

A PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH PATRIZIA VON BRANDENSTEIN

When we comment on the look of a movie, or on the beautiful cinematography, we are often commenting on what the production designer, working with the director and cinematographer, has put there to be photographed. Legendary designer Patrizia von Brandenstein has shown a remarkable range, from the period settings of *Ragtime* and *Billy Bathgate* to the swank Manhattan interiors of *Six Degrees of Separation* to the weather-beaten and far less sumptuous interiors of *Leap of Faith* and *Silkwood*. In this presentation, von Brandenstein leads the audience through sequences from her work, and lucidly defines the art of production design.

A Pinewood Dialogue moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (October 15, 1994):

SCHWARTZ: Now let me bring out our guest for the afternoon, Patrizia von Brandenstein. (Applause)

VON BRANDENSTEIN: Thanks very much for coming. I wanted to examine four films, one quite recent and one going back some years in my career, and examine some design problems. I almost always set something strongly visual in the first reel of a film. And almost without exception, you can see the credits and the first reel of a film that I've worked on, and I think you get a visual gist. You get the beginning of the translation in each of them. The exception is *Leap of Faith*—that has a revelation in the tent. And we'll indulge ourselves and see more than one clip for that.

The first film is *Six Degrees of Separation*, which enjoyed some success here in New York and in general release. This film, I am happy to say, was dragged back from Toronto by myself and Ian Baker, the cinematographer. It was felt that, because this was an interior film, it would be so easy to film it in the studio in Toronto. I went to Toronto, and indeed they have a very large studio; and I know some of the members of United Scenic Artists have been up there and have seen that. They were anxious to have us and promised us everything. But when it got down to it, how can you make this film in a place other than New York City?

Then there was the problem—because you're

wedded in the film absolutely to an apartment on Fifth Avenue on the Upper East Side and their world, the characters' world. I can tell you that, in my years of making films in New York City, there has been a steady decline of acceptance on the Upper East Side, and they do not want to see us anymore! (Laughs)

We were incredibly fortunate. A consortium of Iranians had commenced to remodel a large Upper East Side building, and ran out of money when their assets were frozen and trouble broke out in the Middle East. So the building had sat unfinished for a few years. They also had the real estate bust following the boom and, money being in short supply, they decided to try and sell the apartments. Well, with ceilings of a maximum of eight-feet high, there were few takers. The apartments were cramped and small. But it was the only building from 105th Street down to 59th that would entertain the idea of having a movie comedy inhabit their premises. Everyone else said not only "No," but "Get out of here, or we'll call the police." I walked many, many times those forty or some blocks, and we looked in windows. We looked in doorways. We implored people that we knew who might have been on co-op boards along that avenue. And it simply was not possible. But I was determined to have that park view.

The building we finally made an accommodation with, with the Iranians, was on 86th, and it was [a] very old building, probably built in 1920, just after World War I. But it had been completely gutted so that they could put some more floors in to get the

eight-foot ceilings. The air-conditioning system was visible, and was plastered over in a very simple way. You can imagine how attractive this was when asking price is a million-and-a-half, two million dollars, and the rooms themselves were cramped.

The director had the wisdom to hire very tall actors, Donald Sutherland being 6'4". You can see the difficulties of lighting this. But it was necessary, and I'm happy to say that Ian Baker, who loathed that apartment upon first viewing—as who would not?—because he had envisioned something grand and beautiful. But he soon lost these illusions.

And we determined that the best way to treat this was to paint everything the same color and have the same color value. So that even though Donald Sutherland was 6'4", we wouldn't see a white ceiling behind his head with a line going across his shoulders. But we would see all of the actors surrounded by the same color. The color is red. There's no question about it. The scenic artists among you will be interested in the formulas that Jon Ringbom, our master scenic artist, devised (involving dyes and God knows how much pigment!) I think it was very difficult to light. I know it was. I heard about it from Ian Baker, from [director] Fred Schepisi, from the actors, and from the studio, who picked up the phone and said, "Why have you painted the ceiling red?" But I was able to defend it successfully. Of course we did test it, and we tested all the fabrics as well. But I'm not saying it was easy to light.

It would've been so much easier to shoot if we had not been, I think, of necessity—landed on the 11th and 12th and 13th floors of this Iranian apartment building. (Laughs)

But I do feel that we got something, a kind of fidelity of place of Upper East Side life. And blessed be the crew that was forced to deal with those spaces, because it cannot have been easy. But we used the center floor as the set, and the floor below was a support floor. And the floor above also a support floor, and we did some insert work on the third level. There were a couple of very small terraces, so we were able to light very minimally through the window a couple of times.

The film continues, telling the story, and as it goes we—again and again, art in many different guises is part of the story. The family involved, the Kittredge family, are—he is an art dealer, and she is his loyal helpmate. The kids, of course, hate it all. But because art is a constant presence in their life—and a very specific kind of art: A classic representational, usually impressionistic art from dead white European males (as the saying goes), and we were very fortunate in being able to have lots and lots of it. People were generous and—because I needed this stuff for, like, three months...it's not like I could rent it so easily. But people were generous, and the skill of scenic artists also played a part.

There's a major scene later on in the film which involves the Sistine Chapel, which was built on a studio on 23rd Street. Looks pretty good. Looks very good, and was lots of fun to do.

I liked particularly working on this film because it's a moral dilemma, and there are precious few films that have to do with a moral question that can be resolved. And it was always planned as a commercial enterprise. It was not a limited release, or considered an art film or whatever, but, rather, appealed to a broad audience. And I know it did well across the country. So I was happy to see that our concerns in New York can be concerns across the country as well. And art and its furtherance are things that are very close to my heart, so I was glad to see that we...because every piece of art, of which there're literally hundreds of pieces throughout the film—and every bit of it was seen; lit, and seen and dealt with by the characters. So that's saying something in this day and age.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [How did you get along with the director]?

VON BRANDENSTEIN: The director is from Australia and knows no rules. He's a great guy, Fred Schepisi. If anybody ever gets a chance to work with him in any way, take it, because he's a terrific guy. He's been making films for 25 years. He made many, many films before he hit these shores. But he's got a wealth of experience in directing and producing and writing. Very nice person, although a little rough around—I mean, he's just a force-of-nature kind of director.

(Laughs) He's wonderful.

Ian Baker was tougher—who has also been 'round the block once or twice. I mean, he's been to two county fairs and one circus, and he knows very well that red—especially all of those reds—is a very difficult proposition.

There are actually about ten different hues that are represented to give the illusion of depth. And "illusion" is the right word because, God knows, that apartment was a proverbial white box. It had no architecture. It had no grace; it had no feeling; and it has damn little now. But it works. It's a cheap old trick, to use many different shades of a certain spectrum section, and to create the illusion of depth and complexity. But it's all smoke and mirrors. And not only was it simplistic in architecture and cramped in space, but I was also hampered by the fact that I didn't have a lot of money. I know it looks more luxurious than it was, but I didn't have a lot of money. And we had to move lots of weight-bearing walls to get the camera hither and thither. So it was hard...

But Ian Baker is—I mean, we were both riding out there on the rail together, you know. At least—and he was—that's the great thing about working on a film where everybody is making the same movie. And God knows, how often does this happen? I love the film because we knew we were taking a chance by putting six major characters talking, surrounded by red, for two hours. But if you can take a chance with someone else, it's not as scary. (Laughs)

And besides that, we did test it. We tested all of it. We also tested the art. We enhanced the Kandinsky with chiaroscuro because we felt it did not have enough contrast. And some of the other pictures were also subtly, very subtly, enhanced.

Now the next we have is another fairly recent film. This film is called *Leap of Faith*. This film stayed in the theaters about a week, no more. And I think this is a classic case. There's a couple of interesting design problems here. The film concerns a charlatan, played by Steve Martin; a bogus preacher. And this preacher leads a troupe of gospel singers (and fellow charlatans) around the great South-Midwest. And he bilks the citizens out of money that they think is going to a

legitimate operation—and of course it's going straight into his pockets. He's not a savory character, and I think there are those who say that probably had a lot to do—the public was not ready to accept Steve Martin as a guy who was quite this bad. There are other things in the film, however.

For one thing, the producers—Paramount replaced the producers about a third of the way through the film, just prior... I'd say about two weeks into shooting. They also replaced the cinematographer. They replaced the special-effects crew, (eventually, at my insistence, because I really felt they were incompetent). They replaced the grip, the gaffer, et cetera.

I think this film started out to be one thing and wound up another. It has a lot going for it. When you see it: it's got a wonderful gospel choir, terrific music, an interesting premise. The charlatan preacher has been going around performing fake miracles, and one night, he performs a real one. And it just scares him to death, because he knows he didn't do it.

Then the studio also got nervous because they couldn't see Steve Martin taking an axe to an eight-foot representation of Jesus on the cross in plaster. They got very nervous about it and insisted that the scene be re-filmed. That is what we did—and, I think, to the detriment of the film.

This film had a terrific director, Richard Pearce, a guy that I've worked with several times. And Steve Martin is an incredibly attractive star. It also had the attraction of music.

Technically, I think the film is interesting because it had black people and white people, in a very small space, in brilliant light, in the exterior scenes in that bus. The scene that you just saw is inter-cut, studio and live. It was shot live on location, and it was also shot again in the studio. And it's very cleverly inter-cut so that the balance of light could be maintained, so that everybody's eyes and mouth are coherent, and can be seen—the white people and the black people. It's an interesting problem, and something I had never encountered before. It happened to be—here's this bus crammed to the gills with not only two different colors of people, but also innumerable

gewgaws and gimcracks, plus the computers. And all had different light levels that were necessary.

So I think the cinematographer who shot this part, Fred Murphy, did a very good job. The other cinematographer was—also, the guy who replaced him—is also a good cinematographer, but is known more for straightforward and commercial work and not poetic interpretation.

Now, a lot of times you know you're working on idiocy and garbage. But I could have sworn that this one was gonna make it! Because I loved it! You cannot imagine the fun we had with that choir, who sang incessantly. Not just for the camera—these people sang fifteen hours a day! They sang, and they danced, and they made us all happy. And we loved this piece of work. We just loved it. And Steve Martin was great. And seven weeks of prep; that's one thing. Changing producers, changing cinematographers. Thank God, they kept me! But I'm very sorry more people didn't see it, because it does have a great deal to offer.

When we made the tent, we designed it to go up and come down many, many times like a circus tent. But I didn't want a conventional shape. I wanted a shape that was cathedral-like. This is a bale-pull tent, and the support system was welded for us. And it really—it looks like a rock-and-roll truss. Because it was two-inch I.D. steel, we were able to hang our lights, of which there were many, on it. And it could be set up and taken down in a very short time. The sequence of putting the tent up was not rehearsed, but was filmed over three days, because it was the first time the tent went up.

The engineering was important, because that field—we were in the middle of the panhandle in west Texas, otherwise known as Tornado Alley. And they did roll through regularly every afternoon that summer. But our tent was engineered for 125-mile-an-hour winds, and I wasn't worried—probably foolishly, because I didn't know too much about tornadoes when I went there. But it was built by some guys in Fort Worth called the Sandony Tent Company; and they are good, believe me. And we had fun with the engineering and working it out. I decided to paint the interior

of the tent shades of blue and mauve as if it were the sky, and the blue neon followed. We had some silver stars of adhesive material, die-cut. Miles of the stuff. And we spent an hour every morning putting up several hundred stars on the top of the tent, which accounts for that little shimmer and glimmer. It's very pretty. Anyway, I loved it. And people who see it do love it. Just not many people see it. So rent it sometime, 'cause it's worth it! (Laughs)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible question about the ending of *Leap of Faith*]

VON BRANDENSTEIN: Badly, because that was what was re-shot at the studio's insistence. And you know, the director worked on it at such a breakneck pace that I think, at the end of it, his judgment wasn't so clear, either. I mean, nobody's could be. But it was felt that the audience could not accept Steve Martin because once he works the miracle—and you see in the foregoing scene, you saw what a charlatan—this crowd, how awful they all are. And one night, on the third night of this stand, he does work a miracle. And he's scared to death because he knows he didn't do it. He knows someone did it but it wasn't him. And he is suspicious that they're messing with his mind.

Well, actually, it's just a man meeting the truth for the first time and trying to face it. And he realizes just how bad he is and in a rage attacks this plaster representation of Christ on the cross with an axe. (Laughs) And it's a very strong and powerful scene, and it was felt that perhaps it was too-strong stuff. And so it was scrapped, and a very sort of nothing ending was tacked onto it and, I think, has a lot to do with its problems.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible question about re-writes]

VON BRANDENSTEIN: Actually, a film that is being screened later this afternoon, *Billy Bathgate*, had its ending changed several times. It's interesting—another film that did not do well. I think—and it's also always rewritten by other people, and sometimes even re-shot by other people if the director refuses to do it. It's not the same vision, so obviously there's got to be a very obvious split. So, I think it's not good practice—

the filmmaker's vision...

But that's what happens when you have test markets, you know? 1,200 14-year-olds on Friday night in West Covina tell you you've done something wrong. Well, you go back and re-shoot it. What can I tell you? I mean, it's the way it is.

The next film that I'd like to screen the opening reel of is *Silkwood*. This film is now about twelve years old. It holds up quite well. It concerned the events of the last few months of life of a woman named Karen Silkwood. Directed by Mike Nichols, written by Nora Ephron—[she] was one of the writers on it.

I think in a design sense, [this was] a very challenging one for me, because no one knew exactly what a plutonium factory looked like. There were very few of them, and those that existed—there's not a place where you're going to drop in and take a tour.

In those days, material concerning the physical representation of these places had just become available. And I trucked myself off to Washington to the national—what had been the archive—the Atomic Energy Commission. And also went to Santa Fe, New Mexico, to Los Alamos, and met a man who had been a chemical engineer and had been one of the original guys in Los Alamos and knew a lot about plutonium production. And he talked, and I drew.

And somehow we did come up with a fairly realistic representation. When you see the laboratory in the coming clip, bear in mind that it is probably two or three times the size of a real plutonium plant. But for the accommodation of the camera—and also, dramatically, to show the isolation of this space—I wanted a double-height space of industrial design.

But everything you see is built. It was built in the Dallas Communications Complex, and the opening was filmed in the environs of Dallas.

You will be struck by the similarity to the opening of *Leap of Faith*, which involves buses coming out of the heat, distance, and over the hill...and in this, the beginning of this picture, you'll see the car approaching—a car approaching the plant in

roughly the same kind of shot.

At the end of this film, I knew a lot more about plutonium production than I wanted to. And I always figured if I could find that out in my living room, what must the truth be? The truth must have been so much worse than what I was able to find out in such a limited way for a film.

Because there were no guidelines, I didn't know how big a glove box was. I didn't know how long a fuel rod was. I didn't know how big a pellet was. But because all of those things had to be seen on camera, there had to be a protocol established. And that meant that the production line had to be designed in toto. Now, I am the least likely imaginable designer for this sort of thing. However, it was an interesting journey, and I much enjoyed myself.

I've been told that it is amazingly accurate, and I can only thank the plutonium angels, and the wonderful chemist, whose name was John Anderson, from Los Alamos, who helped me a great deal—because none of us knew a thing. But because it had to be physically realized, we all learned a lot in a hurry. And what we didn't learn, we made up. So I'm sure that... (Laughs) One of the things that I know is not accurate is the size of the place. The real lab was probably a hundred feet by twenty feet. It is obviously much to the advantage to keep the place as small as possible because there's a negative airflow, which is why you can stand up in the place and actually do it.

And a smaller space is much easier. But dramatically speaking, I think our space works better than a very confined space. And as it was, the cinematographer and many other people complained about the claustrophobic feeling of being on the set, because it's smaller than what they were accustomed to working on. But even as it was, it's three times as big as the real plutonium factory line.

The contrast of the enclosed space—claustrophobic in every way; oppressive; prison-like; absence of pigment; absence of color; a kind of deadening of the senses that takes place in the plutonium factory, which for all intents and purposes could be an oatmeal factory. It could be a kibble factory. It is not—I think the key to it was

the fact that these people were ignorant of the extreme danger in which they worked. And to make them behave normally... I don't think they could have reacted as they do in the film in the real environment. It simply would have been too dangerous. But the emotions expressed are natural ones, and they are inhibited in the factory atmosphere. Contrast that with the pastoral and rather lyric quality of the house where they live—which is only a very little humble frame house. But it is a house where a family lived once.

Karen is trying to make a new family. She is trying to redeem herself by this job in the factory and by her relationships with Dolly and with her boyfriend. And they are trying to make an instant family. And of course, there is no family that's instant. It's only [through] the long, hard, slow way that something like that is created.

I wanted the natural world contrasted with the world of the factory. And again and again, you see the home-y-ness of even a kind of artificial love that is projected by these three characters toward each other. And in the factory, everything—all natural and human emotions are sucked out in the scramble of production and the scramble to stay alive.

I think the film is accurate to the story as we know it, but subsequent to the film we found out a lot of things about Karen Silkwood—things that I knew before the film was made. I think she was not an innocent. I think she had some severe personality quirks, and I'm not sure... I think the film tells a true story as far as we knew it... but I don't think it's the true story. (Laughs) And I must say, I think I'm in a minority on that. But nonetheless, I remember when I went to Washington to the Atomic Energy Commission, there's a huge log that's kept, and they write violations on yellow slips. And [for] the two years she worked in that factory, if you pulled out the yellow slips, [they] always had her name on them. So somehow or another, she was not the heroine that she's made out to be.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible question about the real factory where Silkwood worked]

VON BRANDENSTEIN: It was not. It was the most boring envelope factory imaginable, and the top

two stories were built as a corner piece and simply stuck up there. And imagine our surprise [after] one night there was a windstorm and, in fact, it had just sucked the whole thing up and taken it away. So we redesigned it and rebuilt it. But it's a boring and very simple building, almost like a butler building.

And the top shaft—which would have represented the double-height room—that was built. The exterior of the Dallas Communications Complex was not suitable. But the interior, which was unpainted concrete because we were the first film in there—and we used the architecture of certain parts of the Dallas Communication System, their loading docks and so forth. Those were used almost as is and redressed.

However, all the interior scenes that you see—involving the entry and the bathrooms and the cafeteria, not to mention the lab itself—all that is built.

As is everything *in* it. The glove boxes—[the] first bids on the glove boxes that came in were so extraordinarily high that—I mean, they were really like \$50,000 apiece, which would have been absurd for a film company. So we kept chewing away at the design, and we solved the problem. We made them out of cardboard—they were the flimsiest things imaginable—cardboard and plastic lenses through the glasses. And so it's a very simple approach and a very inexpensive approach. It was just the line itself [that] was manufactured out of spare parts from Los Alamos, and it had some authenticity. But because the parts were scrapped because they didn't work in the first place—you see, we had to get things working so that it would move and crank, and go back and forth and up and down and so forth.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible question about the research process]

VON BRANDENSTEIN: The process involves, both in this film and in most other films that I've worked on, lengthy, extensive discussions and visual aids. That is to say, you come to the film when you are hired to do it with a kind of set vision. One assumes that this is why they want you: because during the initial interviews, you've come forth with

a plan, with an idea about this script that might illuminate or enhance some portion of the script. I think that it is inherent in the material, and I remember on the first meeting—with Mr. Nichols and the writers and the producer—we did bring this up.

But it's not beautiful, it's not lyrical. So that's why we put her on a small farm. So it's playing with the truth, but it is a dramatic truth. So that part was my idea. But the idea of contrast is inherent in the material and was also emphasized strongly, on our first meeting, by Mr. Nichols.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible question about collaborating with directors]

VON BRANDENSTEIN: I adapt it as much as he wants it. It is not a solo flight, ever. At least, one hopes not. It is always—and certainly anything I've ever worked on—it has always been an interactive experience with the cinematographer and the director; and very often, more and more, the producer, because the money involved has become another character, another player. And I don't mean this in a pejorative way. I mean, maybe that's good. Maybe that's good. I think you have a responsibility about it. I think you cannot frivolously ignore that part of it.

But more than that, it certainly has to be...at the minimum, it has to be a triumvirate. Let's hope the director's in charge. But nonetheless, it would not occur to me to design and build a set without the step-by-step assurance and help and approval and a concordance between us. And I would hope that—because I like to use models. And very often, a cinematographer can tell tremendous things from a model. And I think even the crudest and simplest model is better than just a floor plan. So I always try to do one, even for sets that are not considered major sets. But sometimes you can really tell something. And of course, with the technology—visual technology—that we have today, this is a very easy thing to do. We can accomplish one in a couple of hours. It will be crude and it's just Xerox, but nonetheless, it really makes a difference in how he sees space. Some people are not talented in 3-D. One does question the wisdom of them becoming film directors, but nonetheless... (Laughs)

Let us help them. Let us help them. Some directors have a very strong spatial sense and can tell a lot from a sketch. And that's okay, too. But I really do believe, because you move through the space, I think a model is the way to go. And the simpler, the better. And a white model, not a colored one. (Laughs) Because if the design can stand on its own in white space, it has much more validity, 'cause color can fool you. I've been doing it for years.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible question about storyboards]

VON BRANDENSTEIN: Oh, for sure, if they come out of the director; if they come out of the director. If it's some guy in an office just drawing pictures, it means nothing. In this very complex—I did a film. There was a storyboard artist—very skilled, very likable, very nice—who did the most wonderful pictures. But they meant nothing because they were not the director's. And I don't mean that the director has to draw. Brian De Palma does it with stick figures and Xeroxes of his Polaroids. He does it very, very simply. But because it comes out of him, it really means something.

Dick Pearce, the director I told you about in *Leap of Faith*, does his own. It's very, you know—he does his own, and they're always valid. He knows exactly the shots. Remember in the bus where you see the choir through the window and then coming down with the bar of lights on the police car into...going inside the car where the scenes with Steve Martin and the cop are played? I remember that because I remember him drawing it on the plane. (Laughs) And I remember drawing it with him. So I love them and welcome them, and I think they're the best. But I think a director has to be involved—preferably physically, but at least his brain.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible questions about revising storyboards]

VON BRANDENSTEIN: They're usually done quite early on because the director is so busy later. He's involved with me. He's involved with, you know, other people on the film. And usually they're done before, although they can be revised. The film that I did in Arizona last year with Sam Raimi—those storyboards we worked on

until the day they were shot. We kept revising them. But we all had a very clear idea of what was going to happen because of them and, I assure you, extraneous shots were not used at all. He really knew from the moment I met him. I saw storyboards on the wall. So other times, I think, they come later. But if they come later, it's not as good because it means it's not coming out of the director.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible question about script writing]

VON BRANDENSTEIN: Yes, you can influence geography, yeah. For sure. You can design it in such a way that he's got to do it, you know? (Laughs) He's got to go this way, this way, and this way if that's the way the hall goes.

But again, I say, this is not necessarily a good idea. If it comes out of the script, if it comes out of the words and the end of the story, yes. You can help somebody by giving them something that illuminates. But don't do it just because it looks good, because I think the film will not have a fidelity of place. I don't think the designer's ego—it sounds great to say it, doesn't it?—but it shouldn't be involved. And it sounds great to say it, but it's something we all are fighting against. Because, unfortunately, the better you get, the more you want to express the columns and the canopies and the portico and the litter and the train and the feathers and—I mean, you know, it's fun, and it's nice. [But] it's not necessarily what you need for the story. It's a hard discipline.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible question about the title "production designer"]

VON BRANDENSTEIN: There really almost have to be two different definitions. You know, William Cameron Menzies was the first man who had the title of production designer. It was given to him by the studio because, I think, the studio wanted to express how much of an influence and how responsible he was during the filming of *Gone with the Wind*. Since then, it has become a negotiated title on the West Coast. And on the East Coast—you were an "art director."

And just since I've been around, that is to say the last twenty years or so, it has become usual to

call a person a "production designer" if you are the head of the visual effect of the film; if you are the chief of visual technology.

The art director now has become a kind of right hand, and first lieutenant, and best friend—a sort of temporary marriage, if you will. But you want someone to carry out your ideas and to be faithful to them.

You want a technician, but you also want an artistic partner. One hopes they will see the film in the same terms that you do. If they do not, you could change art directors, or they could submit to your ideas. Sometimes an art director that works with me might say, "Patrizia, you're making a huge mistake here." (Laughs) Not often, because, you know, you work together, so you have the same kind of vision. An art director has a fiscal and a technical responsibility that—it gets more important...the bigger the film gets, the more important that part of it is. But in television, even on a fairly sizable production in television like [a] television film, you can still be just an art director, and you will have the top job.

It's becoming more usual to call that a production designer as well. There's a distinct difference. The production designer translates the film visually; cooperates with the director of photography and with the director; represents the film visually; represents the film artistically. And that is your main responsibility. There's a fiscal one, too, but it's an organizational one. Not especially a technical one. And that's—sorry for all the words, but I think it requires that to explain the difference.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible question about who hires the production designer]

VON BRANDENSTEIN: In my experience, usually the director. Sometimes the producer will introduce you to the director. That can happen very often. Or you sort of all know each other, but you haven't worked with them before. Sometimes you will just do something that somebody happens to see. When I did *Sneakers*, it was because they had seen *Silkwood*. And they loved the look of the lab, and they wanted that kind of sensibility. None of them knew me at all. Now we're old buddies, but in those days they didn't know me at all.

I've tried hard to do different kinds of films, so hopefully there will be an exposure and eventually enough people know you, and they call you back. (Laughs)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible question about what she did before she came to film]

VON BRANDENSTEIN: I was a set designer for theater and a costume designer. And I had a very strong ambition to work in films. I was a scenic artist—I worked in television and films. And I worked at The Metropolitan Opera as a painter. I kept wanting to do it and kept putting myself in places where... I told everybody I met, you know....they laughed.... But eventually I met some people who were very influential for me and believed in what I could do. And I also worked on a lot of things nobody wanted to do. (Laughs) And I was cheap, and so they gave me a chance.

And once you have a body of credit—you have some work to show—it gets much easier because you have something to offer. It isn't, as they say, a pig in a poke. So they're not buying something they don't know. No matter how much you might like someone's artistic representations, because of the implications on your budget, you really have to make sure that this person can actually do it. So it's hard to get that first break, and it's just by persistence and luck [that it happens]. But I had an art background and a theater background before I started working on films.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible question about whether she stays through the whole production]

VON BRANDENSTEIN: I do. I stay to the very last day. And unless I have a nervous breakdown, in which case—no, no, no, I've never done that. Yeah, I'm there. I'm there all the time. I'm there all the time. I'm there in the crew call in the morning, and I'm there when they leave at night.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible question about when the set is ready for the cast and crew]

VON BRANDENSTEIN: It will be set up long before they arrive, I hope. (Laughs) Yes. I am there because very often things will change. Very often that teapot that you thought was so wonderful is not. And so there's this blood-curdling thing going

on. But, you know, on the set everything is lovely. But offstage there's a lot of breast-beating going on. So yeah, and actually that's why you want to be there as much as possible. Obviously, if you're doing location work, you can't be, all the time. You have to go and check the locations. But generally, I try to stay until the room is set up before I take off for the rest of the day. And then I return after lunch, and I return at the end of the day, when we all go off to see dailies together. So it is a long day and...with a lot of responsibility.

But I like to be there because I don't trust them. (Laughs) So no, you can't trust them. Even the good ones you can't. I mean, even people that you would trust to pull you out of a chasm of burning pitch, you still can't trust them on a movie set. So just remember that, everybody. I mean, you can't. It's good—just be there. Just—

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible question about changes made during production]

VON BRANDENSTEIN: Yeah, sure. No, you do it as soon as you know about it. If they are uncertain about a design, or if they're uncertain about things, they will tell you. If they have any sort of respect for you, they will tell you. Why? It is to their advantage to tell you as soon as they possibly know. Sometimes they don't. That's because they're creative. (Laughs)

But no, most of the time you know ahead of time, and you do your best to change it. Very often, things can be accomplished in a very minimal way. I mean, they're not going to say, "Let's change the prison to the grand ball." Not in my experience, anyway. (Laughs) And there are changes that can be done. There's a lot that can be done even on the set. You can do it with colors of light, you can do it with a quick paint job. Just change it. It's all right. Sure.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible questions about working with Nestor Almendros]

VON BRANDENSTEIN: It was a tremendous experience for me to work with him, because I had met him a couple of times, but it had never worked out that we could work together. The Nestor Almendros that you saw in interviews—and he would make various public

appearances... he was, to me, even—if anything, he was more charming, more kindly, and more humane in his real life than he was in his public life—because he was shy. But it was a tremendous artistic experience for me to work closely with him. I just have tremendous regret that the film [*Billy Bathgate*] did not get wider distribution, because I think his work is superb. (And I am quite fond of mine, thank you!) It is a film that I think can be seen for quite a while. It doesn't work on every level, but it is a good film. And, God knows, it is beautiful. Nestor did so many beautiful films that this is just one among many. But for me, it's really a high point. It was a high point in my life. So I miss him very, very much, and I think the artistic world misses him, too. So—but I'll get teared up if I start talking about him more, because he was a friend.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible question about whether architects or interior designers have the same skills as production designers]

VON BRANDENSTEIN: That's a good question. I'll tell you, the real problem here is not that the skills are not transferable. But in films, you are telling a story, and that is your primary obligation: to tell the story and to tell it in visual images. Interior designers—that is not what they do. That is not the purpose of their work. I think architects have the same kind of thing.

I think the theater is a very good background for films. I think television is a good background for films because it's a storytelling medium. I think the problem is forgetting what is correct—or even what is pleasing to the eye in the sense of interior design, of making a pleasing environment—and tell[ing] the story. The story is the thing. And actually, when you get down to it, it's the only thing. I mean, that's what we're doing here. We're amplifying a story. So I don't think [training in these professions] serves you well, except that it gives you good sources and good discipline and good tools. And I think every background is a good one. Art is good, and theater is good, and design is good, and graphics is good, and magazine design... All of those things are applicable. But the major thing is storytelling. And that's why, I think, sometimes people come from a purely design or interior design or architectural background, and they don't understand why it

doesn't... because they can make the image, but it's not a translation. It doesn't tell a tale.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible question about whether von Brandenstein has ever considered directing a film]

VON BRANDENSTEIN: Yes, yes, actually I have. Except that's [a] pretty recent and kind of feeble desire, if you know what I mean. (Laughs) I think I was very, very fortunate because I got to do what I wanted to do in this world and what I set out to do. It seems churlish to want more. But yeah, it crosses my mind. But it's got to be the world's hardest work, so I suppose I fear it. If I didn't, I would go out there and be trying to do it, you know?

There is a directorial element to production design. But, I mean, you can see that. So.

But, I mean, one meeting with a studio person would probably send me into some sort of—I don't know what! I'm not sure I could do it. But anyway, yeah, it crosses my mind, but so far I haven't done anything about it, because I'm afraid. (Laughs) I fear.

Ragtime is a film that I made with Milos Forman and Miroslav Ondříček, who—I really genuflect when I... (Laughs) These are people who are very, very important to my development artistically. And they are people that, to this day, I have immense respect for, and I love very much. *Ragtime* was certainly the biggest job I'd had up to that point. It was made in two countries. It was made in England, and it was made in the U.S. I made the part in the U.S., and then I also went to England to assist on the rest of the film.

I began to see a greater vision—that there was a point to all this suffering—in *Ragtime*. And I love the film. The first time I saw the film cut together, [it] was three-and-a-half hours long. And the time flew by as if it were thirty minutes. But at the insistence—the studio, Paramount, already had a three-and-a-half-hour film at that time, so they wanted it cut. And it was cut. And it seems slower at two-and-a-half hours than it did at three-and-a-half. Why is that? Originally, the story was divided into roughly four overlapping groups of people. In the final version, it focused on Coalhouse Walker

and his relationships with the rest of the people in the story and how their lives were all affected by this one event. To this day, I love it very much. It has a kind of irresistible gusto that I find very appealing.

It's an interesting technique that about two-thirds of the black-and-white footage that *Coalhouse* is playing the piano in accompaniment to was created using a variety of techniques. Some of them so simple, like a pencil waving in front of the projector and then filming it—it's just amazing to me—but virtually undetectable from the documentary footage.

The sets in England were very large...and mass crowd scenes. The domestic interiors, by and large, were filmed here. But also, there is an extended sequence in the Lower East Side (also filmed here in the U.S.), and the sequence by the seaside involving the early filmmakers (also filmed on the New Jersey coast). But a grand time, and twenty-six weeks of (laughs) a lot of fun on two continents.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible question about advantages of filming in England]

VON BRANDENSTEIN: Cheap! Sure! (Laughs) Yes, the dollar was advantageous at the time, and in terms of the vast numbers of extras that we needed—for instance, the roof, the Madison Square Garden roof, which was recreated in England, needed, I think, close to a thousand extras to get that crowd. And it was possible to do it there—for one thing, the size of the stages—and it was not possible to do it here.

Also, numbers of costumes... the numbers were huge, numbers of Edwardian costumes. The Harry K. Thaw dinner is done—where Harry K. Thaw bursts in on Stanford White—the interior done in England on the stage, and the approach and exterior done here in the U.S. And there's a great deal of that playing back and forth, back and forth. The suburban house, the lovely Victorian house that you see, was also done here in its entirety in Mount Kisco. (Laughs) Just inside the sixty-mile limit. This is a vast and very rich film, so there's more. Rent it.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible question about the

possible release of the "director's cut" of *Ragtime*]

VON BRANDENSTEIN: I keep hearing rumors of it, and the producer, Michael Hausman, occasionally says that Milos has done some work on it. I don't know. But I think it would be a very good idea, in fact. I'd love to see that.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible question about where the Morgan Library scenes were filmed]

VON BRANDENSTEIN: Yes, yes. That was done in England. And also, you know, we approached the Morgan Library here, despite various problems. But the central plot point is the fact that they blow up and set fire to the Morgan Library. And they perhaps thought that this was not exactly the best thing to do. (Laughs) You know, Milos is a real iconoclast. (Laughs) I mean, he's always bombing something or setting fire to it, or whatever. So, you know, I think they were just terribly nervous about the subject matter. They were not unsympathetic, and I think it could have been accomplished in ways better than what we had to do in England (which was blood on the tracks). But it gave us a very viable exterior. Remember, at the time of the film, the Morgan Library is a year or two old. The trees are saplings, and the Polish Embassy, and the different buildings around, look considerably different. In particular, that attractive 1950s-style apartment house across the street would not have been admissible.

So I think it was probably necessary in the end to build it. I think it was the right decision. And there were hundreds of extremely talented people who worked on those sets in England, and I only arrived at the last minute to throw some flowers around. I mean, that was not part of my work. The sets in New York—I had my own work, believe me. So John Graysmark, the production designer, was a very talented man, as well as the numerous art directors.

I must say, I did think it was interesting that here in New York—understand, I had one art director. It's interesting, isn't it? And one decorator. And they had at least fifty people over there—at least—in the art department, all drawing away and doing things... It made me wonder. But I

don't know. I guess we're just used to abuse over here or whatever. I don't know. But I did notice that, the crews were vast there. Of course, they were doing very large scenes. There is that in explanation. And the sets themselves were physically quite large, whereas our sets were smaller, probably a great deal more detailed. But just in terms of physical size, except for the Lower East Side, they were smaller. But it's interesting. You'll see a lot of familiar faces there. Elizabeth McGovern, who plays Evelyn Nesbit; Debbie Allen, who has become a director/choreographer herself; and many, many people... Milos knows how to pick them.

VON BRANDENSTEIN: It [*Billy Bathgate*] was Nestor's last film, and it was damn near mine, because it just about killed me. (Laughs) When a film is not widely seen, especially one that is very beautiful, and that you have taken into your heart—I don't know how you could possibly work on something for nine months and not take it into your heart, unless you were more cold-hearted than I am, that's for sure! (Laughs) But this film, particularly, I loved very much. Probably because of my experience with *Ragtime* and [author E.L.] Doctorow. And this was another Doctorow piece.

And more than any other writer working now, Doctorow achieves characters and achieves plot by a precise description and rendering of events, and places, and things. Most of all: objects and places. When people said, "Don't you want to read his new novel?" I said, "No, I don't think so. I don't think I've got it in me for a third one!" (Laughs)

So you ask yourself again and again, what went wrong? And what part did you have in going wrong? And I can't answer it. It's too close to me. The film is not only beautiful; it has merit in other ways. Besides its physical appearance and Nestor's remarkable work, it has merit. But it gets down to the fact that not wide numbers of people went to see it. The name of the film is *Billy Bathgate*, and it is Billy's story. There is a strong focus on another character, on Dutch Schultz—Dutch Schultz, played by a charismatic star, Dustin Hoffman, and played well, but perhaps inappropriately.

But it is not Billy's story. It is not Billy. And the

name of the film is *Billy Bathgate*, and structurally it was focused as Billy's story. And I tell myself that that's the reason, or that must be the reason. But I don't know; I don't think I could. But I've certainly tortured myself enough with it. (Laughs)

The film was delayed in production by actually quite a substantial delay of three months. At the studio's insistence, we again went to Canada. Those of you who were present in the last hour know that we played this same thing in *Six Degrees of Separation*. We went up there, and we tried to see it and shoot it and this and that and the other thing. On *Billy Bathgate*, we not only went up there, but we designed it, and we started building. We had crews up there, painting and sawing and drilling outside Montreal.

And then, when Dustin's name was on the dotted line, it became obvious that he wanted certain changes in the script and there would be a rewrite, and [Robert] Benton had to do it. And it was agreed by all concerned, I believe, that it was a good thing for him to redo the script. We had to delay. And the weather was going to catch up with us. So we went, changed our schedule, delayed our production.

We started filming in Saratoga, New York, and then to New York City and its environs, and then down to North Carolina. And North Carolina is where the studio work was done and where the small town represented in the film [was shot]. It is called "Onondaga." It is a mythical town. There is no real Onondaga. But it's a small town called "Hamlet" in North Carolina. We wound the film in around the first of March, quite a bit over schedule—over schedule by about three or four weeks. And in May, we returned and did re-shoots in New York City. And I believe in July there were further re-shoots. By this time, I had abandoned hope, you know. And I was not involved in the last period of re-shoots. Very painful. But very beautiful.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible question about difference between working in New York and Los Angeles]

VON BRANDENSTEIN: In New York, I think essentially you can often do with fewer people, where[as] I think in Los Angeles, I think you need

more people. I think the distances are greater, take greater time to traverse. It takes—I think art directors have more responsibility. They have some of the responsibilities that are assumed by construction coordinators in California. And I think that makes a difference. And also, decorators in California have substantial staff, so there is also that to pick and choose from. That department has to be staffed with your blessing, or at least your knowledge, hopefully. That's if things are going really well. (Laughs)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible question about selecting the costume designer]

VON BRANDENSTEIN: I have a lot to say about a costume designer. Depending on the film, I have everything to say. If it's a costume designer that is an artistic presence in their own right and somebody the director has worked with, obviously, why wouldn't I be delighted to work with them? Other times, the director is less sure, and I have a chance to say, "I think we should interview so-and-so and so-and-so and so-and-so." But it is not my decision, per se. After all, many commercial films will have leading players, stars, that have a great deal—the leading lady will have a lot to say about the costume designer. In a contemporary film, particularly. In a period film, it's generally up to the director, the cinematographer, and myself. Be that as it may, I always have opinions, and I always voice them until they tell me to be quiet. So I always say it.

Whether it's heeded or not is another story.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible question about whether she prefers to work in New York City]

VON BRANDENSTEIN: I really don't. Actually, my preference is to be out in the middle of nowhere. There're [fewer] arguments! (Laughs) My last New York film was *Six Degrees [of Separation]*. And then I went to Arizona, and then I went to Florida on a film called *Just Cause*. So it can be anywhere. I don't think it makes a great deal of difference. I think that the difference is in the approach and the tack that you take, but there's no question that California has the studios. If we had studios, we, too, could have that kind of industry here. But we don't. Take heed! Build studios. There has been more than one film that I've had to leave town [for], because there was no studio space.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible question about how she would like to be remembered]

VON BRANDENSTEIN: (Laughs) I'd want to be remembered as somebody who worked! Who kept on working! That's what I'd like. And not burnt out...and not get hateful and not get mean, and still believe that anything was possible. That's what I'd like to be remembered for. Because it's the magic, it's the illusion. (Applause) Thank you.

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TRANSCRIPT: A PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH PATRIZIA VON BRANDENSTEIN

PAGE 13