

IT'S A WRAP

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Rebecca O'Brien & Sixteen Films



British art director
Danny Rogers
on crossing the pond

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Tales from the Art Department

Photography by Adam Van Bunnens - 01895-722748, www.bunnens.com



Art Director, Danny Rogers talks to Tony Allen about dreams of surfboards & chocolate chilli crisps!

Did you always want to work in the Film Business?

When I was a child, the main form of entertainment in our house was watching movies. My mother loved 30's, 40's and 50's films - Fred Astaire, Marx Brothers - all that type of thing.

I remember my parents taking me to the Odeon Marble Arch and seeing films like *The Longest Day*, *The Happiest Millionaire*, *Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid* and *Hello Dolly*. I even still have some of the glossy programmes you got at the movies back in those days. So you can see we were a very film oriented family. I became fascinated with film from a young age but I never really thought about a career in the industry.

So it was art rather than film that was your calling?

I could always draw very well as a child, as can my own children now. In 1977, when I was sixteen years old, we had the Queen's Silver Jubilee and a local shopkeeper asked me if I could paint a Union Jack on his window for the celebrations. When other shopkeepers saw what I was doing, they asked me to paint their windows too. I was completely untrained, but this was my first taste of sign writing and when I came to leave school, I decided to take a sign writing apprenticeship.

As strange as this may sound, one night, I had a dream that I was on a beach and I was sign writing people's names on their surfboards. I talked to my mum about it the next day and told her that I wanted to go to LA. And once I'd finished my apprenticeship, that's exactly what I did.

I was 21 years old. I had a sports bag of clothes, my sign writing brushes and £300 - all the money I had in the world. I bought a one way ticket to Los Angeles and I didn't even know where I was going to stay. As soon as I got out of the airport, I went to a phone box. I flicked through the phone book and found the section on signs. I tore the page out and started going around the sign shops. Luckily, one of the very first I visited happened to be British owned. They gave me a job there and then and I slept on the sofa upstairs.

By 1984, I'd moved on to a larger company and was working on the Olympics when a film art director came in and asked me if I could help out with some props. He needed some glasses etched with some lettering. That was my very first job for the movies. He was pleased with the result and after that, brought more and more film work. I really enjoyed seeing my work on the big screen, so I went to see the guy who owned the sign shop at Paramount and he gave me my first job in the industry - as a sign writer.

How did you go from sign writer to art director?

I then went on to work on movies such as 'Beverly Hills Cop', 'Back to the Future', 'Star Trek IV', 'Parenthood', 'Throw

Momma from the Train', 'The Mummy' and 'Gladiator' amongst many others as well as TV and commercials. My early credits were as sign writer, but I quickly progressed to graphic designer, assistant art director and then art director.

Since those early days, my role has evolved. Of course, I have many years of experience in film graphics, but I also studied drafting for film with Film Design International here at Pinewood. This together with a family background in construction was the perfect grounding for art direction and I've subsequently worked on a range of projects including 'Christmas at the Riviera' (Production Designer, James Merrifield), 'Gladiators', 'Inkheart', French comedy feature 'Mes Amis Mes Amours' as well as commercials for Gatorade & Walkers.

Now, the typical job involves being the production designer's right hand man. The production designer's role is to conceptualise and manage. As art director, mine is very 'hands on'. It's my job to make things happen.



How has the art department changed over the course of your career?

Some aspects of the job have changed a lot over the years. I don't sit down with a pencil and paper any more. It's all done on computer now and I've spent many a night with a bottle of Chianti and the 'Idiots Guide to SketchUp'. Some people are scared of change, but I try to embrace it. I love working with the CGI guys for example. It's amazing how I can create the bottom half of a building as a physical set and the upper part is seamlessly added in post.

Even after all these years in the business, I still get excited when I see my work on the screen for the first time. I'm very proud of all the work I've done but some projects stand out. One in



particular is Spy Game, working with Norris Spencer, Production Designer. I remember helping create the CIA's middle east operations office for that movie and I was really pleased with how it looked on screen. I also enjoyed working on Shackleton with Kenneth Branagh, recreating all the period maps and charts.

I've recently finished working on the new Walkers Crisps commercials with director, Paul Weiland and production designer, Ged Clarke. It was a very rewarding job, but quite a challenge. It wasn't as straight forward as it might look as there were six different products and we had to have props for all six flavours on hand all of the time.



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You're based mainly in the UK now. What are the differences working in Hollywood?

Well, there's the sunshine. But other than that, I really like the working practices in America. You're judged on your merits. If they feel you have the skill set, they're more than happy to give you the opportunity to prove yourself. I would probably have struggled to break into the industry here in the UK, but in America, I was just this young English guy who turned up with a box of brushes and a big smile on his face. They liked that and gave me my chance.

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