

SPOILER ALERT: This story does not divulge any plot developments in "The Gilded Age."

NEWPORT – Bob Hirsch was 40 feet off the ground on the platform of a hydraulic lift positioned outside the windows of a second-floor bedroom at The Elms mansion. Although it was a sunny Wednesday in October, Hirsch was there to provide the "sunshine" beaming through the windows, operating an 18,000-watt light on the set of filming for the second season of the HBO television series "The Gilded Age."

When the show's directors don't find exactly the light they're looking for — the intensity, color, softness or angle — set electricians like Hirsch, working with a team of gaffers, provide the technological wizardry that helps make TV and movie magic.

"You're basically painting a scene with light," Hirsch said. "We create the whole world."

Hirsch was one of the hundreds of people — for the most part unseen — who help bring "The Gilded Age" to the screen. And many of them, like Hirsch, 58, of Wickford, are from greater Rhode Island.

"There's an entire infrastructure of local people who are in this work," said Hirsch.

That work includes electricians and carpenters, caterers and drivers, costume and prop people, even "background" actors, who might be little more than a blur at the edge of your TV screen.

Steven Feinberg, executive director of the Rhode Island Film & Television Office, said that season one of "The Gilded Age" created 1,200 local jobs and worked with 500 local businesses.

When the 'movies' are in town,

life takes a backseat

For many people on the cast and crew, working on TV and movie productions is far from their full-time jobs, but rather an occasional gig that adds excitement to a workaday routine.

Jessica Latinville, 40, of Fall River, usually drives a tri-axle dump truck for a living, but, when Hollywood comes to Rhode Island, you'll find her behind the wheel of a 15-passenger van, shuttling cast and crew between sets and hotels and anywhere else they need to be.

"I just get you where you're going," Latinville said. "I meet people every day. I love it. It's like the van is a counseling room."

But chauffeuring for film and TV productions is not without its tradeoffs, she said. "You have no life when you do it."

When a production is in town, and she faces workdays that can be 16 hours long six days a week, Latinville sends her 8-year-old daughter, Skyla, to live with her parents.

"The Gilded Age" is the fourth production on which Latinville, a member of Teamsters Local 817, which represents theatrical workers out of New York, has worked. "When any movie comes to Rhode Island, they come from New York," she said.

Background actors stand around

and wait for a chance to be 'a blur'

Just as Latinville puts her life on hold for "The Gilded Age," so does Amy Thomason, 34, a background actor from Waltham, Massachusetts. When not involved in movies or TV, the music and theater graduate of Oklahoma City University is a professional musician who gives voice and piano lessons in addition to playing shows in the Boston area.

"I can't be playing gigs at night," she said, noting one of the sacrifices of working on "The Gilded Age."

One day in October, she had to report to the Newport set at 5:45 a.m., which meant leaving her Massachusetts apartment at 4:15 a.m. And she wasn't done filming until 7:30 p.m.

"It was dark when we got here and dark when we left," she said.

And days for background actors, who can be little more than living decorations in the background of scenes, are not action-packed.

"There's a lot of standing and waiting and watching and observing," she

said. "It's a really remarkable thing to watch all the moving pieces fit together."

She appreciates the attention to detail the production pays, right down to the costumes and props used by background actors, "even though we'll just maybe be a blur in the background."

This fall's filming was "Round Three" for Thomason, who worked in Newport on the first season of "The Gilded Age," as well as the first session of filming for season two this spring.

That means she has had a chance to see herself on the screen.

"It's exhilarating," she said. "Every time. Stop it and rewind it, and watch it again and again and again."

Alyzza DeGiovanni wants to experience that same thrill next year, when season two is expected to air. For DeGiovanni, 23, a background actor from Hopkinton and a University of Rhode Island graduate, her one week of filming in October was her first work in the movie business.

"I might be a blur, but I'm hoping it's more distinguishable than it's me."

'Hyper focus' keeps Providence

native on top of props

Some of that attention to detail that Thomason marveled at comes

from the brain of Eitan Levine, a 2007 graduate of the Met High School, in Providence. He is the on-set prop manager for the show. After growing up in Rhode Island, Levine, 33, moved to New York to pursue a show business career, but moved back to be closer to family when the COVID-19 pandemic struck.

First things first: Props are one of two groups of objects found on the production: props and set dressing. The latter is any object used to decorate the set. Props are objects with which actors will interact. They can be as small as pens or pocket watches or as large as horse-drawn carriages.

And Levine has several jobs when it comes to props on the show: making sure actors are comfortable with the props they will handle, making sure props are handled properly, and making sure they are where they're supposed to be when a scene starts.

Those jobs can encompass dozens of mind-numbing details. Some of the bigger crowd scenes, such as fancy balls and street scenes, challenge Levine to make sure that every pocket watch and hand fan is used the way they would have been in America's Gilded Age.

"Everything has to be beautiful and on-point," he said. "It's a very aesthetic-heavy show. It's a lot of focus on a lot of crazy, tiny details."

And, if actors aren't comfortable with a prop, that could take them out of their role and affect their performance.

Take a glass of wine an actor might drink during a scene.

First, because the scene may be performed over and over again, that wine will probably be colored fruit juice. It falls on Levine to make sure the actors are comfortable with the taste and mouth feel of the "wine." And that can change as a scene is shot repetitively: What was fine the first few takes may seem too heavy as shooting wears on. Levine can switch the fruit juice with water, but he has to make sure the color matches the "wine" from earlier takes.

Perhaps most important, Levine is in charge of making sure each prop is where it's supposed to be — and how it's supposed to look — for the start of each take. When a scene may be shot multiple times until the director is satisfied, and then be repeated from several camera angles, that can involve a multitude of details to get right: How many bites have been taken from a sandwich? How many grapes are on a plate? Is this prop to the right or the left of another prop? Getting those wrong could be jarring for the audience watching the finished scene.

"We do try to get as close to matching every time," said Levine. "I tend to focus a little bit on details. I have ADHD, so I hyper focus."

Levine feels a duty not just to the production, but to Newport and the mansions where the show is filmed, where real Gilded Age lives played out with real everyday objects.

"You're giving it a life and a style of life that it hasn't seen in a hundred years," he said. "You're not going to get more authentic than the actual

pieces in the actual places."

Corsets and bustles and

an army of costumers

The Victorian fashion of the Gilded Age brings to mind the wasp-waisted silhouette of corseted ladies, and virtually every woman on the show, from actors you will barely notice to stars Carrie Coon, Christine Baranski, Louisa Jacobson and Denée Benton, is outfitted in garments that bring an authentic period look.

They also bring authentic period challenges, as actors have to make concessions to their costumes.

"It makes you stand differently. You can't bend over. Sitting down is a challenge," said Denise Andres, 69, the show's costume supervisor, a Providence native and graduate of Classical High School and the University of Rhode Island. She now owns homes in Wakefield, Rhode Island, and Brooklyn, New York.

A corset narrows the waist, making the hips look broader by comparison, and a bustle, constructed like the retractable awning on a baby carriage, makes the backside look rounder, said Andres, who worked at Providence's Trinity Repertory Company before following her career to New York in the late 1970s. She added that the smallest corsets used on the show can bring a waistline down to a breathtaking — literally — 20 inches.

"At first, everybody loves the way they look and how tight it is," said Andres. Then comes the bad news. "We tell them they're going to be in this corset for over 10 hours."

That's because there are no "corset breaks" on the set.

"You're in it for the day," she said. "There's no way they could get out of that corset — and get back in it — at lunchtime."

The actors can't even get a little "breathing room" because their dress sizes are based on how big their waists are when their corsets are tightened. "The problem with loosening the corset is the possibility that the dress won't fit anymore," Andres said.

Unlike the men, who basically wear shirts, pants, vests and suit jackets, "in this situation, each female person needs a wardrobe attendant to help them get dressed," said Andres.

During a break in filming on set last month, Coon, 41, an Ohio native who lives in New York, bragged that she can almost dress herself — all except the last catch on the corset.

Taissa Farmiga, who plays Gladys Russell, daughter of Coon's character, Bertha Russell, lacks that bravado.

"I can't get dressed on my own," said Farmiga, 28, a New Jersey native who lives in Los Angeles.



On days when more than 100 women will be present — perhaps for a ball or a street scene — 10 costumers will take some three hours to get all of the women dressed, according to Andres.

Actors' love/hate relationship

with their corsets

"I love history," background actor DeGiovanni said in explaining why she wanted to work on the show. "I love the mansions. And I really wanted to wear a corset."

She likes "learning about the female perspective" of life during that period in history that she gets by wearing a corset.

"It makes me feel more rigid and standing up tall," she said, adding that she doesn't mind wearing it, except in a scene where she had to walk up and down the stairs. "You get out of breath very quickly."

"The first couple of days I let them do it really tight," said fellow background actor Thomason, "but then I learned quickly."

Thomason and DeGiovanni said free food is plentiful on the set.

"They feed us very well," said Thomason. "I just love coming in every morning and knowing that I get to have bacon."

But, she added, her corset can temper her enthusiasm for food. "You have to really pace yourself. Snack all day, basically."

"It's not really the corset," said Andres. "It's the bustle, the train."

"I think that was almost worse than the corset," said DeGiovanni. "I'm small, so it was pulling me over backwards."

Sitting can also be a problem, she said, "Sometimes you just get stuck in a chair."

And, several of the actors said, it can be easy to forget your enhanced dimensions and bump into things.

What else do women in

'The Gilded Age' wear?

Women in "The Gilded Age" get dressed in stages, said Andres.

First, they put on their corset, silk stockings and bustle.

Then, they don a robe and head to hair and makeup, bringing whatever hat they will wear that day, so their hair is not styled in conflict with the headwear.

Then, the rest of the outfit goes on, said Andres, adding that most actors put their shoes on early because that task could be impossible in

a corset, bustle and elaborate dress.

The full outfit for ladies, depending on the scene, could include:

Stockings, bustle, corset, camisole — "They don't wear a bra with the corset," said Andres — petticoat, dress — which may consist of three parts, a bodice, a skirt and an "overlay," a fancy outer layer — shoes, hat, gloves and a purse.

Women who want it can wear elastic around their legs to keep their stockings up, though most stay up on their own.

"We've had some women who were very uncomfortable and almost fainted," Andres said.

For the gentlemen?

"They basically wear a pair of pants, a shirt, a tie, a waistcoat and a jacket," said Andres. "And a hat if they're outside, and gloves."

Providence native feels

weight of shooting 'in museums'

Alex Berard is a Providence native and the Newport location manager for the show.

What does that job entail?

"Basically, we're the middlemen between the crew and the location," he said.

He deals with state and city officials to choose locations for each scene and handles the government paperwork required to shoot there.

He also coordinates with the Preservation Society of Newport County, which owns most of the mansions that appear in the show.

That carries its own weight, "just not bruising anything. We're essentially in museums," said Berard. "That's really the most nerve-racking part of this."

So far, so good on that front — mostly, he said.

"We've had a couple of incidents," he said. "There's been a couple of bumps and bruises, but nothing major."

The buildings can be as much of a star as the actors.

"It's the Gilded Age. This is where it happened. It's nice to see it come to life," said Berard. "It's just nice to see someone using them as they were originally intended."

Newport mansions are no 'green screen'

Coon said that shooting in the mansions forces actors to give bigger

performances.

"You can't be upstaged by the space," she said while taking a break in an upstairs room at The Elms.

"It can be a bit overwhelming," said Farmiga, in an ornate marble room. "Just look up."

"And this is a bathroom," added Coon.

While the actors have to make sure their performances fill the space, shooting in the mansions also helps them play their Gilded Age roles.

"Anytime you don't have to tax your imagination is a gift," said Coon. "It always makes it easier to not have to act in front of a green screen."

Perfect settings, and so

many of them, in Newport

The availability of places where the real-life Gilded Age played out was one of the draws of Newport, said series executive producer David Crockett — a distant relative of the famed frontiersman.

"It's a huge advantage because of the concentration of period locations," Crockett said, adding that it can also be challenging moving the whole production from its studio on Long Island. "We are a bit of a small circus."

After a couple of weeks in the spring, the show returned to Newport for a week in October, filming at eight to 10 locations, he said, promising to return to the City by the Sea if the show is picked up for a third season.

"It truly would not have been possible to do it without these places," said series director Michael Engler. "If you had to build it yourself, we just couldn't afford it."

But Newport's value goes far beyond economics, he said.

"You put the actors in these costumes in these rooms ... you feel it differently."

And the availability of Newport changed how the production is telling the story. It was conceived as being set almost entirely in New York City, which was home to wealthy capitalists in the late 1800s, while Newport was their summer playground a few weeks every summer.

"We realized we didn't have to shy away from telling stories about Newport," said Engler. "It allowed us to open it up to include the Newport aspects of the Gilded Age."

Said Crockett: "We are creating a world, and I think people want to go along with us into this world."

Electrician Bob Hirsch knows it's not as simple as using the mansions from the Gilded Age. Every detail must re-create that world.

Right down to the light fixtures illuminating the mansions. And Levine's props. And Andres' costumes. And Coon and DeGiovanni, Farmiga and Thomason.

"You don't want to have a scene that looks like it's lit by lighting in the 20th century," Hirsch said. "The room itself has to look like it's lit by lighting devices that would have been in that time."

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