



TWO WORLD BUILDER



FROM HIS FULTON HILL STUDIO, ACADEMY AWARD-NOMINATED PRODUCTION DESIGNER **DAVID CRANK** CONCEIVES AND BUILDS SETS FOR FILM AND TELEVISION THAT TRANSPORT VIEWERS TO ANOTHER PLACE AND TIME

*By Harry Kollatz Jr.
Portrait by Zaid Hamid*

Richmond-based production designer and art director David Crank first built a model of Jamestown Fort from Popsicle sticks for a fourth-grade school project at Crestwood Elementary in Chesterfield County. Fast-forward to 2005, and as art director for Terrence Malick's film "The New World," he designed a set for the haphazard frontier village that the production crew constructed from real mud and sticks.

Among the set pieces brought into being through Crank's handiwork are the Braintree, Massachusetts, farmstead in the 2008 miniseries "John Adams," the murderous bowling alley of 2007's "There Will Be Blood," the blade-festooned chair of the 2019 mystery "Knives Out," and the weathered 19th-century Texas towns featured in the 2020 film "News of the World," where his meticulous design, down to the film's re-created newspapers, earned him an Academy Award nomination.

Crank's latest project is the Apple TV+ feature film "Ray and Raymond," directed by Rodrigo García ("In Treatment," "Albert Nobbs") and

For his graduate thesis in theater design at Carnegie Mellon University, Crank created this scale model of a stage set for "Candide" at Richmond's Empire Theatre.

featuring Ewan McGregor, Ethan Hawke, Maribel Verdú and Oscar nominee Sophie Okonedo.

His career has taken him to Uganda, England and Italy, among other locations, but "Ray and Raymond" is being filmed within blocks of the Fulton Hill studio where he's made his art for about 15 years, a tidy retreat adorned by his charcoal drawings of birds, along with portraits and a wall of postcards gathered from museums. But there's little evidence of Crank's past two decades spent creating the looks of major film productions.

"He's built such an esteemed career," says Andy Edmonds, director of the Virginia Film Office, who has known Crank since 1998, when he was working on the pre-Civil War horse-country drama "Legacy." "And when you have someone of David's caliber who stays local to our home state or city, this becomes a significant asset, especially in the decision chain for a given production.

"Directors accept someone of his stature in the business, and they look at making their shows here because of him.

One person can make a difference."

"I'm a storyteller," Crank says about his approach to designing for the camera's eye. "Before I begin a project, I sit down with the director and ask, 'Why are you making this film?'" Many of his major projects have involved directors who also wrote the scripts. "And they can talk for hours," he says. "And I love that."

FURNISHINGS OF HISTORY

Crank can't pinpoint where his interest in building sets started. His older sister enjoyed theater, especially musicals, which she pursued into high school.

His family owned Henrico Furniture Co., but he took little inspiration from room arrangements. "No, I was dusting them," he says, laughing. "That didn't hold much creative allure for me."

As a youngster, Crank traveled with the family to Colonial Williamsburg, where he was fascinated by the Craft House, a home decor store in a place that looked like a residence. "They had little rooms set up; I vividly remember that," he recalls. "I was the only fourth grader who liked going to the Craft House.

"I wanted to be the president of Colonial Williamsburg," he adds, chuckling, "until my mother said, 'You know, he's just a businessman.' That didn't really sound so interesting."

As a kid, he liked drawing Native Americans, which foreshadowed his later career designing the look of both "The New World" and "News of the World," each of which feature depictions of Indigenous people.

He gravitated toward theater at Manchester High School and interned at Dogwood Dell, where he spent two seasons working on various aspects of theater production.

He recalls how his mother asked him what he wanted to do in the future, and he expressed his interest in theater. She told him that whatever he



went into, she hoped it involved art, “because that seems to make you happy,” he recalls.

SINK OR SWIM

Crank majored in art at the College of William & Mary, where professor Jerry Bledsoe, who’d a few years earlier founded the Virginia Shakespeare Festival, shepherded him toward theater design in his freshman year. The course was offered every other year, and Bledsoe wrote a letter advocating for Crank. “They let me skip everything and take it my first year,” he says. “He was incredibly helpful. I think, too, that I may have been the only person interested.”

He continued his graduate studies in theater design at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh. Different from undergraduate study, his experience was more concentrated, with 15-hour days that provided a dress rehearsal for the deadline pressure of live theater and film production. “I think it quickly weeded out people who weren’t serious,” Crank says.

His thesis project involved a model of a theater, designed down to a stage set for a specific production. He chose “Candide,” and the project included renderings for sets and costumes. “We had to use a real theater,” he says, and Crank chose Richmond’s Empire Theatre, then home of Theatre IV, now Virginia Rep. With the television tuned to the 1984 Olympics, he built a model of the Empire, including the plaster Muses made by Italian immigrant Ferruccio Legnaioli. “I’ve built models since then,” he says, “but nothing quite as extensive or detailed as that.”

Before graduating, Crank began working with Charles Caldwell at the Virginia Museum Theater, then under the artistic direction of Tom Markus, starting as an assistant on “Greater Tuna.” Working alongside Caldwell, and then splitting productions with him, Crank designed many shows for the next 10 years. He simultaneously began working for the Alabama Shakespeare Festival and other



(Right) Crank’s sketch for John Adam’s Braintree, Massachusetts, farm that was built in Powhatan (above) for the 2008 HBO miniseries.



regional companies. He lived in New York City from 1986-94.

“It was lovely to be there,” he says, “and I had a great time, and I wouldn’t trade it for the world, but all of a sudden, I started getting ads for funeral plots in Brooklyn. And it’s like, ‘OK, that’s enough. Time to go.’”

MARY, SALLY, POCAHONTAS

The appeal of a house and a yard brought Crank home to Richmond, although his growing career meant he didn’t spend much time here. While he continued his theater work, Crank’s first Richmond-based film production was the 1988 Larry McMurtry-written two-episode miniseries “The Murder of Mary Phagan.” Crank joined a group of five set painters and made \$500 a week.

“I thought I’d died and gone to heaven,” he recalls.

In 2000, he designed the production of the TV movie “Sally Hemings: An American Scandal,” with Sam Neill as Thomas Jefferson and Carmen Ejogo as Hemings, Jefferson’s enslaved mistress.

“David built a full-scale replica of Monticello at Tuckahoe Plantation — interior and exterior,” Edmonds recalls. “It was an amazing set. And that impressed people.”

Crank’s sense of detail went into Ridley Scott’s “Hannibal” (2001) and another

period piece, the HBO miniseries “Iron Jawed Angels” (2004), both made here.

Then in 2005, renowned director Terrence Malick brought “The New World” to Virginia. The production was a significant turning point for Crank, as he began working with Academy Award-nominated, Charlottesville-based production designer Jack Fisk, whose credits include eight films with Malick and two with David Lynch. Crank cites his professional partnership with Fisk as an invaluable part of his training.

Location manager Charlie Baxter arranged for Fisk and Crank to meet. “He told me the Popsicle-stick Jamestown story,” Fisk says, laughing. “He’s so funny and sarcastic that I really wanted to work with him. You want to pick someone you want to have lunch with, who’s pleasant to be around, and David’s wonderful. He’s got class.”

“There can be plenty of toil and agony when you’re making a movie,” he adds, “but with David, you feel like it’s all part of the fun.”

For “The New World,” with major production undertaken 7 miles from Historic Jamestown, Malick went to great lengths



to make the muddy make-shift settlement seem real, working to make a believable depiction of the Powhatan natives to the extent of re-creating the sound of their Algonquian dialect.

Malick was criticized, however, for adhering to the largely confabulated romance of Capt. John Smith (Colin Farrell) and Pocahontas (Q'orianka Kilcher). Crank relates how Malick responded: "Without a little poetry, you wouldn't have the 'Iliad' or the 'Odyssey.'"

"And I thought that was a great answer," Crank says.

'JOHN ADAMS' AND A BLOODY BOWLING ALLEY

Crank was hired to work on the "John Adams" HBO miniseries following a Jefferson Hotel interview with production designer Gemma Jackson (who has since worked on "Game of Thrones," earning an Emmy for the second season). The miniseries hired a huge production team that initially worked for five months to design sets for the six-hour series. The Massachusetts farm of John and Abigail arose in Powhatan County.

But the production went into hiatus, and the farm sat dormant for 13 months. "They didn't have an Adams," Crank explains, "so we kind of rearranged and downsized." The break suited the clap-

Crank created a replica of John Trumbull's painting of the signing of the Declaration of Independence for "John Adams," painting himself (center, inset) and another art director into the scene.

board farm set, allowing the weather to soften its sharper edges.

During the hiatus, Crank worked on Paul Thomas Anderson's "There Will Be Blood," filmed at California and Texas locations.

Crank was tasked with designing the film's bowling alley, which is the centerpiece of a pivotal scene where the relentless oil magnate Daniel Plainview (Daniel Day-Lewis) delivers the famous line, "I drink your milkshake."

Fisk, the film's production designer, shares that the oil shown gushing out of derricks built from actual 1896 plans was actually a mixture of Coca-Cola, water, dye and ice cream. "It was edible," he says.

So, yes, they could drink the faux oil like a milkshake.

The Doheny Greystone Estate in Beverly Hills, built by an actual oilman and often used in productions, was then in part being rented by the American Film Institute. Behind the house stood a building that once held a turn-of-the-century bowling alley that later was converted into a roller-skating rink. "When we got there, it was a mess," Crank recalls.

Removing the old rink flooring revealed intact bowling lanes. Though the ball returns were missing, some of the tracks remained in place. Crank's detective work found diagrams of a period ball-return system in a manual

for a Chicago ladies' bowling league. His team built the mechanism according to those specifications, and the screw holes fit in exact correspondence.

"You want it to look right, so you become obsessed with these things," he says. "It's sleuthing. It's a big puzzle. You have to figure it out.

"These projects allow for an opening into a world you don't know anything about. Then you get to spend six months in it, and then you leave. It's kind of perfect, really. You get to meet all the people who are experts, and that part is incredibly exciting."

'POETICAL LICENSE'

At last, Paul Giamatti signed his John Hancock to the "John Adams" contract, and the production team returned to Richmond.

In a scene toward the series' end, Adams gazes upon the commemoration of the signing of the Declaration of Independence in a painting created by the proud and anxious John Trumbull.

The aged revolutionary grumps about Trumbull's "poetical license," although those details aren't included in David McCullough's biography of Adams.

The miniseries here comments on its own effort — and most such undertakings — in re-creating the past through historical fiction. Adams lectures Trumbull about how such a scene never happened; due to the war, the delegates scurried in and out of Philadelphia to sign the document.

Adams is realizing that the real experience of his life is transforming into a national mythology, and his Philadelphia colleagues are elderly and dying off. The true history of the American Revolution, he grimly reflects, is lost forever.

Crank was tasked with re-creating the Trumbull painting. Two copies exist, one at Yale University, which required reproduction rights, the other in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda, which didn't. The art direc-

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tors photographed the huge canvas one early morning, and a graphic designer stitched the pictures together.

The faces in the reproduced Trumbull needed to resemble the miniseries’ key players. Amid the prominent central group were a few delegates who had not appeared on screen. “The other art director and I were without beards, so we’re the ones standing between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson,” Crank says.

He showed the finished product to his mother. “Recognize anybody?” he asked. She didn’t see anyone familiar until Crank pointed himself out. His mother shrugged, “Eh, could be.” Which still makes her son laugh.

In 2008, “John Adams” received 23 Emmy nominations, winning 13, including Outstanding Art Direction.

For years, HBO displayed the made-over Trumbull painting in its offices.

PORTRAITS, KNIVES AND TEXAS TOWNS

Literally making something from nothing, often on small budgets of both time and money, is in the production designer’s job description.

Among Crank’s tasks as art director for Spielberg’s “Lincoln” was building a three-sided representation of Appomattox’s Wilmer McLean House — in Maymont

park. This was where Lee and Grant signed the Confederate surrender document. The construction took a couple of weeks, for what amounted to less than a minute of screen time.

For “Knives Out,” Crank was tasked with creating three painted portraits of the mystery writer at the story’s center. But 11 days before shooting began, that actor hadn’t yet been hired. “We put a green screen over it, and they had it done afterwards and inserted it,” Crank says with a hint of frustration. “And it was fine, but the idea we could get it done without a cast member was a ridiculous exercise.” Christopher Plummer wound up playing the role.

The script of “Knives Out” also featured a prosaic description of a “display of knives,” Crank says. He’d not yet seen an episode of “Game of Thrones,” although his friend Gemma Jackson designed the famous sword-bristling throne.

Crank worked on the memorable display of knives [below] from 2019’s “Knives Out.”

Director Rian Johnson speculated about the knife display, sending Crank and his staff to the workshop figuring he’d know it when he saw it. Johnson, three days prior to shooting, hit upon the concept of a “swarm of knives.” Someone found the front of a giant exhaust fan, and this gave shape to the resulting sculpture.

“I don’t think originally that the thing had as much prominence in the script,” Crank says, “but they spent eight days in that room, and they used it plenty — and I’m glad they did.”

When hired to work on Paul Greengrass’ “News of the World,” set in Texas a few years after the Civil War’s end, Crank went on a scouting mission for rough-hewn Western locations. Several movie ranch towns are located near Santa Fe, New Mexico, including the Bonanza Creek Ranch, which has been used for films since 1955. It featured enough streets and angles.

“News” filmed both interiors and exteriors there. “We really had to plan carefully how we approached it so when we entered the town, we didn’t see repeats of things,” Crank says.

Crank’s work earned a 2020 Oscar nomination for production design. He learned of the recognition while watching “Good Morning America.”

Navigating COVID-19 protocols, Crank flew out to sit on a designer panel via Zoom and attend the ceremony. “Sure, I would’ve liked to have won, but the great thing about it is that your peers choose you,” Crank says. “That’s a great feeling.”

