



Sony Pictures

All Set

BY HILARY DANINHIRSCH

As the art director for the upcoming film *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, East Ender Gregory Weimerskirch rose to the challenge of recreating the set of an iconic television show and capturing a time and place near and dear to many in our own neighborhood.



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Weimerskirch with the Neighborhood Trolley and King Friday's castle. No drawings existed of the trolley, so he and his team had to build it from photographs of the original. It cost nearly \$12,000 to replicate.

Above: The Mister Rogers' Neighborhood house set, as remade at WQED for the soon-to-be-released film *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*. The traffic light was a gift from art director Gregory Weimerskirch's late father for his 10th birthday. It was the same size as the one originally used on the television show, and the art director was thrilled to be able to use it in the film.

Gregory Weimerskirch grew up watching *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* on Pittsburgh public television station WQED, where the popular children's show was produced. Once, as a teen, he ran into host Fred Rogers on Fifth Avenue in Oakland, near the station's studios. "He was just as sweet as he was on the show," the Bloomfield native recalls. So when Weimerskirch, a 20-year veteran of the movie industry, was asked to serve as the art director for *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, he was thrilled. The critically acclaimed film, which opens November 22, recounts journalist Tom Junod's friendship with Rogers, portrayed by Tom Hanks.

Lacey Terrell



Actor Tom Hanks portraying Fred Rogers.

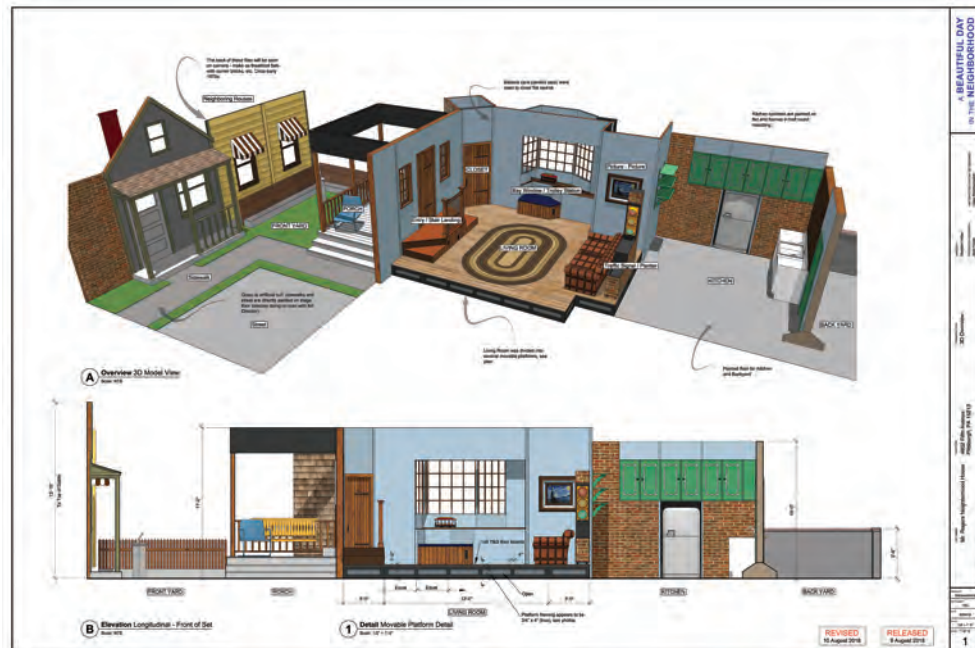
While Weimerskirch, who admired the impact Rogers made on children, on Pittsburgh, and on the educational television landscape, found the work exhilarating and meaningful, he says it wasn't without its challenges.

"This was a surprisingly hard movie to design. I thought it would be easy," laughs 51-year-old Weimerskirch, who now lives in Point Breeze.

"Our job was to recreate this whole world," he says, referring to both Mister Rogers' television house and The Neighborhood of Make-Believe, home to a colorful cast of characters, some of them puppets operated by Rogers. "I would've assumed that WQED had construction drawings and set pieces," Weimerskirch says. But the set was handmade without a template and many pieces had been discarded.

Fortunately, the Heinz History Center houses the original King Friday's Castle, the Great Oak Tree (where Henrietta Pussycat and X the Owl lived), and the entryway and living room where Rogers began each show. The museum's curator and archivists took measure-

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Weimerskirch's original 3D model of the house set. The set was recreated by watching hundreds of episodes of the show, as no drawings existed.

ments of these pieces, as the film crew was not allowed to touch anything.

The art team also visited the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh and the Fred Rogers Center in Latrobe to photograph and measure Rogers' original puppets. Weimerskirch supervised the design of puppet replicas and hired a puppet fabricator who worked for Jim Henson Studio (of Muppets fame) to recreate the beloved characters.

To reproduce the set, Weimerskirch watched what seemed to him like "hundreds of episodes" of the show, freezing video frames time after time to ensure he captured all elements of the set correctly, as even the smallest detail can make or break the authenticity of such a well-known—and well-loved—set.

"I modeled the house set-up in 3D on the computer and then produced construction drawings from which we could build the set," the art director explains. "For *The Neighborhood of Make-Believe*, we did the drawings by hand."

The crew filmed on location at WQED, where Rogers was first hired as a puppeteer in 1954 and later returned in 1966, after a stint with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. While in Canada, he had created the show *Misterogers*, and when he brought it home to Pittsburgh, he renamed it *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*.

The program, which aired nationally until 2001 and continued on WQED in reruns until 2016, was filmed in one production studio. "They would film the house set first—where Mister Rogers walks in and sings—and then wheel that set out and roll in *The Neighborhood of Make-Believe*," explains Weimerskirch.

The studio remains unchanged today, according to Weimerskirch. "It even has the

original lighting," he notes. What has changed are the WQED offices, so Weimerskirch was tasked with recreating the WQED of the 1980s and 1990s, the time period in which the film takes place, an effort that included restoring the corridors to their original appearance and using a former WQED logo from that era.



The exterior of WQED, as it appeared in the 1980s, which is when *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* is set.

To recreate Rogers' office, the crew utilized 31st Street Studios in the Strip District and built a stage outfitted with wallpaper, carpet, furniture, and lighting all sourced to match the originals. "We remade his sofa, matching the upholstery and aging it appropriately," Weimerskirch says. "We also duplicated artwork, including many of the drawings that were produced by children," he adds. Among the other items creating authenticity on the office set are Rogers' 1997 Lifetime Achievement Emmy award and the four Emmys garnered by his show, which the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences recreated down to the engravings.

Some of the WQED staffers who worked on the original television show acted as consultants, including the art director for *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. "I'd run details by her to make sure it was all right,"

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The Neighborhood of Make-Believe, completely remade for the film.

Weimerskirch says, "and that is something you rarely get to do."

Weimerskirch headed down the path to his career as an art director by receiving a design degree at La Roche College (now La Roche University) in McCandless. Upon graduation, he was accepted as an apprentice at Industrial Light & Magic (ILM) in San Francisco, the motion picture visual effects company founded by filmmaker George Lucas.

"As a young person, I never realized that someone designed sets for movies," says Weimerskirch. "While working at ILM, I discovered that you could study how to make sets for film." After the apprenticeship, Weimerskirch attended the American Film Institute in Los Angeles and obtained a Master of Fine Arts degree in production design. He is a member of the Art Directors Guild and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

With more than 20 years in the movie industry, Weimerskirch has many credits to his name, including such films as the forthcoming *Hillbilly Elegy*, the recent *Where'd You Go, Bernadette*, and other Pittsburgh-based movies like *Fences*, *Jack Reacher*, and *The Fault in Our Stars*.

Even though he is no stranger to the film industry, *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* holds a special place in Weimerskirch's heart. "My childhood is so embedded in Mister Rogers," he says. "As a very young kid I knew I wanted to be an architect or to design things, and 40 years later to have the opportunity to recreate this [world] is kind of an amazing thing."

The Pittsburgh-based crew all "grew up with Mister Rogers, so it was a labor of love for everyone involved," he says.

Fellow Pittsburghers might examine the movie with more scrutiny than movie-goers elsewhere, Weimerskirch notes. And East

Enders are likely to recognize neighborhood locales featured in the film, including the pool at the Jewish Community Center in Squirrel Hill, which was shot to resemble Oakland's Pittsburgh Athletic Association (though Rogers swam at both pools).

For scenes taking place at the home Rogers shared with his wife, Joanne, the art team sought out an elegant 1930s building that resembles the couple's Oakland condominium. "We found a great house on Beacon Street that had the right feel," says Weimerskirch. From the outside, he notes, the Squirrel Hill house was shot in a such way that it appeared to depict the upper floor of an apartment building. Inside, as they did with the office set, designers replaced the carpet, wallpaper, and furniture to resemble the Rogers home, down to the finest detail.

"Joanne graciously let us scan many of her personal photos, as well as Fred's many awards and college degrees, so that we could reproduce them," says Weimerskirch.

"For the photos, we had to remove Fred's head in Photoshop and replace it with Tom Hanks' head," he explains. "This sounds easy to do, but it's actually very difficult. We had to photograph Tom in the right light and match the head angle and size of the original."

Rogers' message was one of kindness, so perhaps it is not surprising that Hanks is described by Weimerskirch as one of the nicest actors with whom he has worked. "He invited us all to a Pirates game, rented a whole suite, and spent the whole day with us."

Weimerskirch sums up *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* as "a really well-written script," adding, "The message is so good. It's about kindness and treating other people well—that's the heart of the whole story."

And the heart of Fred Rogers. SA

In Tribute to Mister Rogers

Nashville-based mixed media artist Wayne Brezinka has created a new portrait of Fred Rogers, using artifacts from the archives of the children's television icon, and it's currently on display for all to see.

Incorporating both two- and three-dimensional elements in the piece, Brezinka mounted objects and memorabilia in the fashion of a collage to craft storylines within his artistic profile of America's most beloved neighbor, Mister Rogers. Among the objects the artist used are vintage photos of Rogers as a young boy, old newspaper clippings, audio cassettes of music from *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, a 1994 handwritten note from Rogers to a friend, two of Rogers' bow ties, and a pair of his eyeglasses worn by him. A large mirror is also included.



"The mirror allows the viewer to see their reflection appearing next to Mister Rogers," explains Brezinka.

The portrait is on public exhibit at WQED through December 18. The TV station is located at 4802 Fifth Avenue in Oakland. Hours for public viewing are Monday through Friday, noon to 3 p.m.