

The Art Director behind the Arts:

JOHN P. BRUCE

Talks about Set Construction

Interview by

TOM TAGLIENTE (*German FALCON CREST Fan Club*)

I have come to know John P. Bruce as a friend and have spoken to him several times. He is very kind and has agreed to share his memories of his time on *Falcon Crest* with us.

How did you like working on *Falcon Crest*?

Working on *Falcon Crest* was extremely invigorating. Most everyone got along nicely. As in everything there were a few bumps along the way. But in general, it ran very smoothly. Earl Hamner (the creator) was very much involved — a southern gentleman. It was easy to talk with him and to work with him.

You served as the art director between seasons 2 (1982-83) and 7 (1987-88). How did you land your job on the show?

I had been art directing for *Lorimar* at Culver City, California (at the former *MGM Studios*). *Lorimar* had several TV productions filming on the stages. I was finishing up one of their shows, *King's Crossing*, winding up the series. The head of the *Lorimar* Art Department (Richard Haman) called me into his office. He said, "When you finish wrapping the show, we want you to head over to *TBS (The Burbank Studios)* in North Hollywood, across the street from *Universal Studios*." They had some projects there and wanted me to take over some of the art direction. One of the projects was called *The Waltons* (based on Earl Hamner's life as he was growing up). Completed that series, plus two other *Lorimar* TV shows started to wrap up. Again called into the office and was asked, "Why are you packing up?" "My projects are complete," I said. "Oh no! You are taking over *Falcon Crest* and here is the script." I unpacked, and the rest is history.

As an art director, you oversaw the complete production design of the show if I am correct. Could you please tell the fans a bit what your key duties were and what your typical workday on *Falcon Crest* was like? And how long was a typical workday?

As the art director work hours ranged from 8 to 12 hours (varied) per day/night. After reading the script, my duties were to see if any new sets were to be designed. If so, could an existing set be redesigned to meet the action. Colors to be chosen, door styles, window choice, ceilings, etc., etc.

Before you came aboard, the sets, particularly of Angela's *Victorian Mansion*, had been sort of over-furnished and were very dark. When you joined the show, things started to be visually more attractive and be a bit lighter. When the show moved production from *The Burbank Studios (Warner Bros. Studios)* to CBS in Studio City in 1984 (for seasons 4 and beyond), all the sets went more towards pastel colors and more fashionable fabrics and contemporary furniture. Was this all your doing, or did CBS or Lorimar have certain requirements?

The *Victorian Mansion* was chosen in the wine country because of the expansive vineyards, and the style of *Spring Mountain* was the perfect setting. As per the sound stage interior set of *Spring Mountain*, most of the clutter was removed to ease the action for the actors. In the study, the walls above the wood wainscot were redone with a light blue fabric over a 1/2" layer of foam (Jane Wyman actually picked the color of the fabric). This also helped with sound and echoing problems, and the sound editor was very impressed. I would always talk to Jane casually as to any of the changes or additions to the sets where she was going to be working, keeping the sets light and upbeat. Jane had a great sense of humor and good rapport with all the cast and crew.



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Angela's study on sound stage 10 at CBS — photographed in March 1985.



The foyer with dark wood paneling and heavy ornamental wallpaper in season 1 (episode 15).



In contrast, the *Falcon Crest Victorian Mansion* foyer in March 1985.

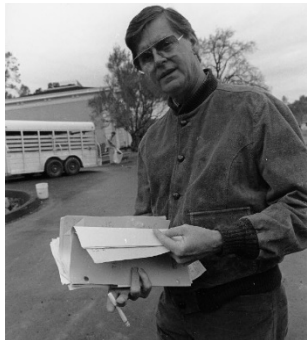
Filming in the Napa and Sonoma Valleys at the beginning of each season was a hallmark of the show. Did you have the opportunity to go on distant location for filming? If so, how did you like filming there, and did you revisit the Wine Country after the show had run its course?

Filming in the Napa and Sonoma Valleys was done in the beginning of each season. Mainly to film the exterior beauty scenes. Scenes that could not be done in the Los Angeles area. We all would stay in Napa approximately 3 to 4 months. Started with prep and ended with tear-down as if we were never there. There was a bit of peace and calm. Pace was slower. There is a "wine tour" that one can take. It is a "train" on tracks that goes up the valley and stops at many wineries — seems like fun.

Is there a specific set design or other artwork that stands out in your memory — whether it be positive or negative aspects?

Set design is based on the requirements of the script to blend into the story, as long as the designed set or sets blend into the story.

The creator of *Falcon Crest*, Earl Hamner, rested his duties as executive producer at the end of season 5. During the following season 6, he remained as creative consultant; after that, his duties on the show were ended. Do you think Earl's absence changed the dynamics of the show? If so, in what way?



Without question, Earl was the glue that kept everything together. He cared. (Those that took over, to them it was just a job.)

Earl Hamner on the set of *The Vintage Years* at Spring Mountain in 1981. The *Bottling Building* is visible in the background.

Are you still in contact with anyone from the cast and crew?

I have made it a point not to get too personal with cast and crew after work. However, I did attend the cast party or wrap party. I would arrive early and leave early.

Who were your favorite cast, staff, and crew members to work with?

Jane was always approachable and always eager to speak with almost anyone, always pleasant. The same goes for most of the permanent cast. My crew — transportation, carpenters, paint crew, laborers, etc. — worked like a well-oiled machine.



A 1981 studio portrait of Jane Wyman.

What was your most memorable scene?

Too many to count.



Gina Lollobrigida as
Francesca Gioberti. **And yes,**



Jane Wyman as
Angela Gioberti Channing.

What was it like to work with Jane Wyman?

Jane was very much in control, but approachable at any time. A few funny things happened. Lana Turner was on the set (always late). Jane said to her: "Lana, I am a bit older than you and I am on time every day when I work. I am sure you can do the same." On a similar note, Gina Lollobrigida had a rôle. She flew in from Italy with her complete "fancy" wardrobe. Jane told her, "Gina, we have a wardrobe mistress who will dress you in the appropriate fashion, color, and style for the scenes." (She brought approximately 20 feet of clothing.) Jane could hold her own. And yes, she was in control, pleasantly. My wife and then 12-year-old daughter came to the set one day, and my daughter had a black and white photo of Jane from the show to sign. When Jane took it from her and looked at it, she said, "Oh honey, this one will not do," and tore it in half right in front of my daughter, who looked like she was going to burst into tears on the spot. My wife and I looked shocked, but were not surprised. Jane had that kind of spirit that was always one step ahead of you. She sat down in her director's chair and took another photo out of the pouch on the side (where she kept scripts and notes and things). Turning it toward my daughter with that warm smile of hers she asked, "Will this one do better?" My daughter smiled back and nodded. Jane autographed that one for her, handed it to her with a smile, and made her day.

Why did you leave after season 7?

Why did I leave? At the end of season seven there was another writers' strike. Most all filming was shut down. No scripts, no filming. I found a position at an engineering firm until the strike was over. I was called by *Universal* to work on the *Universal Japan Project*. I was in the middle of the project and couldn't leave.

After you left, the production design took a change for the worse. The 1988-89 season suddenly went back to visuals that were almost reminiscent of the 1970's in style. The final season (1989-90) was an even more drastic change. Did you watch the show after you left, and how did you feel about these changes?

Earl Hamner was no longer there. Too many changes with crews. The "feel" was gone. The camaraderie was gone.

We have a couple of floor plans of the sets, but we are particularly looking for the season 1 floor plan of the *Falcon Crest Victorian Mansion* as well as the original upstairs hall and Emma's rooftop studio from season 1 and early season 2. We are also looking for the original *Gioberti House* master bedroom and guest bedroom floor plans. Those would be very helpful for our analysis of the set construction in contrast with the real *Villa Miravalle* at *Spring Mountain Vineyards* and *Stags' Leap Manor* respectively. Do you happen to have copies of those plans and elevation drawings you might be able to scan?

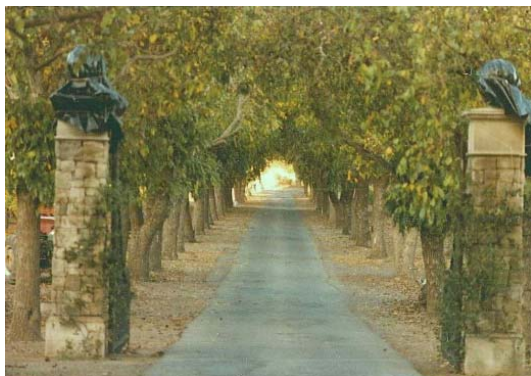
All plans of the *Falcon Crest Mansion* and other drawings remained in the Lorimar Art Department, which is no more.

Do you have any photos of the set or any other production documents you might want to share with us, such as shooting schedules, call sheets, production reports, production cost overviews, art department breakdowns or anything else? We'd be delighted about basically anything that helps us in our research about the history, development and production of the show.

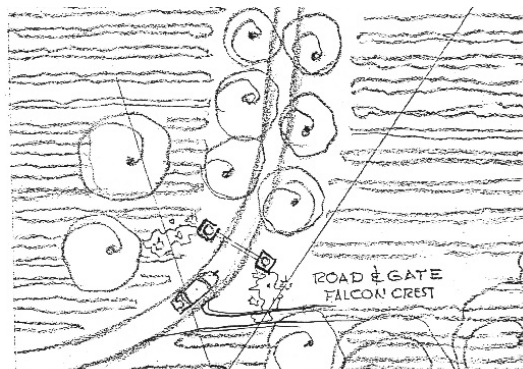
I am continuing to look for anything relating to *Falcon Crest*. However, we have moved, and I have many boxes to look through still.

Two of the most iconic parts of set construction were the gate to *Falcon Crest*, installed on the tree-lined driveway to *Stags' Leap Winery* in the Napa Valley, and a fake stained-glass window resembling the style of the windows in Angela's *Victorian Mansion*; that window appeared in every other hallway set of the *Mansion*. Do you have any photos of these items, and can you tell us more about the design and construction of these parts?

The gates were used periodically. I have not a single photo or drawing of them. I know we replaced the front door at *Stags' Leap* (which was actually the side door entrance). Archie Bacon was the first art director on the production. He has since passed away several years ago.



A rare set photo of the prop gate to *Falcon Crest* and the *Gioberti Estate* prepared for season 1.



An extract of a season 1 art department sketch for the *Falcon Crest Main Driveway*.

Can you talk a little bit about the false gable and back side of the mansion that was built for the scenes where the house was burned down in the fifth season? How did you keep the fire, though controlled, from spreading to, and damaging the actual *Mansion*?

The addition to the rear of *Falcon Crest* was redesigned, built, painted, and dressed to match the existing mansion. Greens (trees and shrubbery) added. A fire-retardant paint was used to cover the entire structure. Fire bars were set in place. Propane bottles were used to control the height and the amount of flame. The added structure to the rear of the mansion was not attached to the main house. It was separated by a clearance of about two feet. It also had plaster board sheathing on the rear wall (both sides) for added protection to the main house and surrounding areas. Metal scaffolding was used for the skeletal structure. Interior walls were also sheathed with drywall. Flame retardant was used on the entire structure including the roof. The *Napa Fire Department* was on hand and on the ready. No problems, no damage.



A western view of the faux gable during construction.



A closer look from the south reveals the distance between the real house and the art department's construction behind the palm tree.

Can you tell fans about the way you approached your work on *Falcon Crest*? Did you have leeway in terms of deciding where certain set decorations would be placed, changed, removed, etc.?

There were production meetings for each script where all department heads would meet and go through the script page by page. Any questions, problems, or concerns were solved prior to filming. Special effects, props, etc.

I know you came to the show in the second season, but in the first episode a pocket watch is given to Robert Foxworth by Jane Wyman as a family heirloom. Do you know if that pocket watch exists today?



The pocket watch that was given to Robert Foxworth by Jane Wyman was a prop. At the end of the day's filming, it would be given to the property master or their assistant until it was to be used again.

Chase's legacy: A pocket watch with the falcon coat of arms.

When a scene called for special effects, squibs, explosions, fires, etc., what types of precautions were used to keep the actors themselves from getting hurt? Did any actors ever suffer injuries, to your knowledge, during your time on the show? If so, can you share some details surrounding them?

We had a very good special effects man who was in control of all effects, e.g. gunshots, squibs, fires, smoke, explosions, etc. etc. To my knowledge we did not have problems with anyone getting hurt or endangered in this area.

When Abby Dalton was written out of the show at the end of the third season with the fire at the spring house, do you know if there was any talk at that time before the finale was even filmed, that Abby Dalton would be returning later in the fourth season? Or did Abby's return come about as the fourth season was being plotted out over the summer hiatus?

Abby was written out for a short time due to possible reasons such as another acting position that conflicted at hiatus, a health issue, personal issues or contractual issues. Once resolved, she was back.

Did actors ever have a say as to what props they wanted to handle? Did any of them have a favorite as far as you know?

The actors usually used the props suggested in the script unless they had a strong objection to a particular prop. I had not noticed any friction in that area.

Were the toy soldiers that David Selby's character used in the show David's own personal contribution to the show? Or did the prop shop make them for the character specifically?

Very interesting question, re: "toy soldiers". October 1981 – January 1982, I had art directing duties for a *Lorimar* television show called *King's Crossing* filmed at *Lorimar* (formerly *MGM*). The script called for "toy soldiers". They needed to be painted. I took them home and my daughter, Rebecca, painted all of them. Since *Lorimar* paid her for painting them, they kept them and put them in their property warehouse for further use. Probably the same.



Richard and his toy soldiers, which he liked to paint by hand himself.

You sent me a photo of an arbor that you had to build for the show on short notice. Can you please share your memories of that time, what it was needed for, and how long it took you to design, build, and have it ready for shooting?

The arbor was designed, built, painted, and dressed in less than 10 hours. I was approached at about noon on a Friday by the U.P.M. (unit production manager) John Perry. He stated, "They are having a helicopter fly over doing lead in shots and various other shots of the *Falcon Crest Mansion*. So, what can you do with this empty area between these two parallel driveways? The existing tree lines are far apart. What can you do?" I said, "We can put an arbor right down the middle." "Great!" John Perry said. "Get to it. Oh, by the way, it shoots first thing tomorrow morning." I sat down by a pile of lumber and started designing (you have that photo). I talked to the construction coordinator, Len Rohm. I explained what we needed. The lumber yard was only eight miles + away. The lumber yard was open and stayed open until we got all the lumber we needed. The frame started near the mansion. While the frame was progressing toward the winery, the painters started to paint (white) of course. By the time the arbor framing was complete, it was $\frac{3}{4}$ painted with greenery going up the verticals and some on top. More plants were placed at the base of the gazebo in the center and seating. Midnight, almost complete. Over 250 feet long. At 6:30 a.m. here comes the helicopter. It made several passes, then gone. They shot what they needed for the main titles.

Aerial views of the *Falcon Crest Victorian Mansion* with and without the arbor and gazebo constructed by John P. Bruce and his team.

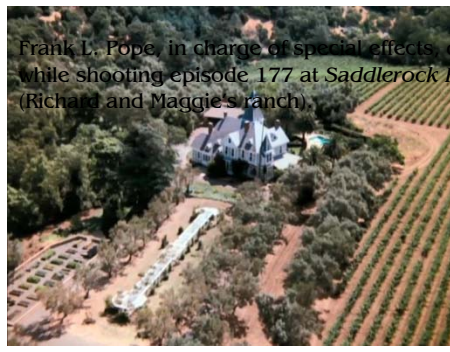


I WAS TOLD FRIDAY AT NOON THAT THEY NEEDED TITLE SHOTS THE NEXT DAY, AND I NEEDED TO DESIGN AN ARBOR, COMPLETE WITH FLOWERS AND VINES, NEEDLESS TO SAY IT WAS READY THE NEXT DAY SIX O'CLOCK PAINTED WHITE, (A BIT WET) AND VINES WITH FLOWERS INCLUDING GRAVEL WALKWAY AND BENCHES

John P. Bruce's draft for the arbor behind the *Victorian Mansion* — on the left the photo without and on the right with his sketch.



John P. Bruce while building the gazebo at *Spring Mountain*. The photo was taken on the driveway between the *Falcon Crest Guest House* (barn) and the *Bottling Building*.



Frank L. Pope, in charge of special effects, during a break while shooting episode 177 at *Saddlerock Ranch* (Richard and Maggie's ranch).



A Polaroid from John's collection featuring the *Falcon Crest Victorian Mansion* (*Spring Mountain's Villa Miravalle*) taken from the *Winery Building's* tower with crew members in the foreground.

Did you ever make a cameo in any of the scenes having to do with party guests, funeral mourners,

wedding reception participants, etc.? If so, how did you like that aspect of the work from the work you did behind the scenes?

Easy question. No. Not in my pay scale (however my daughter was in several background shots).

Will you please tell the fans what you told me about *Spring Mountain* during the days of prohibition when the owner said his property was invincible? I love this story and I think the fans would enjoy your insights to it.

On the *Spring Mountain* property during the prohibition era, the owners at that time were having a party. The owner was bragging that his wine cellar was invincible. Some of his guests went to his wine cellar (which was a cave dug into the side of the mountain), they found some dynamite and blew it up. Never to be opened again. Oops! They built a new cave in the side of a mountain, which is used to this day. One can get to the cave through the bottling plant which is located in front.



The later cave built by *Miravalle's* (*Spring Mountain's*) original owner, Tiburcio Parrott, which is still in use.

Compared to today and the difficulties plaguing sets behind the scenes with cutting corners at the expense and safety of casts and crews, can you describe what the procedures were with safety on the set and how live ammunition, explosives, and other dangerous props were managed?

Safety was always a priority. The effects man [Frank Pope] had his own trailer and semi-truck with all the weapons, explosives, guns, fake ammo, etc. We had a very good crew and respected each other and their duties. Safety always came first.

In 2020, Napa was almost eaten alive by the Glass Fire. The mansion at *Spring Mountain* was 13 feet from complete destruction but was saved in time. Can you tell fans the story of the wildfire that was raging at the time *Falcon Crest* was in production? You indicated some of the cast and crew went up to help put it out. Can you elaborate on that and share the names of those you remember having a hand in the effort to save property and lives at that time?

While we were filming *Falcon Crest* there was a fire in Napa above Silverado Trail Road, which is on the other side of the valley where the *Falcon Crest* Mansion [*Spring Mountain*] is located, but on the side where the *Gioberti House* [*Stags' Leap*] was located (the stone house). The *Gioberti House* was not in danger. Robert Foxworth and some of the crew did go to help put out the fire. Lots of burned brush, but no loss of homes or wineries.

What are your current projects?

I have officially retired after over 50 years in the industry. I have been presented with a 50-year pin, also a gold card with all privileges and benefits (very rare for



Napa Valley in the fall 2020:

The Boyson and Glass Fires destroyed vast parts of the world-famous wine growing region. The historic *Villa Miravalle* at *Spring Mountain* was saved the very last second — compare the charred palm trees in front of the house in the photo on the left. The photo on the right demonstrates how close the fire was to the *Winery Building*.

the industry). First to receive a *Lifetime Achievement Award*. To this day I have lots and lots of “Honey Do” chores. I do yardwork and a hobby (building and flying sailplanes — no noise).

P.S. I am still looking for more items. Hang in there!

Thank you so much for sharing your memories with me, John. I and the rest of the *Falcon Crest Fan Club* administrators appreciate it very much.