this: what is the story we want to tell, and how do we want to tell it? And, what are the parameters that we must remain true to so we can accomplish all of these things. Being a production designer and art director is not for the faint of heart. It's for people who have an exhaustive desire to know, who love the idea of exploration, who are inquisitive, enthusiastic, and love to collaborate. If you don't love the idea of collaboration, then be a painter and a garret; [that's] because the great gift of motion pictures and television is the fact that you get to collaborate with other [like-minded] artists, and what you get through each of them is greater than any one of you could have given or brought to it by yourself. And, I think that's what makes production design and art direction different from any of the other artistic forms or artistic desires of individuals.

Q: Is there anything that Esmeralda wrote to you that you would want to share, that you would like to read to us?

A: Well, there's this one paragraph she wrote to Franco about Tata's apartment:

To the left of the fireplace, what had once been a closet or pantry had been converted into a bathroom. There was a wooden box above the toilet itself with a pull chain for releasing the water and, across from it, an ornate washstand with a mirrored medicine chest above it. The tub was just outside the door, covered

when not in use by a white enamel metal sheet that was also used as a counter. The tub was shaped like the familiar clawed-foot tubs, except that it was raised from the floor so that the enamel cover was counter-height when it was on. It meant that, in order to climb into the tub we had to step onto a chair.

If you look at that apartment, that's what we tried to do. The fireplace area...she goes on to describe later on how that was their cooking area...so, the fireplace area was defined as the cooking area, and they actually used the mantel for storing spices and various cooking things. And, [there's also] the proximity of the fireplace and the sink to this closet, which was now a bathroom, and then the bathtub, which was obviously brought in later when indoor plumbing was brought in and the area was converted. So, we tried to give the spirit of what her remembrance was in a way that the camera could move around it and force the characters and the actors to move in a certain way, [so it] would mirror how the people actually...lived in those rooms.

Q: What was her reaction when she first saw the dressed sets?

A: Oh, it was pretty amazing. It was...I will leave that for her to express herself, but I was truly overwhelmed by the fact that here was a world that I knew very little about, that I read the book and became intimate in terms of her voice on the page, and, then, I had to start thinking of it--Franco and I had to start thinking about [it]--in terms of our mind's eye: how does this look to us? Everyone, when you read a page, you, without even knowing it, start to form visuals, pictures in your mind of how everything is...how we relate to words is through pictures, even if the pictures are only in our minds. So, that process is what the production designer does. Then, the great gift, taking it a step further, is not only did we have the opportunity to read the book and create that in three dimensions, move what was in our minds and in our thoughts into something three dimensional, but then, the great gift of it was to have [Esmeralda] then step back into the circle and literally make it come full circle for us. That is a great thrill, and it's so rare that you get the opportunity to talk to the author and have that additional support and conformation of ideas.