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CAROLINE PERZAN SHARES EXPERTISE

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Thursday, April 8, set decorator Caroline Perzan came to SCAD's Museum of Art Theater to speak to students about the various aspects of production design in film and television.

A graduate of the Art Institute of Chicago, she was originally a student of fine art but later found her niche in set decoration. During the presentation, Perzan described how she volunteered on a film set in Portland and beginning a renowned, life-long career.

Perzan's credits include set decoration for her current project, FOX's TV drama "Empire," along with "Man of Steel," "Breaking Bad," "CSI" and numerous other TV and film credits.

With a presentation, she called "The Art of 'Empire,'" Perzan and primarily discussed how she uses fine art on the show's set to enhance the overall quality of the show.

"A lot of times in movies we want the art to meld, so it doesn't take over the story...but in 'Empire' it really jumps off the walls," she said.

Perzan described the process of working on a TV set, explaining that the crew of "Empire" has approximately five weeks of preparation before each season's pilot episode and that the workload only intensifies from there. "Every episode is an eight-day shoot. Every episode has a new director, but the set crew doesn't get a break.

We're working back to back and it's very fast-paced," she explained.

"It's very collaborative," she said but made it clear that collaborative is not a synonym for easy.

"Everyone is always in an argument about what we should include and what should go where, and I'm like the liaison trying to figure everyone out," she said before joking, "I have a million bosses!"

"Empire" is filmed on primarily built sets that Perzan is responsible for furnishing. She explained that the majority of the sets on the show are actually the same two rooms (and one hallway), redecorated to look like various locations.

Perzan explained that even when a scene is filmed on location, the set decorator still has plenty of work to do, as the crew brings in every set element, "down to the wallpaper."

When she spoke of this decorating and re-decorating process, Perzan related it to the student audience, saying, "You guys can do a lot with your student films. You can do a lot with very little; we do a lot with very little!"

As set decorator, she has primary control over the "look" of the show, but she also must take the characters into account. Saying that some of the most rewarding elements of set design and decoration arise from the subtle "layers and layers of who you want the characters to be."

Perzan wrapped up her presentation by mentioning that, "All of these [film] positions are long roads," but encouraged students interested in set and film.

“There are so many opportunities for living and working in Georgia,” she noted, “most of my LA colleagues have moved down to Georgia.”

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