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'Gangster' puts hit on gentrification

Harlem streets run gamut from clean to mean

By ROBERT SCHWARTZ

When producer Brian Grazer and director Ridley Scott set out to make the forthcoming crime saga "American Gangster," there was little disagreement that the Denzel Washington/Russell Crowe film had to be shot in Harlem, where notorious drug lord Frank Lucas ran an operation that involved smuggling heroin to the U.S. in the coffins of soldiers who were killed in Vietnam.

And so, with meticulous detail paid to production and costume design, the filmmakers took on the monumental task of re-creating the drug-infested, run-down streets of upper Manhattan in the late '60s and early '70s.

"It was the most difficult of all the 75 movies I've produced," Grazer confesses. "We had to create this world, and that was hard because Harlem looks nothing like it did when the movie takes place."

Due to the hard-charging New York City real estate boom of the last few years, once-abandoned buildings are now fetching upward of \$1 million, turning the previously mean streets of Harlem into an uptown, upper-middle-class enclave.

"Redevelopment has smothered most of the earlier layers where it hasn't destroyed them altogether," production designer Arthur Max says.

In other words, trying to find a run-down building in Harlem that could pass for a drug den that's currently not sandwiched between a Starbucks and a Banana Republic was a taller order than it sounds on the surface.

'Mobile Dressing Unit'

"Even the pedestrian signs are different," Max adds. "They don't blink 'Walk, Don't Walk' anymore. They have a neon stick figure moving now. So we had to cover them up with cardboard to make them look as they did back then."

And if New York City has evolved over the last 40 years, it sometimes changed significantly even hours before a shoot. "One day, a restaurateur put up a new awning, which changed the location completely," Max says.

To combat these ever-evolving variables, the production employed a team of set decorators tagged the "Mobile Dressing Unit." And when the shoot required a run-down housing project to double for



Ridley Scott directs 'American Gangster' stars Russell Crowe and Denzel Washington on location in Harlem. It's the filmmaker's first foray into gangland drama.

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the headquarters of Washington's Lucas, location scouts scoured the city, landing on the about-to-be-renovated Marlboro Housing Project in south Brooklyn, a public complex virtually untouched since the late '60s.

"They let us do whatever we wanted," Max reports, "take down walls, basically transform the building into exactly what we needed."

If finding period locations posed a particular challenge, so too did the period clothing required by costume designer Janty Yates for 180 actors whose characters' personal style changed as the storyline did over its six-year period.

"We searched high and low at every vintage shop and costume house from New York to L.A. just to find the right paisley shirt or brown leather jacket," Yates says.

When her far-flung searches turned up empty, Yates hit costume vendors, a ragtag group of aficionados who collect out of passion more than business.

"We'd tell them we needed a black cocktail dress vintage 1969, and they'd send over 50," says Yates, who, with her team, would go through each and every item, pick what they liked and send back what they didn't.

Dressing Denzel

The most fun, according to Yates, was dressing the rags-to-riches kingpin. Washington's Frank Lucas comes to New York in 1968 a proverbial country bumpkin from South Carolina whose sartorial evolution had to reflect his newfound riches.

Washington alone underwent 64 different costume changes. "We had Saville Row suits made for him," Yates boasts. "Denzel loves clothes, and that made dressing him a joy."

On some days, Scott would want some background extras dressed like crack addicts. So Yates was charged with finding clothes that mirrored B&W photos that could've been taken on any Harlem street corner in the late '60s.

Executive producer Nicholas Pileggi knows Harlem and that period well. "I was a police reporter up there for 17 years writing stories about crack dens," he says.

Pileggi heard about Lucas back then and in many ways was instrumental in getting the film made, and getting made in Harlem.

"You go to Harlem now and it's so different," he observes. "Uptown especially has really expanded and boomed. Let's face it, it's hard to find a slum up there."

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