

Veronique Vowell

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In October of 2014, I found myself standing in the rotunda of the California state capitol. I was not scouting a location. I was there with Teamsters Local 399 Secretary/Treasurer Steve Dayan, President Wes Ponsford and Vice President Ed Duffy to pass an important piece of legislation—AB1839—the assembly bill to authorize the tax incentive our industry so badly needed. The Expanded Film and Television Job Creation Act was passed. A fund of \$330 million a year for five years was set aside to help keep our jobs in California. I was humbled to represent location managers in such an important campaign.

Political lobbying, I discovered, was very much like canvassing a neighborhood for filming. I didn't know such a job existed while growing up in LA's San Fernando Valley in the 1970s. I also discovered that very few people outside of the insular world of production know

what a location manager does beyond "scouting."

Location managing, like politics, is the art of compromise in the effort to achieve the impossible. During my 26 years as a feature and television location manager, it became evident that you rarely get everything you want but, with luck, you can get enough to get the job done.

I learned my craft without even realizing it—as a field researcher for the *Ripley's Believe It or Not* television series and before that, as a researcher on the National Geographic network television series. Field research not only involved interviewing people and gaining their trust, but also such mundane chores as measuring doors to make sure equipment would fit, finding accommodations for the film crew and learning the "lay of the land." I traveled the country alone with nothing more than

a small typewriter, a 35mm camera and a roll of quarters for pay phones in the long ago era before cellphones and the Internet.

After a few years, as most film workers do, I found myself unemployed. A friend suggested that I work "pro bono" on an American Film Institute (AFI) thesis film. I presented myself to the student producer and he suggested that I could be the costume designer. When I said I didn't know the first thing about costumes, he looked down at a list of crew positions and suggested location manager. He explained that I would go out into the community and find locations for the film, talk to people and take pictures. It sounded like what I had been doing for the past several years.

After my AFI experience, I needed to find a job that paid. I mailed out more than 400 letters and resumes to production companies, producers and a few locations managers. I got only one response. But, as it turns out, it was the only one I needed. Jim McCabe, location manager on Steven Spielberg's *Amazing Stories*, called me. He liked my letter and wanted to meet me. After a few days, he did something truly remarkable. He recommended me to another location manager for an assistant position on a union MOW. That job got me into Local 399.

When I first started in location managing, I had two things going against me: I was a woman in a male-dominated industry and I was very shy. But life is strange. You never know your strengths until a challenge is presented to you. If you are lucky, you learn that there is a solution to every problem if you take the time to think it through. Some solutions are political, some financial and some are found through trial and error.

In 1989 on the feature *Tango & Cash*, I was presented with a wonderful opportunity. The producer and UPM asked me midway through prep if I wanted to step up from assistant location manager to location manager. I was delighted. I was also terrified. They told me I had 10 minutes to make the decision. I walked out of the office and paced between the stages at Warner Bros. It was a pivotal moment. There were very few women in location and in production then, and I knew none of them well enough to ask for advice. In the end, I simply jumped in and never looked back.

I have had many highs and lows in my quarter century in this job. One that stands out in my memory happened during halftime of an NFL game at Ravens Stadium in Baltimore, Md. Ninety thousand people were in their seats. A regular season game was in full swing. In the tunnels of the stadium were two complete football teams

for *The Replacements*, Keanu Reeves as quarterback, Gene Hackman as the coach, 400 background artists, six camera crews, two Steadicam crews and various other crew members. Once we were let onto the field, we would have exactly 10 minutes to film 10 plays.

As the two-minute warning sounded on the field, the crew waited. But penalty flag after penalty flag was thrown—the last two minutes of the second quarter lasted 25 minutes. Suddenly, as if in a dream, the stadium crew yelled into my earphones: "Go, Go, Go!" I threw out the signal to the first AD and the entire platoon of *The Replacements* personnel ran onto the field. The crowd was on their feet cheering. The stadium vibrated with noise. And as if on cue—exactly at the end of our 10 minutes—Keanu's character threw the ball for the scene-ending final touchdown. The real NFL teams ran onto the field. The crowd roared. And so did the location crew.

The Replacements illustrates the complex details a location manager has to deal with. The Ravens' ground crew and NFL wanted to make sure that during our two-week shoot, the field was kept pristine for the Sunday games. Twice a day, at 6 a.m. and 6 p.m., I would walk the field with the Head of Groundskeeping and a member of the Model family, the Ravens' owners. During those meetings, we would decide which grass turf tiles needed to be removed and replaced and which could be salvaged—which required constant negotiation: "they" wanted to replace all of them and "we" didn't want to spend the several thousands of dollars per tile. In the end, the production spent close

to \$1 million on repairing the field, a compromise.

While shooting *Richie Rich* at the Biltmore Estate in Asheville, N.C., we dealt with all the normal issues associated with filming in an active museum as well as the special requirements of the museum's administration. The Cecil family (the heirs of George Vanderbilt) insisted that the entire crew conform to the same dress code as their staff—long pants and shirts with collars. The location department had the onerous task of enforcing the dress code despite the predictable objections of the crew. "S- - - Happens" T-shirts were definitely a no-no.

On HBO's *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, filmed in Los Angeles, the consequences of filming in HD Video without a script in public places became extremely clear. While actors improvised during exceptionally long takes, merchants and homeowners still insisted on going about their everyday business. The location department (which consisted of me and Andrea Morrissy-Keener) had the pressure and pleasure of trying not to break the creative flow of the actor/writers while still trying to allow the general population access to merchants and homes.

Cold Case filmed almost entirely in Los Angeles, however, the series took place in present-day Philadelphia with all the "cold cases" taking place from 1920s to 1990s Philly. These movies within the show required painstaking attention to detail, transforming the streets and roads of contemporary LA into a variety of period locations in and around Philadelphia.

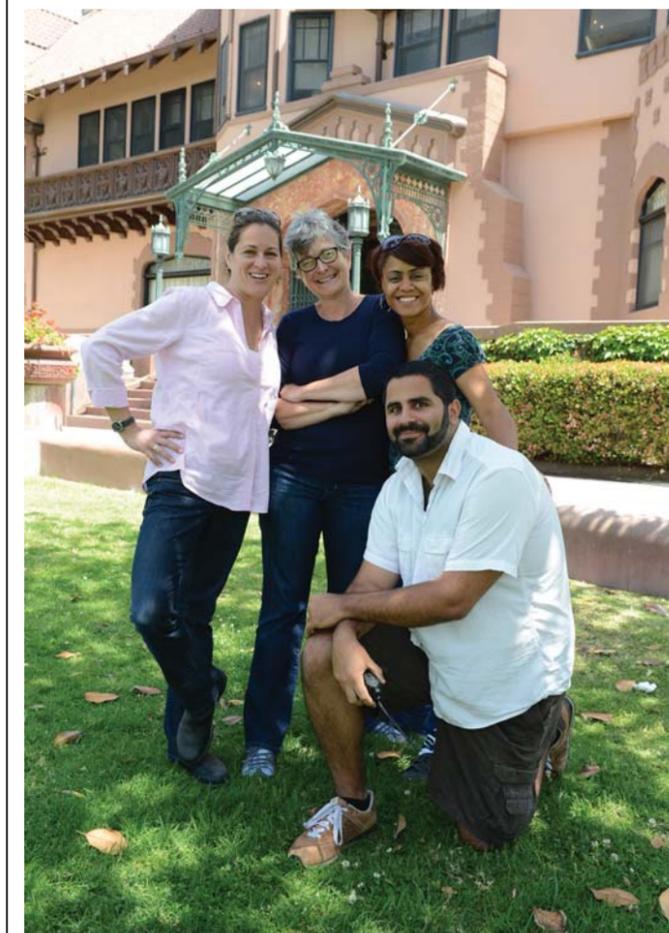
Set in Washington, D.C., but filmed entirely in Los Angeles, ABC's *Scandal* has benefited greatly from the advances in

green screen technology. With ever-evolving scripts and schedules, along with multiple episodes shooting concurrently and last-minute changes, the location department's charge of finding beautiful, East Coast architecture that tells the story can be extremely challenging. Teamwork between all departments on any project is important—on this one it is paramount.

My experiences are shared by many location managers. They know, as I do, that the behind-the-scenes stories are usually more grit than glamour. The job that I started at 29 years old is not the job I do today. When I began, all that was needed was a wad of cash, a smile and a good spiel. Today, the work is done not only with an eye to the

needs of the creative team but also in close association with the legal and risk management executives of the large multinational companies that I work for. And therein lies the finesse of this job.

Finding the location that fits the story is the glamour. Managing the location that fits the crew's needs is the grit. The challenges of the job are as varied as the locations needed to tell the story the script lays out. To transform a real location into a fictional set requires attention to a laundry list of details. Every aspect of every location—no matter how mundane—is important to someone associated with the process of preparing the shoot. These are just a few of the things—not in order of importance, they are all important—that have to be





Lavaux, Switzerland.

done before the director says action: street sign removal; turning on/off streetlights; cable placement; roof access; tree trimming; repaving; toilet rentals; tent erection; lane closures; heat or A/C as required; condor, car and truck parking; snake/insect wrangling; hiring of police/fire personnel; obtaining permits; notifying neighbors; layout boarding; location cleaning; bus stop moving; extras holding; environmental testing; furniture moving and storage; safety reports; insurance certifications; contract negotiations; trash collection; memo writing; production meetings; dog kenneling and it goes on and on.

It takes a team of dedicated professionals to get the job done. I have been extremely fortunate to have a talented,

long-standing crew: Andrea Morrissy-Keener, 12 years; Jason Kaplon, seven years; J. Hanna and Jasmin Paris, four years. Some are with me still, others have moved on to greater glory. Without their support over the years, I would not be where I am today.

Nothing prepared me for this job except for everything I have ever done or learned in my life. Growing up in Hollywood, I was always encouraged to be a teacher even though secretly I wanted to be a police officer. My father, a television writer and documentary filmmaker, taught me an important lesson: whatever you want to do, do it with everything you have. He was famous for telling me long ago that “if I wanted to peck poop with the chickens, then I should go a build myself a wooden bill to be able to do it well.”

My mother who immigrated to the US from Switzerland, taught me to actively observe the world around me, from the beauty of nature, architecture and art, to the diversity of humankind. My years in Switzerland at the University of Lausanne studying French and French literature gave me the confidence to get along with people of all stations in life.

All these experiences prepared me to be able to advocate for location professionals and the greater film community as a Board member of FilmLA, a member of the LA City Mayor’s Task Force, a founding member of the LMGA and a lecturer at a variety of film schools—AFI, Boston University, Emerson College and Chapman University.

In the question-and-answer periods after my lectures, I always get the same two queries: How do you find locations? And how do you convince people to allow you to disrupt their lives with filming in or in front of their homes and businesses? My answers are always the same. I tell them to keep their eyes open because you never know what you are going to find. I advise them to not just throw money and promises at people, but to explain to them how important the industry and the jobs are to the community at large, how it greases the wheels that helps fuel the local economy.

This is exactly what we told our elected officials across the state to gain passage of AB1839.