



# **-REDHEADED BASTARD-** **PROP CHILDREN** **THE SILENT SHAME OF THE ART DEPARTMENT**

**T** here I was, crouched in the street, watching a team of moving men unloading boxes and furniture from an old-fashioned truck. They were doing a good job until suddenly, one of the men strolled down the ramp carrying a wicker chair painted robin's egg blue. Before I could yell, "Where did THAT come from?" a guy to my right erupted into a muttered litany of impassioned profanity. It was okay: he was a propmaster and it was his job to quote from the International Bible of Creative Expletives on a somewhat regular basis.

As the 1st AD yelled "cut," my propmaster jumped to his feet and began stalking toward the naughty extra, the volume of his profanity increasing with each stride. Before he'd made it five feet there was a new, louder stream of profanity coming down a driveway to my left. It was the movie's director and he was hopping mad.

**"WHO TOLD YOU TO BRING OUT THAT &!@# CHAIR?" HE SCREAMED.**

"It was THAT lady," said the extra, turning to jab a finger in the direction a fidgety British woman standing over on the curb pretending not to be there. Ah. "That lady" was our production designer, in essence the "architect" of our film's look. Unbeknownst to anyone she had arrived on set and quietly directed this unfortunate extra to tote a blue chair out of the moving truck, matching nothing that had been shot so far. Turns out that while she was really into the color blue, she didn't know much about the concept of continuity or the terrible fury of an editor who has been sent footage that doesn't match.

The blue chair incident didn't surprise me because I'd become accustomed to the art department being out of touch with what happened on set. A great example of that disconnect is the time

the production designer on the film *Black Dog* sent a guy out to 2nd Unit to decorate the interior of one of our stunt cars. He carefully dressed the ashtray with cigarettes, ashes and toothpicks. He arranged trash on the floorboard then took a bunch of polaroids to document the layout of the messy tableau before driving back to the office, mission accomplished. Of course, when the stunt guys hopped into the car they stepped all over the art-directed trash and punched the accelerator. By the time the car hit 90 mph the contents of the ashtray had swirled around the cabin and out the windows, but not before going into their eyes. Those stunt guys were ready to kill everyone in the art department. Thankfully, the prop department isn't part of the art department.

Well that's not entirely true. On paper, the prop department is absolutely part of the art department and reports directly to the production designer. But in reality, most propmasters will tell you that their boss is the director, and their primary job is to keep the director happy and to come in under budget. No mention of the production designer. In all but the most artfully conceived films the designer is unable to be on set to filter the director's on-set changes, so the sway they hold over the prop department is generally quite weak.

As a graduate of Georgia Tech's College of Architecture, I was trained in the language and art of design, from theory to practice, and I'd grown to wonder if most film designers had any understanding of what happened on a film set.

What I didn't realize was that after several years of working in props, I'd turned into a technician with a special familial resentment toward anybody working in the art department. As a prop guy I only cared about getting the shot done. I didn't have time to care about the art. Like the crew of a clipper ship, the shooting crew sweated and froze together, rode out storms

and schlepped through 18-hour days. Our captain was the director; the designer was just some faraway functionary who had no bearing on my day-to-day business. Rubbing shoulders with the Hollywood crowd had made me confident and cocky. I was proud to be 'Drewprops' on set, convinced that I understood the craft of filmmaking better than most of the out of touch folks in the art department. **BUT OCCASIONALLY I WOULD NOTICE LITTLE THINGS ON-SET THAT UNDERMINED MY FAITH IN MY COOLNESS.**

A gaffer would turn to me and ask, "Hey Drew, will this couch be for sale at the end of the movie?" The couch was a set piece, I was a prop guy... shouldn't the gaffer know what my job entailed? Then I began to notice that the prop department would show up much later in the credits than the rest of the shooting crew, even though we had been an integral part of the action. What was up with that? Who'd brought the guns? We did. Who'd made sure the briefcase of money was on set? We did. Where was our respect? I was beginning to realize that other people might not appreciate my department as much as I thought they did.

About ten years into the business an art director friend invited me to work for him as an additional set designer on a feature film in South Carolina. My dormant design skills were reawakened on that project, and on the day I returned to Atlanta I was called for a set design job on another project. The production designer was a delightful Peruvian woman who'd hired me after looking through my sketchbooks, and I soon found myself being given artistic control over all the signage and the design of a lot of wonderful sets and set pieces. It was one of the most exhilarating experiences of my life to look down on the shop floor and see all my sketches being converted into life-size bits of reality by skilled carpenters, welders, propmakers and scenics.

By then I'd largely let go of my earlier prejudice toward the art department. They had massive deadlines, tight budgets and fitful flows of information from production. We might not be shooting the movie, but it couldn't get shot without the toys we were making. One night I was having drinks in a swanky Buckhead hotel

bar with the production designer and the set decorator when something really weird happened. The decorator started talking about our show's prop department, and it wasn't nice.

**"BUNCH OF LAZY BUMS," SHE GRUMBLED, FOLLOWING UP WITH A LAUNDRY LIST OF REASONS THAT THE PROP DEPARTMENT HAD BEEN A PERPETUAL THORN IN HER SIDE.**

As she and the designer laughingly traded stories about the failings of prop departments on other movies, I smiled thinly and glanced toward the door, on the lookout for soldiers with machine guns because I was smack dab in the middle of my very own spy thriller. I had infiltrated enemy lines and was overhearing state secrets. Surely it was only a matter of time before a guard would discover the real set designer trussed up in a closet where I'd left him after stealing his uniform.

Caught unexpectedly between two worlds, I could see the bigger picture for the first time in my life. **DESIGNERS AND PROP GUYS, LIKE ARCHITECTS AND CONTRACTORS, ARE OFTEN AT ODDS, YET BOTH ARE THERE TO PRODUCE THE SAME END PRODUCT. THEY'RE BOTH ON THE SAME TEAM. BOTH ARE RIGHT (AND BOTH ARE WRONG), SIMULTANEOUSLY.**

Their worlds are so different that they're unlikely to appreciate all the challenges their counterparts face. Not all designers are clueless about what happens on set, and not all propmasters are deaf to directions from the art department. But as long as they're separated by place and by duty, the prop department will continue on as the redheaded bastard stepchildren of the art department and the shooting crew, because that's what they do best. ☺

