

# The Spookiest Set on Television

RYAN MURPHY'S MACABRE DIRECTION HELPED TWO EMMY WINNERS CRAFT A VICTORIAN-INSPIRED NIGHTMARE FOR *AMERICAN HORROR STORY: ASYLUM*

By Cathy Whitlock Photographed by Noah Webb

**W**ITH PRODUCTION VALUES that rival those found on the big screen, production designer Mark Worthington's sets for *American Horror Story: Asylum* would have given even Hitchcock a fright. Drawing on influences from genre classics *In Cold Blood*, *Nosferatu*, *The Exorcist* and *The Silence of the Lambs* plus the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Worthington and set decorator Ellen Brill have imbued the FX show's central setting — the fictional mental institution Briarcliff Mansion — with creepy verisimilitude in league with *The Shining*'s Overlook Hotel, *Dracula*'s gothic castle and the abandoned factories of *Hostel*. The show's interiors, built on the Paramount lot, abound with electroshock chambers and stark labs filled with menacing medical paraphernalia.

For the first installment of *American Horror Story* last season, Worthington and Brill were nominated for an Emmy for art direction in a miniseries or movie. *Asylum*, round two of producers Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk's anthology, revolves around a falsely accused serial killer (Evan Peters), undercover journalist (Sarah Paulson), psychiatrist (Zachary Quinto), nun (Jessica Lange) and sadistic scientist (James Cromwell) who live and work at Briarcliff.



## The Grand Lobby

Briarcliff's foyer is based on the lobby of the New York City Lunatic Asylum, which opened in 1839. "It was this octagonal lobby with a round staircase," says Worthington.

**1** Worthington decided to make the central staircase angular for his set. "It's spiky and dangerous — all those adjectives that help horror." Adds Paulson: "There's something about that staircase that seems spidery and scary. Sister Jude [Lange] calls it her stairway to heaven."

**2** The sconces are Craftsman-style reproductions and were purchased at Rejuvenation.

**3** Co-stars Peters and Paulson. The sets, says Peters, "look and feel really real. It's so scary, you really don't have to do much."

“  
I've worked on great sets over the years, in movies and in theater, and I've never been on a set before that told me so much.”

Paulson



Thredson's Lair

Psychiatrist Oliver Thredson (Quinto, right) assesses the sanity of the inmates while murdering women on the side. His exam room has the aspect of a torture chamber, with unsparing stainless-steel fixtures and a drain on the tile floor for blood. Brill sourced vintage medical equipment from eBay and Chicago's Urban Remains.



Murphy — whose *American Horror Story* marks his first foray into the horror genre — initially steered Worthington (a two-time Emmy nominee for *Ugly Betty*) to photographer-architect Christopher Payne's 2009 book *Asylum*, a compendium of derelict mental facilities. Although the series is set in 1964, Worthington recalls that Murphy also was keen on an overall Victorian inspiration; hence the idea that Briarcliff was a 19th century tuberculosis ward in Massachusetts later converted to a mental institution.

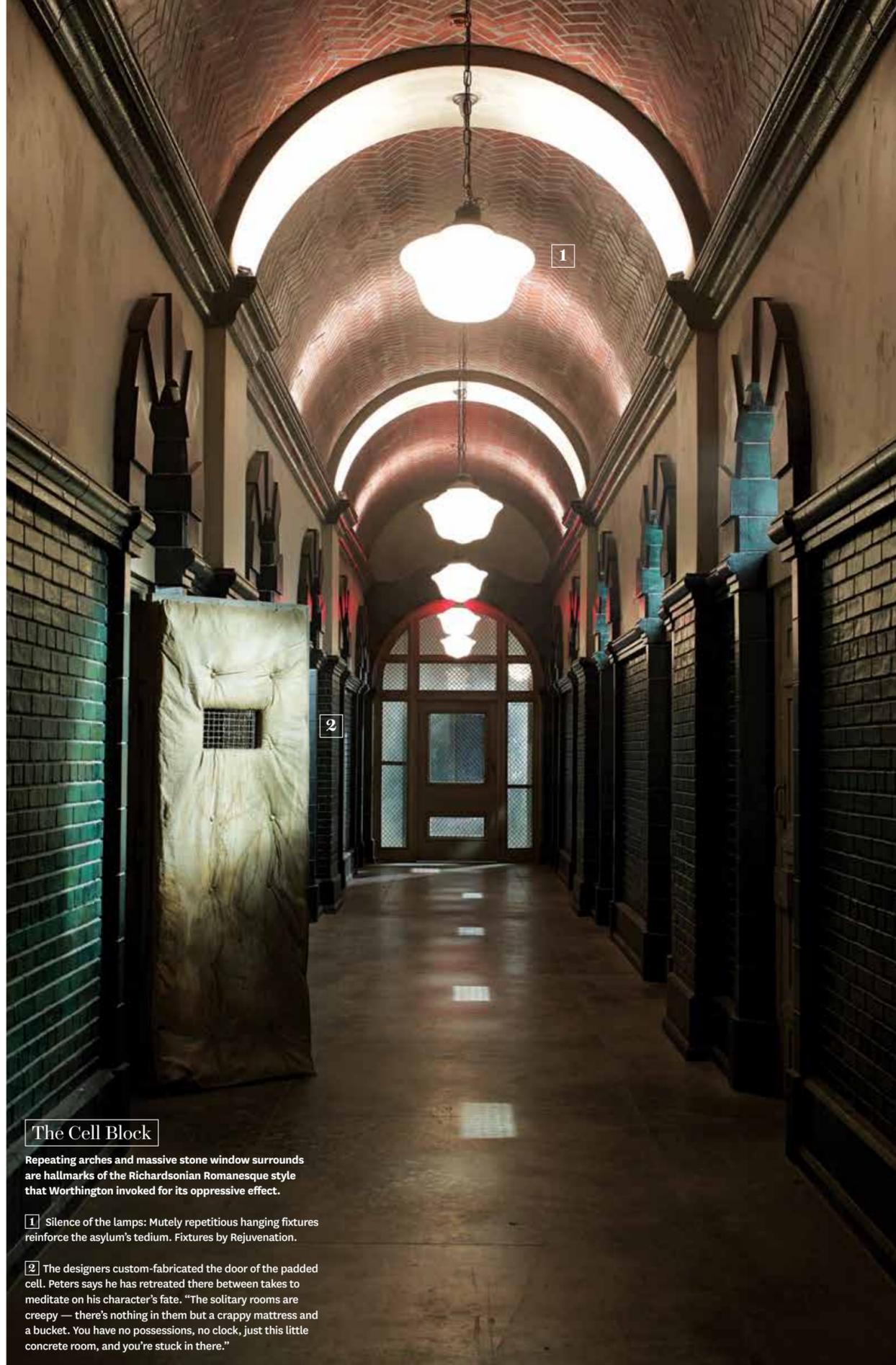
Briarcliff's gothic gloom emanates in part from Worthington's referencing of 19th century architects Frank Furness and Henry Hobson Richardson. "Victorian eclecticism [pioneered by Furness] is this weird melange of styles that were almost grotesque," says Worthington. "The buildings are built for horror. The proportions aren't quite comfortable and nice, which contributes to getting away from the cliché of just another mental hospital." Richardson's style, dubbed Richardsonian Romanesque and characterized by massive arches and rusticated stone walls, was perfected in his 1869 design for the Buffalo State Asylum for the Insane.

Three-time Emmy nominee Brill (*Nip/Tuck*, *Arrested Development*, 24) notes that decorating an asylum is a "whole other mind-set — using the same light fixture and identical beds over and over was key." Brill nonetheless managed a moment of cloistered whimsy by basing Lange's office on that of the Mother Superior in *The Sound of Music*.

Worthington stayed away from the light palette typical of early '60s institutions — memorably depicted in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* — opting for ominous sepia and gray. "The medical sets have a weird reptile-skin quality on the walls that is very uncomfortable," he notes.

*Asylum* viewers are given enough mayhem for many a sleepless night; apparently, they aren't the only ones. "No one likes to be on the sets, and no one hangs out except in the bakery," confides Worthington, who once overheard Lange comment that it was the only set she liked, as it smells like bread and thus seemed friendlier. "I took that as a compliment."

For a production designer on a horror series, you know you've done your job when even the cast and crew are spooked. **THR**

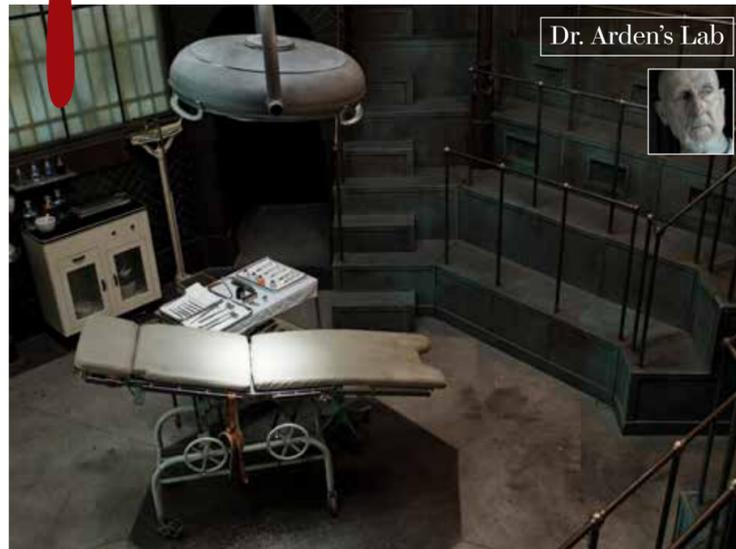


The Cell Block

Repeating arches and massive stone window surrounds are hallmarks of the Richardsonian Romanesque style that Worthington invoked for its oppressive effect.

1 Silence of the lamps: Mutely repetitious hanging fixtures reinforce the asylum's tedium. Fixtures by Rejuvenation.

2 The designers custom-fabricated the door of the padded cell. Peters says he has retreated there between takes to meditate on his character's fate. "The solitary rooms are creepy — there's nothing in them but a crappy mattress and a bucket. You have no possessions, no clock, just this little concrete room, and you're stuck in there."



Dr. Arden's Lab



Inspired by the operating "theaters" from the early days of surgery, the set bristles with the spectre of the unspeakable deeds of Dr. Arthur Arden (Cromwell, inset). "That's the scariest room in the whole asylum," says Peters. According to Worthington (above right), "early asylums were designed like European palaces. They thought if you put people in a beautiful, palace-like building, that alone would help them. But they became these horrible places where they were just warehousing the mentally ill." The overhead light is a 4-foot-wide operating room fixture from the 40s. Recalls Worthington, "I kept pushing — it's got to be bigger, bigger, bigger. It looks scary."



The Bakery

The bakery is the only room where the cast and crew willingly congregate, if only for its aromas and association with life instead of death, though Peters reveals the bread "is harder than a rock. It smells good, but it's like petrified." Brill sits before one of the metal bread-kneading tables that Lange and Paulson are determined to spirit off the set given the first opportunity. "I am the rightful owner of the metal table in the bakery," insists Paulson with mock certitude. "I asked for it first. Plus, I live here. Jessica would have to take it all the way back to Minnesota." Acknowledges Worthington: "They're having a fight over them. Probably neither of them will get it because we'll use them next year." Lange's Sister Jude (inset, right) rules the asylum with an iron fist from a handsome office modeled after *Mother Superior's* in *The Sound of Music*. But she retires to a piously plain bedroom adorned with little more than a twin bed and a crucifix.



The Common Room

The gathering spot for the asylum's inmates, it's one of the only sets with a roof. Says Paulson, "There's something very oppressive about being in there." The battered furnishings — courtesy of the Warner Bros. prop department, Goodwill and St. Vincent de Paul — evoke an emptied attic. "The couches are gross," says Peters. "So's the artwork, the record player and the piano that's falling apart."



Sister Jude's Bedroom

