

MPTD Interview with Patty Hess

Leslie Green: Welcome to "Real Talk with Film DC". This is your host, Leslie Green, director of communications with the DC Office of Motion Picture and Television Development, also known as the DC film office.

This month we're sitting down with local unit production manager Patty Hess. She has worked on such projects as "The Pelican Brief," "The Bourne Ultimatum," and the Oscar-nominated film "Philomena," and most recently the Amazon web series "Alpha House." We know that she's actually working right now on an upcoming network television pilot coming this spring, so we're really excited about that.

Thank you, Patty, for joining us on "Reel Talk with Film DC." We're so happy to have you.

Patty Hess: You're welcome. I'm glad to be here.

Leslie: Great. First of all, let's enlighten our listeners on what a unit production manager actually does. What's your role when a movie like "Bourne Ultimatum" or a television production like "Alpha House" comes to town?

Patty: It's interesting because, in an overall way, what a production manager is essentially doing is setting up the infrastructure for the production of a motion picture. Working in DC, you're setting up a microcosm of that.

Because it tends to be that most movies that come into DC are already up and running in other regions, whether it be California, New York, or Atlanta. Or, as in the case of "Philomena," coming in from overseas. While some of the crew may come with that movie, you're filling in. The role is essentially the same. You're setting up from scratch an office and infrastructure to support the film.

In addition to that, the production manager, the practice of hiring is really more like casting. Because who you get isn't just really what their skill level is, but are they right personality for the director? Or is that grip and electrician the right personality for the director or photography? There's really a different skill-set involved in just hiring local crew.

Then there's getting equipment and making sure that everybody in their various departments are securing the right permits and assurance and safety mechanisms because safety is number one on most production managers' -- any good production manager's minds to be safety.

We're in unpredictable situations. We shoot in exterior locations. We shoot in all kinds of weather and with a lot of machinery. The safety component is not a small one.

In addition to that, there's always the fun task of managing the money. The production manager is often the one who does make the budget and adheres to the budget and is basically accountable to the studio for why there may or may not be overruns or savings. If you've budgeted correctly, they tend to offset one another.

Then, lastly, it is just the day-to-day management of scheduling and adapting the company to change. Because, inevitably, a team effort of film-making with over a hundred people, there's a lot of changes. Whether somebody gets sick, whether the weather changes, your schedule changes, something's not available, or the script changes. You need to be able to adapt the entire company to those changes.

Then, when the movie's over, you wrap it all up and shut it all down and make sure all the loose ends have been tied up and followed through with.

Leslie: That's really interesting. I'm sure there are some folks listening today that may not have even heard of a unit production manager before. How did you get into this line of work? Did you always know that you wanted to be in the film and television industry in that way?

Patty: Not necessarily. I was living and going to school in Tucson, Arizona at the University of Arizona and I met an incredibly interesting writer who's a...it turns out is a MacArthur fellow named Leslie Marmon Silko. Oddly enough, I was going to take care of her ranch and her horses while they went off to make a movie in New Mexico, a story she had gotten a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to make a movie of.

At the last minute, she offered if I wanted to go to New Mexico and work with them they'd find someone else to take care of the horses. It was a little bit, I kind of call it the circus coming to town and I joined the circus. Because once I was on the set of an incredibly interesting story that she had written, it was mesmerizing to me to be part of a team that was bringing to life a story.

In this case, it was over a 2,000-year-old story. It was a Laguna Indian story, which was a Pueblo Indian tribe in New Mexico. It was fascinating to me, that process of storytelling in the modern age, which was essentially what film is and what human beings have been doing for a millennium.

I think that that's what really captured the spirit in me of why I wanted to pursue film as a career. I was just more comfortable in New York, as opposed to LA, being from New York originally. I moved there and started basically making the coffee, as it were, and worked my way up through the business and still have the same love and passion and excitement for it that I did when I started.

Leslie: What can you tell us about the most challenging and rewarding parts of your job as a unit production manager?

Patty: Every day is rewarding because it's different. I like change and I like the unexpected and I like what that does to me as an individual. Because it challenges you to do something different all of the time. Every problem has a different solution and every movie is different from another movie.

I liked the change and the unpredictability of it. By its very nature that is challenging. Challenge to me is not a bad word. Challenge to me is a good word. It's what makes it fun. It's what makes it unique and interesting.

I think one of the things, particularly, that I love about film-making is it's oftentimes a mini course in whatever it is you are filming. For instance, when I worked on JFK, and although I was a little kid when Kennedy was assassinated it reintroduces you to topics and stories and the background and research behind it that you wouldn't have otherwise delved into unless you were studying it, say in college.

The same thing with Johnny, "The Age of Innocence" from Marty Scorsese. Getting back into the world of the 1880s, in New York and everything that was behind it. A director like Marty Scorsese expects you to do your research and know as much as he does about the subject matter, the author, the time, the history.

At that point in time, I was a location manager in New York. All of those things can be difficult. Sometimes, you're in circumstances that are very hard to overcome, like weather is one of them. When we were filming at the Pentagon we had something like 65 or 70-mile-an-hour winds came out of nowhere. You're adapting on site with a lot of people and with schedules. That can be very stressful.

But nothing's insurmountable. There's always a solution to every problem. You just need to be creative and find it.

Leslie: Tell us what it was like to work on the set of "Alpha House," which is the new web series from Amazon. This is a pretty new format for television. I know they came here to do some scenes in DC. Tell us what that was like.

Patty: That was great. It's funny, because in many ways we think of, as we're referring to it now in the industry, made for new media, that it's somehow or other different than anything else. Really what's different about it is the platform. It's the way that content is consumed and viewed and distributed.

Our process, really, is largely the same. Probably one of the bigger challenges, the shift that we've all made into a digital format from film, was probably a bigger change physically in the process of film-making and production than working for new media.

On the other hand, what I think is exciting about it is that you can feel an energy about projects that are coming through say Netflix or Amazon that has a lot of momentum behind it in terms of the potential for creativity and the potential to not have to sit into the standard formats that we've had up to now with say network television, programming of the half hour show or feature films of two hours or so.

The future on the Internet and new media is really nascent, as they say. It could be a five minute movie, it could be a four to six hours miniseries. People are consuming things in this binge viewing. I think it's opening up a whole possibility of things that we haven't really realized yet. I think the excitement and anticipation of that is what's new and different about it.

But our process is essentially the same, in terms of how we break down a script, getting permits, getting permissions, getting all of the crew assembled and shooting it, that is physically the same.

Leslie: I know that you mentioned living in New York for a time and doing some film-making there, and then you came to DC. What do you like most about filming here in DC versus any other place where you've filmed?

Patty: Like New York, where, I started out in New York in the early '80s, and, as I said, I was a location manager there for about 15 years. What I like about DC is what I loved about New York which is that New York is a character in a movie, it's a backdrop and a setting unto itself. It really dictates what happens in the story or why those characters are even there.

It really permeates every bit of the story. Think of any of Woody Allen's New York movies, that's certainly the case.

The first time I shot in DC was on "The Pelican Brief," which you mentioned earlier. Coming to DC, it was very different than New York. I realized it's a character in a movie. I think that that's what I've loved about being here is the privilege, really, of being able to shoot at the Lincoln Memorial or at the Library of Congress or visiting the Supreme Court with Alan Pakula.

Those privileges, of seeing the nation's capital up front and in a very personal way is exciting. It's also fun to get to know a new city. Particularly, in this day and age, when Washington DC has figured in so much of the national news and storytelling, it's really ramped up, certainly since the "The Pelican Brief" days in terms of what goes on in DC.

The other thing is that DC since that time has become such a different place. It's so much more vibrant. There are so many more industries here from, to talk about Amazon. Amazon web services just outside of Washington, DC, all of the technology, all of the medicine, all of the arts.

It's a much more dynamic and international city than it was back then in the early '90s. Part of my interest is evolving and discovering that as it changes and grows.

Leslie: Some of the locations you just mentioned as part of what we like to call postcard Washington, those are great and they show the nation's capital in the light that many people see it. But do you have any favorite locations beyond that area that you like to film?

Patty: Yeah. It made me think about when I first moved to New York from Arizona. New York was going through a really pretty tough time. It was a boycott actually that was going on and movies were going to Pittsburgh and then ultimately to Canada.

The only thing anybody wanted to do in New York was shoot the Empire State Building and maybe lower Manhattan, at the time the World Trade Center. It was very difficult to get movies to stay long enough to discover the treasure trove of places to shoot that no one had ever heard of or going five levels underground in Grand Central Station.

DC has gone through the same thing. If people come for two days they want to know, to be able to establish that they were here. They get the mall and it's all very beautiful and the Washington Monument or the White House or what have you.

I agree with you. I wish, and hopefully moving forward we'll have the opportunity with new media and maybe with some TV series to explore more underneath the postcard areas. I just love Teddy Roosevelt Island. I find that whole little vignette over there pretty interesting. There was

interiors that are just incredible. I don't know that, not necessarily all of them are accessible to us.

For instance, the Peacock Room at the Freer is beautiful. There are some amazing homes that you can shoot in that are a few hundred years old and beautiful. There's just so many places that once if we got out there, scouting it and could build some story-line around.

Neighborhoods, beautiful neighborhoods. Eastern Market is fabulous. What's going on anacostia area is fabulous, and obviously Georgetown, which I've shot in quite a bit. On "The Sentinel," we've shot there, I think we shot there a little bit on "Breach" and then "Safe House."

It's really a matter of getting a movie to come here long enough, so that you get two days of postcard and maybe three days of these treasures that nobody has seen. Hopefully that will happen in the coming years.

Leslie: Absolutely. Can you tell us anything about the projects you're currently working on? I know you have a network pilot series that's coming here soon. Can you tell us anything about that?

Patty: It is, as you said, it's a network pilot. It is about the female secretary of state and it's very, very well-written. I'm really hoping that this does go to series, because it's so smart a show. It's also exciting thinking about what Cate Blanchett said on her acceptance speech at the Oscars in terms of roles that are being written for women now.

A more diverse cast is a really exciting and some really good roles. I think that this show will be able to provide those kinds of acting opportunities. We're going to be shooting in the beginning of April and I'm not exactly sure when it will air.

But I think it's wonderful. I think it's one of the smartest scripts I've read in a really long time and I really hope that it does well and it sticks up. Should it go to series, hopefully they'll be able to, it's based out of New York but they'll be do able to just hop on that Acela train and come down every couple of episodes and shoot here for a few days. Because there's just so much to do and see here.

Leslie: Yeah, that would be great if it's picked up, getting some of that business. Last question. What advice would you give to someone who's looking to get their start in the industry?

Patty: I'm going to borrow from Judi Dench, bless her heart. I got to ask her a similar question when she was here shooting on "Philomena." Interestingly enough, she said her advice is for the person to try and do everything. Try all different aspects of the creative process of, or technical process, where your interests lie, of the film-making experience.

She, for instance, made her own wigs early on. She had to take care of her own wardrobe, so that you really understand a 360 of what the process is. Essentially that's what I've done, and I call it earn while you learn.

But working in film, basically, from the ground up to where I am, I have a really full understanding of what each department needs and does. That helps me manage better and that helps me be a smarter manager and a more supportive manager of the film-making process.

As much as everybody wants to say, "I want to be a producer," or, "I want to be a director," or, "I want to be the star of a movie." The best thing to do is to not do that first but is to try and learn the craft and learn from mentors and people who have done it and can really lend some of their skills.

Our business has always been a generational business. That's how really good scenic artists came up with, it was often a parent to a child and that child to their child and it went on for generations.

Now, we're certainly more scattered across the globe because of film incentives that have pulled people in a more gypsy-like way than we ever were before, but there are still mentors out there. It's still a really good way, I think, to learn from the ground up.

Leslie: I think that's really, really good advice. I want to thank you again, Patty, for joining us here today. This was some great information.

Patty: It's my pleasure and I love DC and the entire mid-Atlantic region, I think, is just a beautiful, wonderful place to live and it's a great place to tell stories. Hopefully we'll be doing a lot more of it.

Leslie: Absolutely. I want to thank our listeners for tuning into "Reel Talk with Film DC." Again, this is your host, Leslie Green, signing off. Don't forget to check us out on the web at film.DC.gov. Like us on Facebook at [Facebook.com/FilmDC](https://www.facebook.com/FilmDC), and follow us on Twitter @DCFilmOffice. Catch you next time.