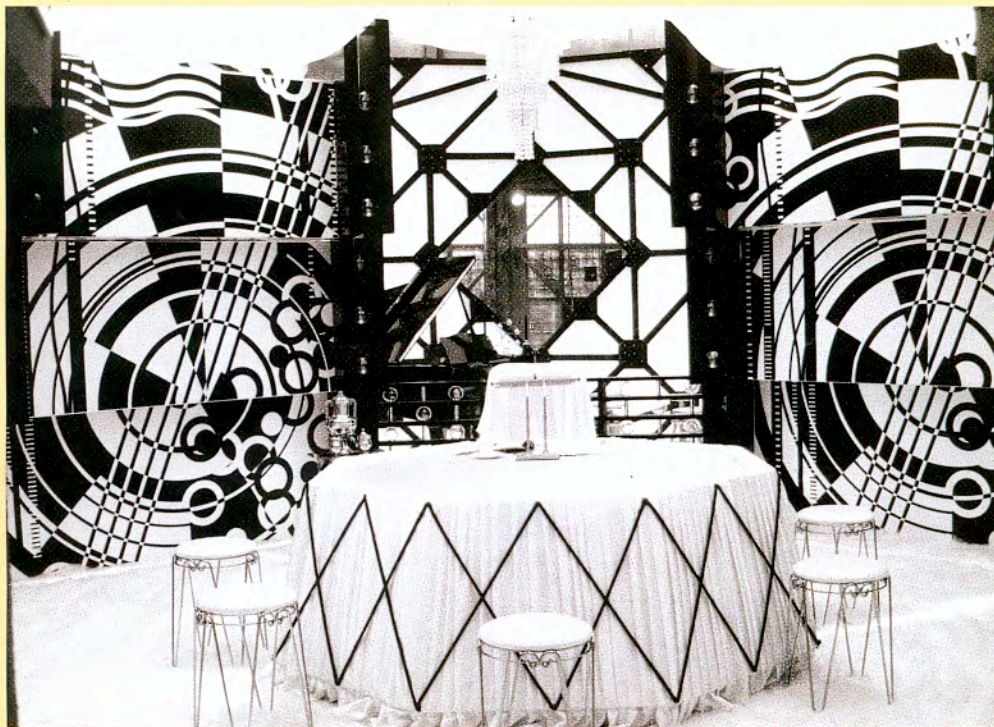


# MATTHEW DAVIES DESIGNING FOR CHARACTER



*The Saddest Music in the World*  
Guy Maddin  
(Canada, 2003)

by JANIS COLE

He is sheer energy. He moves fast and thinks fast. When he tells me that he's worked as the production designer or art director on 11 features, TV movies or shorts since his return to Canada from the U.K., it's clear he also works fast.

I ask Matthew Davies to share his proudest moment on *The Saddest Music in the World*, and I anticipate his answer—the DGC award for Outstanding Production Design. But a different thought flashes through his lightning-quick mind. “I found a great group of Canadian people in Winnipeg and they were telling a great Canadian story. I spent my first seven years in Canada and then I moved away (to the U.K.) for almost 24. Working on *The Saddest Music* in Winnipeg, in the middle of winter, made me proud to be Canadian. It was a very patriotic moment.”

Now 32 years old, Davies received traditional film training at the National Film and Television School in London: hanging foreground miniatures, working with forced perspective sets, doing glass matte paintings and using scenic backdrops. He has contributed his

talent to an eclectic array of films since returning to his homeland roughly three years ago.

Along with his DGC award, Davies has garnered two Gemini nominations. While he enjoys getting these nods, he does not place enormous weight on winning awards for his design work. He feels the best production design blends in with everything rather than standing out. Davies says, “Film is a collaboration and design must be in sympathy.... You can't have an ego. Design choices are no more important than any consideration when helping to tell the story.”

Davies has recently returned from a scouting trip to find exteriors to match the interior sets he's building for *Snow Cake*, starring Sigourney Weaver and Alan Rickman, and directed by Marc Evans. His office walls are filled with displays of small town storefronts in Kapuskasing, Wawa and other remote northern Ontario towns.

Locations are an important part of design, but Davies maintains his primary approach is designing for character. He has been exchanging notes with Sigourney Weaver regarding the set and colour scheme for her home, which will

express the emotional landscape of her character in *Snow Cake*. “Everything that is not the actor is the production design—everything around them, the whole visual motif. Designing for character is what keeps me grounded.”

When Matthew Davies returned to Canada, he introduced himself to Rhombus Media, and is now working with them for a third time on *Snow Cake*. He was designing Barbara Willis Sweete's production of *Elizabeth Rex* in Calgary when Guy Maddin visited the set and hired him for *The Saddest Music*.

“Knowing that Maddin had designed most of his own films, in true auteur style,” Davies says, “I wanted to find a way to get ‘under the skin’ of the director, to give him what he wanted.” To research *The Saddest Music*, Davies screened Maddin's entire filmography. From the films, he made a list of visual cues to research, such as melodrama, Cubism, Gothic and Industrialism. Davies picked up about 200 used books and photocopied roughly 1,500 images that he bundled into groupings to take to Winnipeg. He pinned the images throughout the director's home and studio and let Maddin choose the ones most significant to him. They developed a common language, discussing in detail the feelings and merits that these images provoked.

Davies was conscious of his design choices reflecting the tradition of Maddin's style, with its use of grainy B&W to tell the story, multiple camera coverage, and super-8 and 16mm shooting formats (later blown up to up to 35mm). He consciously wanted to give the design a raw, primitive quality, and not a polished look.

Virtually all the sets were built for *The Saddest Music*, including the exterior of Winnipeg. The shooting warehouse was the same temperature inside as out, about minus-40°C most of the time. Davies trucked in tons of snow to dress the town, which worked well and was cheap. When Maddin saw it, though, he thought it was rather literal, and they discussed covering the real snow with artificial snow blankets. However, they both thought that made the snow too white for the B&W stock, so Davies brought in barrels of sparkles and achieved just the right look.

Would he work in Winnipeg in the dead of winter again? “Yes, absolutely,” he says. “I had a great experience working with Guy in Winnipeg. I want to work with Canadian filmmakers who are telling Canadian stories.”

Janis Cole is a writing professor at the Ontario College of Art & Design. She has made three widely acclaimed theatrical documentaries: P4W: Prison for Women, Hookers on Davie and Calling the Shots.