

## Guest Appearance: Reel world wizard

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(PICS: DHANANJAY HELWADE)

By: Suktara Ghosh

### Guest Appearance - Anne Seibel

*The French Oscar-nominated production designer on what it takes to create magic in the movies.*

One of the greatest reasons for the lasting charm of the movies is that they bring to life any world we imagine. Little wonder then that Anne Seibel, whose work it is to create these worlds, is really into details. On a very short visit to attend a seminar at the Film and Television Institute of India, the Oscar-nominated French production designer went through the works of the art

direction students as meticulously and with as much interest as she would a plan for a Woody Allen set.

"Their work seems nice, though I guess it's difficult for them to understand how we work in Europe, which is very different," she says.

Seibel is pretty much Hollywood's go-to lady for films shot in Europe, and her resume boasts names of directors like Steven Spielberg, Clint Eastwood and Woody Allen. On the desi front, she has worked on Dev Benegal's 2010 Abhay Deol starrer Road, Movie. Quiz her on her legendary colleagues and she shrugs, "I'd say they're similar in their professionalism. They know what they want and what they do. It's easy to work with them. I'm closer to Allen though because I've worked directly with him."

It was Allen's *Midnight in Paris*, which won her the Oscar nomination in 2012 and she has been working with him since on his European projects. "He gives me freedom to work and if he likes what I have done, then I am happy. If there's something he doesn't like — which is very, very rare — then he'd never blame me. He'd say 'we made the wrong choice'."

And does she disagree with her directors? "Not really because I'm flexible as well. And if there are clashes, I make them think I'm doing what they want when I actually do what I want," she laughs.

While working closely with the director, whose vision she gives shape to, Seibel prefers coalescing with the cinematographer as well. "The director of photography for me is very important. If the set is not well-lit or doesn't look good, I am unhappy. I've to make sure that we work in sync on the look of the film," she says, adding how everything from the colour palette to the lights to the props are under consideration. "If you have a magazine of the period, I would look at it and make sure it's just right.

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The look comes together slowly. The base is the script. The rest comes from the research and the way you imagine the character and his life. It's a fast but progressive process," she says.

While she puts in at least a month of research into a project, she put two for *Midnight in Paris* — "I wanted it to be perfect," she says. And she uses everything from paintings to books to architecture as reference points. "You have to constantly feed yourself," she says.

Seibel likes working for American productions based in Europe and doesn't work on many French projects. "Hollywood crews are really professional. They don't wait for you, they just do it. It's a challenge. And if I have a challenge, it's better. It's better than working in films where they don't think production design is necessary," she adds. She also needs to work around the budget and other limitations. While she worked with 200 assistants on *Marie Antoinette*, there were only 60 for *Midnight in Paris*. "We can work miracles if there's the right vibe on the sets. Like *Road, Movie* was a small budget film and all we had were ideas and what came out was so spectacular," she says. In fact, for the *Benegal* film, she went around Mumbai — and lots of dhabas — to get a feel of the culture.

While her parents were people of science, they encouraged creativity at home. And little Seibel set about designing family Muppet shows and building dolls' houses with her cousin since the age of seven. Academically an architect, she came into the movies quite by chance and has been hooked ever since.

And how has American cinema evolved over the years? "Well strangely, I think now American cinema is evolving through television. The series they produce are very good and are now attracting feature film directors, actors and crew. The rest are huge blockbusters, which don't have anything much to do with independent cinema anyway," she says.

Seibel is now gearing up to film the pilot episode for a series for Amazon by Amelie director Jean-Pierre Jeunet in April, followed by a small road movie directed by Eleanor Coppola, wife of Francis Ford Coppola, in France.

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