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Poor Things Deserves to Win the Oscar for Best Production Design

The fantastical sets bring an entirely new aesthetic to the big screen.

BY KELLY ALLEN | PUBLISHED: MAR 8, 2024

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Poor Things left viewers astonished but with a lingering desire for more. The **fantastical film** brings an entirely fresh look to the **big screen**, guiding onlookers through an eccentric scientist's **London** home, the curious streets of Lisbon, an imposing ocean liner ship, an Alexandria hotel and slums, and a Parisian brothel. The vision of reality seen through a fairy-tale, dreamscape lens, which came to life through a collage of techniques, clearly deserves to win the Oscar for production design this awards season.

The plot—based on Alasdair Gray's **novel** of the same name—lends itself nicely to the extraordinary universe. It centers on Bella Baxter (played by **Emma Stone**), a woman brought back to life with the brain of an infant. Director Yorgos Lanthimos knew he wanted to build a complete world set in an ambiguous period for Bella to inhabit. So he enlisted production designers James Price and Shona Heath and set decorator Zsuzsa Mihalek to create it all from scratch.

Nearly every set was constructed on soundstages at the Budapest-based Origio Studios. The city of Lisbon was built as a composite set (meaning it's all connected, so you can walk through it as if it were a real place) on the largest soundstage in Europe at Korda Studios in Budapest.

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Throughout the sets, organic forms tied to the human body and shapes rooted in nature drive the design. Godwin Baxter (played by Willem Dafoe) lives in a salmon-colored house on a London street, which lays the foundation for the film. It has a warped staircase that Heath describes as “sort of dripping, sort of melting flesh” that leads to a bright red door. Pops of rustication on the exterior and in the living room “look a bit like bullet holes or worms or a brain texture,” the designer adds.

In Godwin’s study, a sunken padded floor made of memory foam sits under a ceiling with massive interlocking ears on it. The walls feature a relief sculpture painted in dark blacks and greens that’s reminiscent of a lustrous mussel shell. “[Humans] have always looked at nature to copy for architecture,” Heath says. “We went a bit more sort of gnarly, a bit more organic, things that are maybe perceived as ugly or a bit rougher [and made them] beautiful and different.”



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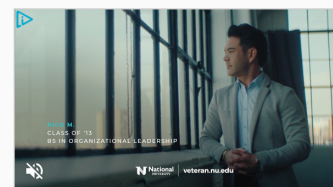
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Doused in a medical green color (masked by black and white coloring in the movie), Bella’s bedroom boasts carved fish on the ceiling. The walls are padded and quilted with visions of fancy ships, sail boats, and hot air balloons. The setting is in stark contrast to the Blessington residence of Bella’s former life (with interiors shot at a Budapest university’s library) that resembles a coffin filled with military memorabilia. A resin floor,



which the production team designed and poured on location, echoes a river of blood.

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Other notable details throughout include the oyster shell backsplash of a Lisbon bar, a fish tank built into a Lisbon building's wall, a pearlescent floor featuring an almost tiger-like pattern on the boat, and the phallic windows of the Parisian brothel. No opportunity for a fitting characteristic was missed.



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Custom furnishings mixed with sourced pieces fill the sets. An array of unusual and wacky **Art Deco**, Edwardian, and Victorian items help fashion a perplexing period. In Baxter's house, custom gigantic chairs in the powder blue, wall-plate-covered dining room make the characters appear like little dolls. A custom wood bed with intricate carvings, inspired by a real one, provides support for "furious jumping" (as Bella fondly describes it) in the Lisbon hotel.

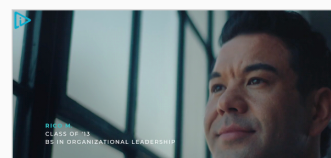
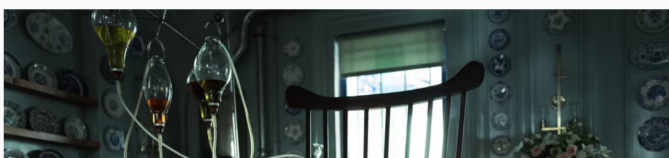
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Devising atmospheres rooted in truth and intertwined with elements of science fiction meant taking a diverse approach. The idea was to “create a 1930s studio movie as if that was still the standard way of how movies were made today,” Price says. “We would be able to use all the techniques from the beginning of filmmaking right up to modern techniques, such as LED screens... [Lanthimos’s] theory was that if we did that, we would come up with a new aesthetic.”



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Along with typical and scaled sets, the team constructed miniatures, printed backdrops, employed LED screens, and used some computer-generated imagery “but only to enhance and put the icing on the cake,” as Price puts it.



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“There were no easy sets,” Price adds of the pure enormity of the project, noting that they couldn’t even take the sky for granted. “Even in the forest, we put in trees at a 45-degree angle. In most films, you do an exterior and you just go to a forest and shoot it. It’s an easy one.”



YORGOS LANTHIMOS / SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES

From the whole experience, Heath learned to stray away from simplifying and sanitizing ideas because an audience might not like it or find it to be too much. “I felt with *Poor Things*, people are really ready for it,” she says. “They want it. They like it. They love it. And they like to be challenged on many fronts.”

Price agrees. “Audiences are so well-educated nowadays,” the designer says. “It’s hard in any form of creative endeavor to do something which people are kind of gobsmacked with and we kind of think we did it, which is unbelievable.”

Only time will tell how the 96th Academy Awards, honoring movies released in 2023, play out. The show begins on Sunday, March 10 at 7 p.m. ET. Of course, all of the other productions nominated for the production design category—which include *Barbie*, *Killers of the Flower Moon*, *Napoleon*, and *Oppenheimer*—are worthy of recognition. But we’ll be rooting for *Poor Things* this time around!

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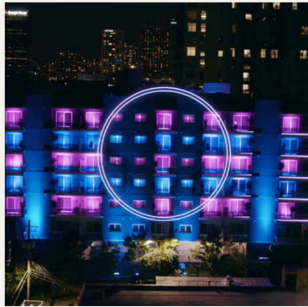
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