

Janice

Seated at a sleek stone conference table in the climate-controlled, carpeted, corporate offices of Drury Design Dynamics in downtown Manhattan, Janice Davis leans back in her chair and admits, "I'm basically a practical person." Indeed, practicality seems to have guided this set designer's career from the start. But look closer and you'll see a glint in her eye that suggests a strong underlying sense of humor. You'll also see that the *objets d'art* lining the shelves of the conference room are, in fact, set models for many of the industrials on which she has collaborated with creative director Chris Drury. These designs routinely combine practicality and humor in presentations which are themselves a distinctive hybrid of stage show and themed entertainment.

Over the last six years, Davis, 40, has designed industrials with Drury, whose firm has recently begun producing multi-themed training sessions in which attendees (frequently salespeople for pharmaceutical companies) rotate through different environments resembling theme-park pavilions. Often working with only a few weeks' notice, the company pushes the design envelope whenever possible, creating elaborate interactive shows designed to ensure that, in Davis' words, "the people, instead of sitting in their seats looking at slides and looking at their watches, waiting to get to the golf course, are involved in the event."

Take, for example, a recent Drury-designed show for Schering-Plough, to launch



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Janice Davis (portrait, left) takes a you-are-there approach to designing sets for industrials and themed entertainments, placing attendees for a Calvin Klein fragrance division meeting on a desert island (left), a Hollywood soundstage (bottom, right), and in a romance writer's studio (bottom, left). For a Howard Johnson industrial she called on her theatrical background, creating a *Bye-Bye Birdie!* "Telephone Hour"-inspired multi-level hotel set, with rooms ranging from the housekeeping office to a typical guest room (below).



setting, at oak tables in a courtroom, on camp stools in a Desert Storm-inspired command center, standing before buzzers to compete in the game show "Nose to Nose," and wandering through Davis' scaled-down American village called D-Town.

"It was great fun and wildly successful," says Davis, who adds that, by the end of the day, "people in the improv room were standing on their chairs, howling and applauding." This from a show with a set budgeted below \$60,000 and which was allotted a mere six weeks to be drafted, built, and loaded in (drug-related projects often gather dust on the shelves for months awaiting FDA approval, and then go into production with no time to spare).

Davis had only four weeks to design a show for Calvin Klein's fragrance division in May 1992. Although the event was a formal meeting to highlight its products Obsession, Eternity, and Escape, according to Davis, "They handled it almost like a theme party, so the whole room was decorated." The meeting took place on three consecutive days; each day the participants gathered in the same room to contemplate one of the three perfumes and found themselves in an entirely different environment, with the seating configuration, set, and audio/visual equipment customized to fit the concept.

The first day was devoted to Escape. "They were escaping a shipwreck on a deserted island—there actually were palm trees and sand. The screen was the sail of a ship. The speakers spoke from the ship's deck and the audience was on beach chairs." The next day was devoted to Obsession. "It was a Hollywood movie set and they were all assistant



the new allergy drug Claritin-D. The meeting was held in three corner ballrooms of the New Orleans Superdome. The 1,500 participants, equipped with keypads and questionnaires, travelled in teams, competing to win \$30,000. They rotated through diverse environments learning about the new drug while seated cabaret-style in a comedy club

a theatre-trained designer who turns industrials into themed entertainment





directors of the *Obsession* movie. They sat in director's chairs and watched the movie being made." Each director's chair sported the Calvin Klein name and could be taken home as a souvenir. For *Eternity*, "They were at a salon, watching a romance writer come up with concepts for her book, *Eternity*." The audience watched her in her study as images suggestive of eternity were projected on various screens built into the set.

Davis has designed innumerable projects for Drury, some of them conforming to a more traditional corporate "three-gray-flats-and-a-logo" look. She finds the collaboration nourishing. "Chris and I work the same way," says Davis. "We just click." Drury agrees: "Janice and I really strike a nice chord because

ter again. "I'm comfortable giving that up for a while because this is a very sane schedule and I have two little kids—Chelsea's six and Graham is three. Theatre is so time-consuming for so little money that it's not a good trade-off for me right now. It's much better for me to have time for them and know that when the day is finished, the day is finished—most of the time. Plus, my studio is at home; if somebody falls down with the babysitter in the backyard, I can drop what I'm doing and go out and be with them."

According to Davis, her decision to go into theatre design was inspired, by, yes, practical concerns. As a sociology major at Hunter College, she took a theatrical design class, taught by lighting specialist Ian Calderon, to fulfill her humanities requirement.

University, studying set design with the likes of Oliver Smith and Lloyd Burlingame. As she puts it, "When you come out of NYU, you work. It's a trial by fire, but you survive it and you've got a career." It was at NYU that she learned the practical value of pouring her heart and soul into a project while being ready to change her design on a dime. "And," she says, "you come out of there not just knowing what you want, you know how to get it on the stage, and you know how to represent your ideas in a way that people are going to understand what you mean and then they're going to see them realized."

After completing her MFA at NYU in 1982, Davis spent several years working Off Broadway and at regional theatres, and several summers designing teleplays at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center in Waterford, CT. Her theatre experience provided her with many useful skills. "Coming at it from a theatrical background, Janice brings two wonderful points of view to this," says Drury. "First of all, she understands the dramatic moment better than a lot of other scenic designers. She understands content. And, more importantly, because she comes out of theatre, she understands budget. She's very talented at figuring out ways of doing things and having it look the way we want, but within the budget."

When it comes to technology, however, Drury does not stint, and Davis is right there with him. Their upcoming project for a pharmaceutical company launching a prescription antibiotic will integrate a VActor into its multi-set environment, along with a giant monopoly game called "Chairman of the Board" (where attendees are both players and game-pieces) and a game show called "Formulary Feud." Although the company has been working on the project for almost a year, the show is on hold pending FDA approval, affording Davis a little breathing time. "But I don't know how to sit still," she says, "So I wrote an article about travelling through Europe with children and sent it out to the airline magazines." Continental not only accepted the article, but has asked Davis to write a regular column for them on the subject, seeing as her advice is so, well, practical. ■



Davis designed a glitzy game show set in which attendees at a Schering-Plough product launch for Claritin-D, a new allergy medication, went "Nose to Nose" to compete for prize money (left). Though a meeting she designed for Sandoz Pharmaceuticals required a something a bit more traditional, Davis still eschewed the cliché "three-grey-flats and a logo" look, instead coming up with a television news show concept incorporating numerous TV monitors (above).

she understands concept-driven design and creating an environment."

While Drury keeps Davis running from project to project, she maintains freelance status with the company. She has taken time to teach set design at both her undergraduate and graduate alma maters, Hunter College and New York University, respectively. And she's found the time to design an interactive candy store in Boston called Sweet Enchantment, where customers take candy out of knotholes in trees and tread across a bridge over streams of sweets. She's also created themed displays for Bloomingdale's and other department stores.

Although she finds these projects fun, challenging, and lucrative, Davis occasionally gets nostalgic for her theatre roots. "I go to the [Metropolitan Opera] and think, 'Oh gosh, I remember when I used to do things with crumbling stucco instead of things that were neat all the time.'" But then practical considerations take over, and neatness starts to look bet-

ter. She recalls, "I walked out of my first class and went to a telephone and called my best friend and said, 'I know what I want to do with my life now.' It was the first time I realized you could do something in theatre that was really a practical career."

"I've always known my ego wasn't sturdy enough to be an actress," she continues. "I couldn't see myself schlepping around to auditions in somebody else's clothes and getting rejected and not being able to pay the rent. So I figured a career in theatre was not for me. But I did love it and I've always loved to draw; it never occurred to me to put the two together. I went into that class and realized we were going to be drawing and painting all semester and I would be sitting there with my paintbrush and getting college credit for it, and that it was a way to be involved in the excitement of theatre."

Davis graduated from Hunter in 1978 and, half a year later, was a graduate student at New York