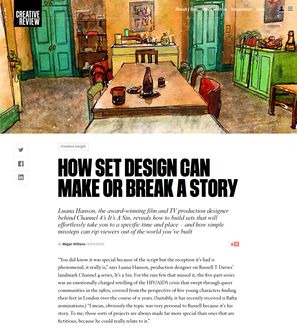


Creative Insight

HOW SET DESIGN CAN MAKE OR BREAK A STORY

Luana Hanson, the award-winning film and TV production designer behind Channel 4's It's A Sin, reveals how to build sets that will effortlessly take you to a specific time and place – and how simple missteps can rip viewers out of the world you've built

By Hugo Williams 10/04/2021

"You did know it was special because of the reception it's had is phenomenal, it really is," says Luana Hanson, production designer on Russell T Davies' landmark Channel 4 series, It's a Sin. For the rare few that missed it, the five-part series was an emotionally charged retelling of the HIV/AIDS crisis that swept through queer communities in the 1980s, centred from the perspective of five young characters finding their feet in London over the course of 6 years. Outdably, it has recently received 6 Bafta nominations[1] I mean, obviously the topic was very personal to Russell because it's his story. To me, those sorts of projects are always made far more special than ones that are fictitious, because he could really relate to it."

A student at the time of the crisis, Hanson also had her own catalogue of references for that time and place, which helped to formulate the world-building seen in the series. Her student accommodation, for example, informed how she tackled the 'Pink Palace' – the nickname for the home of the show's five protagonists, Ritchie, Roscoe, Jill, Colin and Ash. Though Davies wanted the flat to be a real location, nothing suitable could be found in Manchester, where the production was shot.

As such, they built their own set inside an old school, which allowed them to go to town in creating the worn feel of the characterful apartment. "We really wanted to do that beautiful layering of the bed[linen, and things like that," Hanson says, "and you get so restricted sometimes on location in terms of what you're allowed to do and what you're not allowed to do."

Top drawing of the Pink Palace kitchen and It's a Sin: Above, living room set at the Pink Palace. All images courtesy Luana Hanson

To build the world we see in the series, Hanson began by researching the HIV/AIDS crisis, scouring newspapers, books, magazines and the internet to get a feel for the time and place. She then reached out to people who had direct experience of living in, such as hospital staff. The fans-in-use of the hospital sets was even installed by the same people who had laid the floors in Middlesex Hospital, which housed the country's very first dedicated AIDS ward.

"We got lots of props from eBay, collector's places, antique places. Things came from all over the place, rather than just going to places to hire stuff from," she says. "Even the writing on the nurse's station board – we were keen to make sure that was different handwriting or it didn't look as though it was done by the same person," a fatal error she's noticed in cinema.

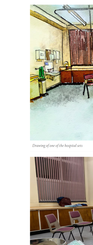
"One thing I'm a stickler for is packaging, because you can bin packaging from the 60s, the 50s, the 70s ... from late places, but it's really worn and knackered, and lot of people just stick it on the set like that, whereas she's didn't. We remade the packaging with that graphic, so it was new," she continues. "So it didn't look like an old tatty cereal box, it looked like a box that had just been bought a few weeks ago from the supermarket."

Davies was as militant about detail as Hanson, something she gathered from the off. "The first meeting that I had with Russell, he brought out of his bag a wine glass, and he said to me, 'that's the wine glass that I would really love to have in our show.' And it was a tiny wine glass, and I said, 'oh my gosh, my mother had one of those.' And he said, 'exactly!' We all used to drink from these small glasses. We didn't have these big goblets that I keep seeing in period films. So that was his first reference, but what that gave me a gauge on was that I knew he was really interested in the detail on the sets, which was brilliant for me because I love detail and getting that right."

Drawing of the Pink Palace set, made by knocking together two grant-made set-ish school building

Most productions, she says, have a hero prop, and in this case it was the gang's pink cup. "Sometimes you find a fantastic prop that's just brilliant and you think, oh where can we put that? We've got to make that really prominent because it tells this part of the story." The cup was so integral and memorable to audiences that there are now knock-off versions being sold online.

Elsewhere, Printaker, the print shop where the character Colin works was based on a real-life printers, Prontaprint, which Hanson recalls being the "new shiny print shop" to go to at the time. "I remember going to Prontaprint in the 80s, and we actually found a guy who worked in one, and he had collected and kept photographs of inside one. So we got all this amazing reference from it ... we ended up printing pens with the [Prontaprint] names, we had and everything. It was fabulous being able to find that research and being able to take it a step further. We wrapped all the reams of paper in the logo and everything."



The Printaker shop where Colin worked, set in an old chemist shop in Eccles

Hanson recalls Callum Scott Howells, the actor who plays Colin, marvelling at the detail on that set – but it wasn't just the cast who were convinced of the work. "We did two shops next to [the printing shop] we did a TV rental shop to the left of it, and then we did a Woolworths to the right," she says. "What was funny was when we were dressing it, we had people going up to that TV rental place and honestly, they were going, I didn't know you could still rent televisions these days!" she recalls. "And we had people walking into the print shop going, oh is this open?"

In another scene set in an estate agent's office – which ended up being shot in the prop master's office after the original location was lost – even the houses being advertised on display boards were era-appropriate thanks to the careful work of the graphic design team. "To me that was really important because they were in the back of shot, but that's what helps create the period of it. If we'd just stuck [images] on of modern houses, it would've looked totally wrong."

Estate agents

Leaving no stone unturned in terms of detail gives set departments the opportunity to dial up other elements, Hanson explains. "You start with researching the period, and then charting to the director and the producers about what they want this world to emulate – do we want this as a realistic world? Do we want it slightly stylised? Which way do we want to go? Do we want it grungy? Do we want it true to those colours that were around then, or do we want it slightly heightened? It's all those sorts of questions."

For It's a Sin, the team was open to edging the parameters of realism. "Ours was slightly stylised I'd say. If you go really back to the 80s, some of the colours we made slightly brighter – particularly on the streets and stuff like that. We just tweaked it a tiny little bit, because ultimately you are making a drama, we're not making a documentary. It also to help convey the mood of what is happening within that scene," she says, adding that the "lighting plays with that as well, whether it's more sombre lighting or it's more joyous lighting and brighter."

Drawing of one of the hospital sets

Bedrooms in the Pink Palace

It's true that the audience wouldn't come close to registering all of the detail that goes into each set, yet when that detail has been overlooked, nothing could be more obvious. Even Hanson's 13-year-old son pointed out the flaws in a film they had recently watched together.

"I hate, which is weird, been criticised for detail that I post on sets. They say, oh the audience never see it, but I don't know. I loathe that saying, because I just think, if it's not there, we will notice it more that it's not there. The point is that it's meant to play in the background, so that it creates the whole ambience.

"I always think a set should never look like a set. And also I think some things can get over-designed – either over-designed or under-designed. They're not helping the acting because really we're there to support the actors. The set is the says. "Unless you're doing some futuristic thing and it's meant to be all about the set, everything should sit back to make it all believable as an overall picture."

Learn more about the individual sets from It's A Sin on Instagram: luanahansoninteriors.co.uk

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