

# LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION!

Many people dream of making it big in Hollywood or creating media that changes the arc of history; few succeed. It just so happens that Berkshire alumni—more than we could feature here—are working and excelling in the entertainment industry. From award-winning set decorators to groundbreaking directors, actors, producers, and choreographers to beloved reality stars, these alumni have drawn from lessons and experience learned at Berkshire to take entertainment to a whole new level.



Baseman at the Newel Gallery in Manhattan, where he often searches for set decor items. Photo by Joanna Chastman

## NEEDLE *in a* HAYSTACK

**Set decorator Andrew Baseman '78 transports film and TV audiences.**

By Megan Tady

Set decorator Andrew Baseman was on the hunt for a Dixie Cup, and not just any paper cup would do. He was decorating an office set for the upcoming film "The Trial of the Chicago 7," based in 1968. And every last detail—including a Dixie Cup perched on a desk—needed to reflect the time period.

"I love shopping for the hard-to-find item," Baseman says from his home in Chelsea, N.Y. "It's like looking for a needle in a haystack, especially with a period piece. Having the right paper cup on somebody's desk or at a coffee station—that's exciting to me."

Baseman and an assistant eventually tracked down the Dixie Cups in the original box. It was a lucky find, as were the dozen 15-foot-long church pews—poised for free on Craigslist—that he used to furnish the courtroom set for the film, which is directed by Aaron Sorkin and stars Sacha Baron Cohen and Eddie Redmayne. The film follows the story of seven people on trial for charges surrounding the

uprising at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

Yet luck doesn't have much to do with Baseman's success. He's made a name for himself as a meticulous and committed set decorator who can rapidly research sets and transport audiences, tracking down elusive items to visually articulate the script and its characters. In 2018, Baseman won an Art Directors Guild Award for his work on the film "Crazy Rich Asians," directed by Jon M. Chu. He was also the set decorator for Chu's "In the Heights," which is based on the musical written by Quiara Alegria Hudes and Lin-Manuel Miranda. Other film and TV projects include "The Nanny Diaries," "The Americans," "Gotham," and "Eat, Pray, Love."

Baseman says his role differs from that of a production designer, a title that goes back to "Gone with the Wind." The production designer conceives the look of a movie and the set decorator starts with an empty space and procures



Baseman's set decoration for the film "In the Heights," scheduled for release in summer 2021. Baseman Ramos as Usnavi and Melissa Barrera as Vanessa in Warner Bros. Pictures' "In the Heights," a Warner Bros. Pictures release. Photo by Macall Polay

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everything, including furniture, rugs, wallpaper, lamps, and the art on the walls. "I often create characters' backstories, even deciding where they graduated from college if I hang a diploma on the wall," he says. "My work includes all the details. Ninety-nine percent is not in the script."

The feat is truly monumental. To create interior sets—inside a character's home, for example—films often use people's real houses or apartments. Baseman and his team arrive with a large truck and must empty out the residence, carefully taking photos so they can later restore the house to its original condition. Then the real work begins: decorating the set to reflect a character's life. Nearly always pressed for time, Baseman sometimes still adjusting a set mere minutes before the actors arrive, often working while the set lights

are being hung up above him. Each character requires a vastly different look—a grandmother who's been living in her apartment for 30 years needs "30 years' worth of layers of everything she owns," Baseman continues. "Her books, her clothes if you open the closets, everything in the kitchen, piles of mail and magazines—all those things I have to find."

For period films, Baseman has to conduct historical and cultural research, painstakingly tracking down each item and then ensuring that it accurately reflects the era, culture, or location. For the film "In the Heights," his team decorated sets to reflect Cuban, Dominican, and Puerto Rican families.

"We had a big responsibility to tell their story, because Cubans, Dominicans, and Puerto Ricans are not well represented on the screen,"

Baseman says. "The production designer and I did a lot of research to find out the subtle differences in how people from each of the three islands furnish their own homes."

Once production begins, Baseman is on hand to open the set and make any last-minute adjustments. "I want people to think the set is a real environment," he says. "Sometimes a producer will walk onto a set and think that we found it like that. Of course we didn't. We spent a long time making it look authentic. My ultimate achievement is when I'm doing a biopic and the relative of the character comes to set and cries, saying something like, 'Oh my God, this looks just like my father's house. I can't believe you made it look like this.' I like tears if they're positive. I don't really want crying if I did it wrong!"

Every once in a while Baseman notices something that's too late to fix



Baseman spent his four years at Berkshire immersed in drama and the arts.

just as the cameras start rolling—a loose curtain panel over an office window in one film, for instance, still has him vexed.

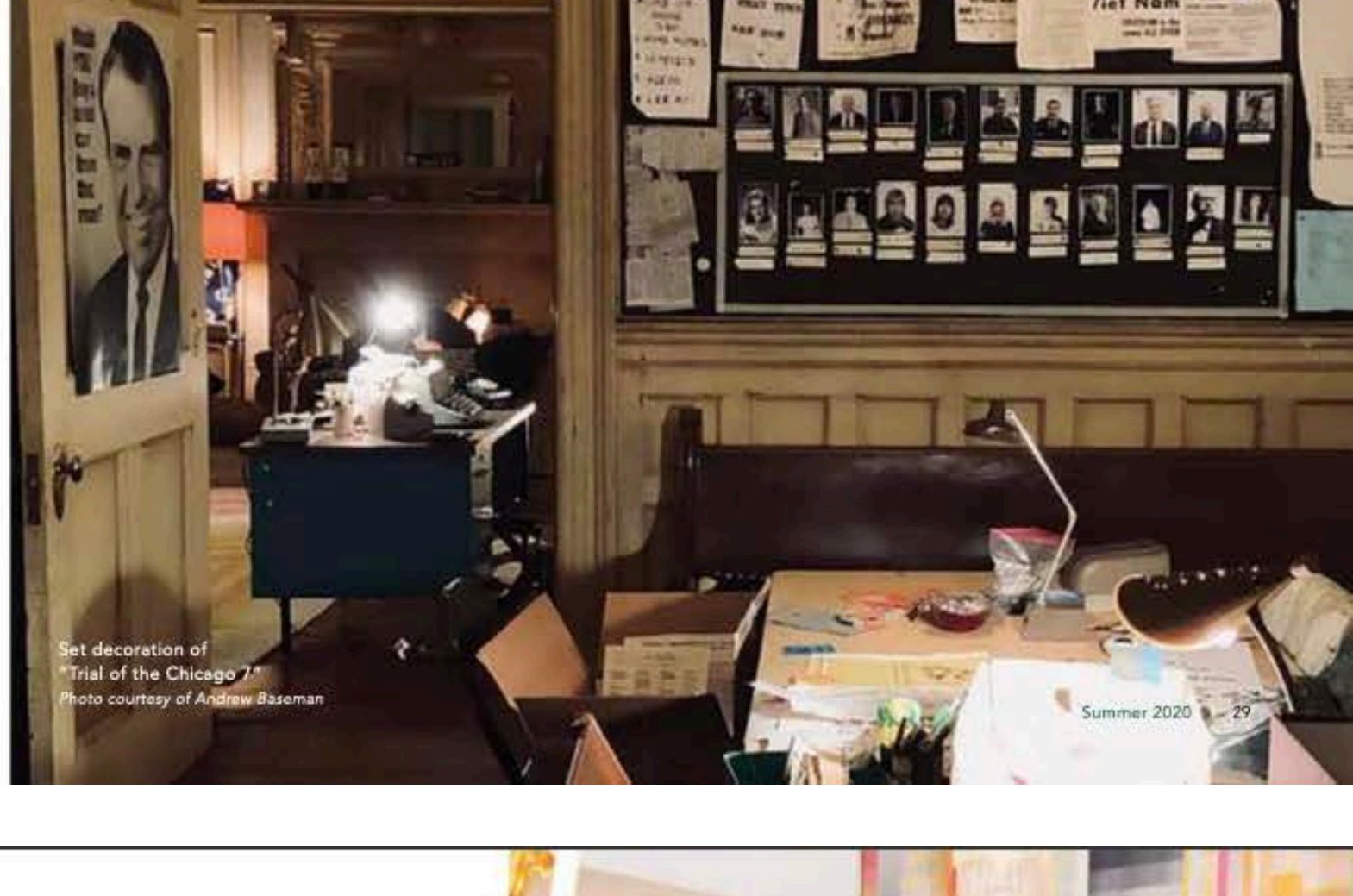
"I have a good eye for detail, and it's also a curse, because when I go to the movies and I see something that's wrong, I obsess," he says. "I can't help it."

### EARLY TRAINING

From a young age, Baseman was intrigued by detail, noticing things other kids (and even adults) did not. "I was an unusual kid," he says. "I was into antiques and furniture refinishing." He spent many hours in his parents' bookstore and antique shop in South Egremont, just up the road from Berkshire School. "That was instrumental in my development as a decorator because so many things came

through the doors of their shop that I got to learn from. Our house was furnished with antiques, so I'd ask my parents, 'Where did you get this? What is it?' Tell me everything you know about it."

When he was 8 years old, Baseman became captivated by antique postcards—which, at a nickel a piece, were one of the few antiques he could afford to buy himself—and he attended postcard shows and auctions. It was at flea markets with his parents that he discovered a lifelong passion for antiques with "inventive" or "make-do" repairs, which he explains on his blog, "Past Imperfect: The Art of Inventive Repair," are "unique examples of necessity and thrift, made during a time before Krazy Glue was invented." "If I bought things that were



Set decoration of "Trial of the Chicago 7." Photo courtesy of Andrew Baseman

imperfect, I could afford them because most people didn't want them," he says. "I realized that I preferred the imperfect to the perfect ones because they had an additional something, so a broken teapot with a metal handle is to me more interesting than the perfect one with just a normal handle." Baseman now has the largest collection of make-do antiques in the world, rotating 600 items for display in his home. "It just really took off. I started to write about them and study them. It's grown into an obsession."

When Baseman arrived at Berkshire, he was nervous about playing sports, something he says would have been "a disaster." Full of ingenuity, he asked his teachers if stagecraft (constructing scenery) could fill his sports requirement, and thus began four years of building and designing sets, costumes, and posters for drama productions at the School. Hungry for knowledge and experience, he also took every art class available, becoming president of the Drama Club. At graduation, he was awarded The Berkshire Dramatics Cup, The Margaret V. Beattie Memorial Prize for Excellence in Art, and The John E. Rovensky Memorial Prize for Excellence in Independent Study.

"Without even knowing it, I was training to become a theater designer," Baseman says, who earned his bachelor's degree in set and costume design from Carnegie Mellon University and began his career as an assistant set designer on Broadway. "Berkshire really had a lasting impact on me. I had a real sense of pride being at that school. I loved the history of it. I loved the setting of it. I loved the community."

Long before Hollywood beckoned, Baseman's first breakthrough came during his junior year, when he had the temerity to approach the acclaimed Berkshire Theater Festival about designing posters for its upcoming

season. His offer was declined, but he was asked to become an apprentice. Baseman accepted, and the early connections he made there were instrumental to his later success. It was there he met production designer Bill Groom, who called on Baseman years later, after he had pivoted from Broadway, to join him as the assistant set decorator on what would become Baseman's first film, "Rocket Gibraltar," starring Burt Lancaster.

"I was so green," he says, of working

on the film. "I had never worked on a movie set, and I didn't even know the terminology." He has learned a lot since then. "I turned down work very early on because I didn't think I could handle it. I didn't really know where to find the things [the set would need]. I don't turn down projects, but not because I don't think I can handle the job. At this point, I love doing big period movies because those are hard to do, but it's a challenge and I really enjoy it."

Baseman at Newel Gallery. Photo by Joanna Chastman