



F O R Y O U R C O N S I D E R A T I O N
OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENT IN PRODUCTION DESIGN
CONTEMPORARY FEATURE FILM

In The Heights

PRODUCTION DESIGNER NELSON COATES

"Little details that tell the world we are not invisible..."

ABUELA CLAUDIA



The Bodega Exterior



The various incarnations of the Bodega interior were built at the Armory, along with sidewalks, street, trees and Salon interior and exterior, incorporating the facades after filming on 175th had wrapped. By doing so, we could make sure that continuity was seamless for the scenes which cut back and forth between location and stage.

The Bodega transitions through three distinct incarnations over the course of the movie - The Bodega as it appears in the opening of the film, the closed Bodega with a mural and fashions that inspire Usnavi to stay, and the current day Bodega that has a full-on DR beach vibe, incorporating elements of the entire film. In order to make all of transitions, the last version was designed first. The Beach structure, with detailing inspired by heritage Dominican structures, needed to fit in the final version of the Bodega. The layout of the space was occurring simultaneously with the choreographic creation of the opening number. We taped out the set on the floor of rehearsal halls each day for Choreographer Chris Scott, and provided stand-in shelving and counters to assist the blocking and development of the space.

Jon wanted a map inside the Bodega to introduce audiences to the Dominican Republic. Chris Scott wanted actor Anthony Ramos to jump over the counter and refer to the map. Not only did the counter have to be designed for a lot of jumping, but the location and scale of map elements had to be just right. As the map would dominate the Bodega back wall, it needed to feel unique and homemade. I asked Andrew and his crew to collect items typically sold in a Bodega. Bottle caps, lids from condensed milk cans, sugar packets, Metro cards, discarded Lotto tickets, sea glass, guitar picks, subway tile, goldfish, gummy turtles, keys, lots of different Dominican candies, and even shells & sand from a Dominican Republic beach all made their way into the Bodega map.

Arches inspired by Dominican structures, pressed tin ceilings, and custom built shelving incorporating handmade details and aging to appear as if 30 years old were fabricated. For ease of filming, shelving sections were built on casters, and packaging not needing to be manipulated was affixed to the units.

The Bodega was stocked with private label regional and national label products, many of which were suggested by Luis Miranda, in addition to those researched in the neighborhood. Andrew and his team mapped out the products and placement, and volumes of labels, signage, and graphics were created to flesh out the space.



The Bodega Interior



With limited stage space, the nightclub set needed to be a location modify. The scripted event is called Fiesta in the Heights. Posters for the event are in evidence throughout the neighborhood prior to the event. The space needed to be exciting, sexy, and Cuban themed. Using a multi-level black box space in Chelsea (by chance managed by Jimmy Smits' son), the transformation plan began. Some beautiful Cuba tiles discovered during prep influenced the ultimate floor design. Collaborating with Graphic Artist William Hopper, a four-tile pattern was extrapolated to look as if painted on wood plank flooring. To keep the design from wearing during the course of filming, the pattern was printed on the underside of a clear plexiglass material, then tested with dancers. As Salsa requires felt soled shoes and lots of spinning, the floor material needed to be "just the right speed."

The bandstand and back drop incorporated details from buildings in old Havana. Antiqued mirrors and fringed rich red shaded fixtures were installed throughout.





On location, the salon had about ten feet of interior. After we wrapped on location, the façade was disassembled and reassembled on stage and attached to the full interior set. As with most storefronts in the Heights, light typically comes into the shop from the front. In order to provide lighting opportunities in the back of the shop, an industrial window was created and installed in the back of the salon set.

All the furniture elements in the salon were designed to roll away as part of the choreography.



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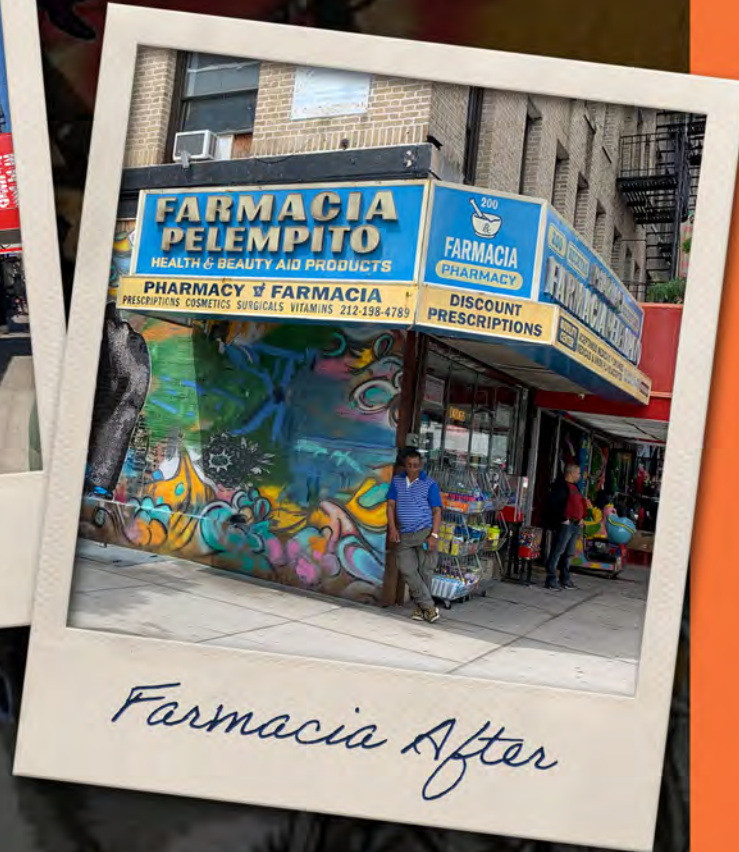
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Stage Build



Farmacia Before

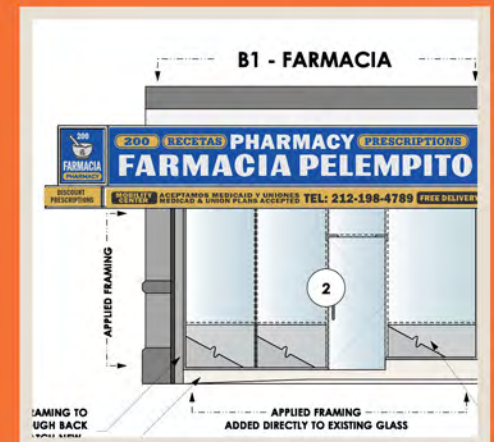


Farmacia After



The movie is framed as a story told to kids on a Dominican beach, one of whom is revealed to be Usnavi's daughter. With that as a device, the block needed to transform back a few years before her birth so it would make visually sense.

As with much of northern Manhattan, gentrification had already encroached on the neighborhood - Lots of LED rope lighting, vinyl awnings, glass walled store fronts, Chase Banks, computer stores... Built facades, signage, murals and dressing were designed for four city blocks both sides of the street to create the two eras of the intersection.



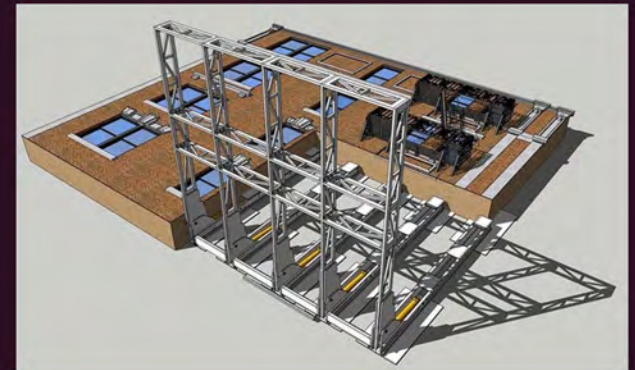
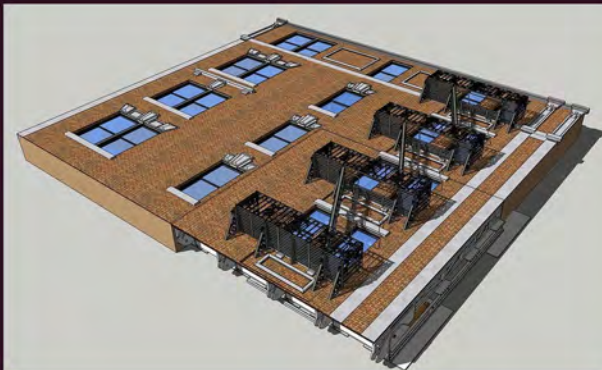
Jon's concept for "When the Sun Goes Down" was an amazing idea that needed testing to see if in going forward, the execution of the visuals felt emotionally integrated into the number. The scene starts on Nina's fire escape overlooking the George Washington Bridge, then the couple eventually dances up the side of Nina's apartment building. Our challenge was creating weightlessness on the outside of a building, and the ultimate flexibility for the camera, lighting, and choreography.

The scene needed to be lyrical and elegant, expressing the weightlessness of being in love... We knew the actors would need a physical environment with which to interact and simultaneously we needed to demonstrate that gravity hadn't been suspended for everyone else.

A 55' x 55' dancing wall set was built 4' above and parallel to the stage floor to allow for rigging below. A two-story 26' x 26' section of the building that included four double hung windows and 2 fire escape baskets & ladders was built to connect to a hydraulic rig fabricated by SFX coordinator Jeff Brink. That programable section could move from vertical to horizontal in 5 secs, and operate at any speed or variable speed, and could stop at any point, allowing for ultimate flexibility in choreography.



When the sun goes down

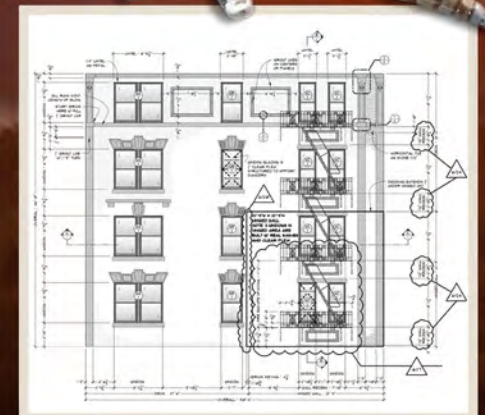
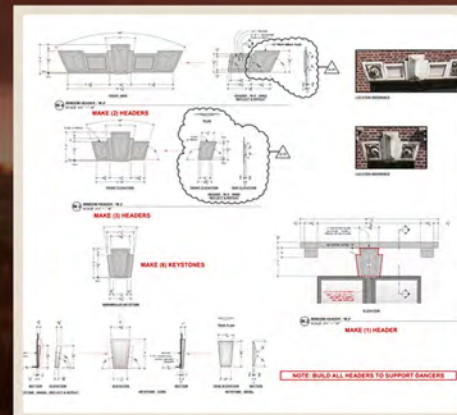
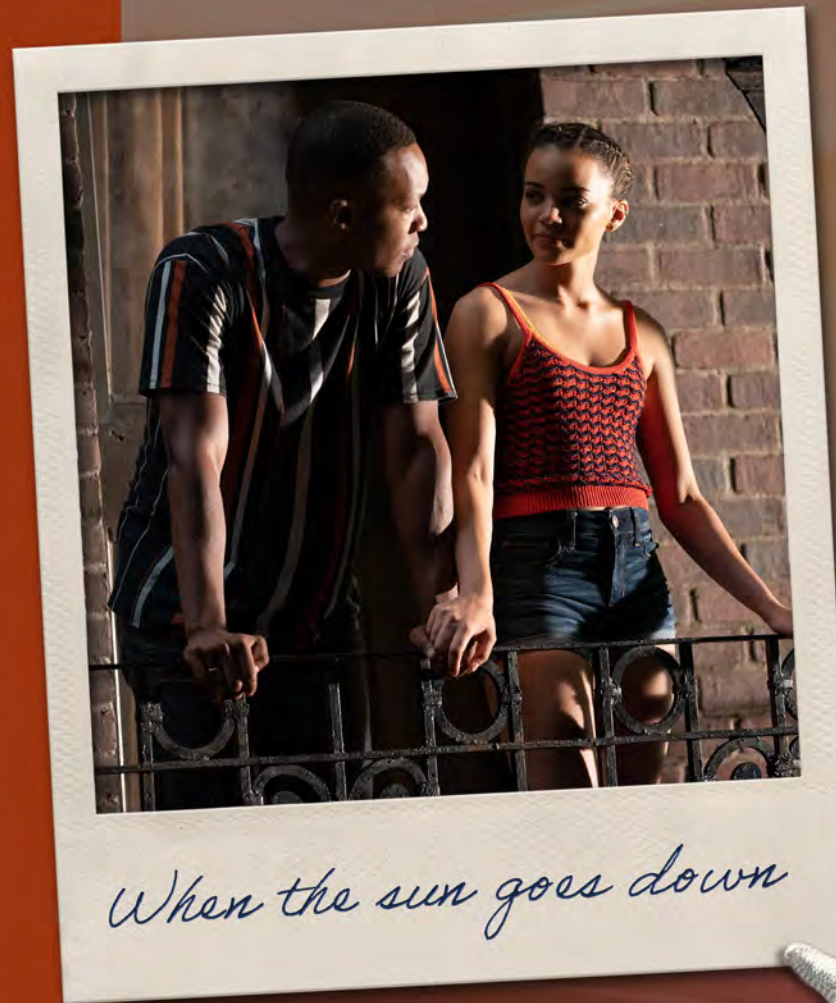


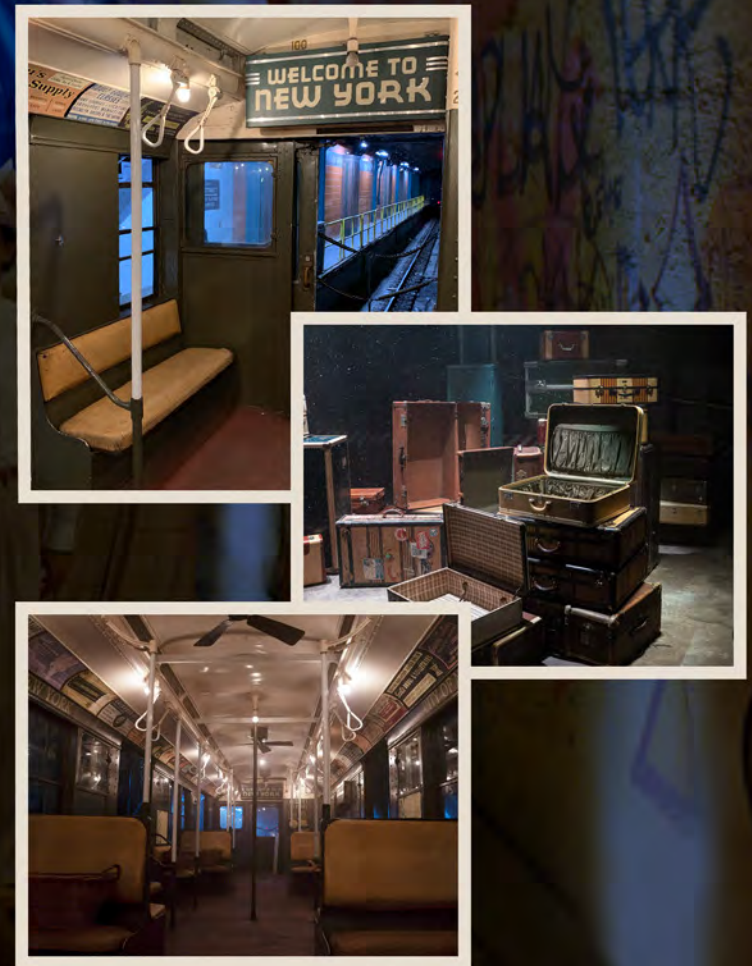
The fire escape baskets had to be reworked to be dense enough to support body weight and create danceable surfaces. Ladders and baskets on the hydraulic section were constructed from steel.

Stone elements on Wadsworth Ave. building parapets where Lin filmed the first commercial for the Broadway production were replicated for the top cornice.

All windows were danceable. Window dressing was fixed to the set so as not to move. Fabric drapes were soaked in stiffeners to help retain rigidity when the wall was moving. A/C units for windows were gutted then supported with wood boxes to become danceable. An additional window platform with a matching window parallel to the stage floor was created 12' feet above the stage floor to facilitate capturing the image of Benny & Nina dancing across the window.

3 interior apartment environments were built to "place" optically behind the windows. One of those sets was a dining room with a matching double window so the young boy could see the dancers... and so the audience knows gravity still exists.





The initial discussions for Pacencia Y Fe were to have the song performed in a dark soundstage. I was hoping for more visual structure. After scouting a few locations with Jon that he thought may feel too literal, I took him to the NYC Transit Museum. Since Abuela Claudia sings of her 1940s journey from Cuba to the U.S, I thought period subway cars could serve as a visual conveyance of her memories. We needed more time and space than the museum would allow, so we began to work with the MTA to coordinate renting the historic subway cars, and to find a station where the scene could be staged.

Though an elevated train is referenced in the musical, the only elevated train close to Washington Heights is in Inwood. The Dykeman Station serves as the starting point. As the subway enters the tunnel into Washington Heights, the electrical handoff served as a way to transition into the past, with the other riders turning into 1940's dancers. Subway ads turn into Cuban graphics. Very specific set pieces were introduced throughout the closed subway maintenance station to punctuate aspects of Abuela's song. The finale takes place in MTA's 191st street station - the site of a public arts project in 2008. Over time areas of the tunnel art had been tagged or destroyed. We worked with the original artists or their estates to restore what we could, and sections for which we could not obtain clearance were covered and painted with our own graffiti.



The Pool

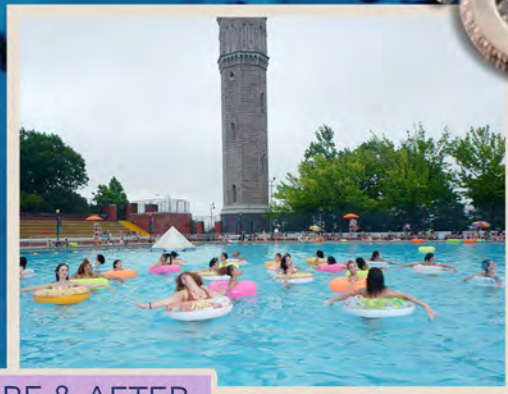


The NYC Parks Department had never allowed anyone to film in Highbridge Park Pool so that particular location took a lot of finesse to gain access, and accomplish prep and filming in a very limited window.

Originally built as the reservoirs for water service to northern Manhattan, the pools had hollow decking with pipes underneath, necessitating an engineering survey and weight restrictions for the types of equipment and camera crane.

The Parks Department also had to be convinced to hold off on a major historic renovation of the 1880s stone pump tower that would have clad the tower in scaffolding for two years starting two months before filming.

Ultimately the Department agreed to allow filming (so long as Opening Day was not moved), rehab the pools, remove fencing and railings that would've inhibited shooting, and paint the pools our chosen color. We installed large scale banners on structures and walls where we couldn't paint.



POOL BEFORE & AFTER





Murals & Artwork

One of the first things we did in the neighborhood was to paint a mural on the side of the Bodega location – of a man in a boat dreaming of returning to the Dominican Republic, with the DR flag pointing the way. Before starting major construction, we wanted the neighborhood to demonstratively know we were going to take great care to present the visuals in such a way as to honor the community. (So many asked if that mural could remain. The Building owner agreed and it is still on the block).

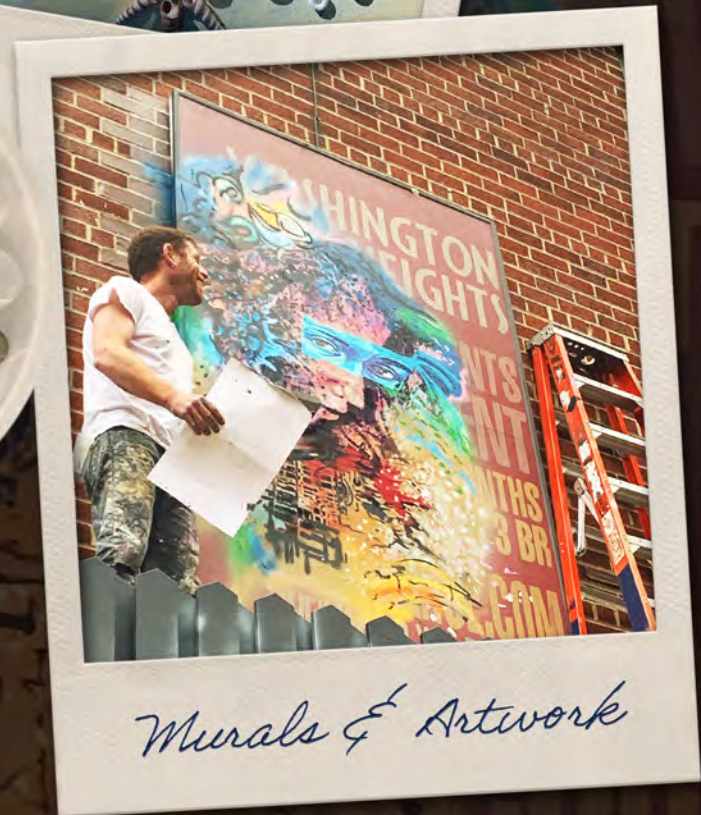
Murals and collaged art were present throughout the Heights and Inwood, but lots of the pieces were tribute art. I wanted to incorporate artists & art from Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Cuba throughout the movie. Several pieces from a Cuban artist I have known since college were incorporated into set dressing. A Dominican artist I discovered during early prep allowed us to create the exterior salon mural from elements of three murals in the DR. And musical themed artwork from Puerto Rico adorned the Rosario home.

Graffiti Pete's original artwork needed to have a connective style and feel ubiquitous in the neighborhood. Base pieces were designed then printed on a PhotoTek material, mosaic'd into locations and sets, and overpainted in situ to feel as though they were completely painted in place. Elements were designed in such way as to allow the actor to easily overpaint during the scene take after take.

We wanted to make the film feel natural, and yet the evocative, allegorical design was carefully crafted to showcase the textured and multi-layered history of the intergenerational neighborhood culture, adding layers of detail to the characters' journeys, while creating a strong sense of place. A sun-bleached palette was derived from buildings, fabric, and sign references from throughout the Heights to reinforce the heat of the summer during a blackout.

Representation on screen has the potential to give hope... hope to succeed, encouragement to try new things, to encourage viewers to connect to their individual superpowers and follow their dreams.

Seeing what a project does for an entire community and beyond with representation makes you realize how people are presented in media really does affect how they're treated in real life. Our obligation, challenge, and joy extended from the big boisterous moments on through to the quiet details that will keep this story, this community and the joy of the people of Washington Heights from ever being invisible again...

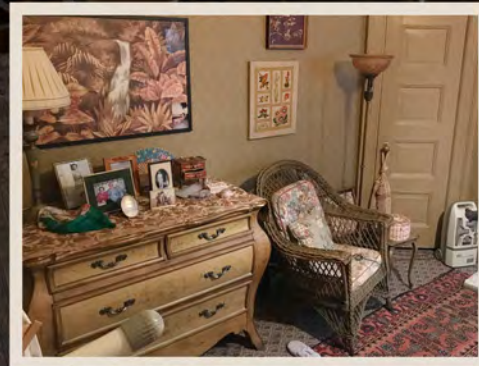
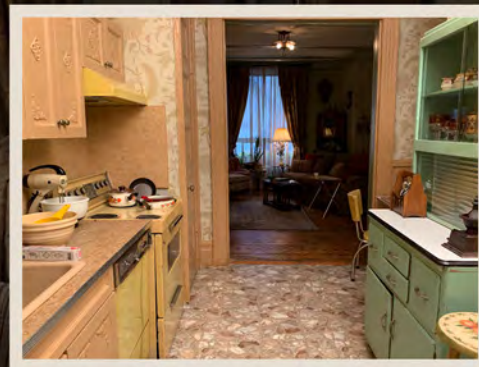


Murals & Artwork

In the Broadway production *Usnavi & Abuela* live above the Bodega. We scouted many apartments, but the distance to walk in scenes, and the reverse view of the street looking away from the GWB, did not visually connect all the neighborhood spots in the opening number. Jon liked the idea of using the main floor of one of the townhouses, so we counted steps from the corner to decide which townhouse to use. Owned by a contractor couple, the perfectly distanced townhouse recently had been remodeled and was quite modern. The owners agreed to allow an extensive location modify, turning their home into a layered old style Cuban-influenced residence.



Abuela's Apartment



Ironically, the northeast corner of the intersection had a car service. Ultimately that business space was redesigned inside and out to become Rosarios... with prefabbed set pieces created to minimize displacement of the existing company.



DESIGN DEPT. CREW

Chris Shriver - SUPERVISING ART DIRECTOR

Andrew Baseman – SET DECORATOR

Brian Goodwin - ART DIRECTOR

Katya Blumenberg – ASSISTANT ART DIRECTOR

Jeremy W. Foil - ASSISTANT ART DIRECTOR

Mathew Sama – ASSISTANT ART DIRECTOR

Hugh Landwehr - ASSISTANT ART DIRECTOR

Clifton Leach -ASSISTANT ART DIRECTOR

Will Hopper - LEAD GRAPHIC ARTIST

Danah Kim – GRAPHIC ARTIST

Mike Pantuso – GRAPHIC ARTIST

Erik Knight – GRAPHIC ARTIST

Sha-Sha Shiau – ART COORDINATOR

Ada Mitchev - ART PA

Emma Weiss - ART PA

Hallie Fu – ART PA



Dream Team

"You're trying to do a deep dive into a specific culture, food, furniture, art — the things that are held so dear [locally] that they're just as important to the storytelling process," Coates says.

"The neighborhood includes a mix of Puerto Rican, Dominican and Cuban influences. So helping delineate those cultures and also making them germane to what you see in Washington Heights was very important to the story."

