

Lauren Polizzi, art director

Lauren Polizzi has worked in the industry for more than thirty years as a set designer and art director on such films as *Jurassic Park* (1993) and *Star Trek Beyond* (2016). She has also taught at the American Film Institute in Los Angeles for more than fourteen years. In what follows, she shares her experiences with the shifting workplace dynamics that have resulted from mobile production and increased financial pressures.

What does an art director do?

Art directors are the “first officers,” if you will, to the production designer. They assist in the conception and management of bringing an entire film’s sets to fruition, from concepts to working drawings, and from construction through filming.

Art directors, and often illustrators, are hired soon after the production designer, and we begin with reference materials, simple 3D models, and/or loose sketches. Getting from there to working drawings requires many additional sketches, illustrations, models, and action plans as well as meetings with numerous department heads, all with the goal of developing the designer’s initial concept into a working set of plans that serve both the director’s needs and the shooting company’s. At the same time, we’re making presentations to the studio, the director, and the art department. We’re developing construction schedules and creating budgets. Art directors also meet with a number of other departments, including special effects, visual effects, grip, lighting, props, and set decoration, to develop a

cohesive way to achieve each goal. Sometimes those meetings inspire new ideas, and so it's back to the drawing board, and the process repeats.

We'll meet with producers and assistant directors to determine when each set is needed and where. We'll then work with set designers to finalize the working drawings for construction. When those documents are ready, we hand them over to construction and other departments, and then supervise that project's progress. When the crew gets there to begin shooting, we'll be there to make sure they have everything they need. If the director and crew are satisfied, we leave to go get the next thing ready. If a set transitions in any way, say there's a "before" and an "after" condition, then we need to be there to keep tabs on any alterations. In short, we talk with a lot of people, propose a whole host of ideas and solutions, answer a lot of questions, and keep all the plates spinning smoothly. There are many, many moving parts at any given time.

What does your typical working day look like?

For me, a typical preproduction day will start between seven and eight in the morning. I come to the office and check in with my set designers, model makers, and illustrators to make sure they are on task with all current information. Once into construction, my day will typically start at seven o'clock on stage or location to guide any developments, and make sure that everyone there is equipped with all the information they need. Then it's checking back in repeatedly with everyone else, to keep it all moving forward. My days will last anywhere from six in the evening, in the very early stages, to nine o'clock or later when things really get going. It just depends on what's needed for the next day. Sometimes there's so much happening in so many places that there aren't enough hours in the day to feel on top of it all. It can feel relentless and daunting, but it always seems to work out.

So you are doing both design and management? What's the balance between the two?

People don't realize how many decisions go into designing environments for a film, even for a small, simple set like the room we're sitting in now. Somebody has to figure out how the action will work in the set, create a plan, pick the materials to use, decide on the colors, and so on. What kind of lighting elements should we provide? Built-in overheads? Shall set decorating provide lamps? What about windows? Where should they go, and what shall we put on them? Blinds? Drapes? What does the DP [director of photography] need? Is this wall going to have to go away so that the shooting crew can get the camera angles it needs? Those are the kinds of puzzle parts to creative design that I really like. But I like the managerial part, too—the meetings—it's a big part of it. When does the set shoot? How much

time do we have? Who will draw it? Where will we build it? Which department will provide which pieces? Can we purchase any of it, or repurpose any pieces of previous sets? Is there enough money to accomplish what we want? Art directors juggle all of that, but even that has its creative aspects, too. I enjoy it—at least I always manage to say that in retrospect!—but it can be a very stressful position, as things often have to happen quickly. People can get nervous, and sometimes testy. Managing personalities is a big part of my day as well.

Can you talk about your relationship with the production designer?

Each designer brings his or her own design preferences, workflow, and personality to each project. I come on board to support that designer and try to work within their methods, plus offer mine. It's important that we understand one another, that we work in tandem, with easy and open communication. We have to create and share so much information, and for so many hours a day, we'd better have a good rapport. If not, it can all go downhill quickly. It's key, and that goes for working with everyone on the production. When we each head off in different directions to oversee things, we need to know we're on the same page. The designer will count on me to figure certain things out on their behalf, anticipate trouble spots, and then keep them posted on all developments. It's a real team effort to keep it all moving forward, and stay flexible, but with a cohesive end goal. And on productions with multiple art directors, it's even more essential, as things can easily get missed or overlooked when everyone thinks that another person is taking care of it. Smartphones have helped here—it's so easy to make a call, or send a picture for explanation. As long as you're in a place with good reception!

Are you usually engaged in production for the entire shoot?

My involvement depends on the size of the production, its budget, and where things stand in the schedule. As a set designer I often finish up long before production is done, as the drawings must be done ahead of construction. As an art director, I'm there for as long as what I'm in charge of is still in development, or shooting. I might last the entire run, or I may come onto a show a bit later, as the sets I'll supervise may not shoot for a while. It just depends. But once my sets have shot, I'm done, wherever that lies in the run of the whole production.

What are the frustrating parts of the job?

There are countless frustrating aspects of the job, and I think I've covered a few of them. But the first on my list would be negotiating my rate for a job, and we negotiate every time we take a show. The union negotiates with the producers

for a scale rate, a minimum, but does not negotiate for individual members' rates. But as you grow in experience you want to be compensated—and dare I say *appreciated*—for that experience. There are different ways that productions go about deciding what they'll pay you, and those always seem to change. But often you're simply told, "We're only paying scale," or, "We won't pay you more than what you made on your last job." So that rate could last for years.

Another frustrating thing that I always find somewhat amusing is what happens early on, with just about every show. There's an introductory production meeting where we all are introduced, and the producer tells us how happy they are that we're all here, that we're the best team in the business, and how much fun we're all going to have. But not long after, we might get called into their office and pointedly questioned as to what the hell we're doing with our creations and/or budgets. Like we're out of control, or trying to take advantage of the company. What? Just a little while ago I was the best in the business! Ha! I well understand that there's a lot of money at stake, and that they are in charge of keeping track of it. I appreciate that making sure it's being spent wisely isn't easy. But some go overboard and make the process antagonistic—they want to make sure we know who is in charge, and that we're being watched. The best ones are firm, but listen to your reasoning, and then make guiding, informed calls. It's important that we all have a contributing voice and are not just told "no" over and over.

Do you have an agent who represents you?

As an art director, I do not have an agent. A few art directors do, but most don't. It hasn't been necessary for me.

Is negotiating for yourself stressful?

It is for me, and it never seems to get easier. I'm always wary of the process. You never know who you'll negotiate with, their demeanor or their role within the production, what they do or don't know about you. I usually negotiate with a production manager or producer, depending on who is already on board in production. And each one seems to know beforehand what you made on your last show. They all say they don't, but they do. I went to negotiate on my most recent job, where I knew the producer from a previous show. I went in expecting to have some time to talk with him, but he said this time they were doing all negotiations through the controller—he wouldn't be involved. I had to do it all via email. So I sent the controller my requested rate, and he then passed it on to a representative at the studio. I heard back by email that the rate was denied. That's not exactly a negotiation, nor very personal. It became a fight just to keep my rate from the previous show. I almost had to turn it down. But we did reach an agreement—after a third party got

involved on my behalf. Afterward I spoke to other people in my department, and it was clear that many of them had endured a difficult fight as well.

Are negotiations becoming more impersonal and less involved?

I think so. You are an independent contractor up against a corporation. Asking for anything above the scale rate is done at your own risk. And anyone on the other end of the conversation can just say that the studio said no. This is the first time that I experienced such a curtailed negotiation, so I will have to wait and see if it will be a trend or not. It's tiresome having to go through this battle each time, which was only made worse this time by communicating only through email. Making your deal with the producer sets in motion how you will communicate with that person over the course of the show. You begin a relationship—for better or worse. As much as I've disliked negotiating my rate on each show, I have at least appreciated this dynamic. As it becomes more impersonal, you have to make quicker decisions because there's no relationship to leverage. You need to decide to take the wage reduction to have the job or walk away in hopes that another offer comes your way. You sometimes have to make quick calls, and gamble on the results. It's stressful—this is your livelihood at stake.

How do you find jobs?

Fortunately I have worked with a lot of people who seem to like my work, and I've been at it quite a while, so my name is fairly well known in feature art department circles. I'll put the word out to my friends when I'm available and looking for work. Also, the union has what they call an availability list, so as soon as you are out of work you can elect to be put on the list as "available for work" if you want to be. But the union does not find the work for you. Anybody who is hiring can request this list. At this point in my career I get more calls from friends looking to hire someone than from people making cold calls off the list. And I get calls to make recommendations on others, too. But it depends. Job offers tend to come in waves—it can be quiet for a good while, and then suddenly a number of calls come in. My last break was longer than I anticipated, about four months. It happens. There are lulls. It's why it's important to save money. During my days of unemployment I can relax and have a vacation. And when I'm ready, I'll email friends and say, "Hey, I'm looking for work again," and hope I get some calls back. Many of my colleagues do the same thing.

Can you usually find work throughout the year?

Yes, mostly. And I think if you are willing to work in television, or travel for features, you can probably work more consistently. There are plenty of projects these

days looking to take experienced people to places out of state. Your options also improve if you can do more than one thing—like, I am willing to art direct or set design, and will work on features or television. I'll go for the project that a) has people I like, or have wanted to work with, or b) sounds interesting creatively. But it's the people I'd be working for that gets the most emphasis when I'm deciding on a show. Who cares if it's the biggest show in Hollywood if you're going to be miserable for the next eight months?

Do you think a willingness to travel is an important professional asset?

Yes, more and more. Twenty years ago, the features I worked on were based in L.A. At least the stage work was based here, but you went on location to shoot other footage. You went to Chicago if you wanted that skyline, or wanted to feature some aspect of that city—if it was important to the story. Now tax incentives mean you might be sent to any number of places to film locations *and* build stage sets. And possibly make that location city look like a completely different place—like Toronto for Los Angeles, or Boston for Anchorage. It can be pretty nutty. When you get into it, into the detail of each place, they're a lot more different than you think!

It used to be fun to pick up and go on location for a period of time, but now I have a house and pets, and it's more complicated. What used to be location work for six to eight weeks is now six to ten months. Some people have families and bring them along, and it's a big move for them. Otherwise they are flying back and forth a lot, and that's tough on people. Relationships can suffer. Because of this, many have chosen to switch from working in features to working in television in order to stay in L.A., as it's more consistently local work. Some have picked up entirely and moved to incentive-rich cities, such as Atlanta, where they can feel settled and somewhat secure about work. Again, it's about personal choices. I'm choosing to continue in features, keep my home base in Los Angeles, *and* be picky about where I go, too, so I have to accept that I could very well have more time off work in any given year. I am unwilling, as yet, to move, and that is my choice. My roots—my family and friends—are here. And, as these things have proven cyclical in the past, I don't believe that any one place will last forever as a work haven anyway.

When you end up in these places, how does the makeup of your department change?

It depends on the size of the production, where you're filming, and how many people you are allowed to take, if any. It can become a horrible mess if you are going to a place that is not used to seeing film crews and you are tasked to find local hires. You may end up needing to bring more people from L.A. because there are no (or not enough) locals who can do the work—especially set designers, as that is a more specific job that requires a good amount of talent and organization. In extreme

cases, you may be left to do portions of the work yourself because you need something fast, and there's no time to find someone in L.A., fly them out, and familiarize them with the project at hand before the deadline. This is a) not very healthy for you, and you can't endure it for long, and b) against union rules, and the company can get fined if it's discovered. Many productions have gone to New Orleans and Atlanta, and there are more and more people gaining experience in those areas as a result. But if you are the third or fourth company coming into a now-popular area, and all the experienced people are already working, you must then hire less-qualified people, which could end up costing you time and money, or convince production to allow you bring more people from elsewhere. That goes for any city.

Is your position at risk of being filled locally?

It's happening in a number of places. For example, the production we are prepping right now is going to shoot in Vancouver, and Hollywood has trained a lot of people up there for quite some time now. There are well established, qualified, and talented people living there. I'm doing preproduction work here, but my services won't be required in Vancouver as there are others happy to take over the position. So I am out of a job when the show moves there. If the producers had changed their minds and were taking the show to a US location instead, I'd likely remain on the project. Again, it depends on the place and the timing.

Which cities have enough local talent that studios can find people to fill the art department?

I'd say the biggest are Vancouver, New York, New Orleans, Atlanta, and, of course, London—London is busy right now. And soon perhaps Boston. A number of shows have been going there. But again it depends on how many shows are in a city at the same time.

What if you just want to stay in Los Angeles?

These days, you will probably have to work more in television, or be satisfied with piecemeal feature preproduction work. As I mentioned, many are reframing their careers, moving, or even retiring. I also teach at the American Film Institute, which I enjoy, and I've been thinking that in another five or seven years, maybe I'll try to transition back to set design and continue to teach part-time at AFI. I might even consider taking a full-time position there if they had one available. I can train new recruits as well or better from home! As more shows are heading out of town, and getting more and more stressful, I'm starting to feel like I may want to make some of those career-based decisions sooner—for my own sanity and comfort level. You spend so much of

your day at work that you can lose touch with friends, lose family time, personal time, and other things that create a quality of life. I don't want my entire life to be about work—as much as I do enjoy what I do. I hear personal relationships can be pretty nice! I'd like to pursue and enjoy other things as well. We'll see what happens.

Moving around the country also poses professional difficulties. You're leaving long-time colleagues behind for a local crew you don't necessarily know.

Yes. I often miss my colleagues, especially when I have to train someone in the way we work. With set designers, for example, it's not just being familiar with a piece of software, like Vectorworks, it's knowing how those drawings need to be created, what our process is, how we build things, and being part of a fast-paced creative team. It's even more difficult for construction, as they need so many more people. And they need to be fast and competent workers. If they aren't trained, and they move too quickly around all that equipment, it can lead to injuries, some serious. And that is not good.

Whether in L.A. or out of state, it's so much better working with a familiar crew. There's a shorthand that has been developed; you're friends. You know what everyone's temperament and talent is, and you all have fun, and can better keep your sense of humor through stressful times. But if I can't take those people with me, I will get recommendations from other local shows and other colleagues who have worked in the area. They'll tell us whom they hired, and we'll start with that list. I have found some gems who are eager and hungry to do the work. They have the skills and enough experience for us to guide them onward. Some new recruits just think working on a movie sounds like fun, and they are only there for that singular experience. Some may have no film aspirations at all. They may be architects or interior designers and want to give movie production a shot, then find it's not really what they want to do. Some of them experience the hours and deadlines and decide it's not what they expected or want to deal with. Some people do end up liking it, and end up putting their heart into the work. That's the point when we know we've just trained another person to take our place!

What do you make of the incentives game? Do you think there are a lot of hidden costs associated with moving from location to location?

I'm sure there is quite a bit going on in this tax-incentive game that I don't know about. Most of us can't fathom how the incentives are actually worth it. I asked this question of our construction coordinator—the same guy with whom I worked on *Mockingjay, Part 1* (2014) and *Part 2* (2015) and *Star Trek Into Darkness* (2013). We spent about \$50 million on construction for each of those films. They sound like equivalent figures until you understand Lionsgate received 30 percent back

from Georgia for each *Mockingjay* film. That's millions of dollars, and sounds like quite a deal! Still, to reach our goals, we also had to bring in more than a hundred additional people *just for construction* in order to get it done on time. Other departments needed additional crew as well. All that travel, housing, car rentals, and per diem adds to the bottom line. Plus, you have to factor in the additional shipping costs to bring in the necessary equipment and goods. It's mind-boggling. Isn't it cheaper to just stay at home? How does this not offset that 30 percent subsidy? I don't see the overall budget. Producers do. They must come out ahead somehow. But to us, it's all additional and unnecessary stress, headaches, training, and trial and error. It's already difficult and complicated work. Why make it that much tougher?

Right now Atlanta is investing a lot of money into their production infrastructure, praying that the filming will stay there. Pinewood has built a new complex right outside the city. I hear it's pretty nice. There's even a dedicated Home Depot on the lot! But Hollywood is fickle, and will shift work elsewhere at any time if it means additional money to them. Why wouldn't they? Many states already have found this out. Hollywood leaves, or isn't generating enough revenue or jobs to justify governments making it easier for productions to remain there. For those of us based in L.A., it gives us a bit of hope that some work will eventually return home, though that's only a partial victory. Sadly, studios have been downsizing their Los Angeles back lots as well. They've been closing their mills, staff shops, scene docks, and other support services we've always counted on—they don't want the overhead anymore. Those buildings have been torn down and replaced with new parking structures and office spaces. Certainly not soundstages. I have no idea who's occupying those big new spaces. Development and marketing divisions?

Television and cable shows now dominate the stages on these lots. I fear that even if features do come back to California, we won't have good spaces for them to use. We'll be forced to use the same kind of limiting and frustrating warehouse space we've had to endure in other states. It'll be interesting to see what happens.

You mentioned the headaches of shooting on location. Can you give us examples of that? What causes additional stress?

Obviously we are under pressure to use local goods, services, and talent. And it is more convenient to do so, for all concerned. It also improves on the production's rebate when your expenses are local. But it can also pose challenges. For example, local vendors are not used to our types of requests, or our timelines, and most vendors don't stock inventory like they used to. It's common for us to order a lot of different material samples to compare their suitability—how the textures and colors appear under lights and on camera. But local merchants tend to offer only limited selections. And for so many of the futuristic sets I work on, we're looking for more

unusual things. So we have to get the things we want shipped from elsewhere, usually Chicago or L.A. if we're in Atlanta. When I worked on the original *Jurassic Park* (1993) in Kauai, just about everything was shipped in from elsewhere. And of course we may need to see samples of things first, but those samples might arrive damaged, or maybe the company makes a mistake and ships the wrong thing, or the wrong color. And because we're doing all this from a distance, it's more time consuming. Delays in shipping are common. And we don't have much time to spare. You can't slow down the production train, so you compromise on things you otherwise wouldn't under what we'd consider normal circumstances.

Then there's the weather. There's a big reason the film business is in Los Angeles, and it's the weather. It's often sunny there with mild temperatures. I'm both frustrated and entertained every time I see a national weather report. I look at Boston, Atlanta, New Orleans. When I see rain or snow or freezing temperatures I think, "How's that working out for you?" When I left to work in Atlanta I prepared myself for hot humid weather, and what I thought would be a temperate winter. Because I like to be prepared, I took snow boots with me—my friends thought I was nuts! But need them I did, and I had to buy additional gear, too. We were building a lot outside, and in open buildings without heat. It was freezing, an absolute nightmare, and I felt bad for all the guys working out in it the whole day. They could barely function in the cold, and equipment would shut down; paint would freeze. Plus you can't build outside in snow or rain. We lost a lot of precious time, and stressed out about finishing our sets on time. Sometimes production can change the shooting schedule to circumvent the bad weather, but often it just comes down to putting more people on more overtime and on weekends to finish. We still lost two shooting days due to ice and snow—that storm in Atlanta even made national news. But the sets got done! I have a plaque on my office wall that reads, "We don't believe in miracles . . . we rely on them."

Are we getting to the point where the whole logic of shuffling the pieces around the world is starting to affect one's ability to be creative?

Absolutely. It's hard for talented people to do their best work while constantly on the move. They're getting tired of it. It's hard to keep your life together when you're on the road that much.

What are the three biggest concerns art directors face?

I'd say time constraints, productivity pressures, and budgets. I often say that we teach studios the wrong lesson every time. It seems we are constantly given less time and less information to accomplish what we need to do. "Well, you had twelve weeks to build the set last time, so now we're giving you ten weeks." And we'll

manage to figure out creative ways to meet the new deadline. For the next project they'll give us eight weeks. Once again, we will manage to pull it off but we'll need more overtime and perhaps produce less quality. But the studios continue to tighten the timeframes without adjusting their expectations. They know we'll produce. They know we don't want to fail. They know we want it to look good. They know we want to maintain our reputations. But at a certain point we have to remind them that their expectations are unrealistic. There are times when we have to say, "No way, it can't happen," as no amount of people or overtime can accomplish what they want. You can have the set look good, cost little, or be done quickly. Pick any two.

If I can add a fourth concern, I would say incomplete scripts on feature films. Sometimes we'll start with just an outline for the film. An outline is often enough to get us started with concept illustrations and initial set designs. But as the director becomes more involved and new script pages arrive, we may need to accommodate new ideas and actions, so set concepts may change in some form or another, or even disappear. If construction has already started, they need to tear down and rebuild. I've been on shows where months of work were wasted because the original action or concept was thrown out for new, updated material. And the schedule doesn't always change, so now you're repeating the process (sometimes several times) but in much less time. It can get crazy. Everyone on the crew is on top of one another to solve problems and get work done. It can feel impossible to plan anything in any kind of mindful, let alone financially prudent, way. There's a saying: where there is chaos, there is cash. It seems increasingly rare to be given the proper time and budget to accomplish the tasks at hand in a well-thought-out manner. We're always going into overtime rather than planning efficiently from the start. Yet somehow there's always money to do things over when ideas change.

What drives the unfinished scripts?

It's hard to answer that from where I sit. If a production has a main actor attached with a script outline and a release date, that's often enough to green-light a project. Our department will start from there. We try to proceed cautiously with a skeleton crew—just the bare minimum to get the work started. If the release date is sooner rather than later, planning and implementation need to happen quickly. There's no time to waste. Sometimes that strategy works out all right. The initial outline provides an adequate framework for us to do our jobs and then expands, and the script adheres to that initial idea. But I've worked on other productions where sets change drastically, and multiple times, and end up costing more in terms of both cash and sanity.

As an example, on *Star Trek Into Darkness*, we had a big opening scene on a primitive planet where all the vegetation is red. It was a huge, complicated chase

scene for which we were going to build a village, a temple, pools, and a landscape that the characters worked their way through and down. They were to run through a forest, down a mountain to a beach, and then swim back to the *Enterprise*. So we scouted Hawaii. But after figuring out how we could make it work, and tech scouting with the director, it was deemed too expensive. Over the next months they cut the scene down to a fraction of what it was. In the end, we went from big set pieces and beautiful Hawaiian vistas spanning much of Kauai, to a 40-by-125-foot hand-made set on a platform in a parking lot in Playa Vista. It worked, and it worked out well, but it was reimagined, re-scouted, and re-budgeted *numerous* times, and also went from what was to be the first set shot, to nearly the last. It's just one example of the time, effort, and money gauntlets we go through on these big productions.