SETDECOR

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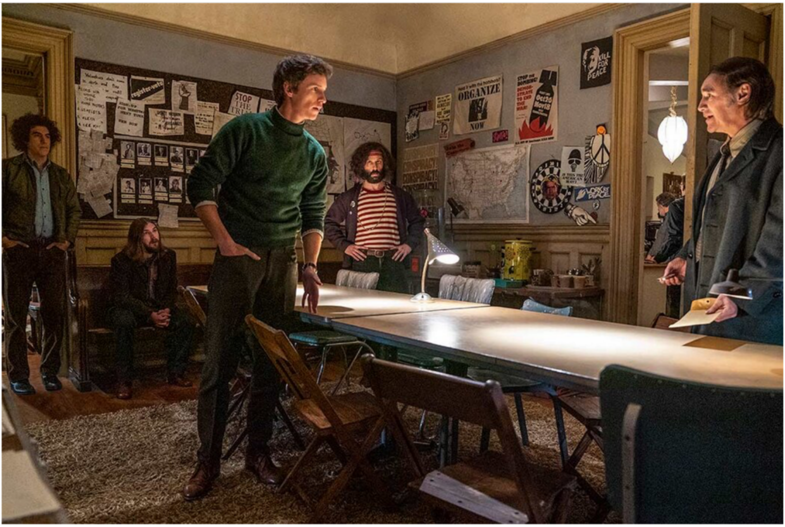
THE TRIAL OF THE CHICAGO 7

February 15th, 2021 by Karen Burg with Set Decorator Andrew Baseman SDSA



Sacha Baron Cohen as Abbie Hoffman, Danny Flaherty as John Froines, Eddie Redmayne as Tom Hayden, Jeremy Strong as Jerry Rubin, Mark Rylance as Attorney William Kunstler. Photo by Niko Tavernise ©2020 Netflix.

Set Decorator **Andrew Baseman SDSA**
Production Designer **Shane Valentino**
Paramount/Netflix

1969...

We are transported to the fervent time of change meeting the entrenched misappropriation of power. The sets created by Production Designer Shane Valentino, Set Decorator Andrew Baseman SDSA and their teams give us instant backstories, illuminating each movement and personality, helping propel this chapter of our nation's history from courtroom drama to thriller!

"What was intended to be a peaceful protest at the 1968 Democratic National Convention turned into a violent clash with police and the National Guard. The organizers of the protest — including Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, Tom Hayden and Bobby Seale — were charged with conspiracy to incite a riot and the 1969 trial that followed was one of the most notorious in history." –Netflix

SETDECOR talks with Baseman not only about recreating the events, but also about the experience of doing so!

SETDECOR: What was your personal connection...your initial reaction to the story and the events?

Set Decorator Andrew Baseman SDSA:

Although I was a young boy when the events depicted in THE TRIAL OF THE CHICAGO 7 took place, I vividly remember the year, but only vaguely remember the incident. Not only was 1968 the year of the Democratic Convention in Chicago, it was also the year that HAIR opened on Broadway. My parents saw the show and brought back a program, which I excitedly brought to school for show-and-tell. Although my friends thought it was cool, my 3rd grade teacher was not amused. I imagine due to the cast full of hippies. Oh, and the nudity. But I was intrigued by hippies and dressed as one for Halloween that year and for many years thereafter, complete with a long hair wig, love beads and a homemade protest sign.

Most of my political news at that age came from watching topical television shows such as Rowan & Martin's LAUGH-IN, filled with jokes targeting Richard Nixon, Spiro Agnew and other political figures, usually going over my head. Jump forward a few years to the mid-1970s when my father, who owned a bookstore, sold Abbie Hoffman's STEAL THIS BOOK. As a young teenager, I "borrowed" the book and thought it was hysterical. I've been a big fan of Abbie Hoffman ever since.

Sacha Baron Cohen as Abbie Hoffman, Jeremy Strong as Jerry Rubin, John Carroll Lynch as David Dellinger.
Photos by Niko Tavernise ©2020 Netflix.

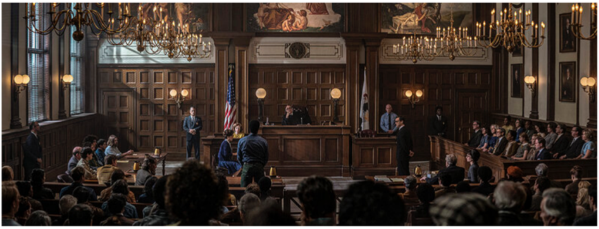
SETDECOR: Collaboration...Obviously, this is where it all begins...
Collaborating with Production Designer Shane Valentino...

Baseman: Shane and I had previously collaborated on the HBO movie THE NORMAL HEART (Emmy® winner, Outstanding Television Movie), and loved our time together. We always wanted to reunite with another juicy project and our stars finally aligned for CHICAGO 7. Among other things, Shane is a master at finding detailed research, so by the time I came on to prep the movie, about 6 weeks from shooting, the walls of our offices were plastered with black and white photos of the actual riots, Black Panthers, protesters, judges, and lawyers. We watched archival footage and interviews and immersed ourselves in the music, art, and books of the late 1960s.

SETDECOR: Collaborating with Writer/Director Aaron Sorkin...
He stated that this was to be a re-enactment, a retelling not a documentary...
And yet, you are a deep-diver when it comes to history and accuracy! He is so specific in his dialogues, was he also in his scene notes?

Baseman: Aaron was a dream to work with. I have long admired his brilliant writing and was thrilled to work with him as a director. He and Shane got along swimmingly, and he trusted us fully. His script, although full of brilliant dialog, did not contain much in the way of specific set details, so we relied on the research as a starting point and then went from there.

Aaron was shown only a few renderings for some of the larger sets, including the *courtroom interior* and the *Grant Park bandshell*. But all of the interiors were shot exactly as dressed, without anything being removed or changed.



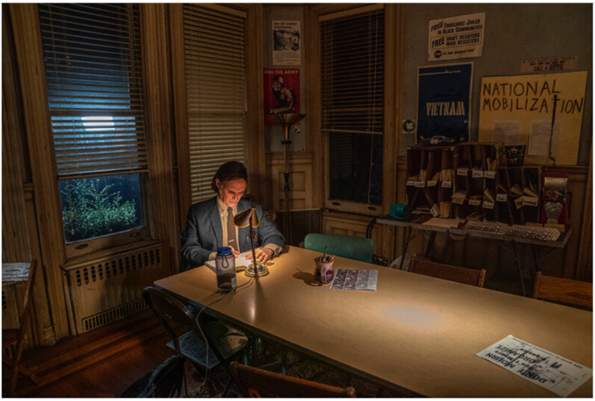
The trial courtroom...Aaron Sorkin says, "The actual courtroom used in 1969 wasn't much to look at. I wanted a big imposing federal courtroom to feel like the whole weight of the government was coming down on these people." The 8 giant chandeliers were custom-made for the set. Photo by Niko Tavernise ©2020 Netflix.

I am also grateful that Cinematographer Phedon Pemberton, who did an outstanding job, fully appreciated the practical lighting we provided, and did not remove or change any of our lights.

SETDECOR: Before we talk about the courtroom and other symbols of power, please tell us of details from any of the sets that we shouldn't miss, details we would want to be sure to spot on second or third viewing!

Baseman: Some of my favorite details are not obvious on first viewing, such as a crudely made cardboard mailbox with a banana in *Abbie's* mail slot, and a vintage mannequin bust with a sash made from an American flag and covered in political campaign buttons, both in the sets for *The Conspiracy Office*.

Please watch again to try and catch them!

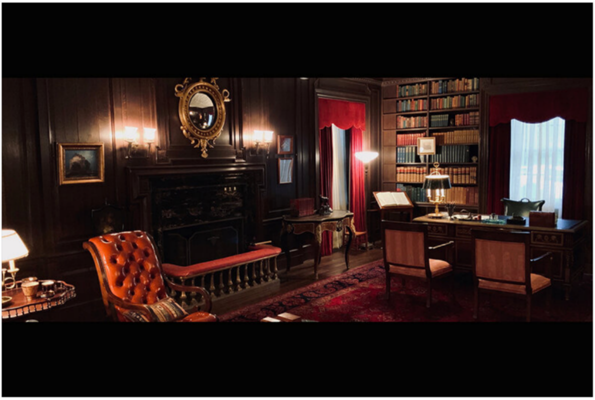

FREE THOUSANDS JAILED IN BLACK COMMUNITIES
FREE DRAFT RESISTERS WAR RESISTERS
VIETNAM
NATIONAL MOBILIZATION

The Conspiracy Office...Mark Rylance as Attorney William Kunstler working late into the night. Note the cardboard mail slots, one with a banana! Photo by Niko Tavernise ©2020 Netflix.

Sadly, some of my favorite dressing items are not seen in the final cut, such as a working colorful 1960s pinball machine with patriotic motifs in *The Conspiracy Office*, and a collection of antique still banks in *Judge Hoffman's Outer Office*. But it's important for me to fill these environments with as much rich and authentic details as possible. Some of the sets were shot over the course of many days and weeks, so it's important that we help create a world that the actors feel are real and can do their best work in.

Key Sets!
SETDECOR: There are so many juxtapositions throughout this film, particularly the *offices*, which could seem boring, but you were able to portray personalities and perspectives in those spaces. Let's start with:

Portraying those wielding the Established Power of the Government...
Former Attorney General Ramsey Clark**: We loved the elegance of *Ramsey Clark's* home office /library, the quiet power emanating. Also, the tableau aspect of the agents perched in an alcove while *Ramsey* [Michael Keaton] is conducting the scene like a maestro. With your knowledge of antiques, is there something we should know about how you approached this set?**



Former Attorney General Ramsey Clark's study/home office...©2020 Netflix.

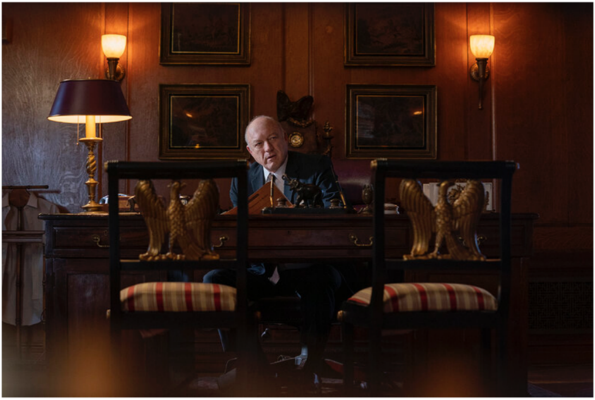
Baseman: A funny thing about *Ramsey Clark's* house was that we found research photos of his actual home, which was modern, complete with an Eames lounge chair and mid-century furnishings. I was looking forward to creating a lighter, 1950s home to contrast the dark, antiques filled offices of *Judge Hoffman* and *John Mitchell*. Clark was 41 years old in 1969, as opposed to actor Michael Keaton, who was around 69 when he shot his scenes portraying Clark.

I feel that had a younger actor been cast in the role, I would have had been able to purchase that Eames lounge chair for the set. But I am pleased with how the set turned out, filled with English, Continental, and American furniture and artwork. I even got to sneak in a ceramic vase with a make-do repair (I collect antiques with early repairs and write about them in my blog *Past Imperfect: The Art of Inventive Repair*) in the entry foyer.

[Editor's note: For additional photos see galleries above and below.]

SETDECOR: *Office of the Attorney General, Clark's* former office now *John Mitchell's*, the offended bully...besides the scripted portrait replacement in the outer office, which we see happening on screen, how was the office changed for *John Mitchell*?

Baseman: John Mitchell, a convicted criminal [later] and friend of Richard Nixon, was a staunch Republican. I filled his imposing office with burgundy damask drapes, black and gold furnishings, and elephant desktop items.



Office of the Attorney General,1969. John Doman as John Mitchell. Photo by Niko Tavernise ©2020 Netflix.

Mitchell represents old world/new money, so we imagine he brought in his own collection of shiny things, some veering on garish. The outer office is filled with red leather-bound books, red spined law books, carved gilt eagles, and small bronze statues of Roman soldiers. Lots of symmetry and control. [See photo galleries.]

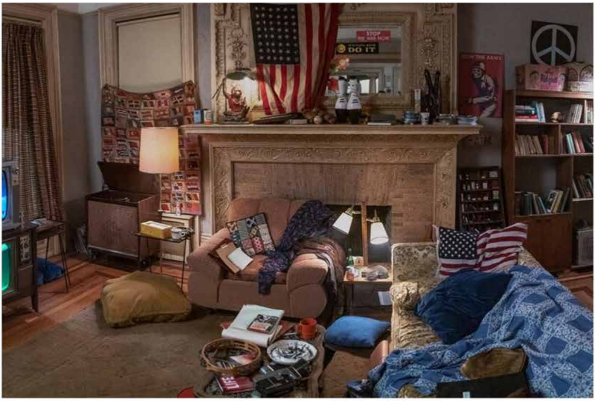
SETDECOR: *Judge Hoffman's chambers...a Midwest ultra-conservative who decides his own rules...*

Baseman: In contrast to Mitchell's spacious office, *Judge Hoffman's* office is much smaller in scale and lighter in tone. The furnishings are more Americana, and filled with patriotic collectibles, such as antique cast iron fire engines, an Uncle Sam mechanical bank, and WWI trench art (decorative items made from artillery shell cases), and military drums. These are things typically collected by old white guys and I imagine his wife, family, and friends bought him some of these items over the years.

Judge Hoffman’s office...Mark Rylance as Defense Counsel William Kunstler, Ben Shenkman as Defense Counsel/Constitutional Law expert Leonard Weinglass, Joseph Gordon-Levitt as Assistant Federal Prosecutor Richard Schultz, J.C. Mackenzie as Chief Federal Prosecutor Thomas Foran, Frank Langella as Judge Julius Hoffman has back to camera. Photos courtesy of Netflix ©2020.

SETDECOR: *Portraying the People’s Power*, the underground movement... Black Panthers/SDS/Yippies/The MOBE— a disparate group, each so distinctive, each unique. This mixed group of defendants used a house as their de facto headquarters for the trial, which someone humorously dubbed *The Conspiracy Office*...It became the heart of the film.

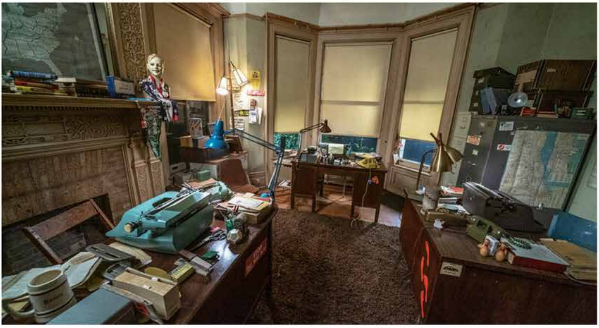
Baseman: *The Conspiracy Office* was one of my favorite sets to shop for and decorate. Aaron states in the script: “…*the whole place resembles a dorm that’s been taken over by a college newspaper*.”



The Conspiracy Office...one of the many rooms with myriad details. Baseman and team focused on staying true to the time period and the people who were sharing the space. Courtesy of Netflix ©2020.

My assistant Carly Whitaker and I had fun shopping for many of these items at vintage shops in Chicago and found lots of great pieces and silly relics from the 1960s. I also found some of the furniture and quirky dressing at a NY favorite, propNspoon.

Our fantastic graphics designers, Holly Watson and Dan-ah Kim, created the endless posters, fliers, stickers, maps, newspaper clippings, and photos which filled the walls.



The Conspiracy Office... One of the details to note: the vintage mannequin bust, with sash made from an American flag and covered in political campaign buttons. Photo courtesy of Netflix ©2020.

Most of the furniture is thrift shop "quality" and includes over-stuffed 1940s upholstered sofas and chairs, mismatched metal and wood folding chairs, a long wood bench to tie into the court room benches. Although there is a childlike quality and playfulness to the set, serious stuff was happening there, so we wanted to make sure it wasn't too juvenile. We brought in many American flags and scattered red, white and blue elements throughout, including a concrete lawn jockey redressed as Uncle Sam.

[For more photos, see the galleries above and below!]

The Black Panther Party headquarters, Oakland – Bobby Seale, Fred Hampton...

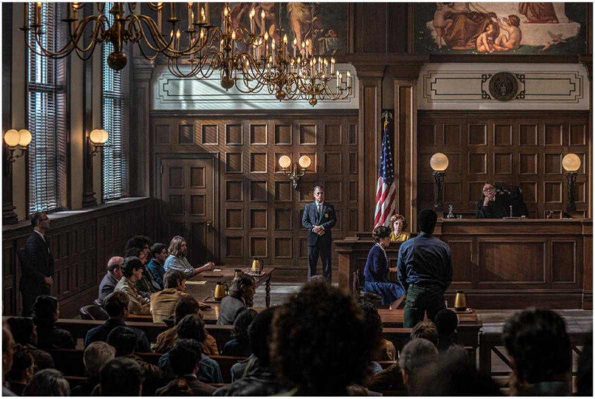
Baseman: In contrast to *The Conspiracy Office*, I wanted to give the Black Panther Party Headquarters some dignity and warmth. We kept it to a tight color palette of ochre, brown, and orange and plastered the walls with neatly placed photographs of important black men and women of the time, printed and hand drawn posters and fliers. Although the furnishings and accessories are a bit mismatched, there is a sense of order and calm. Briefly seen are well organized rooms containing racks of coats for a coat drive, and a food pantry. The Black Panthers gave back to the community and we wanted to show that side as well. [See photo galleries.]

SDS – Students for a Democratic Society...

Student activists under the banner of "participatory Democracy", part of the progressive Left in the 1960s, Tom Hayden...

Baseman: We see very little of this room in the final cut, but I wanted to make sure it stood out from the other offices. Unlike the Black Panther Party Headquarters, the tone here is cool with blue walls, matching cream desks with light wood trim, and gray file cabinets. The walls are similarly plastered with posters and flyers, but they are layered and more haphazardly placed.[See photo galleries.]

SETDECOR: And then we have the *courtroom*...
The Cathedral to Power...

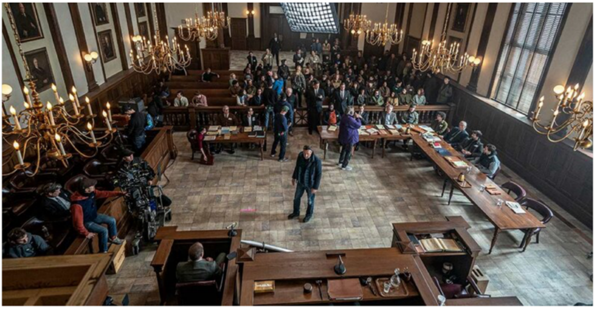


United States District Court, 1969, Defendant's side. Photo by Niko Tavernise ©2020 Netflix.

Baseman: Knowing that the courtroom would be seen more than any of the other sets, Shane and I wanted to make sure we got the details right. The location was an abandoned church, with very little detail. We used the 4 walls and windows of the room but everything else, including the wall paneling, judge's bench and jury box, was built.

The first things we procured for the movie were the wooden church pews, found for free on Craig's List...to assure our acceptance into Heaven, the production company made a donation to the church who was tossing them out...and we ended up rebuilding and painting them.

We also had the 8 giant brass chandeliers custom-made, knowing that they would be one of the most prominent features of the room. The wall sconces were rented from City Knickerbocker, the tables were found at Fennick Props, and the jury chairs were from Arenson Props. The portraits were printed and overpainted by the scenic artists and we framed them in antique carved gold frames.



The courtroom, reverse. Behind-the-scenes, literally! For camera set-ups, stand-ins and some of the background actors are in place. From this viewpoint you can see items on the judge's desk that Langella requested. Photo by Niko Tavernise ©2020 Netflix.

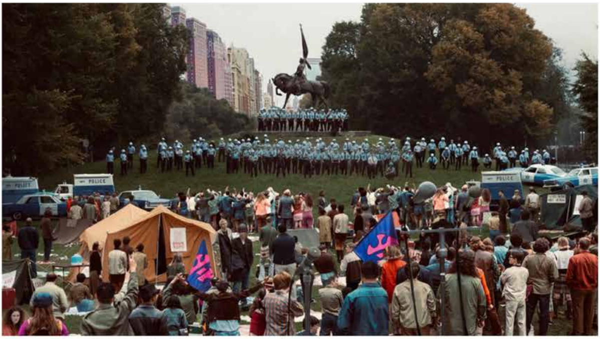
Frank Langella, (*Judge Hoffman*) drew me a sketch of specific items he wanted at his desk, including a water carafe, box of tissues, pen cup, and a glass jar with hard candies. He also requested a comfortable seat cushion, since he literally sat in his chair at the bench for 12 hours a day, for about 3 weeks. I'd like to think that the period Kleenex box we found for him helped with his outstanding performance.

[See galleries for more photos.]

SETDECOR: *The Park...the Streets...*

You filmed at some of the actual locations?

Baseman: We did indeed shoot in some of the actual locations of the riots, including Grant Park and the surrounding streets. It was a bit trippy recreating such important and iconic events where they actually occurred.



Grant Park...This is just the tip of the massive crowd and the massive set dressing! Courtesy of Netflix ©2020.

For the hundreds of demonstrators, we brought in hundreds of pieces of set dressing including custom made tents, sleeping bags, park benches, barricades, folding chairs, luggage, thermoses, blankets, coolers, flags, banners, etc. It was remarkable seeing the finished film with the actual black and white footage intercut seamlessly with our recreations. I was so proud our team. I'd like to give a shout out to the Chicago unit and leadman Carl Ferrara and the set dressing team, who organized, cleaned, packed, trucked, and dressed the thousands of pieces of set dressing used throughout the film.

Grant Park, Bandshell... Sacha Baron Cohen as Abbie Hoffman. The bandshell and all accoutrements were built or brought in. Again, just the tip of the massive crowd and the massive set dressing! Photo by Niko Tavernise ©2020 Netflix.

SETDECOR: What was the first set shot? And the last?

Baseman: Our first day of shooting was on location in Chicago in early October. We needed to capture all of the exteriors, including the riots in Grant Park, before the leaves started to turn orange. The actual riots took place in August, so it was a constant race with the clock. The last to be shot was the *Haymarket Tavern* (set in Chicago) where the protestors crash through the plate glass window in Hoboken, NJ, in December. I felt sorry for the actors who were freezing outside in their summer clothes but convincingly acted as if they were overcome by the heat.

SETDECOR: What was your biggest takeaway from the making of THE TRIAL OF THE CHICAGO 7?

Baseman: In reading the script for the first time, I was surprised how relevant the story was. It was halfway through Trump's tumultuous presidency and some of the events depicted were still happening. From the start, I believe Aaron wanted the movie to be released in October 2020, right before the presidential election.

By the time the trailer came out, just a few months after the Black Lives Matter protests and noted incidents of police brutality, it was clear that history was indeed repeating itself. In watching the trailer, I got chills hearing the chanting of "the whole world is watching."

It really could not have been more timely.