



DENNIS MONG/SHOWTIME

Filming *American Rust*

Pittsburgh locations lend steely authenticity to new murder mystery series

by Robert Rorke

WHILE CREATING THE FICTIONAL SMALL TOWN of Buell, Pa., for his new series *American Rust*, Dan Futterman was spoiled for choice when he came to Pittsburgh.

“You get this incredible variety in this small area,” he says.

Futterman, the executive producer of the Showtime series, made use of several sites in the city and some neighboring suburbs, including Ambridge, McKeesport, Monessen and Rankin, to film the murder mystery drama. He then stitched those scenes with others filmed

on the soundstages at the 31st Street Studios in Pittsburgh.

Scenes include an abandoned steel mill, a former grand home fallen into disrepair, a lonely train track and even a brightly lit, fully operational bowling alley. As the story unfolds, a sobering reality coexists with the natural beauty of the region’s rivers and offers a portrait of a place passed over by time and the people who hope for something better.



Allegheny and Washington counties

“Everywhere we pointed the camera, there was something to look at,” says Jeff Daniels, who stars as Del Harris, Buell’s police

On the set of *American Rust*, David Alvarez, who plays the character Isaac English, runs alongside a moving train. The series is based in a fictional Pennsylvania town.

chief. “Whether it was beautiful or ugly—the rivers, the bridges, the towns that had been left behind—you don’t have to build them. They’re there. They’re still there.”

The Perfect Crime Scene

THE SERIES PREMIERE BEGINS with the murder of an ex-cop at an old steel mill. For Futterman, the staggering dimensions

Round Up



In the series, Chief of Police Dell Harris, played by Jeff Daniels, talks with Grace Poe, played by Maura Tierney.

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of the Carrie Blast Furnaces in Rankin made for a perfect crime scene.

“You couldn’t build it, and you couldn’t think of it,” he says. “Those incredible furnaces that are just 40 feet high.”

Now a functioning art and event space called Rivers of Steel, the Carrie Furnaces are open to the skies, another feature that struck Futterman.

“It’s dripping sometimes, and it felt like the right spot for this [murder] to happen,” he says.

Futterman scouted locations for the series with John Adkins, a Pittsburgh-based locations manager who worked on the 2015 film *Foxcatcher*, which was also set in Pennsylvania. (Futterman co-wrote the screenplay with E. Max Frye.) What the city had to offer in terms of variety

and proximity set it apart from more widely used locations in Los Angeles and New York.

“All of the places we filmed at are within a half-hour of each other,” says Futterman, who also writes for *American Rust*. “You go to L.A., and you cannot get anything within two hours of each other. New York as well. You have the city, but you’re not going to get up to the Hudson Valley.”

He started building his TV town with two bars.

“We said, ‘Let’s have the Main Street bar, where Harris goes to have a drink with his friend Jackson, and then Rylan’s would be this wholly other kind of bar. One is like the older guys’ bar. The kids go to Rylan’s Tavern because he doesn’t care if they don’t have ID.’”

Exteriors for the Main Street bar were filmed in Monessen while the interiors were shot at Heidi’s in Rankin. The exterior of Rylan’s was built under the steel girders of an expressway in Rankin, a set re-created by production designer Lester Cohen in Pittsburgh’s 31st Street Studios.

Hot Properties

WHEN MAKING MOVIES AND television, it is not unusual for exteriors and interiors to be filmed in completely different spots. Take the dressmaking factory where Grace Poe, one of the characters (played by Maura Tierney) in *American Rust*, works.

“The exterior was in Donora, and the interior was in Pittsburgh in the Allegheny West part of town,” Futterman says. “We found a gorgeous loft-like space [in

Jeff Daniels, who stars in the series as Chief of Police Del Harris, stands among items at the mill in the show. Shots of a location are not always the same for the interior and exterior of featured places. For example, Grace Poe's dressmaking factory interior shots (lower right) were filmed in the Allegheny West part of Pittsburgh at an old factory that had previously housed (at different times) a printmaking and a tractor factory, and the exterior locations were shot in Donora, Washington County.

what was originally a tractor factory], and then all of these machines and cutters and everything were brought in by a production designer.”

One of the few splashes of color in the series is Grace's pink trailer. The show built both her home and a cabin for Harris in the green space of a former Westinghouse campus called Churchill. Grace's trailer was burned to the ground in one episode, but Harris's cabin still stands. (Amazon is in negotiations to purchase the property and turn it into a distribution center.)

Series set in Pennsylvania are hot properties on TV right now, but Futterman resists comparisons between his show and HBO's *Mare of Easttown*, which was filmed in Chester and Delaware counties and recently garnered 16 Emmy nominations and four wins. In fact, he did not want to watch *Mare* while *Rust* was in production.

“*Mare* and *Rust* are from different sides of the state,” he says. “As Harris says to somebody on the show, we are a lot closer to West Virginia than we are to Pittsburgh.”

Welcomed by Locals

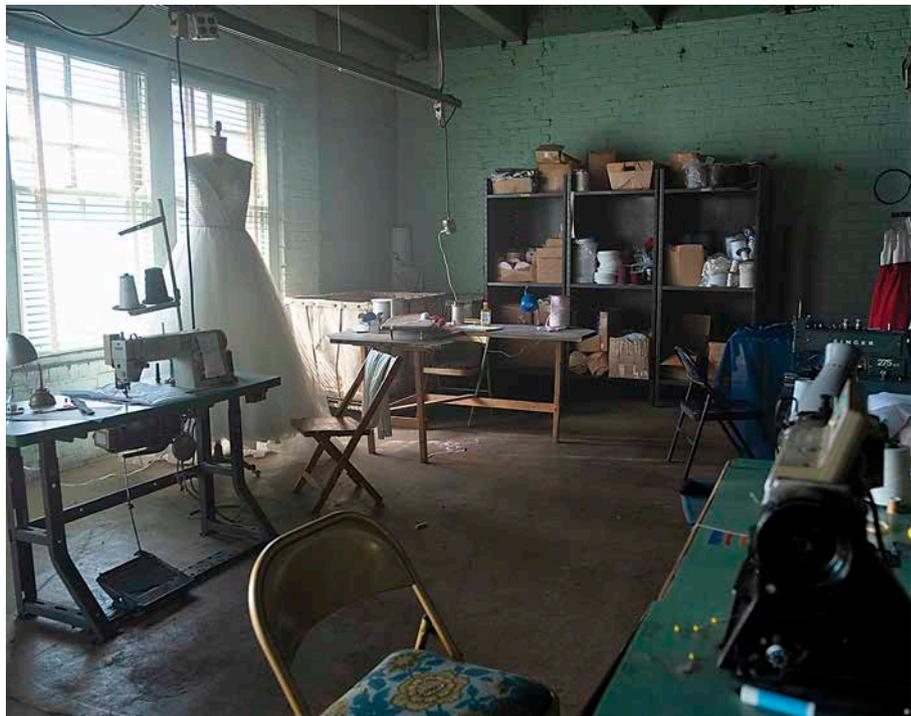
PRODUCTION ON *AMERICAN RUST*, which began in March of 2020, was halted for reasons related to the pandemic. As a result, some locations were scouted twice. Futterman was surprised by the second choices, which were generally an improvement over the first round. He was also cheered by the reception that the cast and crew received from the locals.

The Glassport Lanes in Glassport, Allegheny County, closed for three days while production filmed there. Owner Anthony Molinaro played a pivotal role during filming at his bowling alley.

“I didn't know I was going to be a point



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person for the extras,” he says.

Extra actors were tested for Covid-19 before the actual shoot, which lasted from 4 p.m. to 2 a.m. Some locals wanted to be extras because of their childhood memories of the bowling alley.

Molinaro says he was busy throughout the entire shoot. The producers didn't want advertising on the scoreboards and also asked for certain scores. Some scenes took 25 takes.

“I was stressed. I probably should have had a technical person there for the score-

boards,” Molinaro says. “It was hectic, but all worth it. And that Maura Tierney couldn't have been nicer. So thoughtful.”

Should *American Rust* receive a second season, Futterman looks forward to returning to Pittsburgh to work with the same cast and crew.

“Pittsburgh is becoming a little bit of a center for filming for very good reason,” he says. “It's got a great set of crew members to support that. It has great places to shoot.”

—Robert Rorke writes from Brooklyn, N.Y.