

# Virtual Soapbox



## Seven Weeks in a Professional FX Makeup Studio Mette Hedin\*

*A costuming and makeup wizard spent seven weeks in an intense course at a world-famous FX makeup studio, and found that the important lessons she learned were more about the people she worked with than the techniques she learned.*

Last year I took time off from work to take a dream vacation. I had been planning it for over a year. This didn't, as you might suspect, involve living in the lap of luxury, lounging by the pool in tropical climes or



Exterior view of Neill Gorton Studios in an old factory building.

even visiting spectacular views. Instead I headed to England to stay in a B&B in a sleepy little village to work incredibly hard and practically fall over from exhaustion as I arrived back at my room every night.

I had stealthily planned my trip to a seven-week course at the [Neill Gorton Prosthetics Studio](#) for well over a year, to go and learn about special FX makeup from the pros. The course offers a very immersive crash course in up-to-date techniques and materials in a small group (no more than six students per course). Getting into the course requires getting approved based on photos of past work, and a lot of patience, as courses are normally filled up a year in advance.

It was with not a little trepidation that I finally set out, as I was about to spend a significant amount of time with six complete strangers, my five fellow course mates and my teacher, in a workspace entirely unfamiliar to me. I am used to working in a very constrained space, namely my kitchen floor and paltry back



Our row of work stations.

yard, so having a proper studio to work in was going to be a major part of the experience.

The space, housed in an old factory building, was much bigger than I had anticipated and it quickly became clear that having a proper work environment was a luxury that would be far too easy to get used to.

We each got to take possession of our own work bench and make-up table where we could keep our in-progress work and the set of complimentary tools included in the course. These work stations were lined up in a row in a larger studio that also had ample



The often overcrowded common worktable.

daylight. In addition to the above mentioned facilities in the studio, we had a whole separate mold room with ample exhaust ventilation, both in small booths and overhead. That meant we could start a process late in the evening and return the next morning to look at the results without having to worry about it getting ruined from rain or cold.



Sculpting at my workstation.

floor space, a large common work table as well as other necessary facilities, such as a sink, a washing machine, and a television for watching cinematic reference materials (although most lunch breaks it enabled us to snicker at the latest episode of "Face Off").

Now, special effects makeup involves a lot of hazardous materials, and when I have to play with the big nasty chemicals at home, I have to do so outdoors, which means I am limited by weather and



Making a mess in the mold room.

trash cans and set aside finished molds that gradually filled up the room.

Getting your work done frequently involved an elaborate ballet, navigating yourself and your projects around what everyone else was up to, and the tool you put aside just a minute ago may easily have been picked up by someone else, whether for use on their project or due to an attempt to clean up to clear some space.



Getting ready to fiberglass in the mold room.

If you imagine the facilities from my description, you may picture yourself working quietly and efficiently in a large airy space, but in fact it also teaches coordination and cooperation. While the building seemed vast and endless at week one, by week seven, we were carefully navigating between various in-progress projects, overfilled



Spreading over to the common work table from my cluttered bench.



My model in full makeup – the end result of seven weeks of hard work!

This may sound frustrating if you, like me, are used to working on your own and having control of your environment but in the end this may have been the most valuable resource on the course. The other people in that room provided me with not only amazing company during the long exhausting days but also with as much feedback as a costumer can ever handle as well as an extra set of hands when really needed.

In the end, my fellow course participants provided a much fuller experience than the sum of the knowledge imparted by the course itself. My comrades in arts were a way to bounce ideas, a means to greater insights and their work was a source of inspiration. By working alongside me they gave me a reason to push myself further than I thought possible and the experience would have been so much poorer without them. In the end it wasn't so much the studio but the people it housed that was the real workspace of my dreams.

*Mette Hedin is a sci-fi and fantasy costumer who specializes in recreations of things that don't exist in the real world. She loves learning new techniques and materials, and is always looking to expand her costuming horizons. Visit her [Costuming Fools](#) web site.*



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