



## On Set with Glenda Rovello



**Kenneth Caldwell**

*Glenda Rovello is a production designer for the television show Will & Grace. We spoke to her in Los Angeles.*

**arcCA:** *What was your emphasis in architecture school?*

**GR:** I went to the University of Texas at Austin. The emphasis was on design; on getting the big idea. I was completely under-prepared when I went to my first job.

**arcCA:** *Where did you go to work?*

**GR:** I went to work for Barton Myers in LA. Before that, I had an internship with Robert Venturi and had been a teaching assistant for Charles Moore.

**arcCA:** *What kind of projects did you work on?*

**GR:** I was very, very junior, and I worked for a year and a half on the Phoenix City Hall complex. At that time, Barton did a lot of books, and I did diagrams and illustrations for those, too.

**arcCA:** *How did you get into television work?*

**GR:** After Barton, I had gone to work for an architectural designer, and I just knew this was not for me. I had a very good friend who was a Vice President at Paramount, and he set up a lunch so I could meet a production designer who was doing a variety show at Paramount. There were two other production designers in the restaurant, and they joined us. All

through lunch, these three guys grilled me with all kinds of questions. By the time I got home, another production designer had left me a phone message, and he said he was my ticket to success in Hollywood. I met him the next day, finished up a side job, and worked for him for thirteen years.

**arcCA:** *Is there a parallel with the traditional client process?*

**GR:** A producer calls and asks if I am available, and I say, "Maybe." I read the script and take notes, I note where there are swing sets and basic sets, and I imagine the way an actor might move through the space. Like architecture, the plan is very important, so I work on the different ways that a director could have the action take place. It is about movement first, then style, and then I introduce the layers of details on top of that. But, first and foremost, it is about the plan.

**arcCA:** *What's a swing set?*

**GR:** Swing sets are the sets that might be used one time, but can be recycled. A basic set, like a character's workplace or home, recurs week to week. This season, I am doing a show that takes place in a junior high school; that is a very large, basic set. Another show has a character inheriting his mother's apartment in the Apthorpe in New York, and another show takes place in a lingerie design lab.

**arcCA:** *What do you show your clients after you read the script?*

**GR:** I tell them my impression of the script and show them a lot of images. For the basic set I just mentioned, I would show them images of the actual Apthorpe apartment building. For the design lab, I will do research on what I would like the style of the building to be. Once I see that we are on the same track, then I build a model; some people show sketches, but I prefer to see the true scale, so I present models. I design what are called multi-camera sets, which tend to be proscenium sets, so there is no fourth wall; it is open to the audience.

**arcCA:** *How did the design process work on Will & Grace?*

**GR:** The writers of that show are very design savvy. They asked for an amazing New York apartment. When I took over the project, we showed the writers the ideas for the set, and they liked it. Then we met with the director, and he did some adjustments so he could shoot it in a way that he wanted to. For example, he raised the kitchen. You need to plan for other sorts of uses that may be required in the future, but not called

for in the pilot script. That's why the upstage spaces like the terrace and TV room are there.

**arcCA:** *During the design process, does the producer ask you to develop dozens of schemes?*

**GR:** I don't present multiple options. I give my complete effort in one direction, and then it can change. Remember, I can have a set built in a day. But it is constantly evolving. When you see the physical appearance of the actors, the set must adjust to work with them.

**arcCA:** *Are you constantly redressing an apartment?*

**GR:** Yes, like in real life. Will now has a remodeled kitchen with a stainless steel countertop. These changes can become a part of the story.

**arcCA:** *How long do you have to design a set once the idea is approved?*

**GR:** The minute I know where we are going, the carpenters have to start building. Sometimes I have to design the whole thing in 24 hours, and I might have six days to build it. For one script, I needed the Temple of Dendur. We had the reflection of the atrium walls and a truckload of Egyptian icons from various prop houses. In that same time period, we did a stage area of Jack's [from *Will & Grace*] television show, and we had to create an office for Alec Baldwin and a portion of Central Park. Our drawings are dimensioned like working drawings, but of course you have no mechanical, no foundations. The drawings are like interior elevations, except you have to indicate where the walls break.

Sometimes we are shooting for a few days and then all the scenery has to be changed and the new scenery has to fit and be ready for the director by the next day. Now that gets complicated! And it means a lot of work at midnight.

**arcCA:** *Can you talk about the permanence or impermanence of your work?*

**GR:** During pilot season, I am always so excited, because it's like having kids; you watch them grow and mature, and then they are gone. It can be a little melancholy. Yesterday, I was admiring the Apthorpe set, and I don't know if I will see it again. These sets are more recognizable and more accessible than many buildings. That doesn't make them permanent, just more visible. ●

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