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Far out designs for prime time

Super Sets

Designing TV's Brave New Worlds Is a Special Kind of Art

By Neil Shister

"I HAVE a theory," says Jack Chilberg, the art director of "Battlestar Galactica," ABC's multi-million dollar version of *Star Wars*. "I don't think anybody should notice the set in a show unless it's wrong."

Talk about professional humility — Chilberg had just spent six months of his life designing 42 sets costing $2.5 million for the three-hour premiere version of "Galactica," slated to be one of the main attractions of the network's upcoming season.

He was walking through the sound stages at the Universal lot, past the residue of his labors. Most of his handiwork, however, no longer existed. The sets were struck almost immediately after they had performed their function.

Chilberg's world is, by definition, grounded in illusion, the only reality the two-dimensional image that is eventually framed within the borders of the screen.

Just beyond the range of the camera a sound stage is crowded with confusion. Electricians on catwalks. Script girls making sure that detail continuity is maintained from scene to scene. Grips lugging lights. Sound men positioning mike booms. Agents making deals. Producers agonizing over delays. Directors reconsidering shooting angles.

But once the red light at the entrance to the stage blinks on and the cameras roll, the battalion of technicians and crew dissolves from view. All that matters at that moment is the actors. And the set.

Rarely do critics pause to consider sets. Sets are, as Chilberg notes, intended merely as backdrop for the more important action occurring before them. Yet they are crucial in determining how a show plays. They not only establish a locale, they give the images their tone and texture. The way a film "feels" is, to a large extent, determined by the sets.

Most sets for television shows hardly merit much notice. They are relatively simple affairs, usually consisting of a flat exterior against a painted canvas backdrop, or maybe a three-walled, ceiling-less interior.

Norm Newberry, an art director for the Quinn Martin production company who has specialized in series work, likens his role "to building a Ford instead of, say, a Lamborgini." The emphasis is on solid utility, not elegant frills.

"Seems like no matter how a series is conceived," says Newberry, "the action keeps ending up in a kitchen or a dining room. You're always thinking on your feet, coming up with last-minute ideas to make those standard interiors look fresh."

Probably the most ambitious set that will be seen on television this season is the recreation of the entire town of Henning, Tenn., which Bob MacKichran designed for "Roots: The Next Generation," the mini-series sequel to "Roots" that takes the Alex Haley saga from the Civil War to the present.

"It's the opportunity of a lifetime," says MacKichran, "the chance to go from an empty field and build a whole town that evolves from the stagecoach through the railroad and then the automobile eras."

MacKichran's task was to believably simulate a locale that once actually existed. He did his job so well that the first time Alex Haley walked down Main Street, he reportedly got the chills seeing places he remembered playing as a child.

What most pleases MacKichran about the set? "The open spaces. When you build a set on a studio back lot, the buildings have to adjoin each other or you'd see another set in the background through the gaps."

Jack Chilberg didn't have MacKichran's good fortune. "Roots" is being filmed on a setting that used to be Walt Disney's personal ranch. "Galactica," though, is entirely a sound-stage shoot. And all its sets had to come out of Chil-

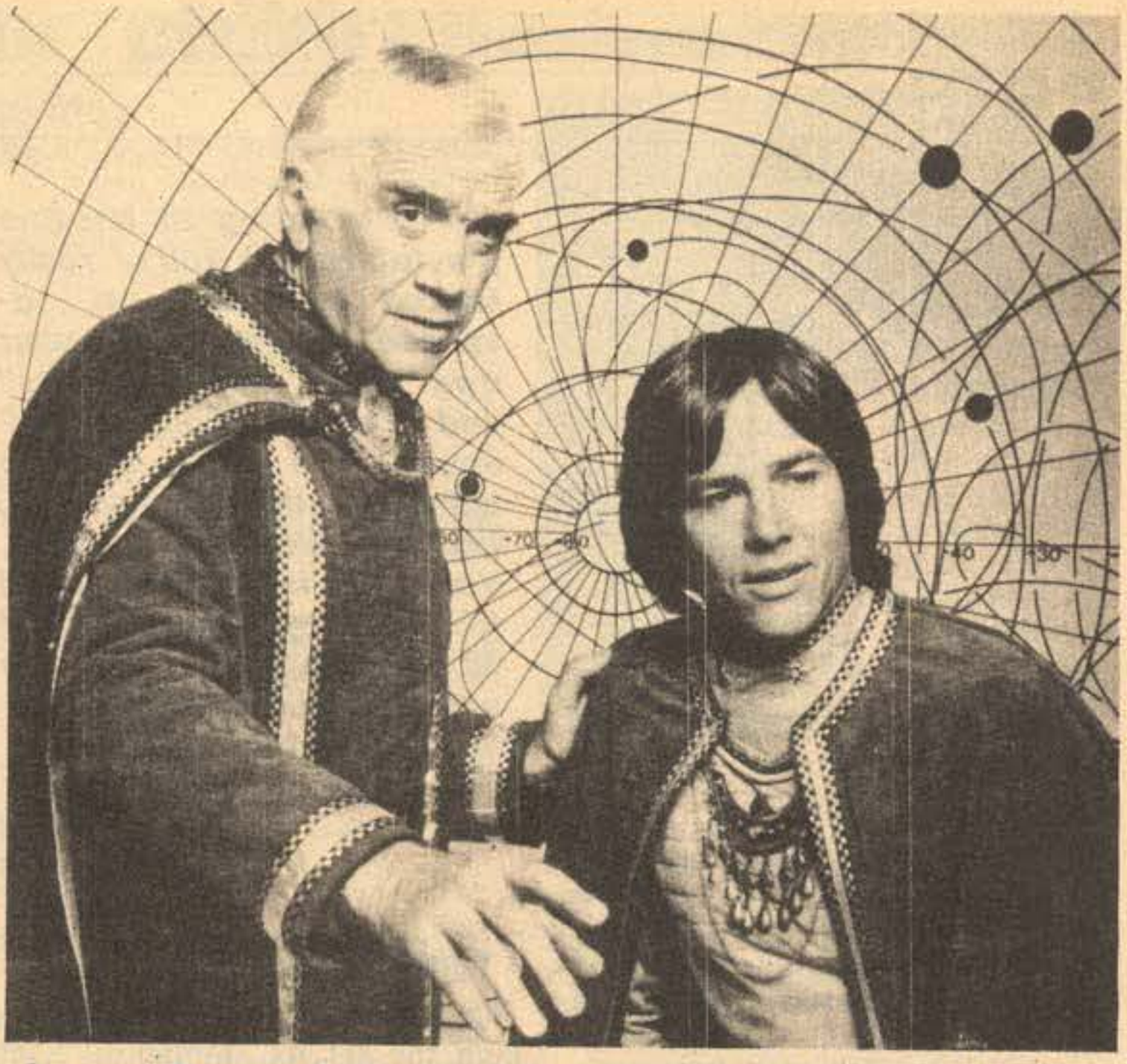
berg's imagination.

"Galactica" is the most ambitious project that Chilberg has undertaken. The show is futuristic science fiction, a genre that has not been successful as prime time series material. It involves a ragtag flotilla of homeless space immigrants in a distant past whose civilization has been ravaged by inter-galactic war. The voyagers represent the last remnants of human life heading for a distant, unknown astral colony: Earth.

"When I started out on "Galactica" I met the director for the first time," Chilberg remembers, "and he asked me how I felt about doing the show? I said, 'I'm terrified.' "

Terror is hardly Chilberg's usual reaction to a new project. He is a seasoned veteran as an art director, a 20-year veteran of his trade. He started out in the business as a teenager running the blueprint machine at MGM. Since those days he has done feature films as well as television series.

One of his early television undertakings was Jack Webb's "Dragnet," an especially tough challenge to the art director. "Sgt. Friday was always going to five average middle-class houses in the San Fernando Valley each week and making them look different within the same show was hard. The hardest problem for an art director is doing something ordinary and and nondescript and still making it believably real." Chilberg solved the problem by using different color schemes in each house to make it clear to the viewer that Friday was moving through different environments as he solved the case.



Lorne Greene, Richard Hatch on 'Galactica' Set

. . . designs that determine the 'feel' of the show

Another Chilberg project was "Rich Man, Poor Man." Although the show was shot in Los Angeles, it simulated settings from all over the world. Only the most astute viewer would have known the shootings weren't on location.

One of his assignments on that mini-series was the recreation of a Hudson Valley riverfront locale. He set off to research the region and discovered that architecturally the buildings there, constructed in the late 19th Century, resembled the frontier west. "I learned that it doesn't matter where a building was constructed so much as when in determining its look."

"Galactica" was a departure for Chilberg, who had never done science fiction. The challenge was enormous. "You're trying to imagine the future but you're really limited by the most advanced technology of your own time. 'Buck Rogers' and 'Flash Gordon,' for example, with all the flashing lights in the background, now look like period pieces. You try to interpolate ahead to how things will look, but 30 years from now I'm sure our set will appear hopelessly primitive."

Along with "Galactica" producer John Dykstra, whose inspired minaturized special effects for *Star Wars* won an Academy Award, Chilberg set out to translate the script into a series of sets that would succeed both technically and esthetically. Form, even in far out sci-fi fantasy, has to follow function. "If the set doesn't read logically to whoever is looking at it," Chilberg cautions, "no matter how theatrical and dramatic it doesn't work."

The collaboration with Dykstra

A circle of reporters rings the huge spaceship 'command bridge,' which is central to the action in ABC's new 'Battlestar Galactica.' The computer terminals are real, and programmed to play electronic games with operators.

— ROBERT BOWDEN

sets

was crucial. Dykstra conceived of how the battlestar would look from the outside, "an insect-y shape like a large beetle with two pods running along both sides." Chilberg had to adjust his interiors to conform to that design.

Even more important was the need to make the sets consistent with the general approach Dykstra was using in the super-imposition effects. To give the television production the same kind of spacious depth that made *Star Wars* such a magical viewing experience, Dykstra was forced to simplify and exaggerate his techniques. On the small screen much of the detail that could be exploited in the movie would be lost. Surface detail on the models had to be conspicuous. Objects had to be large enough so that the television viewer would be able to pick them out. This imposed another mild limitation on Chilberg.

Dykstra also had a definite opinion for how the ship interiors should appear. "I wanted the sets to have an 'aged' look," he says. "I was really tired of the flashy, slick, shiny interiors used in most space movies that make the ships seem like they were brand new prototypes."

The design he finally concocted for the bridge is an awesome creation of circular tiers rimmed with computer consoles that leads up to a command throne worthy of a flying structure a mile and a half long. With four major entrances, actors can move on and off camera from either stage left or right without the audience wondering where they came from or went.

The color of the set is dismal, monochromatic grey. This was part of Chilberg's plan. "Most sci-fi gets into wild colors and ends up looking like a set for a musical. We were trying for a very disciplined military look reminiscent of maybe a World War II battleship."

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— art director Jack Chilberg

Functioning computer screens give the set its animation. There are over two dozen of them located around the outer rim, genuine equipment lent by a manufacturing firm. To heighten the sense of realism during shootings the computers were programmed to play games so that the extras sitting in front of them wouldn't have to feign absorbed preoccupation. "Even when we cut they kept on playing," recalls Chilberg.

The "Galactica" sets have a sparse, almost cold austerity appropriate for a show about the perils of being estranged in the outer reaches of space. The cramped interiors become even more confining when contrasted with the special effects animation that shows the ship hurtling through space.

After wandering through several sound stages looking for remnants of his sets that still stood, Chilberg returned to his office. The walls were lined with artist concepts of possible sets, most of which didn't materialize for one reason or another, usually budgetary "I've never done a set that I'm completely happy with," admits Chilberg. "I suppose I would have liked to have some of the 'Galactica' sets look a little stranger, a little less pedestrian."

Except for the permanent bridge set, little of Chilberg's work remained intact. The production company was involved in shooting subsequent episodes of the adventure; his assignment was only for the opening, three-hour epic. His place as art director had been taken by his assistant on the original venture. Recently returned from a post-production vacation in Scandanavia, he was rested and ready for his next assignment.

Did it bother him, he was asked, that his work had such a short life? All the hours involved in design and construction and then, sometimes moments after a shooting was completed, the sets dismantled?

"No. What I like best is conceiving something one day and then seeing it built soon afterwards. I've done some architecture and built something that I thought was terrific and then come back 10 years later and discovered some idiot had disastrously remodeled it. That's heartbreaking. But when you're making something to appear on a piece of celluloid it's going to stay there on the film forever just the way you designed it. I think this is really more rewarding.

"You end up with a photograph of what was in your mind."

Neil Shister is Television Writer of The Herald.