

ON THE MARK

JUDY HOFFLUND SHARES THE DETAILS OF HER EXPERIENCES MAKING *A HAUNTING IN VENICE*, WHICH EARNED HER THE PRODUCERS MARK CERTIFICATION.

INTERVIEW BY LISA Y. GARIBAY

A Haunting in Venice Judy Hofflund, p.g.a.

The film *A Haunting in Venice*, adapted from the Agatha Christie novel *Hallowe'en Party*, is a terrifying mystery featuring the return of the celebrated sleuth Hercule Poirot.

It is anything but a triumphant return. Now retired and living in self-imposed exile after World War II, a weary Poirot is cajoled by an old friend to attend a séance at a decaying palazzo—on All Hallows' Eve, of all days. When one of the guests is murdered, the detective himself is bewitched by the palazzo's secrets.

The 2023 film reunites the team of filmmakers behind 2017's *Murder on the Orient Express* and 2022's *Death on the Nile*, including director Kenneth Branagh and producer Judy Hofflund. Branagh reprises his role as Poirot alongside an ensemble that includes Kyle Allen, Camille Cottin, Jamie Dornan, Tina Fey, Jude Hill, Ali Khan, Emma Laird, Kelly Reilly, Riccardo Scamarcio and Michelle Yeoh. After two turns adapting a Christie novel for the screen, Hofflund talks about the new circumstances that the team had to adapt to, along with tried-and-true methods they relied upon to bring their version of Poirot back to the big screen for a third time.

YOU SPENT 30 YEARS ON THE AGENCY SIDE OF HOLLYWOOD. HOW DID YOU SEGUE INTO PRODUCING?

I quit being an agent and manager about 11 years ago. A couple of years later, Kenneth Branagh called me and suggested that I produce movies with him. How could you say no to him? I represented Ken for about 25 years, so we have a long relationship.

DID THAT BACKGROUND EMPOWER YOU WHEN YOU BEGAN PRODUCING, OR DID IT FEEL LIKE STARTING FROM SCRATCH?

Both. A lot of producing was second nature to me. I've read 10 scripts a week for all the years of my career. I understand material and developing a script. The casting process is second nature to me, and fun. I love having the whole world of actors to explore, not just my client list. I know all the agents and the managers, and that was very helpful to Ken because I take as much as I can off his plate, especially work that is LA-based. In the preproduction stage he can be focused on sets and helping to get the script right.

The on-set stuff was not (second nature). That was all brand new. I didn't really understand what it



The all-star cast of *A Haunting in Venice* includes Kelly Reilly (far left), Tina Fey, Michelle Yeoh and Kenneth Branagh. Below: Branagh on location with DP Haris Zambarloukos.



meant to be a department head and how many departments there were in making a movie. I just asked everybody tons of questions, including Ken, who was generous with his time. With every movie I've done now, I feel like I've got it down a little bit. I learn more every moment, but I do get what it means now.

WITH A COUPLE FILMS UNDER YOUR BELT, HOW DOES THE ON-SET COLLABORATION BETWEEN YOU AND KEN WORK?

Ken and I work very well together. He's very efficient with time, and we both have a good shorthand. There's less for me to do in production because it's Kenneth Branagh. He's made a lot of movies, and he knows what he's doing. My job more than anything is to be there when he needs me, and when things come up that I don't have to involve him in.



Armie Hammer and Gal Gadot in *Death on the Nile*. Below: A still from *Murder on the Orient Express*.



I remember midway through *Murder on the Orient Express*, Ken said to me, “How would you define your job here, your on-set job?” I said, “Problem solver.” He said, “Exactly.” There’s a little bit of “What do you think of this?” Or, “Will you talk to this department head about this?” Or, “Could you modify your shooting day next week so this actor can get out of work midday?” then talking to the AD about it.

But once we’re shooting and the budget is signed off on and everything is going forward, there isn’t a ton to do in a day for me but to support Ken. Then I get busy again in postproduction

when cuts are being delivered and with publicity and marketing. Our movies are distributed by Disney, so I talk to a lot of departments about things like product placement and merchandising. I try to handle all of that so that Ken is just focused on making the movie.

THIS IS A LOOSER AGATHA CHRISTIE ADAPTATION THAN THE PRIOR TWO FILMS IN THE SERIES. DID THAT OFFER NEW OPPORTUNITIES?

We were fortunate to have the Agatha Christie estate sign on early for the

adaptation. They saw the plan for what this movie was. Michael Green is a brilliant writer, and he was able to deliver a first draft that we cast from—which is no easy feat. Ken and Michael were on the same page in what they wanted to accomplish, and I saw an opportunity to push it to be scarier.

We all wanted it to be, look, and feel different. The idea of a movie that happens mostly over one night during a big storm in Venice in a gorgeous old palazzo—a scary movie that’s going to be released before Halloween—that was the formula. The mood of the book is strong and it’s a strong story, but it was embellished, made more cinematic, and set in Venice. There were big changes, but no one resisted them, which made it all a lot easier.

WHAT WAS DIFFERENT ABOUT THIS POIROT FILM COMPARED TO THE OTHER TWO IN TERMS OF CHALLENGES?

It was made for about two-thirds of the budget. The same kind of schedule, but a very reduced budget. There was definitely pressure and tension in executing Ken’s vision. He is very responsible about budgets. We ended up coming in just a tiny bit lower, which was spectacular. But there was pressure in shooting a lot in fewer days with a big ensemble cast.

There were fewer visual effects than in the other movies, thank God, budget-wise. Ken shoots as naturalistically as possible. He really loves to do that for actors. We didn’t shoot inside the palazzo at all. We used the palazzo only for exteriors. The interior of the palazzo was built on stages at Twickenham. Ken likes four walls and a ceiling so actors walk into a room and feel that they’re in Alicia’s bedroom or on the balcony that she has fallen from or been pushed off.

Most of the department heads that we worked with had worked on the previous

Judy Hofflund on location during the production of *A Haunting in Venice*.



movies. We all had to understand that it was a little bit different on this movie because we didn't have the luxury of more time. It's such a great group of people—completely committed to what they do. They're so good at what they do.

EVEN IF THERE IS LESS TIME AND MONEY, WHAT ARE THINGS THAT YOU WOULD NEVER SKIMP ON?

First, getting the script right. We are spoiled by Michael Green. What a great writer he is. He gets every detail right. Second, getting the casting right. When we were introducing these movies, I said to Ken again and again, "It's got to be all-star." In *Murder on the Orient Express*, anyone could look at that and think, "I love Johnny Depp. I love Michelle Pfeiffer. I love Daisy Ridley." There was so much to make people want to see the film. Don't skimp on actors. Always be thinking, "Who can we get who's really valuable?"

Also, a poster is key. I was excited to try to make the posters not look like every other movie. Sometimes you see a movie poster and there's 15 actors with a

house or a train or a boat in the middle. A lot of those posters look the same. I like spare. I like something that turns my head and is arresting and maybe doesn't answer every question. It makes me want to find out more. I encouraged that as much as I could on *A Haunting in Venice*.

WHAT NEW APPROACHES OR TACTICS CAME OUT OF THIS PRODUCTION THAT YOU KNOW WILL INFORM WHAT COMES NEXT? AND WHAT PRACTICES WERE ALREADY IN PLACE THAT YOU RELIED ON MOST?

What I learned most on this movie was attention to detail. I feel like I have the mechanics down so I could pay attention to just how important the details are.

Now, if you get six or eight of those details wrong, what could be a good movie becomes a not-so-good movie. The smallest little points make a big difference to you relating to a character and rooting for the good guy.

When you're an agent and a manager, you don't have the luxury of time to harp on every aspect. You have to just get stuff done. It's the opposite in producing

a movie, where you need to ask, "What do I need to look at more deeply?"

For a lot of this, I'm looking over Ken's shoulder. He's made a million movies. I watch him in the grading room saying, "No, go back. Let's make those rooflines a little bit darker." No detail escapes him. I don't know how it works with other directors, but I've learned to look at the movie and think, "Oh, yeah, look how great that roofline looks!"

As a producer, it's enticing to be continuously crossing things off a list. But I've trained myself to slow down and think about what we need to improve. Take the time to get it right. Don't just think, "OK, now we're ready—let's go."

WHAT SECRET WEAPON HAVE YOU CARRIED THROUGH EVERY ONE OF YOUR PRODUCTIONS?

Every single day when I go to work on these movies, what I have in my mind is, "Only love." Because I think you can't lose. If it's only love to Ken, hopefully I'm making his day a little bit easier. If it's that department head who's frantic and saying, "I need more time for this wardrobe," if I'm coming back with only love, I feel like I'm helping the process.

My longer version of that is, "No ego; only love." Because if you can check ego at the door, everything's going to be better. ■

Certification via the Producers Mark (represented by p.g.a.) indicates that a producer performed a major portion of the producing functions in a decision-making capacity on a specific project. Criteria, its definition, the process for earning the mark and other particulars can be viewed at producersguildawards.com.