

# INSPIRED COLOUR PALETTES OF PRODUCTION DESIGNER SANDRA KYBARTAS

by JANIS COLE

Production designer Sandra (Sandy) Kybartas wears exquisite fabrics in muted colours, accentuated with minimalist accessories, achieving an understated classic chic. Her home has bits of wall cut out here and there to create clever trails of natural sunlight, while bold colour splashes draw attention to her fine collection of sculptures and large-scale canvases. A country oasis she's modelled in her backyard is like a grand film set, exemplifying how design flair oscillates seamlessly between her work and life. Yet Kybartas holds no illusion about the designer's role, stating that her goal in film is to enhance the vision of the director.

Kybartas works alongside quality directors, bringing her assured vision to numerous movies and television shows including the sweetheart series *Due South*, Triptych Media's features *Lilies*, and *Republic of Love* and *Against the Ropes* for Paramount Pictures. It is her job to oversee the 'look' of everything that the camera will capture—from studio sets and location modifications to props and set decoration—and she always looks for ways to underscore and enhance the emotions of the story. For instance, a scene she tackled in the television thriller *The Colony* had two characters running through a tunnel feeling frightened; however there was no story content to show their fright. So Kybartas designed the tunnel running underneath a park, then devised mangy tree roots growing down through the park soil and into the dark tunnel. By having the characters make their way through dangling roots, with dirt flying around them, she created emotional engagement in the scene, through production design.

One of the first people brought on board a project is the production designer. Kybartas starts her process by reading the script several times, looking for pace and emotional content in the story, and making notes about her feelings or any 'pictures' that leap into her head. These initial strong responses will usually become meaningful to her as she designs the film. Then she sits down with the director to discuss what they would like to accomplish, and to exchange ideas that can help enhance the script. The production designer collaborates closely with the director and director of photography (DOP), and it is this triad that essentially oversees everything that becomes the physical image of the film.

An intricate part of designing for Kybartas is coming up with the right colour palette for a film based on the emotionality of the story, and then assigning a tonality to each scene. Once the palette is worked out, she passes it along to department heads—the costume designer, set

decorator, props coordinator, camera department and locations manager—and she says that getting them all to subscribe is the key to making colour tone work. Kybartas also considers the elimination of colours to be equally pertinent in her process; she tends to eliminate chromatic blues.

For *Camilla* (directed by Deepa Mehta), it was a Dolce and Gabbana scarf that caught her attention, and she matched her colour palette from that. A Caravaggio painting started her process on *Lilies* (directed by John Greyson). And for *Republic of Love* she received direction from director Mehta to play with colour by draining it in scenes where the lead romantic couple was not together, and intensifying colour in scenes where they were. Kybartas appreciates Mehta's boldness with colour, and confides that the director's encouragement resulted in Kybartas' taking on more extreme and exaggerated explorations, coming up with scenes of glittering silvers, stark whites, and multidimensional combinations of black and white with mere hints of colour.

When principal photography wraps, so does the work of the production designer. Catching a broadcast or public screening offers Kybartas her first chance to experience the impact of her work in a film. *Republic of Love* premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival last year, in a coveted gala spot. The Roy Thomson Hall is an ideal setting for a production designer to witness a freshly struck print, and Kybartas found the audience reaction thrilling.

Armando Sgrinuoli has been Kybartas' art director since she invited him to collaborate on *Lilies*, and she describes him as having "an operatic sensibility and the eye of an angel." Her work on Canadian productions, with dedicated producers such as Christina Jennings and Anna Stratton, brings Kybartas the greatest satisfaction, and she holds fond memories of working with director John Greyson. "He is someone who embraces ideas that are out of the ordinary. He requires that I stretch my limits, and it's in that zone where the best work happens. Deepa and John are two directors who make my work bigger than it would otherwise be."

