



# PRODUCTION NOTE

Serge Lalou and Sophie Cabon (Les Films d'Ici Méditerranée), Isabelle Truc (Iota Production) & Jordi B. Oliva (Imagic Telecom)

# AN “ECOLOGICAL WESTERN” ABOUT OUR RELATIONSHIP TO THE LIVING WORLD

*La Baleine* is an unprecedented artistic adventure. It is as much a cinematic epic as it is a critical examination of human belonging within the vastness of the living world. This is a film that challenges our conception of cinema. Corbac, our protagonist, is an unmistakable presence that dominates the screen. He is the archetype of the anti-hero. The story, like his quest, is anything but ordinary. His seemingly insane endeavor brings us back to what we truly are: a species inhabiting a planet populated by other species, with whom we have cultivated an interdependency and common legacy for millennia. Corbac - through dedicating his final days to rescuing and preserving the skeleton of a stranded whale, reminds us of what is essential and beautiful. Ironically, through his gesture, he turns towards life rather than death.

The story explores several social issues, their impact extending far beyond the film's geographical boundaries in the Occitania and Mediterranean:

**THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS** : *La Baleine* unfolds in the 1980s, a pivotal decade during which the world slowly became aware of the environmental calamities inflicted upon the planet. The storm that rages over the village seems to foreshadow that natural disasters are no longer exceptional. On the beach, the body of the whale stranded amidst plastic debris and corroded household appliances reminds us of our negligence towards pollution forty years ago, and the ever-growing impact of pollution today. Corbac sees in the whale a marvel bestowed by the sea, and understands this is anything but ordinary. In recent years, scientists have noticed an increase in cetacean strandings linked to human activity. In New Zealand and Australia, around 300 cetaceans are stranded each year, with a record of 700 in 2017. Approximately 3-10 whales are beached each year in France, and another 10-40 die within the Pelagos sanctuary due to fishing nets or collision with vessels - a number the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) expects to increase. Humans, too, are victims in this process. The recent scorching heat of the summer of 2023 inflamed millions of hectares of forests worldwide. *La Baleine* is a reminder, in the face of mass ecological crisis and species extinction, to revive a working and interdependent relationship with nature.

**AGRICULTURAL OVEREXPLOITATION** : In the cellar of the village cooperative, harvesting machines whir at full capacity, as conveyor belts process thousands of grapes in a setting reminiscent of Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*. Here, in the heart of the countryside, we witness a portrait of viticulture at the peak of its industrialization.

Simply put, in the 1980s, the province of Languedoc was a wine factory. Quantity took precedence over quality, and all methods were used to increase yield. In the frenzy of the cooperative cellar, the dark and intense purple of grapes crushed by machines floods the image in a bloody aesthetic revisited throughout the film. The work is exhausting and mind-numbing. Through this setting, the director underlines the inevitable ecological and health disasters of such exploitation. This reflects contemporary concerns of agricultural overexploitation and the rapid depletion of natural resources. Similarly, Corbac is afflicted throughout by an unknown disease, seemingly as a result of his work. Although in the 1980s, the awareness of diseases caused by pesticides and phytosanitary products was practically nonexistent, Corbac senses it within. *La Baleine* is dotted with the wearied faces of village peasants to highlight the scars of intensive farming.

**RURAL POVERTY** : Corbac lives as a recluse in a dilapidated farmhouse, surrounded by abandoned vineyards. The other villagers see him as an eccentric misanthrope who has «let himself go» after his wife's death and estrangement from his daughter. For the viewers, privy to his interior world, he is much more complex. We know that the abandonment of his vineyards is a political gesture - a refusal of the intensive production of the cooperative, which dictates that he must exploit his land with pesticides. By rejecting the norms of the market, Corbac sinks into poverty. Mathilde, his daughter, chooses to leave - because the village, apart from the cooperative experiencing its dying years of prosperity, offers no economic prospects. She thus protects herself from being swallowed by her father's sadness. Such rural poverty is not a thing of the past - it persists to this day in France and across the world. These areas continue to be sunk into poverty as the youth move elsewhere, a phenomenon we have collectively witnessed since the beginning of the industrial revolution.

The poetic simplicity of *La Baleine* captivated us upon our first reading of the script, yet we were ultimately convinced to produce the film due to its political positioning. By harnessing the aesthetic of the Western, *La Baleine* provocatively explores our social and environmental reality all while retaining an underlying adventure narrative. This is a unique production challenge, and the reason why we assembled a team of accomplished European producers who are equally committed to the project. From the epic nature of its production, through to a story that reimagines the way we portray the world, to the inherent challenges of financing such a film - our production adventure will be rich.

# AN ECOLOGICAL WESTERN

At first glance, *La Baleine* seems out of a fairy tale. Yet, it's rare to find such a force of reality in fiction: how does this story, being so grounded, manage to evoke the wondrous imagination of fantasy? Sylvère Petit's gaze, meticulously focused on framing the living beings around him, manages to place us into the heart of a new genre, the "Ecological Western".

*La Baleine* demands a precise visual and aesthetic treatment:

## **A BOLD MISE EN SCÈNE REFLECTING THE WORLD'S BIODIVERSITY:**

On screen, the director invites us into an exploration of **the infinitely large to the infinitely small**. From the stranded whale, the largest marine mammal, to the planktonic dreams of the protagonist, we navigate a universe that is both very realistic and poetic.

**INTERSPECIFIC NARRATION** : Committed to a "cinema of the living", **the director's gaze shares the screen between humans and other living beings**. This is why Couille-Molle, the dog, Blanche, the barn owl, or Lazare, the crow, are each given screen time and individual trajectories. By presenting all living beings without hierarchy, we break with the codified representation of animals in cinema.

**AN UNORTHODOX USE OF WESTERN AESTHETIC:** The vineyards of southern France would stereotypically evoke the romantic cinema of Marcel Pagnol, Robert Guédiguian, or caricatural representations in American cinema (*Catch Me If You Can* by Steven Spielberg, *Magic in the Moonlight* by Woody Allen, etc.). Conversely, Sylvère Petit chooses to construct an oppressive and sombre reality through a dark juxtaposition between his protagonist and the rest of the village. Through expansive shots, he creates space for landscapes and characters alike. As such, the Western offers us a frame of aesthetic reference.

**A FILM BORDERING ON GENRE FILM :** *La Baleine* draws its inspiration from the genre film, but does not confine itself to it. Although it evokes the Western, the film allows itself to detour into the world of comedy, fantasy as well as the realism of peasant cinema.

As independent European producers, we believe that now is a fertile time to make such a film. It is undeniable that recent years have been marked by the search for new narratives. Anti-heroes like those in Thomas Vinterberg's *Drunk* or Gilles Lellouche's *Sink* or *Swim draw* audiences to theaters. Animals now take the place of human protagonists i.e in Jeremy Skolimowski's *EO*. Netflix created excitement with *My Octopus Teacher*, a documentary that traces the friendship between an octopus and a diver. Similarly, auteur films with expansive naturalistic cinematography like Hlynur Pálmason's *Godland* or Felipe Galvez's *The Settlers* defied expectations upon their release. We also see films with a dystopian undercurrent, such as Thomas Cailley's *Le Règne Animal*. encouraging us to rethink our relationship with the living world.

# CINEMATOGRAPHY & VISUAL AESTHETIC

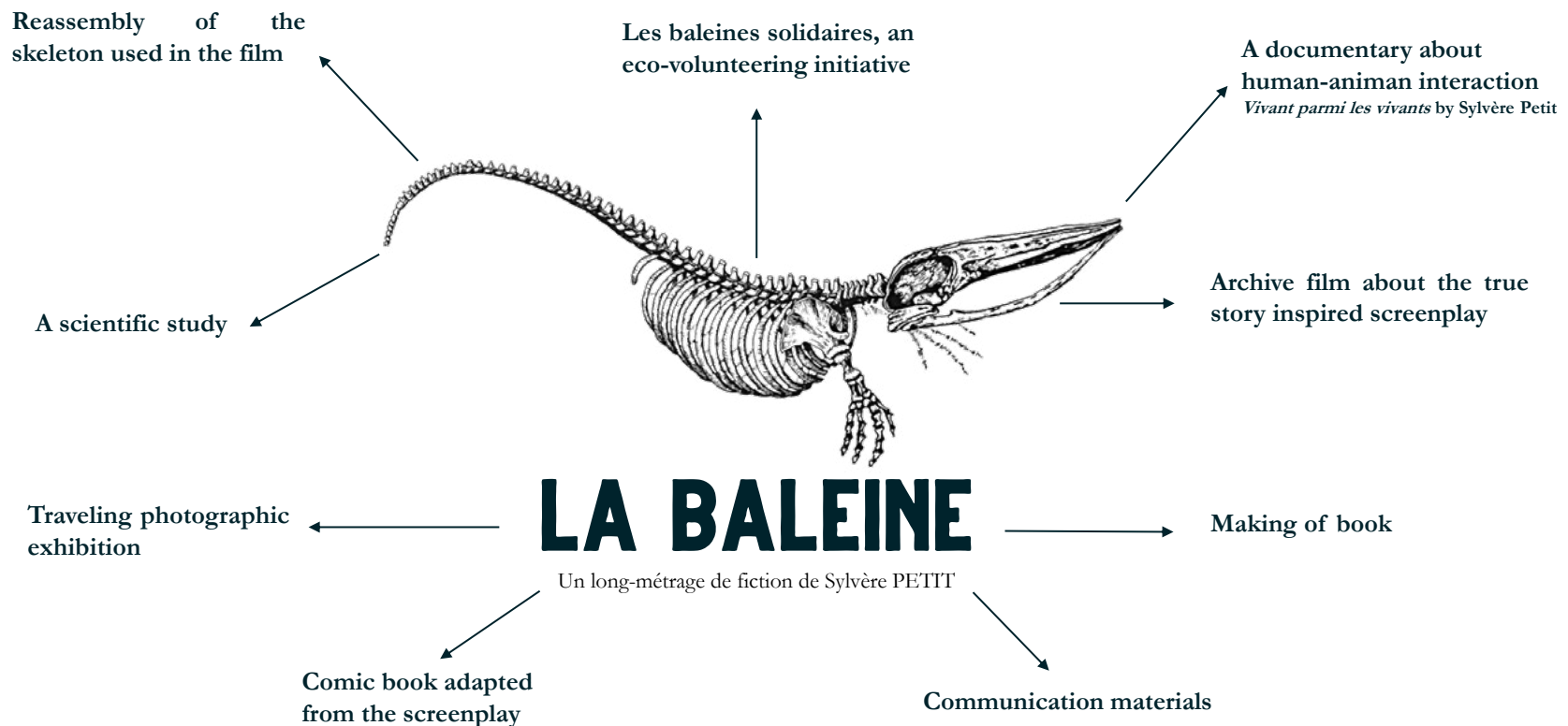
*La Baleine* opens with a dark tone, with the loneliness and sadness of the protagonist engulfing us. During the first two-thirds of the film, the film sinks into this insidious darkness while giving the audience privileged access to Corbac, creating an affective bond. Then, spurred by the optimism of Mathilde, the cinematography brightens, the adventure becomes collective, and the film ends on a cheerful note. In an effort to escape the strict bounds of genre, Petit weaves comedic interludes through *La Baleine's* somberness. This contrast is created through lively characters like Toinou and sequences with the village children who, curious and without preconception, find themselves joyfully helping Corbac as he cuts apart the giant of the seas. The plot evokes a fairytale, centering on animals steeped in mythical allusion; the whale, the barn owl (Blanche) and the watchful black crow (Lazare). This imports a poeticism to the story; one that is reinforced by the dreamlike sequences of microorganisms. Underlying this is a firm commitment to an authentic representation of Occitania in the 1980s. Whether it's the atmosphere in the village, the storm, fox hunts, or the work in the cooperative cellar, *La Baleine's* world building is incredibly precise. This is why *La Baleine* is an ecological western as much as it is a tale of adventure, a fairytale, or a realist exploration of peasant life and the living world.



Inspired by the cinematography of J. Campion's *The Piano Lesson* and the western touch of Alan Parker's *Mississippi Burning*, we oscillate between meditations on the inner states of our characters and wide shots of the landscapes they inhabit. The contrast between hierarchical Judeo-Christian society and the uncontrolled nature it seeks to dominate is explored in a film like Martin Scorsese's *Silence*. Other references include Verena Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor's *Leviathan*, Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo*, Robert Eggers' *The Lighthouse* and the reimagined treatment of the western genre in Rodrigo Sorogoyen's *As Bestas*.

# TARGET AUDIENCES, IMPACT CAMPAIGN AND FESTIVAL PLAN

To support the film's distribution and impact campaign, we will also create a series of cultural and multidisciplinary pieces entitled "La Constellation de La Baleine", which include:



These will be financed and created separately to the film with our academic and creative partners. We have experience with this approach at Les Films d'Ici Méditerranée, through the release of our first animated feature: *Josep* by Aurel (European Film Awards for Best Animated Film, 2020, César for Best Animated Film 2021, Louis Delluc Prize for Best First Film, 2020, in official selection at the Cannes Film Festival, 2020, etc.). For *Josep*, we created a similar set of accompanying material, which helped the film achieve wide distribution in France and elsewhere. In Spain, the comic book was adapted into Catalan. An educational dossier was designed with our cultural partner and co-producer, The Memorial of the Rivesaltes Camp. Four years after its release, *Josep* continues to travel. In October 2023, it was honored across the Atlantic with several screenings and events organized in New York and Quebec. The Alliance Française of New York screened the film in theaters, and the Maison de l'Occitanie in New York chose to invite Aurel as part of its exhibitions.

**With confirmed support for distribution in France from Jour2Fête, in Belgium from O'Brother, and internationally from The Party Film Sales**, we know that *La Baleine* will reach broad audiences and the niche viewership of auteur films and western enthusiasts alike. However, the release of a first fiction feature film is a long-term adventure, and identifying target audiences to better support its distribution is necessary in an increasingly competitive market.

With the impact campaign, we aim to reach the following audiences:

**SCHOOL AUDIENCES** : Thanks to the support of the [CANOPÉ](#) network, a public operator of the French Ministry of National Education, an educational dossier for *La Baleine* has been developing since September 2023. We are confident that this will be complete by the film's release (2026), and will distribute it via European educational networks. Our networks across the French Institutes, the Alliances Françaises, the AEFÉ (Agency for French Education Abroad), and the Laïque Mission are avenues we will explore for this distribution.

**SCIENTIFIC AUDIENCES & COMMUNITIES** : We have multiple partnerships ideal for reaching scientific communities. The first is with the Observatory of Marine Mammals and Birds, coordinator of the national network of cetacean strandings: [PELAGIS](#). In addition to helping us monitor the stranding of a fin whale during the filming of the movie, PELAGIS is partnering with the film for scientific purposes. The data collected during the autopsy of the whale during filming is intended to be disseminated nationally and internationally. The second partner is the National [Museum of Natural History](#) in Paris. Several teams of researchers will be present during the filming of *La Baleine*. Thanks to the stranded specimen, they will have privileged access to the autopsy of the cetacean. These researchers will analyze the process of cutting, preparation, and reassembly of the skeleton of the whale. This research will lead to a concurrent lecture series scheduled alongside the release of the film.

**ECO-VOLUNTEERS** : By opening our process to eco-volunteers, we believe the film will actively engage with audiences sensitive to the ecological crisis. For example, during the filming of the cutting of the real stranded whale over 5 days, these eco-volunteers will conduct on-site awareness-raising activities aimed at highlighting the poor health of our oceans and the threats to cetacean species. We aim to recruit fifteen such eco-volunteers across Spain and Belgium, the two co-producing countries.

**LOCAL AUDIENCES**: The true story of Jean-Louis and Patricia Fabre, which inspired *La Baleine*, is very popular in the Occitanie Region. With this in mind, we will produce a short documentary of archival footage about the history of the two winemakers who, in 1989, brought the skeleton of a stranded whale to Port-la-Nouvelle at their wine cellar farmhouse. This will be an important support piece for international distribution at the time of the film's release.

**GENERAL PUBLIC** : The skeleton of the common rorqual whale used in the filming will be cleaned, reassembled, and exhibited for free entry at the maritime station of Concarneau (Brittany, France).

Our film will find its place in theaters in France, Spain, Belgium - the three co-producing countries - and elsewhere in Europe and the world. **The film won the 2022 Creation Grant from the GAN Foundation, which has a history of incubating market successes** like *Titane* (2021), *Petit Paysan* (2017) and our very own *Josep*, was widely selected in over twenty international festivals in addition to attracting several hundred thousand viewers in theaters. This is an audacious debut that has all the assets to gain visibility in A-category Festivals (Cannes Film Festival, Toronto International Film Festival, Sundance Film Festival, etc.) as well as in prestigious selections such as the César Awards in France, the Louis Delluc Prize, or the European Film Awards.

# COPRODUCTION & FINANCE PLAN

*La Baleine* is budgeted at **€3.2 million**. First films require a strong investment from each producer, hence we turned to trusted partners. We have existing partnerships with our co-producers Isabelle Truc (IOTA PRODUCTION, Belgium, and Jordi B.Oliva (IMAGIC TELECOM, Spain), the distributors (JOUR2FÊTE, France, and O'BROTHER, Belgium), and the international seller (THE PARTY FILM SALES) to support this film.

With Iota Production, Serge Lalou has already produced two feature-length documentary productions with Les Films d'Ici in Paris: *On est vivant* by Carmen Castillo and *Le vertige des possibles* by Viviane Peremulter. During the Francophone co-production meetings in Luxembourg in 2019, we reconnected with Isabelle Truc, who showed great enthusiasm for the film. The initial reason for this choice of co-production with Belgium is artistic, as Sylvère has always worked on his fiction shorts with Belgian cinematographer Virginie Surdej (*Une famille syrienne* by Philippe Van Leeuw, *Magritte* for Best Image, *Adam* by Maryam Touzani, *Le bleu de castan* by Maryam Touzani, etc.). Finally, given a Catalan lead role (Sergi Lopez), we quickly initiated discussions with Jordi B. Oliva, the incredible co-producer of *Josep* by Aurel. *La Baleine* thus confirms our desire at Les Films d'Ici Méditerranée to create bridges with Catalonia and neighboring Spain. After *Josep* by Aurel and *They Shot the Piano Player* by Fernando Trueba and Javier Mariscal (a quadripartite co-production between Spain, France, the Netherlands, and Portugal), we are firmly establishing a production strategy focused on the international scene. This is necessary to support the debut films of young authors in the Occitanie Region. It is precisely with this aim in mind that we will produce the next fiction film by Aurel, this time with the production company Nakamura, based in Valencia and recently awarded the Goya for Best Documentary.

In France, we have the confirmed support of the National Center for Cinema and Animated Image (CNC), the Occitanie Region, the Montpellier Metropolis, PROCIREP-ANGOA, the GAN Foundation, distributor Jour2Fête, Ciné+, international distributor The Party Film Sales, and SOFICA CINEVENTURE, which has recently given us a favorable opinion on the project. In Belgium, we benefit from the support of the Belgian Film Commission, the Tax Shelter, BeTv, and distributor O'Brother. In Spain, the project has been supported by the Catalan Fund of the ICEC. The remaining partners we aim to bring on board include EURIMAGES, for co-production support, additional SOFICAs in France to establish a pool of necessary private funding for the film, Wallimage in Belgium, as well as TV channels (Movistar, TV3 Catalunya, RTVE, Filmin, etc.) and a distributor (B-Team, etc.) in Spain.

# DIRECTOR AND COPRODUCERS

At Les Films d'Ici Méditerranée, we've been guests in Sylvère Petit's cinematic universe for ten years. In 2014, we produced *Biou*, a six-minute short following a Camargue bull from its pasture to a bullfighting arena. Then, in 2017, we produced *Ani-maux*, a documentary filmed from the perspective of patients in a veterinary clinic, in which human interactions became strange, almost unsettling whispers. A director, beekeeper, and wildlife photographer, Sylvère guides his audiences on a collective adventure. His cinematic worldview seeks to champion humans and animals equally on screen. Sylvère has already directed two fiction shorts - *Les Ventileuses* (2009 - 30') and *Les Assoiffés* (2014 - 24') - which embody this aesthetic, political, and technical approach. This is a disruptive cinema: one that questions our place, interdependent among others, within the living world. Sylvère is deeply inspired by the ecological frameworks of philosophers such as Vinciane Despret and Baptiste Morizot. In late 2024, we will release his feature-length documentary *Vivant Parmi Les Vivants*, co-produced with Arte France and Cinédokké in Switzerland.

Serge Lalou, the founder of Les Films d'Ici Méditerranée, has been an independent producer for nearly forty years, and has an extensive portfolio of over 600 documentaries and feature films in fiction, animation, and documentary. He is renowned in the industry for works such as *Waltz with Bashir* by Ari Folman (2008), which won the César for Best Foreign Film and the Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Film among others. Other works, such as *Michael Kohlhaas* by Arnaud des Pallières (2013) was an Official Selection at Cannes Film Festival and other prestigious festivals. *Fire at Sea* by Gianfranco Rosi (2016) won the Golden Bear at the Berlinale and other accolades. Joining Lalou at Les Films d'Ici Méditerranée is Sophie Cabon, an associate producer closely aligned with Petit's work. Cabon has overseen the production of Sylvère Petit's feature documentary, *Vivant parmi les vivants*, laying the groundwork for this debut fiction feature.



*La Baleine* benefits from an experienced production framework, further strengthened by international co-production. Isabelle Truc, producer at Iota Production, brings twenty-five years of experience in audiovisual and film production. Iota Production has produced over seventy documentary films, many of which have received accolades at international festivals. Examples include *Ma'ohi nui, au cœur de l'océan mon pays* by Annick Ghijzelings, which was selected at numerous international festivals, and *My Name is Clitoris* by Daphné Leblond and Lisa Billuart Monnet, winner of the Magritte for Best Documentary.

Jordi B. OLIVA, with nearly twenty years of experience in content production for cinema and TV, provides essential support in both delegated and executive production. Oliva is heavily involved with the Spanish technical teams that will be present during filming, overseeing areas such as sound, costumes, set design, and makeup.

# SYLVÈRE PETIT, A TALENTED YOUNG DIRECTOR

Sylvère Petit is an emerging filmmaker who has gained significant recognition in the Occitanie region of France. His short fiction films have been screened at numerous festivals both in France and internationally. *Les Ventileuses* was selected for the Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival, the IndieLisboa Festival in Lisbon, the Cinemed International Mediterranean Film Festival in Montpellier, among others.

We are closely following the journey of his latest feature-length documentary, *Vivant Parmi Les Vivants*, through the Category A festival season. With a release scheduled for late 2024 or early 2025, we are awaiting the results of its submissions to festivals such as Cannes (Directors' Fortnight, Official Selection, etc.), Locarno, Venice Film Festival, and IDFA in Amsterdam.

# DIVERSITY, INCLUSIVENESS AND ECO-PRODUCTION

In line with the film's themes, *La Baleine* is a socially conscious debut feature, with diversity, inclusion, and eco-friendly practices at the heart of its production process.

While the film centers on a male protagonist in a predominantly male rural setting of four decades past, it subtly concludes with a feminine influence through characters like Mathilde and Gisèle. Reflecting the cultural diversity of French society, the film embraces its viticultural backdrop and includes characters like Raoul, representing the Maghreb immigration of the 1980s.

In terms of production, inclusivity is emphasized, with key roles held by women, including two executive producers, a first assistant director, a production manager, a director of photography, a production designer, an editor, and a colorist. Moreover, *La Baleine* champions eco-friendly production practices. The production manager will double as an «eco-production manager,» overseeing efforts to minimize the carbon footprint. Measures we'll implement include sourcing local and organic purchases, selecting energy-efficient equipment, prioritizing collective transportation, and raising awareness among department heads.

Specific eco-friendly measures under consideration across various departments:

**CAMERA AND LIGHTING:** Opting for energy-efficient equipment and considering reuse for lighting gear.

**COSTUME, MAKEUP, AND WARDROBE:** Prioritizing cruelty-free and natural cosmetic products, preferring reuse and second-hand costumes.

**DIRECTORIAL:** Limiting paper usage, utilizing digital tools, and scheduling to minimize travel.

**PRODUCTION:** Planning waste management, organizing transportation to reduce car usage, providing bicycles, and installing composting toilets.

**SET DECORATION:** Prioritizing reuse for set elements and minimizing polystyrene usage.