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INTERVIEW: STUART CRAIG

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Leavesden Studios

Three-time Academy Award winning production designer Stuart Craig received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Art Directors Guild in February 2008. Over the last decade, audiences have become familiar with Craig's work as production designer on one of the most successful film series around the world: *Harry Potter*. The average Harry Potter film costs \$280 million to make, taking seven months in preproduction and another seven or eight to shoot. Based at Leavesden Studios, Craig typically employs around 40 people in his immediate art department and can be in charge of up to 200 employees. With the final Harry Potter film currently in production, Craig's talents will soon be freed from the Harry Potter legacy and opened up to new horizons.

When I met Stuart he was in the midst of filming *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince*, the penultimate in the series of seven.

Jane Barnwell (JB): How have the changing directors through the series affected your process?

Stuart Craig (SC): Well each one has different priorities so that has actually kept it fresh for me. I doubt we could've gone this far if nobody had moved on, I mean they could argue that I should've moved on. Each of the books has something fresh, new and spectacular which is a challenge. Chris Columbus in the beginning did two films, David Yates, this is his second film and we've had Mike Newell and Alfonso Cuarón in the middle so it's a hell of a range of different approaches really.

(JB): I know this is an unfair question but do you have a favourite in terms of the overall film and your design?

(SC): What I am doing now is correcting things that could've been better in one and two. There's a legacy that gets passed on and in the first two we couldn't build the world, we couldn't afford it so we went to various locations. Those locations in some ways are unsatisfactory. We went to Alnwick Castle, Durham Cathedral and so on, and the real world is less than perfect; theatrically, it's full of unnecessary

information, extraneous stuff. That has given Hogwarts a very complicated profile, rather untidy in the early movies. So in the later ones we've had the chance to revisit and tidy up and improve the profile. So in some ways, which film do I like the best? This one, the most recent because some of those things have been addressed.

(JB): Can you talk through the process you go through and how the books have influenced that? I understand that you have tried to stay true to the books. Has that helped or hindered you at particular times?

(SC): David Heyman the Producer made a promise to stay faithful to the spirit of the books but in abridging the books the movies have to make an enormous number of omissions. So in that sense it's not possible for the films to be faithful to the books. Where there has been anything potentially contentious or unclear we have consulted JK Rowling.

In the books themselves there is an enormous amount of detail—which is part of their appeal and popularity. Kids adore that detail and have an encyclopaedic knowledge of it, which is an inherent part of the success of the books so we are obliged to stay faithful to that. Jo Rowling has been very realistic about the fact that movies are a separate entity—true to the spirit of the books but they are their own world and if anything we have enlarged her world.

There are very few intimate spaces in the movies. Harry's cupboard under the stairs in his aunt and uncles house is one. We've ramped it up — Hogwarts is enormous, the landscape in which it sits is enormous, we've used all of the highlands of Scotland, Glenn Nevis, Glenn Coe, Loch Shiel are all within the Hogwarts grounds.

What we've done is give a spectacular eyeful – and that's where we've departed, we've ramped it up from the book.

(JB): What did you look at apart from the books in terms of reference material and inspiration?

(SC): The first and biggest thing was how old is Hogwarts? Well, it could be a thousand years old, a timeless institution and there are very few examples of architecture in existence that are that old. There are the great European Gothic cathedrals, Oxford and Cambridge universities so that is where we went. How do you create a world that is that old? So we went to those places and in the beginning we used them literally and ever since we've been emulating that architectural style.

Because they have magic they don't need technology so everything has a vaguely 1950s look about it and I can't claim that was a conscious decision in the beginning but it's implicit in the books. The Hogwarts Express is a steam train and steam trains finished in this country in the early 60s so that sets the feeling of where it is in terms of technology. But it's the most wonderful mix in that they wear jeans and T shirts, use 50s technology, live in 13th, 14th, 15th century surroundings and we are deliberately exploiting those different influences and letting periods clash together in an energetic dynamic way.

(JB): In the Ministry of the last one there certainly appear to be several periods combined in one place – what were your references for that? I know you looked at the London Underground.

(SC): Yes we try and start from a logical point in that if there was a Ministry underground then you are obliged to think of the practicalities of that. So we went to the London Underground and looked at several of the closed earlier stations on the Metropolitan line. The facades on the street and the interiors are all lined with ceramic tiles, because it's impervious and strong. That immediately gave us a credible direction to follow. With magic you don't want to be too whimsical you want it to grow out of something grounded. Then we discovered a lot of the detail (again on the Metropolitan line) of the ceramic tile was classical, cornices, columns, Doric and Ionic. You're influenced by all kinds of things, I was driving up Charing Cross road/Tottenham court road and looked above Burger King and there was a terrific piece of late 19th century Victorian architecture, highly detailed, a kind of earthenware ceramic so I took a photo and came back to the studio and made up an elevation from that.

The Ministry is supposed to be a huge bureaucracy under ground so what we were looking for were thousands and thousands of offices so I used this façade [from Burger King] to give me an elevation of offices hundreds wide and hundreds high and in that way you piece together the look of the place.

(JB): I know you like to try and construct your design around just one or two ideas and to use contrast to accentuate these. Could you speak about how that operates in the Harry Potter films?

(SC): That used to be the principle of the designer John Barry (*Clockwork Orange*, the first *Star Wars*, the first *Superman*) who died tragically at 43 years old. He was a great British designer who had a great wit and he used to say it's best to have just one idea. If you get to three or four that's too many and you're diluting. I've always found that to be very true and repeated it often. Funnily enough on HP because of the requirements of the detail it's easy to lose sight of your own first principle and have very complex sets. We're shooting on a set right now that is very complex indeed and one of the challenges is to give it back that basic simplicity. We have an amazing DOP Bruno Delbonnel and he is managing to light simply but dramatically and giving this confused architectural and prop detail a simplicity back. So to adhere to John Barry's principle is getting difficult on these movies.

(JB): Could you describe how important light is in your design process?

(SC): It's the most important decision really. Where you put the window or the practical lamp. We discuss it, make sketches and models and talk to the cameraman as early as possible. Without light there is no form and so it's crucial. You block the scene in your head with that in mind. I always start with a window, you know when you draw a face you start with the oval of the head and then the next thing you put in are the eyes and it's exactly the same with the set. My first doodle will be a rectangle of a window.

(JB): What about the entrance and exit points? How early do you decide on the relationship between the interior and the exterior and how you make that relevant and possibly enhance the story?

(SC): Yes it's really important. There is always a sense of context. Its situation, where it is and how you get to it. An example of one we're working on now which is very much an interior/exterior set. In fact this is where Dumbledore will die and he falls from the top of this tower to his death below. We have a circular tower with openings all the way round. The physical set is cladding inside and out and camera within and a camera without. This tower 350 feet above the ground - its situation, where it is and how you get to it is crucial.

(JB): How much of your own drawing do you do now you are the head of such a big art department?

(SC): I do hundreds of very rough doodles and then from that to a plan and a section. I prefer to quantify in terms of dimensions and then give them to the draftsman. We have the luxury of a very talented architectural illustrator Andy Williamson who translates that in to these incredibly polished full colour illustrations, which are much more sophisticated.

(JB): What is your approach to the colour palette?

(SC): In this country, we've become very adept at the look of a period film. We're good at pattern and ageing and the effect of the atmosphere on the architecture, the way moss grows the way rain runs and stains it leaves behind. Our master painter is highly skilled at creating these effects and we enjoy it. I am in fact talking about colour. Grey is part of our sensibility and we recognise it as part of our lives (in Europe) and we do that automatically. The cameraman we have now did *Amelie* and *A Very Long Engagement*, which are colour films that use red and green greatly. We have de-saturated the colour within this grey palette and the images now are very black and white, very restrained. So with those films behind him we're making a very exciting film in terms of colour. (Harry Potter 6)

(JB): And how does that work in terms of contrast with the Dursleys, which tends to be more colourful?

(SC): There is colour in the Dursleys world. There is a brash vulgarity there that we haven't denied. Digital grading is a huge factor Bruno spends the first hour of each day grading the rushes. Everything is on the negative – the brightest to the darkest are all within the exposure range but then it is de-saturated.

(JB): How influential is the CGI on your design?

(SC): We are heavily involved with computer generated creatures giants, dragons. Concept artists come and work in this department and they are much better than that than me – so that is a kind of separate world within the art department I don't design those creatures at all. And the other way we use CGI is to extend our sets. More and more we build a little bit that the actors interact with and then what is beyond is computer generated. But we treat that just as we would a real set, we design it and

draw it. Do working construction drawings of it and give that to visual effects and they then construct it digitally. We provide samples, this is the way the paint runs, this is the brickwork. We provide full size samples, which they scan and use to texture their digital constructs.

There is a sense that we design it then hand it over and you lose touch with it for a while but they send back. It is a work in progress for comments and you do get to comment and retain contact with it.

(JB): So it doesn't come back completely transformed from your original intent?

(SC): It can happen but it tends not to. It would be better if we were all occupying the same premises and talking everyday but I'm not sure that's possible.

(JB): How do you design for characters who have very limited personal space?

(SC): That idea of intimate space was quite a theme really because, living with the Dursleys, Harry slept in the cupboard under the stairs. His lack of security was an aspect of his character that we tried to deal with in the early films and in designing the dormitory and his little four-poster cot bed we were very conscious of the fact that this was a refuge for him. He felt more at home here than anywhere else and so we deliberately made it small and curtained it so that it was comfortable. It contrasted the security of that space with the vastness of the rest of the place.

(JB): In the last one Imelda Staunton's office must have been an opportunity to have some fun?

(SC): Imelda Staunton's office is in a stone tower, a circular room, a drum and then we imposed this fluffy pink kitten based world of hers on this massive stone interior, which created a great contradiction. We exploited that and got some fake French reproduction furniture and the decorations look slightly off, slightly brittle and it contradicted the basic architecture of the room.

(JB): Can you give an example of something you are particularly pleased with and explain why?

(SC): I always enjoyed in the early part of my career being part of ambitious films, shot on locations that were a real adventure, like *Gandhi* or *The Mission*. *Gandhi* has lots of design compromises in it, but when it's good it's about building into a landscape and making my designs look like they are part of the landscape they are built out of. I find that the most exciting thing a designer can possibly do. And we did that once on the Harry Potter series where we put Hagrid's hut in a real location instead of the back lot. We persuaded everyone to go to Scotland and build Hagrid's hut in Glencoe in the Highlands (on Harry Potter 3). We built it in glorious sunshine and when we started shooting it rained for five weeks continuously. But it looked great on the screen, we kept shooting through the rain and the cloud shadows added so much, they energised the image. That really stands out as the most satisfying experience of all of them for me.

Now we build it on the back lot and it's not the same; we surround it with a blue screen and then we composite in the background which is fine but it's not there in every shot and it doesn't have the dynamic that the real place had. So without question that was the best experience for me.

(JB): Congratulations on your recent Lifetime Achievement Award. I wanted to ask if awards impact on your work in any way?

(SC): They don't. I really mistrust them. We get them, we go to the ceremonies and stand up there and say thank you very much, it's part of the business and goes with the job, but my best work is buried in my worst films probably. It's a lottery - strange and distorted. So I tend to ignore it. That's not to say I haven't enjoyed myself, everyone appreciates praise and flattery but I don't set any store by it.

About Author: Jane Barnwell is a filmmaker and academic. She is a Senior Lecturer at London Metropolitan University, Department of Art, Media & Design. Her publications include *Production Design: Architects of the Screen* (Wallflower Press, 2004) and *The Fundamentals of Filmmaking* (AVA Publishing, 2008).

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