

How Production Designers Turned Time Back 50 Years for ‘Chicago 7’

by Jordan Walker — March 18, 2021 in Interviews, Production Design 0



The Trial of the Chicago 7. Michael Keaton as Dr. Fred Hampton, News Anchor Martin Luther King Jr. as Bobby Seale, Mark Ruffalo as William Kunstler, Aaron Eckhart as Walter J. Cronkite, Eddie Redmayne as Tom Hayden. Photo: Newsarama/NETFLIX © 2020

Awards Daily spoke to Production Designer Shane Valentino and Set Decorator Andrew Baseman on the complexities inherent in making 1969 Chicago as accurate as possible for Aaron Sorkin's Oscar-nominated *The Trial of the Chicago 7*. Even though the film is heavily set within the walls of a courtroom, the exterior shots were shot on location at the site of the actual 1968 riots in Chicago's famed Grant Park. It was imperative for Valentino, Baseman, and their team to accurately depict these locations to ensure the film's historical accuracy.

Awards Daily: The first thing I'd like to say Andrew and Shane is that I loved the movie *The Trial of the Chicago 7* and just want to applaud you and your team for a fantastic job within the production department!

Andrew Baseman: Thank you so much!

AD: I was very invested in talking to you both. In addition to thoroughly enjoying the film, the Chicago portions were actually shot in my neighborhood! I'm a few blocks away from Grant Park, the actual sight of the riots depicted in the film, and while filming was taking place in fall 2019, I witnessed many scenes being prepped for production.

Shane Valentino: That's amazing. I hope we didn't disturb your way of life at all!

AD: How did you both get involved with *Chicago 7*?

AB: Shane got the call and called me, so I'll let him explain!

SV: I met with Aaron Sorkin in 2018 through my agent and we met and just had a great conversation. The most important thing for him was how to wrap his mind around filming the riot scenes, and the riot scenes specifically involving the riot police vs. the protesters. My experience on *Straight Outta Compton* really maximized the format, shooting as much as you can for the scene without exceeding your limitations. What I did in *Straight Outta Compton* in just a two block period was just capture a very specific time in Los Angeles without having to rely on archival footage, and that was the biggest thing for Sorkin is not having to rely on that archival footage. We had a great conversations, and it was around the same time as the Kavanaugh senate hearings, so we had a lot to talk about and connected very quickly. The rest is history. I was able to bring in my own team, and Andrew and I met on the set of *The Normal Heart* and we always wanted to work together again, and this opportunity presented itself.

AD: I know you both did the riot scenes here in Chicago, but how much of the actually movie was shot in here Chicago?

AB: We were shooting in New Jersey for Chicago and everywhere else, aside from the key exteriors location scenes in Chicago that really can't be replicated anywhere else.

SV: The biggest job as a Production Designer is to determine the best place to build and film these sets and we determined most of the exterior scenes needed to be shot in Chicago – not only for the historical authenticity, but for the reality, the depth of the streets like on Michigan Avenue. In terms of the breakdown, we shot 9 days in Chicago and 27 days in New Jersey. Most of the 9 days in Chicago were exteriors and on Michigan Avenue and in Grant Park. We front ended it by doing all the Chicago stuff first and traveled back to New Jersey for the remainder of the shoot.

AB: The reason we started in Chicago was due to the fact the riots were in the summer and by time we were in Chicago, it was October so leaves were starting to change on the trees so everyday we were hoping the temperature wouldn't drop too low at night so the leaves wouldn't change colors or drop from the trees. You don't notice it too much in the film, but the actors were all wearing tank tops because we're depicting summer, and they were extremely cold.

SV: I will say the temperature was decent during the day, but the night shoots were problematic.

AD: Well, Grant Park is situated adjacent to Lake Michigan, which can severely alter the temperatures Downtown. Away from the lake, you can have 10-20 degree temperature swings!

SV: Oh yeah, easily! Something we didn't really anticipated, and of course as a native you would've known, but for myself I wasn't prepared for that swing. In Grant Park, there's a lot of trees, so once you go into the shadows, that temperature is going to drop as well. It really made a difference psychologically, even though it had no real impact on shooting.

AD: Chicago architecture is so unique and eclectic to the point you can have 100 year old buildings in close proximity to contemporary high rises. The film is set in 1969, did you have any challenges trying to replicate 1969 Chicago in 2009?

SV: I know Andrew can speak to this, but one thing I'd like to mention is Michigan Avenue now has a median, and that didn't exist in 1968...

AD: Oh wow, I didn't know that!

SV: Yes, you would think it would be easy to just shoot down Michigan Ave towards the Hilton, but it was a one way, so that to me became important because I like to stay as true to history as possible. So we had to rake the camera to achieve that and augment things to get everything looking just right!

AB: The challenges really had nothing to do with architecture, but with the hundreds of protesters and what they brought to the protests. That would be period-styled tents, sleeping bags, blankets, chairs, thermoses – all the little things they'd bring to the campsites in Grant Park. We had to create most of the tents and scoured the antique shops in Chicago to find things that would work, which ended up being really fun because a lot of the props were locally sourced!

SV: I would also say, Andy's job as a set decorator is to make things feel authentic and real. He did this by filling in the little gaps and bring in those period props to the forefront. What my role was is to do a proper analysis of the architecture and make sure everything is period correct and what may need the help of visual effects in post-production. As you said Jordan, some of the buildings may be incorrect due to the fact they weren't there 50 years ago, but things go much deeper than that on a granular level. It's the signage, bus stops, lamp post that may not be correct and we needed to figure out. Do we hide them or accentuate them to fit into the time period?

The biggest challenge was Michigan Avenue. Being inside Grant Park, it was an easier task to achieve the realism of the area because the greenery of the trees helped us hide the things that were problematic.

AB: It's really the things you don't think about like the trash cans and park benches and you think "oh, those have been around forever!" when they actually haven't, they're swamped out quite frequently, so you have to track down the appropriate trash cans and benches to ensure the historical accuracy.

AD: Speaking of historical accuracy – I noticed something and I wanted to get your takes on it. During the scene where the rioters come face-to-face with the mob of police on the side streets, I know that block very well! That scene was shot in front of Dearborn Station, an old train station that's been converted into office space and restaurants. I noticed in one shot there was an U-Haul truck parked on the street. Was that placed strategically to block the Bar Louie restaurant sign?

SV: That's exactly right!

AB: As I recall, that was early in the shoot and we weren't supposed to be shooting down that street. The scene suddenly changed and we were shooting in reverse so we could see a lot more.

SV: The difficulty sometime is preparation. We like to prepare for a 360 degree view of our environments, but often financially it can be difficult. In that specific scene they were marching to get Tom Hayden (Eddie Redmayne) released from the police district – which was great information for me to know because they aren't called police stations or precincts like everywhere else, they're called police districts. This was an at intersection, so within the first few days of filming, everyone's trying to get used to filming with each other and in the process, you see more of the world than you originally anticipated. But yes, we used vehicles constantly to hide things that weren't period correct.

AB: It was really the first day of shooting that prepared us for the remaining eight days of shooting where we would get additional things in case they wanted to open up a wider shot of the environment.

AD: I just had to ask that question! I knew that Bar Louie wouldn't have been historically accurate, but the truck could've easily just been parked on the street naturally.

AB: That's so true and so funny you pointed that out because it was a difficult space for me because I didn't want to shoot there. I was hoping for more of a confrontation during that scene in front of the police district – I wanted and envisioned shooting on a street with a dead end. That location had a lot of hanging signs, scaffolding down the street and lots of other small annoyances, so it was imperative for me to communicate well with the team after seeing dailies about ways to make sure things are removed in post.

SV: Also if I remember correctly, that facade was a school so we had to adjust camera angles to avoid certain lights and signage.

AD: Let's shift to the courtroom scenes. Being that the film is about a trial, a significant time of the film was spent in the courtroom, easily over 50% of the film was in the courtroom...

SV: I'd actually say it was more than that! Maybe close to 75% of the film. We shot three weeks in that courtroom.

AD: Did you both set out to do an exact replica of the original courtroom used in the 1969 trial?

SV: Like I said in the beginning, my approach is to always deliver historical accuracy to the projects that are based on historical events. This is original courtroom was designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, so it's a completely different look and feel to what you see in the film. I wanted to do that, not only because I'm a fan of Mies van der Rohe – but Sorkin had an allergic reaction to that style. So we switched to a more classical approach for the courtroom, which I think was for the best at the end of the day. It really fit with the cinematic imagination of what we think courtrooms look like. I'll let Andy explain how we adapted the space to make the space work in a multi-functional way.

AB: What we ended up with was so much better than what it actually was! I like to think this courtroom will go down in history as an iconic courtroom – an Aaron Sorkin courtroom – like *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I hope the courtroom will be remembered as an imposing, beautiful, classic courtroom.

When we scouted the location, we found an empty church that was gutted, so the main sanctuary was just four walls, windows on two sides. The only things remaining were about eight brass hanging fixtures that were along the ceiling. The producers were really excited to use those as is. We needed lighting and originally they were going to be removed, but what you see in the final cut is just about how we found them. The irony is, I think those hanging fixtures get more screen time than anything else in that courtroom!

SV: To add to that, it became more about creating these strategies for how to film that space. One way to show the passive of time, different emotional beats within that space, and one way to do that is often through lighting. We worked well with our Director of Photography, (Academy Award nominee) Phedon Papamichael on the how to get the perfect quality of light in that space. The large lights were great for us to have to depict early morning, afternoon and evening. We used practical lights for a general source for our top light. We used sconces going around the interior to give it more depth, and shadows when we needed it.

It was our task to meet Aaron at the page and it really helped us elevate what he's putting on the page and it really helped us elevate what we do – that was our main goal.

AD: My final questions is to find out what the biggest challenge of the film was. Was it trying to capture a certain scene? Was there anything outside of the realm of possibility or anything you wish that could've been included but wasn't?

AB: The main challenge for me were the offices. We did the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) office, the Black Panthers office, the Judge's office, we did John Mitchell's office (John Doman), we did Attorney General Ramsey Clark's (Michael Keaton) office, so there were a lot of older white men were needed to decorate for. We wanted to make sure the Black Panther's office was thoughtfully done and had a lot of integrity. This office needed to be different from the SDS office, which in turn was very different from the conspiracy office. The questions to ourselves was how do we really show the character?

We did that through very specific colors and materials that differentiated each from each other – finishes were different, color vs. matte, organized vs. disorganized... I really wanted to make sure at first glance the audience knew exactly where they were.

SV: My biggest challenges were designing the exteriors for Chicago. That's where we get the largest scope for the film, so we needed to achieve the largest scope possible on a limited budget and I think we did a pretty good job. There's always small things I wish could've been done differently, but as a whole, I'm extremely proud of what we produced especially in the short amount of time we had to shoot there.

The Trial of the Chicago 7 is currently streaming on Netflix.

Tags: Production design The Trial of the Chicago 7