

Inside The World of Production Design with Jourdan Henderson

Owen Shapiro, Jourdan Henderson

Owen Shapiro 00:04

Welcome to Kino Society with Owen Shapiro. Today's guest is Jourdan Henderson, a production designer who began her career in Austin, Texas, working her way up on films such as Spy Kids, two and three man of the house and there will be blood. She has also art directed on several projects, including Huntsman Winter's War Transformers last night, and Manchester by the Sea. These are all definitely big movies, and I'm thrilled to have her on the show today. Can you tell us a bit about yourself?

Jourdan Henderson 00:41

Sure, I'm Jordan, I've been working on films and commercials since around 2000. I started out in the production office trying to figure out what I wanted to do and made my way to the art department. And I've been doing that ever since. And I've done a few jobs in the art department finally landed as designer. And just yeah, I'm one of the lucky ones who's only had to do that and didn't have to hold a second job to do it, I was able to make a living in this business and stay with it.

Owen Shapiro 01:12

What made you want to join the film business?

Jourdan Henderson 01:16

When I was a kid, I always watched movies and TV shows. And I would always watch a lot of the behind the scenes things. And I found it really fascinating. All the work that went into it and all of the fun and the camaraderie that I saw behind the scenes. And so it was something that I knew I wanted to do. And then I grew up in a small town. So then it was a little bit like that wasn't a real job. But when I got to college, they had a film program. So I immediately joined that. And and that's how it went.

Owen Shapiro 01:45

So you went to college in a in your own small town, and then you came here or did you go to college,

Jourdan Henderson 01:51

I went to Texas a&m in Corpus Christi, I moved I moved around a little bit. So high school was a small town and they just didn't encourage, you know, creative fields as much as like get a real job kind of idea. And so I'm glad I didn't listen to that. And as soon as I saw, like, I moved to a bigger city, and they had a film program. And it made more sense. Like why would you have a film program if that's not a job that someone could have? So So what was the transition, like,

Owen Shapiro 02:20

from your old education to the actual industry,

02:24

um,

Jourdan Henderson 02:25

I will say I went to school at a weird time where things were transitioning into digital. And so a lot of the things that I learned in college weren't necessarily practical, practical for when I got my first job and film. I mean, I learned a lot of theory, a lot of academics for film, and then a little bit of production stuff. But like, you know, my first editing class was on deck to deck machines that people don't even use anymore. And then, as I was graduating, I was using some software and doing those kinds of things. So as soon as I got on a job as a set PA, it felt like that was four years of college film classes in two weeks. Like it just was a whole different experience. Yeah, that's

Owen Shapiro 03:14

that definitely makes sense. We actually had a another production designer last time, and she went to school for architecture. So you went to school for art design, what's really what kind of advantages is art design have in production design over architecture?

Jourdan Henderson 03:30

Um, I mean, when you go to school for architecture, we have a lot of people that become set designers that went to architecture school, because they are drafting, they're just drafting differently for film sets, and not practical things that need to last forever. I actually just studied general film production, not specific production design. They didn't have that option. And I didn't know that that's what I wanted to do at the time, I will say, I think my, at least my college experience for film was probably limiting. And Had I known that I wanted to do this, I probably would have chosen a school that specifically has production design as a major, like UT or, you know, USC or something like that. But I just sort of was in a place where I wasn't sure about that yet.

Owen Shapiro 04:16

What's the process of production design in like, how do you do things in your current job.

Jourdan Henderson 04:25

I first start with reading a script, and then I usually meet with a director and we then kind of converge on the ideas that he or she would like to convey and the ideas that I've kind of come up with or how I've interpreted that script creatively. And then there's a lot of reference research, just concept ideas. Sometimes we actually have concept artists on to start kind of blocking out some ideas, getting some things kind of getting a cohesive environment and you just kind of start going that way, like each set, you take one by one and just add layers upon layers until you're into the full on production.

Owen Shapiro 05:09

So how does art design fit in with your production side? Yeah, so

Jourdan Henderson 05:13

set design. So once those concepts are realized, and we have a space, whether it be a stage or location, you survey those locations with size and specs, and ceilings and weight and all these things. And you either have some concept art, some reference art, some things to get them started. And they would then take it to give you a floor plan and idea, you start doing elevations of walls ceilings, and as

they're drawing, you are guiding them, you're checking things you're discussing things, they will see problems that you may not because they are more technical, because those are the drawings that then go to construction to build. So you do have to have an aspect of realism, not just like, hang that thing from there, because sometimes, that might not work. So you have to collaborate with set designers and construction and art directors and designers.

Owen Shapiro 06:08

So most important thing in it is teamwork, right?

Jourdan Henderson 06:11

Yes, for sure everybody's got apart, not one person can do it by themselves.

Owen Shapiro 06:16

Then you work in many larger, and also some indie works, what's the difference is working one or the other? What do they give you like some kind of creative freedom?

Jourdan Henderson 06:26

Yeah, for sure. The smaller ones, you do have more creative freedom, you're more collaborative, you're more collaborative with all of the higher ups, the producers, the director, you're just more involved, because there's less people, and everyone's trying to make it for less money and be creative. That way, when the big budget movies, they can be fun. But there are so many people involved that it can sometimes feel a little bit like you're just going to work and you're a cog in the wheel, because you have your thing, it's not that you don't have responsibilities and small things to take care of. And they all plug into the bigger picture. But, you know, at the end of the day, you're at least I feel more connected to the smaller picture where I'm involved with a smaller group of people versus being one of sometimes two to 300 crew members that I've been on shows where all of a sudden, you meet someone later, and you both worked on that show and never knew each other existed. So it's a little bit of that.

Owen Shapiro 07:28

So yeah, when you watch a smaller film be worked on you can see something in the background, say I did that when you watch a bigger movie, it's kind of drowned out by just everyone doing something different.

Jourdan Henderson 07:39

It can be Yeah, and the bigger movies also have tended to gone very visual effects heavy. So there's a lot that I personally I think visual effects is cool. I know it helps. But when it crosses a certain level where it's, you know, 80% visual effects, that's not as enjoyable for me, I like to really build things and get in there practically instead of just staring at a green screen. So that's, that's also a difference. It's sort of like we build partial sets, and then paint things green. And that's, it depends on what you're doing. And if you really love the project, and that lends itself to it. But if it's just a big blockbuster, they're cool. But like, for me, I like to do things that are a little bit smaller.

Owen Shapiro 08:26

So how is production design evolved over time.

Jourdan Henderson 08:31

I mean, the budget levels, just from the time I started, movies that I even knew about weren't necessarily these huge, hundreds of millions of dollars, like there was there was a nice little happy medium in there. For me, that was like the 40 to \$60 million movie and those, those were the ones that have. Ultimately, they're not that many of them left, like you're lucky if you find one that's in that budget range. Right now it feels like everything's under 20 or over 100. And that really does change how things go. You also have a lot of people who because of visual effects, don't understand the cost of visual effects. So everybody just thinks it's a magic one you wave and they want to go I want to, you know, I want to \$50 million movie, but I only want to pay 10. And that doesn't quite work either. So there's a little bit of this like, kind of an annoying sort of struggle you start when you do movies now, where you're budgeting before thing, or you're creating before and then comes along the budget and those things don't line up. And so you have to play this kind of Jenga game with all the departments and the creatives to make everything actually work and a lot of time gets spent on that which can be exhausting.

Owen Shapiro 09:49

So there's this just this creative disconnect or budgetary disconnect, in realistic expectations between the creators and the people that actually More so have to work on on the project.

Jourdan Henderson 10:02

Sometimes, I mean, not all of them, but a lot of things like, I have an experience now that I can tend to read a script and throw a ballpark in my head just like, Oh, this is probably this budget range at least. And then if I see some concept drawings, and then that kind of dictates like, oh, they're thinking way bigger scale this, this version. But then when you're kind of told, oh, we haven't given a budget yet, but we think it's this ballpark. And you know, those things don't line up. But your trains already headed creatively, like producers and directors want this thing. Eventually, it all comes to a way there's a political part of it, where you can't just go No, you can't have that you have to be creative and understand and do the work and show it on paper before you can have those conversations. And then eventually, there is some sort of like, come to Jesus meeting of like, how do we get on the same page and make this work?

Owen Shapiro 10:58

Yeah. So when given less budget for a movie, you have to get more creative, right? When you're given?

Jourdan Henderson 11:05

Yeah, for sure. Yeah. I mean, sometimes it also depends on where you're shooting. La is more expensive. So a lot of films go out of town, they chase tax incentives, because sometimes you can get a little bit more on screen. But yeah, it's it's definitely, you've got to be really creative. And some of those super small movies, I mean, yeah, you choosing your locations is much more important. Because if you can find something that can work and make it look like bigger budget than what you have, and you don't have to do too much to it, then you that's a win for you at that location.

Owen Shapiro 11:40

So you like the the 40 to \$60 million movies, because you still get these a lot more to work with. But you're not completely drowned out.

Jourdan Henderson 11:52

Yeah, I feel like it's a it's a happy medium, like it always tends to be. People seem happier, people don't seem as stressed out and crazy and pushed to their limits on those kind of in the middle ranges. Yeah, once they're really big, it's just it, it feels a little bit like a snowball, and you're just like hanging on like, okay, we're gonna make it through at some point.

Owen Shapiro 12:15

So any other any particularly works that have inspired you. Any particular movies that stand out as good production design to you? Hmm,

Jourdan Henderson 12:26

um, I'd say, I mean, the last couple years, I have noticed, I mean, anything that's, um, like shape of water was very heavily production design. And that was I don't see a ton of like, movies like that, where it's thought through all the way like, it's not that people haven't thought through. But like, when you want Have you seen that movie? Yes. So, you know, the colors were thought out for the sets for the costume, everything, everything was together. And everyone had to work together to create a full vision. And I feel like films like that really inspire me because they, that becomes a full work of art. And it's not that other films can't be but you know, everybody has their own department they're doing it comes together, it's fine. But films like that I can see like, the full scope of everybody working together to get one vision that somebody had. And when it works, it's it's just it sets it above anything that you've seen.

Owen Shapiro 13:28

Yeah, I do have a few narrative issues with that movie. But it looks really really good. It is a very, very good looking movie. On the contrary, are there any movies have stood out to you as just not good production design?

Jourdan Henderson 13:42

Yeah, so movies where I've noticed that characters and set dressing for their personal rooms don't match when characters and like, there was a character that had a painting, and I didn't think that was a painting that she would own based on the character that they had built up into that point. And so I think it's distracting when it feels like maybe homework wasn't done to really understand the character before people just start dressing a room, because those that's very distracting to me when I feel like a space doesn't match who the person is.

Owen Shapiro 14:16

So maybe it was a disconnect between the script and the production design.

Jourdan Henderson 14:22

It could be that or the you know, there's a set decorator that also does those things. So everything that's on the walls, that's, you know, the designer ultimately has the final say, but you have a decorator who is putting things in there and and maybe they thought it would work but for me, certain colors don't work when I think it didn't match. Like that person wouldn't have this or that. That particularly sort of makes it loses me for the movie like then I just don't focus on it because I feel like it wasn't thought out Well,

Owen Shapiro 14:55

about your works. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe that you have been nominated for a Directors Guild Award

15:03

for Art Directors Guild Award,

Owen Shapiro 15:05

Art Directors Guild Award. Mm hmm. So do you have any of your any favorite work that you've done?

Jourdan Henderson 15:14

Yeah, I think there will be blood is one of my most favorite movies that I worked on.

Owen Shapiro 15:21

I love that movie so much.

Jourdan Henderson 15:23

It was a good one. I was not the designer on that. But I helped a lot. We were very particular in making sure that everything we did was accurate for the timeframe. So we have old old like 1800, Sears catalogs to double check that his shaving kit, his that everything, the wallpaper we were researching to make sure those patterns actually existed and who designed them and what I mean, it was down to the amount of research to just make sure that we legitimately got that right. Including oil pipes, because we actually did use real ones that we would, we found not all of them, but a lot of them were and we found we worked with a lot of oil, people out in Texas and went and got very heavy, heavy things and made sure they were right, and that those parts existed. So that was I just think that was far as creatively being involved in creating that world. That was a really special experience. And you know, we were out in the middle of nowhere. And so the crew really was close. And we only had one bar to hang out together. And so everybody knew everybody. And it just was like it felt like that movie experience that people kind of think that we live in which every now and again, you get where it feels like you went off to camp and made a film with your friends. And it was really great. That's kind of that one was really particularly special.

Owen Shapiro 16:54

It definitely paid off. It's one of the honestly, it's one of my favorite movies period. Yeah. So that was you mentioned that that was a particularly entertaining movie to work on. And also, are there any others that stood out to you as the knotless? particular?

Jourdan Henderson 17:11

I mean, they all have a different vibe, like I will say like working on Transformers was a hard show that is a hard environment. It is demanding. It is not necessarily fun, per se. It's long hours and deadlines that seem to be crazy. I think that's also why the smaller movies kind of feel like they can be challenging with deadlines, but they're just not as soul crushing. To the degree that I've been lately. I'm just trying to think of everything I've worked on. Lately, there have been a lot of projects that have started up and shut down. So I've been on a few of those. So I always forget because there's movies that I work on. And then they don't they don't go anywhere. So

Owen Shapiro 17:59

you're not having fun on transformers and you are having fun and there will be blood. I think we should be having fun more movies to take the quality.

Jourdan Henderson 18:07

Yeah, yeah, exactly. Yeah, I guess too. It's like your mind like I when I worked on a movie that's that level, like a transformers. To me that's like just a product. It's not something I'm personally invested in. Like, There Will Be Blood felt like I was invested in it. Manchester by the Sea. I was invested in it. And

Owen Shapiro 18:27

I'm anxious about

Jourdan Henderson 18:29

things that happened. Those are the ones that like and I think it also is because you have a story and you have a script and you have characters and you have things that mean more than digital robots.

Owen Shapiro 18:39

Yeah, I don't even I can't remember the story of tried to seem like four trains, three Transformers movies? I don't know. I can't remember the story of one of them. It's Yeah, there were a lot of explosions. That's

Jourdan Henderson 18:51

it. And that's what they're and they're good for those things. I mean, there's a spot for those movies for sure. And I think it's worth it. I'm glad that I've worked on all the levels of films because it did at least show me that, you know, I know what sort of level makes me happiest. Because Yeah, when you're starting out, all I wanted to do is get the next the bigger movie, the bigger movie, want to just keep climbing that ladder. And it feels like at the time that that's supposed to be your goal is the bigger movie, the better for your career. And that may be true for some people, but it just felt like great. I can do these big budget movies and sometimes they're great and they're great people on them. There's not it's not like it's all miserable, but it's it's just a different beast. And I'm glad that I did them because it just shows that like oh, I I can find I can now choose levels of films that I enjoy.

Owen Shapiro 19:46

That does seem very logical. So now with the new virus in place, things are pretty difficult. How have they been going for you? I know that one of your projects was on hold about maybe some other projects.

Jourdan Henderson 20:01

Um, so there was when everything happened earlier in this year I was on a Sony movie called fatherhood, I was doing some additional photography for that. And we got shut down at like, 5:30pm, the night before the first day of shooting. And that one actually did come back this summer. And we did shoot it in COVID times, it did look differently, we ended up moving everything to the Sony lot, only. So every location I had, I then had to like, figure out how to make the commissary on the Sony lot become an airport lounge and how to do this and that. So we really had to change things. And it didn't make working more difficult. They did it very safely, I will say they did set a high bar and that was appreciated. Yeah, crew getting tested a couple times a week, color coded systems, we had people all over the place cleaning and spraying and our sets had to be fogged and sequestered from people for three days before shooting, and it changes it changes the game on how you work for sure. And then as far as other projects, I had two other jobs that I was set to design. Both have paused for what I can only imagine is indefinitely for right now. Because there's no new dates for when that would pick back up. And another film I was prepping went to Toronto, it seems

Owen Shapiro 21:35

to be happening a lot lately. So do you think that these new set requirements and having to film it only the lot? Do you think that's going to affect the movie in any particular way? Do you think you're going to be able to recreate it? Well, in that limited space,

Jourdan Henderson 21:50

um, for that, because it was additional photography, it'll work fine for what they did. I don't think that full movies, unless they're only stage set bill movies, which is rare. I don't think that that will be able to work. And I know that productions are getting back out in the world. And in doing things, it's just in a different way. And it's more you know, it's more costly. It's more people have concerns and the requirements. And so I mean, every day it kind of changes, we've gone through all kinds of rules, we have a union guidelines she'd have called the Safeway forward on how they would like things to be some of those practices seem like things we should maybe keep up and down right now for sure. I mean, people want to start things happen or certain shows, because COVID is expensive on a production. A lot of shows that have smaller budgets may not be able to add that line item of however much it's going to cost to deal with COVID for the crew,

Owen Shapiro 22:49

what is next for your, for your career,

Jourdan Henderson 22:53

I am really focusing on getting more design jobs. I do have an agent. And it's it's been great to have that that is a step in the right direction. I have been able to design a few things here and there. And hopefully that'll continue to happen. just hoping, yeah, more projects come back, people start working again safely. And we'll see more design jobs. That's my goal.

Owen Shapiro 23:21

So about the safety requirements, do you think that a lot of this should be kept for the future, just forever?

Jourdan Henderson 23:29

I mean, it's always nice when people say like, Hey, we're only gonna let you do 10 hour shoot days. That's always nice. Just because I think over the years, the hours that we put in are, you know, sometimes pretty dangerous. I've definitely been on commercials where we've, they've worked crew so long that people have had accidents. I think that that sort of minimizing, you know, we don't need to work 16 hour days, that's completely unacceptable. I do think that that's a problem. And I really hope that this sort of helps people see that and cut back on those hours. I don't know if I'm super hopeful about it. Because I know the people with the money, always win and push harder. So we'll see.

Owen Shapiro 24:16

All right, thank you so much for your time, and that's f6

Jourdan Henderson 24:20

All right. Well, thanks so much.