

## Laura Benson – 2008 Alumni

My name is Laura Benson (née Livingstone), I am a former SHS student who finished school in 2008, I can't quite believe that's 14 years ago... I am now a Chargehand Painter for the Construction Departments within the Film and TV industry.

Whilst at Spalding High my A Levels were Biology (just for AS), Food Technology, English Literature and Art.

I always loved art and painting in particular but wasn't sure what job opportunities were out there. When I finished my A Levels, I went on to do a 1 year Foundation Diploma in Art at Stamford College. This was great as the course offered the chance to trial lots of different aspects of creative practices from Photography, Graphics, Print Making, Film Production, Textiles, Painting and many others. After trying the variety of practices on offer I was still drawn back to painting.

After the Foundation Course, I went on to University and studied a 3 year BA Hons Theatre Design Degree at Nottingham Trent University. Again, so as to not pigeon hole myself I picked this course as it offered lots of different practices from puppetry, costume, lighting, sound and scenic painting to name a few. This allowed me to build on my painting abilities but also gain other skills that I could possibly utilise in the future. During and after graduating my course in 2012 I gained experience working for local theatre and scenic construction companies. I would like to say that even though I greatly enjoyed and benefitted from going to University, for anyone unsure if it is the right path for them, the alternatives of an apprenticeship or work experience can be equally, if not more valuable.

I came into the world of Film and TV around 2013. After numerous emails and 'cold calls' - a necessary evil that I don't believe anyone enjoys at the start of their career - my first film industry work experience was the glamorous task of painting a piece of wood to match in with an existing prop cheeseboard on the film *The Riot Club*, which was being filmed at Pinewood Studios. There I met other painters and art department crew and in doing so built up my industry contacts. From these early contacts I gained work on productions such as *Pride, Pudsey: The Movie, Man Up, Nativity 3: Dude Wheres My Donkey* and *The Honourable Woman*. Throughout this time I sign wrote shop fronts in central London, painted inside the Tate and Lyle buildings next to Tower Bridge and even painted a copied section of the Empire Sate building in Coventry. I then managed to get the contact for a Head of Department painter and after further 'cold calls' I eventually got my break working for him as a trainee painter 2014. I was a trainee and then an improver for a couple of years working on productions such as *And Then There Were None, Criminal, Tulip Fever, Bridget Jones' Baby* and *Stratton*. I got to take my mum to the cast and crew screening of *Bridget Jones' Baby* in Leicester Square, so actually got to watch *Bridget Jones* with *Bridget Jones* herself René Zellweger which was a fantastic thing to be able to do. After approximately a further 3 years I completed my training and became a full Construction Painter working on productions such as *Paddington 2, The Mercy, Overlord, The Bodyguard, Yesterday, Aladdin, The Hustle, Downton Abbey* and *Devs*. In 2019, I was promoted to my current position of Chargehand Painter. This position involves running my own sets, locations and painting team. I have fulfilled this role on productions such as *Cruella*, the upcoming *Indiana Jones* film and my current production, Season 2 of *Lord of the Rings - The Rings of Power*.

My future plans are to continue building my skills as a Chargehand and then progress to Supervising Painter and ultimately Head of Department, often abbreviated as HOD. HODs are in charge of creating the paint finishes for all of the sets in line with the Production Designer's vision alongside budgeting, crewing and managing the entire paint crew.

The advice I would give to anyone studying any of the arts but are unsure about what career paths are available to them, I would say there are a fantastic array of creative jobs out there. The Film and TV industry being a great example, they are just not as widely advertised as many other occupations. Don't worry or put too much pressure on yourself, pick a course (if that's what you want to do) that gives you options. Whatever you choose just make sure you enjoy it. You want to

be in a job in the future that you don't mind getting out of bed for at 5am! Being punctual, willing to learn and polite will get you through most doors, beyond that, make and look after your work connections and try to bring a smile to whatever team you find yourself working with.