



The Act

HARD LESSONS IN LOCATION PRODUCTION

BY THOMAS WALSH, PRODUCTION DESIGNER

I've always wanted to work in Savannah, Georgia, and as that old chestnut goes...
"Be careful what you wish for!"

The Story

The Act is the first edition of a new crime anthology series created by writer/producers Nick Antosca and Michelle Dean. Based on real events taken from the news, it originated from Dean's successful *BuzzFeed* article, "Dee Dee Wanted Her Daughter to be Sick, Gypsy Wanted Her Mom Murdered." Their excellent pilot script is a cautionary tale, one rich in character, details and backstory and I was very grateful to be a central participant in its visual realization. With apologies to Charles Dickens, but from the beginning "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness." And due to a series of unforeseen circumstances both unnecessary and avoidable, *The Act* proved to be a very difficult endeavor for this author and his Art Department.

The two-hour pilot was the story's anchor and it is the visual cornerstone for the entire season. Directed by an excellent creative collaborator and gifted storyteller, Laure de Clermont-Tonnerre,

The Act is a complex and dark tale about a grifting mother, played by Patricia Arquette as Dee Dee Blanchard, and her victimized accomplice in larceny, daughter Gypsy Rose, played by Joey King. Dee Dee Blanchard had falsely misled their well-meaning neighbors and the larger social media world to believe that Gypsy Rose was physically and mentally handicapped, when in truth she was not. Gypsy Rose was an emerging woman, one who was emotionally conflicted, sexually repressed and well coached by Dee Dee at portraying many physical afflictions in order to game the social welfare system. At the beginning of the story, these two tormented souls have just moved into their brand-new American with Disabilities (ADA) compliant custom-built home, one that was donated to them by the Habitat for Humanity community of Springfield, Missouri.

A Visual Concept that was Wide and Tight

Conceptually as well as in reality, their home looked like an adult-sized dollhouse; more a living character than a set piece, that over time,

A. HOPE ROAD, HABITAT FOR HUMANITY COMMUNITY BACKLOT. AERIAL VIEW OF SKETCHUP MODEL BY HIND AL-SHANEEN.

B. DEE DEE AND GYPSY'S HOUSE. STAGE SET. SKETCHUP MODEL VIEWS BY HIND AL-SHANEEN.

A. BACKLOT LOCATION PHOTO STUDY OF THE ABANDONED MILL CREEK HOUSING DEVELOPMENT, RINCON, GEORGIA.

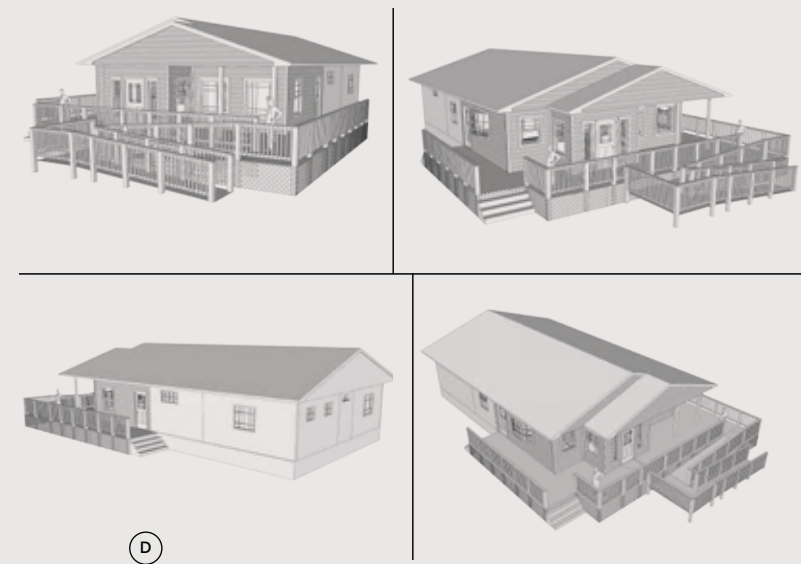
B. BACKLOT COMMUNITY LAYOUT SHOWING BOTH THE BUILT HOUSES AND THE PROPOSED DIGITAL BACKLOT SET EXTENSIONS. SKETCHUP MODEL BY HIND AL-SHANEEN.

degenerated into a cruel and confining surrealist cage. The basic concept for the design was simple, to make the ordinary appear extraordinary! The work of gifted American photographer and visual artist Gregory Crewdson inspired the imagery and lighting. Cinematographer Zach Galler was masterful in creating character and mood through his lighting, as well as his compelling visual compositions. The anamorphic 2.39:1 lens format was chosen in order to maximize the staging and storytelling possibilities. The sets, locations and their spatial proportions were all tailored and

selected in order to accommodate this widescreen cinematic approach, a format that really does have the potential to make the ordinary, extraordinary.

Eastward to Savannah

The story's real events took place in Springfield, Missouri, but the "Show-Me" state does not have a significant film incentive program and lacks a robust filmmaking infrastructure. The producing studio wanted to make this show in Atlanta, but it proved to be far too busy and crowded; so they decided to shoot in Savannah, Georgia, instead, so they could still capitalize on Georgia's significant financial incentives and rebates. Hollywood's addiction to pursuing subsidies has turned its filmmakers into migrant art workers more akin to modern day paleo-hunter-gathers. I have worked in many regions, as well as foreign countries, so I have no fear of remote locations or the "new." I believe that filmmakers should always be open to the possibility of working in cinematically diverse locations and proactively solving the challenges that may be encountered, provided that they have the full support of their producing studios and that they require their appointed managers to provide the leadership necessary for addressing the challenges the region may present or that the appointed filmmakers may encounter.



TITLE	DEE DEE AND GYPSY HOUSE LOCATION
DATE	08.27.2019
REVISION 1	08.27.2019
REVISION 2	08.27.2019
REVISION 3	08.27.2019
DRAWN BY	HIND AL-SHANEEN
CHECKED BY	HIND AL-SHANEEN
SCALE	1/4" = 1'-0"
DATE	08.27.2019
BY	HIND AL-SHANEEN
DATE	08.27.2019
BY	HIND AL-SHANEEN



Necessity can be a Mother

Savannah has many virtues and graces, but it is a young market for the manufacture of media productions. Providing a sufficient number of experienced artisans to meet the needs for more than one production at a time remains a significant challenge for this evolving film community. Besides aviation, maritime shipping, military bases and tourism, Savannah is also the home to SCAD, the Savannah College of Art and Design, which is a magnet for many talented art and design students from all over the world.

within Savannah's local creative community by being inclusive. I'm grateful and proud of the local team, one that consisted of recent SCAD graduates and former faculty. In the end, the quickly assembled Savannah-based Art Department was, as Mary Poppins would say, "Practically perfect in every way!"

Also perfect was the exceptional set dressing crew, migrants all, they were by necessity mustered from up and down the Atlantic's Eastern Seaboard. The set decorator, Bryony Foster, was my most

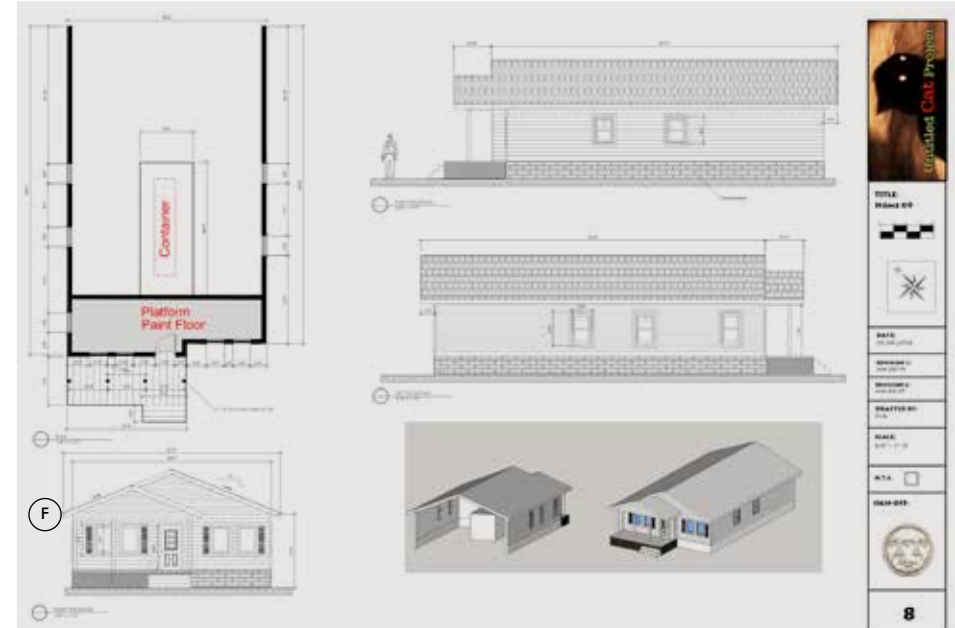
C. BACKLOT HOUSES UNDER CONSTRUCTION.

D. SKETCHUP MODEL STUDY BY TYLER TUNNEY OF DEE DEE AND GYPSY'S HOUSE EXTERIOR.

E. DEE DEE AND GYPSY'S HOUSE EXTERIOR. SET PHOTO. COURTESY OF NBC UNIVERSAL.

F. SKETCHUP VIEWS BY HIND AL-SHANEEN OF ONE OF THE SHELL HOUSES FOR THE BACKLOT.

The Act had a late summer start-up, and my efforts at securing an experienced Georgia-based Art Department at that time was unsuccessful, so SCAD became the primary source for the small Art Department's hires. I'm a strong proponent for nurturing local talent even if it results in more work for me as the Art Department's senior mentor. I admit that this was an unorthodox approach, but given the production's challenging 28-day design-build schedule, and the studio's mandate to maximize local rebates, I felt that this was a chance worth taking. A lovely added benefit from this decision for both the Art Department and the company was the goodwill that we engendered

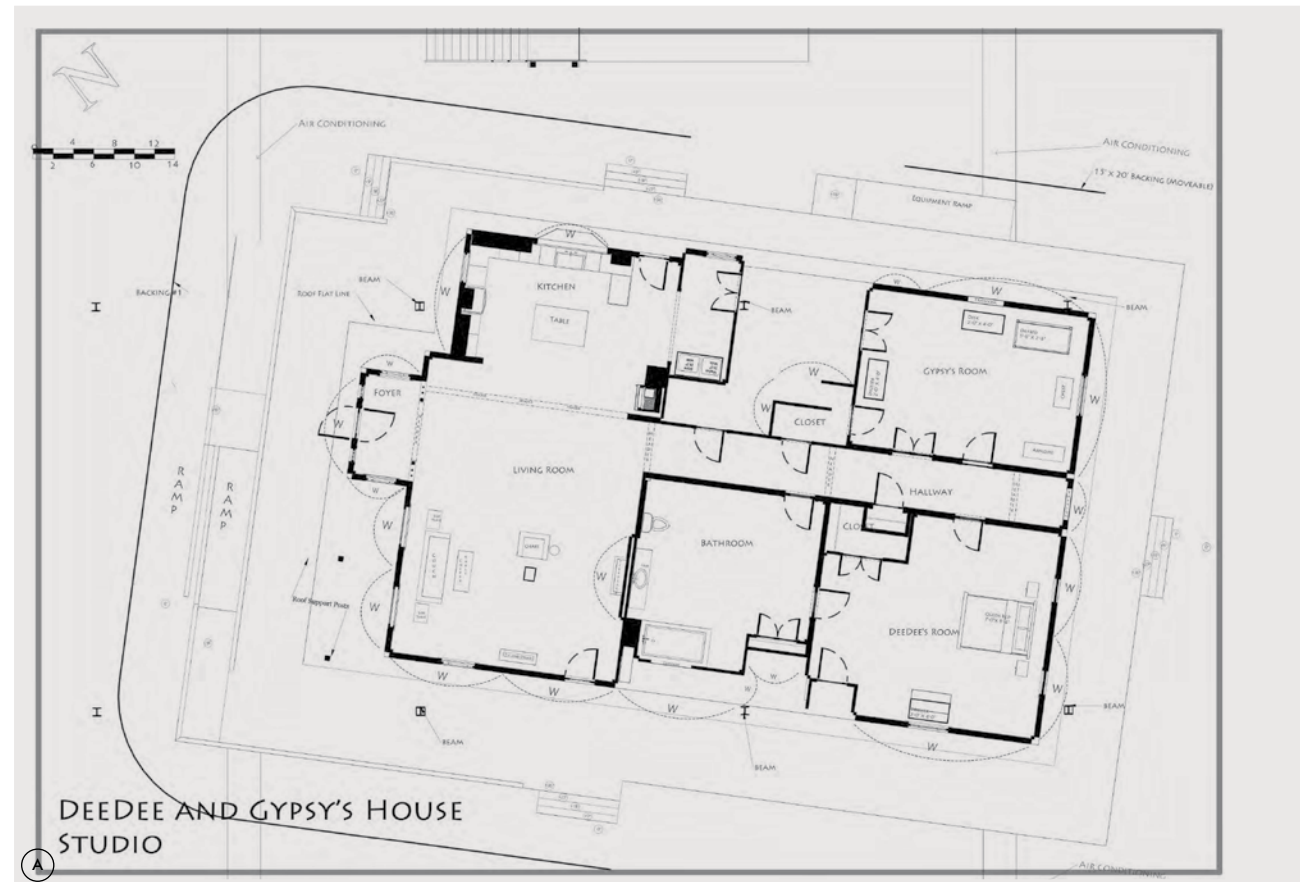


valued creative partner. Like all Brits, she travels well. Bryony is a maven of thrift stores, as well as yard and estate sales, and she has that uncanny ability or luck for finding character-appropriate furnishings from local sources. Once again, this talent was critical due to the production's remote location and rebate requirements.

And they call it Show BUSINESS?

The Art Department's start-up was negatively impacted by my very late hire, a delay that significantly reduced the essential time required for me to provide a proper breakdown and logistical analysis of the regional strengths, weaknesses and the feasibility of potential locations. These days, this is not a unique problem

but rather more of a symptomatic and chronic epidemic that is being experienced by many designers and Art Departments who are required, for incentive purposes, to work in smaller cities, as well as the regional production centers. It is long overdue for the ADG to generate a detailed study with compelling data in order to illustrate to the studios the cost savings that they will derive from green-lighting a small start-up Art Department for a few weeks prior to leaping into full pre-production. During this phase, the designer would break down the script and identify the design and construction start-up priorities while working in tandem with the show's creators, managers, and location department in order to generate the essential preliminary designs and data that will



A. DEE DEE AND GYPSY'S HOUSE INTERIOR. SKETCHUP PLAN BY TYLER TUNNEY.

B. DEE DEE AND GYPSY'S BATHROOM. SKETCHUP MODEL BY HIND AL-SHANEEN.

C. DEE DEE AND GYPSY'S BATHROOM. SET PHOTO.



better inform their budgets. Equally critical, this window of time will allow the Production Designer to carefully consider, interview and secure the most important and capable key departmental hires, who are invaluable for achieving an overall financial savings and ultimately, a professional realization of their productions.

Looming Clouds, Hurricanes and the Cautionary Tale

The Art Department's primary start-up challenge was the design and building in twenty-eight days of a Habitat for Humanity community, one that consisted of fourteen houses, two that were practical and twelve shells, all of which were located in an abandoned tract-home subdivision thirty minutes west of Savannah. In addition to this backlot, the full interior of Dee Dee and Gypsy Rose's home had to be simultaneously built at the Film Factory, a converted lingerie workshop-turned-stage facility located in Savannah's Yamacraw Village District.

There were a number of trials and tribulations that were encountered in the building of the backlot community. A shortage of local crews and materials, along with a very slow location acquisition process proved to be among the biggest

challenges. Add to this a very high attrition rate within the ranks of the backlot's construction crew due to an extreme and relentless summer heat, one hundred percent humidity, daily lightning storms and a historic hurricane season. And then there was an intrusive local building and safety department that refused to recognize the difference between the building of temporary motion picture structures and that of real houses. The production was required to comply with a number of their building code's statues starting with the commissioning of a formal set of engineer's drawings which had to be plan-checked and then monitored through ongoing worksite visits by their building inspectors; all of which contributed to significant delays and increased construction costs.

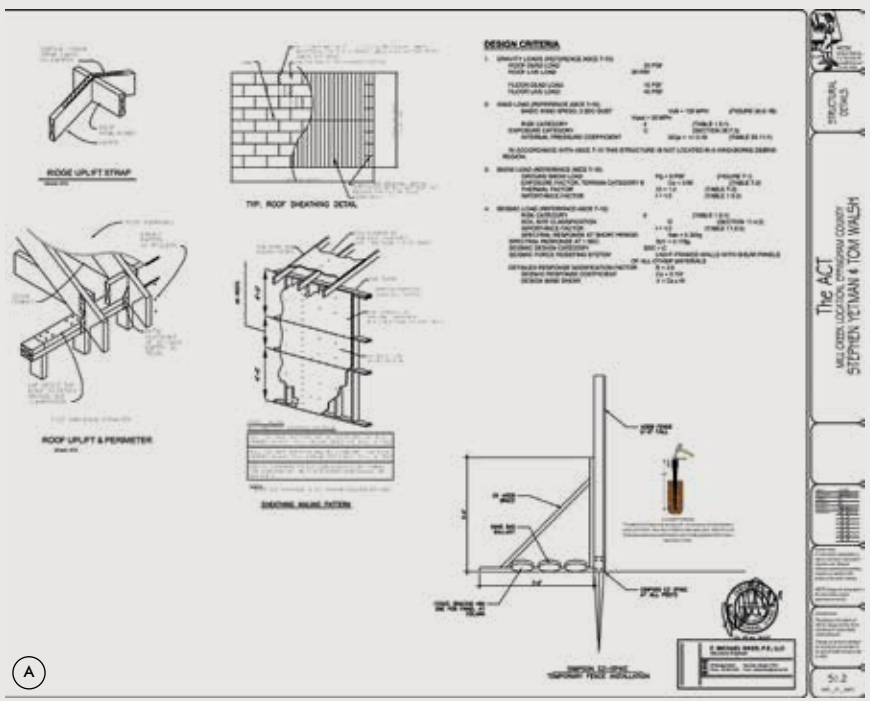
D. & E. DEE DEE AND GYPSY'S ON-STAGE BEDROOM AND LIVING ROOM. SKETCHUP MODELS BY HIND AL-SHANEEN.

F. DEE DEE AND GYPSY'S ON-STAGE BEDROOM. FRAME CAPTURE BY CINEMATOGRAPHER ZACH GALLER.

G. DEE DEE AND GYPSY'S ON-STAGE LIVING ROOM. FRAME CAPTURE BY CINEMATOGRAPHER ZACH GALLER.

H. DEE DEE AND GYPSY'S ON-STAGE KITCHEN. PHOTO COURTESY OF NBC UNIVERSAL.





A

A. DETAIL OF AN ENGINEER'S DRAWING PACKAGE DETAILING BUILDING CODE ANCHOR REQUIREMENTS. DRAWINGS BY ARTEC DESIGN & DRAFTING, AND F. MICHAEL SIKES P.E. LLC STRUCTURAL ENGINEER.

Of course, when building in a hurricane region one wants to try to ensure that the sets don't end, up blowing into the next county or state, so a few of the building department's requirements were both reasonable and necessary. In the end, despite all of these delays, the production's ultimate shooting deadlines and schedule were met. This good fortune was truly a miracle, but it was also a tribute to the local Savannah design and construction crews. Though they were too few in their numbers and less experienced than the distant hires who were eventually but reluctantly engaged and traveled in by the production's managers, the local crews in every other way proved themselves to be professional, resourceful, well mannered and extremely hardworking.

B. OPTICON-BRANDED SIGNAGE GRAPHICS BASED ON ISTOCK SOURCED AND APPROVED, LICENSED GRAPHICS. GRAPHIC DESIGN BY ANDREA JOHNSON. SET PHOTO COURTESY OF NBC UNIVERSAL.



B

C. OPTICON VENUE LAYOUT LOCATED IN A MALL'S VACANT RETAIL SPACE. SKETCHUP MODEL BY HIND AL-SHANEEN.

D. OPTICON VENDOR BOOTHS. SKETCHUP MODEL BY HIND AL-SHANEEN.

Dante's Nine Circles of Clearance Hell

There was another significant design challenge that many productions share in common, that is of the current state of the studio's legal clearance departments and their excessive oversight. Currently, they possess a unilateral and unchecked ability to inflict costly delays and a great level of frustration upon the art, set decoration, prop and wardrobe departments. Clearance requests for obscure items in the background certain to be small and out of focus, as well as the script's most significant requirements, are all scrutinized with same level of concern, often beyond all reason. I confess that I have become spoiled from my experiences working for Netflix. The streaming-cable natives have adopted a more cooperative, enlightened, and supportive clearance and copyright review process. The major networks are emigrants to the streaming-cable world and their legal departments remain possessed by archaic and fearful legal metrics and guidelines. The pattern of review that many encounter when submitting requests to the producing studio's attorneys usually starts with them saying no, then after much back-and-forth shifting to a maybe, and occasionally a yes! Often they will say, "Why don't you just make it?" But when original designs are submitted for manufacture, they are still inclined to deny its use due to a narrow and subjective reading of the copyright infringement rulings. In general, many of their comments and decisions are based on little to no understanding of the filmmaking process and the time constraints, volume of work and challenges that creative departments are faced with. At the heart of it is a



C



D



E



F



G



H

E. OPTICON EVENT AREA. SET PHOTO.

F. OPTICON. SKETCHUP MODEL BY HIND AL-SHANEEN.

G. & H. OPTICON. SET PHOTOS.

ALL OPTICON GRAPHICS BASED ON ISTOCK SOURCED AND APPROVED, LICENSED GRAPHICS. GRAPHIC DESIGN BY ANDREA JOHNSON.

A. SOUTHSIDE BACKLOT HOUSES IN PROGRESS.



B. SOUTHSIDE BACKLOT HOUSES. SKETCHUP MODEL BY HIND AL-SHANEEN.



C. FINAL 2D VIEW USED TO MANUFACTURE A 120-FOOT X 15-FOOT BACKDROP. SKETCHUP MODEL BY HIND AL-SHANEEN. FINAL ARTWORK CREATED BY CRAFTY APES, VFX.



D. PRODUCTION CONCEPT ART. GRAPHIC DESIGN BY T. WALSH.

E. LIVING ROOM ALTAR TO GYPSY ROSE. PAINTING BY SCENIC ARTIST KIM DAVID.

F. INTERIOR OF DEE DEE AND GYPSY'S KITCHEN AS SEEN IN ITS FINAL PHASE OF DECLINE AND DECAY. PHOTO NBC UNIVERSAL.

far too draconian application of copyright law vs. fair use opportunities. One can just imagine the Art Department's collective groans when we learned that we had to design a regional Comic-Con convention requiring the requisite trademarked branding with less than ten days to design and manufacture hundreds of graphic assets.

Short-Order VFX Backdrops

Another original challenge the Art Department faced was having to create a very large panorama backdrop for the stage set, one that needed to depict the Habit for Humanity's backlot community. The problem was that it needed to be designed, shot and manufactured before the backlot's construction would be completed. There were no rental backings that worked and the show's managers would not allow one to be painted in the beginning when there was still time. Digital printing was the only option, but without a high-resolution image file of the location, we could not proceed. In order to turn lemons into lemonade, Hind Al-Shaneen, our talented ADG-PA, turned her SketchUp model of the backlot into a file with sufficient data for the visual effects

team to create a photo-realistic digital matte painting over a weekend. Their digital file was sent to an Atlanta-based graphics vendor, who printed it onto fabric that for the cinematographer's lighting purposes was preferred over vinyl. Necessity became the mother of our salvation and the backdrop that resulted worked surprisingly well, and it was fabricated and delivered in days rather than weeks.

Lessons Learned and Better Tomorrows

When first getting a script, it is the Production's Designer unique role to look at nothing and see everything—all the possibilities. Designers are entrusted with the important responsibility to make something from nothing. So for me, making motion pictures on location is a version of from farm-to-table filmmaking, too often while having to walk through the fires of production. Though always challenging and potentially rewarding, location filmmaking can also be disastrous. What was most lacking in the making of *The Act* was any proactive attempt on the part of the producing managers to address and report back to the studio the fundamental details of the deficiencies that were identified during the early days in Savannah. From the outset, the studios and their producing partners must be the first to ask and answer the most fundamental questions of whether the chosen region has sufficient human and physical resources to ensure for the successful realization of their productions. They cannot apply Donald Rumsfeld's doctrine of "You go to war with the army you have, not the army

you might want or wish to have at a later time." If the answer to their questions regarding available and essential resources is negative, then it is their professional and moral responsibility to provide their production's advance team with the essential preproduction time, experienced professional leadership and resources from wherever they may have to be brought in from in order to ensure the production's successful outcome.

Of equal importance are the application of leadership and the setting of a moral compass that only the studios can assure. They must be the ones to monitor and safeguard that a constructive covenant and strong partnerships exist between their production's senior stakeholders, both producing managers and department heads, especially when working on distant locations where clear lines of communication and mutual trust are essential to the overall success of their productions. **ADG**



D



E



F

Thomas A. Walsh,
Production Designer
Bo Johnson, Lawrence Kim,
Art Directors
Tyler Tunney,
Set Designer
Ray Goto,
Storyboard Artist
Andrea Johnson,
Graphic Designer
Hind Al-Shaneen,
ADG-PA
Bryony Foster,
Set Decorator