WHAT IT TAKES TO BUILD A SET

WITH TRUE BLOOD'S PRODUCTION DESIGNER: SUZUKI INGERSLEV

Owen Shapiro 00:04
Welcome to Kino Society with Owen Shapiro. welcome back to a new society, a podcast where you listen to me say stupid things about movies. Today's guest is Suzuki Ingerslev live an art director and production designer with more than 20 years of experience. Her best known design credits include Six Feet Under shark in treatment here and now and True Blood. Also, her list of accomplishments include three ADG nominations and 13 Emmy nominations. We're talking with the true expert here, can you tell us a bit about yourself, um,

Suzuki Ingerslev 00:42
basically, I grew up in Southern California and never really had a big desire to go into the film industry. And then I went away to college, and I met some friends and they kind of were telling me about the film industry and my, my boyfriend at the time, his father worked at NBC and he was always saying, you know, don't become an architect, you should become an art director. And I'm like, I don't even know what that is. So, I begrudgingly actually came into the film industry thinking like, I'm not sure if this is really what I want, but then I have no regrets.

Owen Shapiro 01:13
So you went to university for architecture in general, and you ended up being a production designer,

Suzuki Ingerslev 01:21
even more random than that. I became It was a physics major switch to architecture. And then I practice for like six years, and it just wasn't, you know, what I thought it would be, I thought it'd be a little bit more glamorous, designing like amazing houses all the time, and, and the money was tight. And I had an opportunity to interview for days of our lives as a draftsperson, taking my architectural skills, and parlaying them into the film industry. So that's kind of how that came about.

Owen Shapiro 01:49
So do you think your architecture actually ended up influencing your production design at all

Suzuki Ingerslev 01:55

big time, um, I studied so much architectural history. And I'm just like, by nature and architecture lover. So if I go on a trip, I'm taking pictures of architecture more than people and places. And so once you get into the film industry, you get to design so many different things, and just having a knowledge of all the different styles that exist throughout history, or, culturally, or even just like fantasy, you just have such a great background for that. And also starting off as a draft person, knowing how to draft and actually build sets actually came in very handy.

Owen Shapiro 02:31
So architecture can actually better production design in a way that as if it were influencing the design overall.

Suzuki Ingerslev 02:40
Yeah, I mean, you know, people go to film school and study similar things. But for me, it just seemed to work out really well, that is a male dominated business, what we were in, at least when I started, it was and you deal with construction, and you want to be the one that knows how to build something, and that come in there not knowing how to actually like, things get put together. And sometimes I think, you know, in architecture school, you learn great proportion, and you also learn what makes sense and what doesn't, and how things would really be built. And

03:07
sometimes

Suzuki Ingerslev 03:08
it can look fake, if you know, like how that window could never support that roof, you know, things like that.

Owen Shapiro 03:13
Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. So is there any difference between designing for film and television and like in terms of budget in terms of requirements, in terms of anything in general,

Suzuki Ingerslev 03:24
it's interesting, there's kind of a snobbery between film versus TV, or there used to be and our TVs kind of caught up quite a bit, a lot of the series, you know, don't look like All in the Family or you know, nothing against them. But it was a different look back in the day, and TV's become pretty sophisticated. And we actually build the sets very similar to feature sets, or at least I do for the shows that I create. Back in the day, you just had walls and lighting from overhead. Now you build like entire spaces with, you know, ceilings that move and you know, practical lights that are built into the set to help people like them to give them a more realistic look. So I feel like you know, we've blurred the lines on the difference between film and television design. But you know, features tend to get more time than we do. We're always rushing, you know, because every nine days is a new episode while on a feature, you could have up to six months of prep.

Owen Shapiro 04:20
So is it a thought it's in television, often they do multiple episodes at points? Is that actually true?

Suzuki Ingerslev 04:28
You know, it started recently, they call them double up days or whatever. And sometimes it's to save money, but usually your maybe one or two days or overlap days where they're trying to pick up extra shots, and they just only can the student can only give them nine days to film, otherwise it gets too cost prohibitive. So they'll run a couple extra units that day, but in general, no, you're not shooting two episodes at once. Not in the world that I'm in not for like that high premium cable.

Owen Shapiro 04:54
So do you have any genres you prefer to designing for since you already mentioned that? You know, there's a difference between television and movies. Is there anything difference between genres? No,

Suzuki Ingerslev 05:05
actually, for me, I don't mind any genre, as long as it's like, very clear the parameters, what people want, you know, working with, like a team of people, you have to make sure that you're all on the same page. And I think sometimes that's the hardest part. But what I look for, whether it be you know, romantic comedy, or whether it be, you know, like a True Blood is a lot of characters. And then you can develop the characters further and create these kind of great worlds. And I think, to me, that's what I like most when it's really character driven, and the people are unique. And you can sit down with the writers or the directors and the actors and kind of create their worlds. So for me, I like doing all of that stuff. And I like the challenge of doing different things.

Owen Shapiro 05:45
So what information do you have based off of what worlds you want to create, such as, as a director tell you give you any info on what kind of worldly wise and how do they present that,

Suzuki Ingerslev 05:56
um, it depends on the show, I, when I worked with Alan Ball a lot, he created Six Feet Under and drew blood and here and now. And in his scripts, he's so descriptive. And you can kind of get into his mind, especially after working with him for a long time. Like, you can say one word, and I'd be like, Okay, I get it, I get what you want. And he has a little bit of input in television, the directors don't always have as much input unless they're starting the series. Usually, you have a lot of guest directors, and when they're there, it's more as a guest. And you have to kind of keep the continuity and know what's going on on the show more than what they would know. So producers tend to step in. But to me that's like, I'm, I work with my decorator, and I work with construction and my art director. And sometimes we'll create these ideas and worlds and try to decipher who a character is just on our own. And, you know, they'll say there was a lonely woman living in a house, does she collect cats, though, you know, statues? What is she? Like? What is? Is it a messy? Is it clean? You know, like, just developing all that stuff with your team is great.

Owen Shapiro 07:01
Is there any times that you have to do things more individually? Or is there any ways that the team is sanctioned off to do separate things particular?

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Suzuki Ingerslev 07:08
No, we're usually all pretty much a team. I'm the one that tends to go out, gather all the information. I'm the hunter gatherer, I get all the notes from directors and producers and scripts, and then I kind of put it in my little Think Tank, and then try to come up with concepts and ideas. I have a lot of people helping me do research too, because sometimes I think spaces and everything, just to understand a different world, you have to really know what the real world is in order to like, kind of enhance it. So we'll do that. And then I'll go on to location scout, I'll pick locations, we'll, you know, come back disseminate all the information with like the set designers and the decorator and what colors we're using, we'll share it with the costumer. So I kind of feel like, you know, in a sense, that is opposed to working separate. It's such a together business. And that's what's making it hard right now, um, the art department kind of is the hub of the show, like, I feel like we get information before most people, and then everybody relies on our designs to kind of expand what they're going to do, I'm going to have to share it with the director and the producers make sure they're happy, then I have to share it with the director of photography and make sure that he can light it and understands how I'm building in, you know, situations. And then I have, you know, the, the guy, the costumer who wants to make sure that you know, she matches the colors of the set. So I'm kind of sending out a lot of information to a lot of people and I find the better you are at communication, the smoother the job goes.

Owen Shapiro 08:39
So coordination makes it much easier. And it also it makes them more coherent in the sense.

Suzuki Ingerslev 08:46
Yes, and I think it, you kind of see like when a show is running a little bit of luck. It's much easier to kind of all work together and really just come up with a common thread and make it work.

Owen Shapiro 08:58
Now how exactly is production design? evolved over the years? How has it changed, since you've talked mostly about how it is now? How was it in the past,

Suzuki Ingerslev 09:08
in the past, you know, when you did television, you basically had three wall sets, it wasn't like four walls that's like in a feature. So you had the three walls, you had multi cameras often. And you know, you have to think when you're shooting three wall sets, you can't shoot up too much because you'll shoot off the set and you can't shoot to the side. So you kept it kind of on one plane 180 degree plan. And then they tended to light from the top. Now with television, it's become pretty sophisticated, you know, with the green screen and all the stuff that we create as well, that if we don't have the city of New Orleans outside, we can actually green screen it in and do all these different things. And it also comes down to building like we build a house like a real house people walk on my sets and they're like this feels like a real house because we're making it 360 degrees contained. So it's Pretty much the camera can go in any direction that it wants to Up, Down sideways through doorways. And you can follow people around and build in lighting that feels like real. Like you have overhead lights, you have floor lights, you have sconces in the walls, and it just gives you a real film. That's kind of a big difference in television.

Owen Shapiro 10:20

I personally don't know too much about production design, but there are people that mock the three light sitcom trope. Yeah, that it's it's very, very simple. And it's a very old fashioned way of doing things. What, why is that,

Suzuki Ingerslev 10:37
you know, it works for what they're doing. And you're watching those shows, I mean, they've actually come up in the world quite a bit to they're not quite as basic as they used to be. But in general, you don't need the fourth wall, because generally you're shooting in front of an audience for some of them. And it's just a whole different dynamic to you know, how they invented it a long time ago. And, you know, you expect that look, you don't expect it to look like, you know, Blade Runner, you know, when you watch those shows, and they don't necessarily need to be that, you know, so I feel like in that sense, they do get prepared, but they actually do put a lot of work into sets to and they usually have a very small amount of space to deal with. And so they're compiling all these rooms and sets into one stage and everything has to be able to be shot and moved out of the way.

Owen Shapiro 11:24
All right. If you've won several awards for your work, do you have any favorites of what you've done particularly? Well,

Suzuki Ingerslev 11:32
there's a funny story to that, um, I actually have been nominated for like 13 Emmys, and some art director awards, but I've never won. I've lost everyone. So I kind of joke that I'm always a bridesmaid never a bride. And it's a bummer, you know, you get to the Emmys and you're excited and you hope that one time you'll actually win, but we haven't been that fortunate. So the honors been and all the nominations. And part of me is like, Oh, I don't want to get on that stage anyway, and give a speech. But, um, my favorite shows, you know, our shows that I remember, because of the people as well, like six feet under, you know, we're all still really close. And True Blood is amazing. You know, in you, we got to design such a birth of sets, like from vampire headquarters to swamps in the south, and, you know, cemeteries I mean, it was just such a, again, as I said, so much character driven sets that when you get to do a fairy strip club, I mean, it's just one of those things. So those were magical shells. For me those two for sure.

Owen Shapiro 12:36
Yeah, between six feet under and Trueblood those two seem to have a lot of variety between them.

Suzuki Ingerslev 12:42
Oh my god, I think we sat down once and we figured, you know, between sets and locations on both show there's over 2000 sets and locations. Just in those shows.

Owen Shapiro 12:53
Is there anything else in movies or TV that you've actually been really impressed by? Like is it that you think is really particularly interesting, maybe one movie or show in particular that influenced your own work?

Suzuki Ingerslev 13:06
You know, a long time ago, I watched that Baz Luhrmann, Romeo and Juliet. And I love that and I thought, like, wow, the attention to detail in that movie was amazing. Whether it was like, you know, seeing the side of the curb painted, or those beautiful neon crosses in the church, I felt that was such a visual feast. And I've always thought about that, like, there's no shot that's small. So if you have the time, it's great to put a lot of detail into your sets. And I think, you know, I've gotten a lot of compliments on that from actors, it feels more real to them. Directors, when they shoot it, they're like, oh, there's like a real sweet spot here. And we see that you've paid attention to like every shot that could possibly happen. And like when I build the sets, I like to have the depth I like to see into other rooms. And again, you know, I don't always have the money to do that. So I'll do it kind of cheaply. And as my construction coordinator used to say, oh, Suzuki's bonus rooms where we don't really have the money. But again, you don't ever want to just shoot a flat wall behind you. You know, that's one thing for interviews. But when you're actually doing a show, you really want to see you can get as much depth and then it's going to feel as real as possible. And I think Romeo and Juliet was one of those, like, perfect design movies that you know, inspired me imagine 96 one. Yeah, that was lahrman I think it was Claire Danes and Leonardo DiCaprio

Owen Shapiro 14:25
in it. Yeah, that one actually, I remember that being very well made.

Suzuki Ingerslev 14:29
Yeah, definitely.

Owen Shapiro 14:30
Now, on the other side of the spectrum, is there anything that you found to be downright bad? Like maybe a movie or show that was just do you saw this is not done? Well?

Suzuki Ingerslev 14:39
Yeah, I mean, that's really popping out. I mean, I see maybe sometimes, and you know, that they didn't have a lot of money and it doesn't necessarily look, you know, as polished as it could. But again, it's not always fair to judge like a blade runner and those kind of movies against, you know, some of the lower budget movies and everybody does what they can, it would have to be pretty awful for me to notice how terrible it is. I try Not to judge it that way. Um, and, you know, I think the hardest aspect of my business is, you know, just dealing with a lot of personalities, you know, there's so many personalities and egos in my business that that's kind of the part that, you know, makes it difficult sometimes.

Owen Shapiro 15:16
Yeah, because if it's about cooperation, it needs to be people need to be on point and working with each other.

Suzuki Ingerslev 15:23
Yeah, and they need to be kind to each other. And I feel like when a show is dysfunctional, starting at the top, it kind of trickles down. And it's so much better when everybody just pulls their weight does their job and actually cares about the material

Owen Shapiro 15:36

on your websites, you actually have a few pre renders of some sets, how exactly does that work? How does the pre rendering apply to the sense or the vision of the rendering,

Suzuki Ingerslev 15:48

um, for me, it actually helps me out more than anybody, I like to do use Photoshop. So I will do like a quick little rendering, scan it in, and then I can color it in. And I feel like I can throw in wallpapers and furniture and you know, when you're dealing with sets that could cost upwards of like, a million dollars, you don't want to create something, and everybody's gonna be like, Oh, I thought it was going to be a tutor, not a Spanish style house, you know. So I don't leave any of that stuff to chance. So I try to render it as close to what my vision is to get everybody on board. And not just producers, but also my team and my decorator, they can see what vision I'm going for. And the colors, if anybody has any, you know, decisions on colors, because, you know, in the old days, they used to kind of do pencil sketches. And again, you don't see really color there, it's like so great to have like the Photoshop and the SketchUp now where you can actually create these many worlds and lights and really show it to people just to cover yourself.

Owen Shapiro 16:46

So once a vision is in place, what is the process of transforming it into something to be used in a movie, it's big,

Suzuki Ingerslev 16:53

um, you know, we have these things called basic sets. So if you watch True Blood are six feet under one was the funeral home and the other one was like murlocs bar, those are your basic sets. And you know, you're going to be in those, like every episode. So a lot of thought and time actually gets put into those because you know, directors get tired of shots, actors get tired of being in one room to try to make them as diverse as possible. So usually, I take a little more time like a week or two to design those and make sure everybody's on board. But then once it's designed, you've got to draw, so you have a draftsperson that goes in there, one or two, and they create all the details so that you can actually build off of it, you know, and so the construction crew then gets it and bids it and they paint it and they plaster it and they weld it. I mean, there's so many like people that go into it. And then after we finish it, the decorator, they all come in to furnish it and the lighting people usually fighting with the decorating team to get in there and see who's going to have the time, you know, allowed in the set before we shoot it. So they want to light it, they want to decorate. And then actors sometimes want to rehearse in it. So you have to be at least two months out, at least you know, to kind of get like a big set like that up and ready and and not rush it you know, but on on swing sets was what we call a swing set is when it's like going to be used maybe one time and an episode usually have like a day to design that not very much. And I try to get it out as quickly as possible. Because in nine days, you know, or 10 days, you could be filming that set. So not as much time and thought goes into that or money because it's going to come down.

Owen Shapiro 18:27

So can have the set design in particular affect the audience and the audience's impression of the film.

Suzuki Ingerslev 18:34

I feel like if we do our job, well, it's just continuing telling the story. If it's too distracting, then we didn't do our job. It shouldn't just be about production design. Unless it's like you know, one of those, you know, really unrealistic kind of quirky, funny movies. But in general, the background should go seamlessly with the actors and what they're doing and they can create mood, you know, you can make a room darker, lighter, you can tell the character story really quickly. Are they poor? Or the rich? Are they unhappy? Are they hoarders are they? There's so many like things that we get to tell. But again, you know, I don't want the room to be a hoarders room. And that's all you see, you should see the character in that space. So I feel like you can manipulate a little bit the audience emotions towards, you know, the characters. But in general, you know, it's up to the actor to really pull off that part

Owen Shapiro 19:24

about this sillier, more unrealistic kinds of films. So this out is set design working demos.

Suzuki Ingerslev 19:32

That's something you have to talk about their producers and director head Do they really want to stylize it and make it crazy and funny, and I haven't really had to do anything that wild for me. Everything that I do, I try to like grounded in reality. So I said to Alan, when we're talking about True Blood, let's make it really about Louisiana and the world of Louisiana. And then the supernatural creatures just happened to be running amongst everybody. And that makes it easy. scarier in a weird way or more interesting, right? Because it's the world that you know. And yet there's all these like supernatural people that run around in it. Same with like, when you do a very scary movie, you know, you don't want to, like just deliberately make the house like rundown and creepy unless it is totally about that in some homes abandoned mansion, but you want to like make it scary. Like when you think of some of the horror movies you've seen. It's taking place in a house that you live in the phone rings downstairs and you're upstairs, you know, I think that that kind of helps create that world for people like trying to make it realistic. And unless you me, I'm trying to think of like a crazy movie, but I can't even think of any off the top of my head. And they're fun to watch too. But it's just a different style.

Owen Shapiro 20:45

Yeah, that's definitely makes sense. So I have actually seen a little bit of True Blood. And I noticed that it was it did seem much less like a vampire thing and more like something with vampires. It's took place in the actual world. And that was more so with the just the environment that they set up.

Suzuki Ingerslev 21:05

And that's what we tried for the basically the first years. It got a little bit quirkier as it went on we when we did the various strip club and when we did like underground vampire headquarters, although I still base the vampire headquarters, and the cistern that I saw in Turkey's underground world, and I thought, wow, something like this would be so great to have for the vampire. So it is based in like history and architecture. But again, it is a vampire underground headquarters. Yeah,

Owen Shapiro 21:33

that's definitely seems like a logical way to do things. So a while back a few months back, a pandemic hit two worlds, and their COVID-19 is pretty big deal nowadays, and it is making a lot of jobs very hard to do. How exactly does this affect your job?

Suzuki Ingerslev 21:51
I think our industry is one of the last industries to come back, like everybody else has been slowly trying to come back. And then it's taken us longer, because we have strong unions, and you're dealing with sag and IFC and the Teamsters. And, you know, they want to make sure that everybody's safe when they come back. So nobody was quite agreeing on exactly how to come back what the rules and regulations are going to be and, and so you know, it's been like four months, since any shows are really taken off. And you know, now's the time, when you really need a lot of content, people are burning through things that I'm like, Who's gonna watch all this content, but that was my answer, the pandemic hit, and everybody's watched a lot of content, and they're hungry for more so slowly, they're agreed on some protocol for us to come back. And, you know, as a whole, the film industry is very ahead of its time, I feel like they're always very serious. And always think a few steps ahead of everybody else. And so you know, they have testing, they have quick results testing, they're going to have different zones for people. Like, if I don't need to be on stage, I'm not going to be on stage. So that all works. And you know, you don't you can work from home, some of the time, you can have zoom meetings. But the hardest part for me is that you know, why you're on a set is that you're working with a group of people. And it's almost like your family for the time being, and you spend a lot of time there. And there's a lot of thought that goes into anything, and you need to talk to other people. So it's such a social job that is going to be hard just to be quarantined from other people and having to stay away and not not even hug anybody or talk to anybody just, you know, wear masks constantly. I'm dreading that part a little bit.

Owen Shapiro 23:39
Yeah, it does seem like a nightmare once most films are going to start to get rolling, people are going to have to wear masks and still take extreme precautions, that people seem to be very worried about 2020. In terms of film, I'm more worried about 2021 since things actually filming in 2024 2021 are a bit of limbo right now.

23:58
Yeah, I know, there's I mean, there's a few

Suzuki Ingerslev 23:59
things going on. But there's a lot of shows slowly trickling and starting up and interviews are happening again. I think you know, everybody's still confused on like, the actual filming part like prepping, you can prep. You know, we usually go on location scouts, and we take one then with and we all go together and you can talk in the van and get your work done. And now we have to drive separately and all meet at a location. So you're going to be spent a lot of time in the car and away from people. So it's another tricky aspect of it all. And then once the actors get on stage, you know, they're going to be very protective of them. And you know, how do you deal with like sex or kissing scenes or crowd scenes? It's all stuff that they have to kind of figure out and do we have to green screen those things. They talked about bringing in people's significant others for sex scenes. I don't know. It just seems like I think we're still at the forefront of what's really going to happen.

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Owen Shapiro 24:50

Now a bit of a nightmare scenario. If the virus does not go away for a few years, what will be what will happen in that case? Will people How do you figure things out? You think or? Well, it's still be in a bit of production, how

Suzuki Ingerslev 25:06

my opinion, I think that just a microcosm of what I've seen already happening here in Los Angeles and people not working is that people will panic, and they'll do anything to go back to work. So maybe it could be the pick up of more non union shows, and people don't care, they set it, they sign their rights away, if they get COVID, or they get sick, you know, it just happens that way. But it's not people can't sustain not working for that long in our business, like we lose our health care and all the other benefits that go with it. So I think people would become open to just signing away their life, which is kind of unfortunate, too, and scary, because, you know, you don't want to just go to a show and be replaced every time somebody gets COVID. Right, because there's a lot of people that are behind us that we could just have, you know, the next person come in, so

Owen Shapiro 25:55

I can definitely see that. So, finally, what are you doing currently? Are there any projects specifically that you're working on? And what's your experience working on them with the COVID pandemic? Um,

Suzuki Ingerslev 26:08

I have not been working yet. I've had interviews and had zoom interviews and tried to do presentations on zoom and all that stuff. And so waiting to hear back which show I'm going to get so I have not jumped into that world yet. All I can say is that I have a lot of friends that have slowly trickled in and just hearing their stories. But as far as I go, I've been actually not wanting to be the first person back. I do don't mind. I don't unfortunate that I don't need to panic and get back to work right away. I'd rather have a couple other people on shows be guinea pigs, and then let's see how that goes. And then come back. I personally like to stay in state them.

Owen Shapiro 26:45

Yeah, it's scary. It is very scary with everything going on. So that's all really the questions I have for you today. Thank you very much for your time. All right. Thank you.