

Arts & Entertainment

How 'Empire' set decorator gives the show its look



The set decorator for the Fox Television show "Empire" talks about her role in creating the look for the program, and gives a tour of the soundstages for the production, which is shot entirely in Chicago. (John Owens, Chicago Tribune)

By **John Owens**

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When "Empire" protagonist Lucious Lyon meets with his three sons in his plush New York mansion, or when Lyon's ex-wife, Cookie, holds court with the hip-hop mogul in his gleaming Manhattan office, the main focus is on the implausible-yet-entertaining plot and the scenery-chewing performances from [Terrence Howard's](#) Lucious and [Taraji P. Henson's](#) Cookie.

But the environment that surrounds the actors in the hit Fox drama is almost as flamboyant as the actors, from the paintings by New York-based artist Kehinde Wiley in the Lyon mansion to the grand piano in Lucious' office designed by Warren Shadd, the nation's only African-American piano

manufacturer.

One woman who shares responsibility for creating this look is Caroline Perzan, the set decorator for "Empire," now in the middle of its second season.

Perzan, 46, was born in Country Club Hills and went to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She is a Hollywood veteran who has spent 25 years working primarily as an assistant set decorator or set decorating buyer on TV shows like "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation," "Breaking Bad," "Hawaii Five-o" and "Knight Rider," along with movies including "Frost/Nixon," "Public Enemies" and "The Horse Whisperer."

But she welcomed the chance to move back home for "Empire," which, despite being set in New York City, is almost entirely shot in Chicago, at Cinespace Studios in the North Lawndale neighborhood and dozens of area locations.

"I originally came back to Chicago to work on (the Superman reboot) 'Man of Steel' and stayed here when 'Empire' launched," said Perzan, who lives in the city with her 13-year-old son. "It's allowed me as a single mom to leave LA and come back to my roots. It was a dream come true to bring my child back to raise him here."

On "Empire" Perzan works closely with show co-creator [Lee Daniels](#), executive producer/showrunner Ilene Chaiken and the various directors and production designers who work on the show to develop the overall look on standing sets, which occupy four soundstages at Cinespace, as well as other locations where "Empire" shoots.

A key component of this look is the African-American-themed art that graces many of the sets. Original works from well-known artists such as Wiley, Walter Lobyn Hamilton and Mickalene Thomas are prominently displayed at Lyon's mansion, office and other standing sets.

"We were conscious about using these artists from the start of Season 1, when we created Lucious' office — we knew that we had to have contemporary African-American art in there," Perzan said. "That was all Lee's influence, because of his passion for art. When he directs some of the "Empire" episodes, he'll start a shot focusing on a piece of art, then pan to an actor. It's rare for a TV director to do this."

But show colleagues credit Perzan for taking Daniels' ideas and running with them.

"The world of Lucious Lyon is one of art and extravagance and taste, some good and some bad," Chaiken said. "It's an over-the-top world, which Caroline totally understands. She gets Lee's sensibilities and

understands how we care about authenticity and provenance."

"I gave Caroline a lot of creative say," added Cece Destefano, production designer for the first season of "Empire." "I would usually do research on a script, show her the research and let her run with it. If she says 'I found this great fabric or great piece of furniture or great piece of art that will add to the set,' then I'll defer to her, because she has a great eye."

In a recent interview with the Tribune on the "Empire" set at Cinespace, an edited transcript of which follows, Perzan talked about her duties.

Q: What's the role of a set decorator?

A: A set decorator is someone who fills everything inside and outside the set, except the walls and the architecture. The set decoration team does everything from the drapery, the carpets, artwork, lighting, books — you name it.

Often times, we don't build the set; we'll go to a location and completely alter the location. We'll go into a coffeehouse and it might not have the right look. So we'll clean it out and bring in our own pieces.

But my favorite sets are the permanent sets, like Lucious' mansion. It's one of my favorite sets because of the art on the walls. The art is inspired by our (co-) creator, Lee Daniels, and his love of art. I'll present to Lee many pieces of art, and we'd determine what needs to be in the room. We've changed a few pieces of art from Season 1 to Season 2, and we build on the existing sets. As the shows become mature and we get more money for the sets, we add to them.

Q: What was your favorite location shoot on "Empire"?

A: I loved shooting at the Tribune Tower. We were there during Season 1 and shot in (former Tribune publisher) Col. McCormick's office on the 24th floor. We used it for the office of Beretti (a rival record industry mogul to Lucious Lyon, played by Judd Nelson). We changed everything in the room. We took out a conference table and brought all of Beretti's world into there. We weren't allowed to hammer a single nail next to the Colonel's fireplace, so we hung 30 gold and platinum albums, since (Beretti's) supposed to be a big music producer. We made this amazing rig of cable and hung each album so they were perfectly aligned.

Q: What's the difference between working in LA and working in Chicago?

A: In LA we have many prop houses. So it's 100 times easier to decorate a show there. In Chicago, I'm actually buying and renting a lot here in town, using the local resources. We go everywhere. A lot of times

I'll find an old sofa at a secondhand store. I'll redesign it with the help of my upholsterer and make it look like a \$20,000 sofa.

Q: Is it difficult to make Chicago look like New York?

A: Not at all. Chicago has that same sophistication as New York, so there are a lot of similarities. Some things are different, though. Because New York doesn't have alleys like Chicago, we always have to gather up trash and dirty up the streets on exterior locations, so we can get that authentic New York flavor.

Q: How do you like working in your hometown after spending so many years working in Hollywood?

A: It's been great — I've moved here permanently. It's a conscious effort to give my son a more stable environment. And we've been doing our part for the local economy, buying from local artists and vendors. There are so many looks we can create here, and that's what keeps film companies coming back.

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