

TCM THE PLOT THICKENS

EPISODE TWO: TARGET HOLLYWOOD

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In 1961, Peter Bogdanovich met Polly Platt. He was 21, living with his parents, and already considered a young genius in the theater world. Polly was 19 and a widow. Her husband, a poet, died in a car accident and she was putting her life back together. She was small and thin, blonde, A little bohemian, a lot of personality.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Was there any, was there magic right away?

PETER BOGDANOVICH: I liked her. And I liked the idea of living with somebody. I hadn't done that before. I asked a couple of people. [laugh] Nobody wanted to do it. So Polly seemed like a good idea

BEN MANKIEWICZ: I'm not sure if this is really how Peter really felt about Polly when they first met, or if this is what happens when memories get tangled with years of resentment. It seems out of character though. Peter's a romantic – his movies are about love and he seems to like *being* in love. But this is the way he remembers it now. Peter was working as an artistic director at a summer theater in upstate New York and he hired Polly to be the costume designer.

PETER BOGDANOVICH: We had started an affair and, And we lived in a little house, um, next to a babbling brook. It was nice. I thought it would be over when we finished the summer but it didn't end that way. We moved into an apartment together. which I really didn't want to do. But I couldn't figure out a way to get out of the situation.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Polly would later say, "Peter brought me film; I brought him life."

Over the next decade, they shared a mission. They loved movies and wanted to make them. But in 1961, they were practically kids. They didn't have many connections in Hollywood and they lived all the way across the country. For most of us, it would have seemed like a pipe dream. But not for Peter, and not with Polly by his side, just as determined.

Peter wanted to be a director. And this is the story of how he made it happen.

[THEME MUSIC]

BEN MANKIEWICZ: I'm Ben Mankiewicz and this is The Plot Thickens, a new podcast from Turner Classic Movies. This is episode two: TARGET: Hollywood

[THEME MUSIC]

BEN MANKIEWICZ: When Peter and Polly got back to the city, they moved into a small apartment not far from his parents. In 1963, they got married. Peter's father didn't like the idea.

PETER BOGDANOVICH: And he said, you are too young to get married. You know what you should do, when you're walking down the street next time, you will see a child in a stroller that being pushed by his mother. That could be your wife.

My father was 20 years older than my mother. And they got along pretty well.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: This is obviously a strange thing for a father to say to his son. Strange doesn't really cut it. It's uncomfortable.

[WEDDING MUSIC]

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Peter's parents didn't come to the wedding. He didn't invite them. A close friend, an actor named George Morforgen, was his best man.

PETER BOGDANOVICH: The justice of the peace, a youngish guy, not young, he was about 35, or something 40. Um, was very casual. Have a seat, what's your name? Peter, Polly, oh yeah, hi George. Uh-huh, very casual. But when he started the speech he suddenly became Dylan Thomas or like he was doing Shakespeare. Do you Polly, Peter. He was really, I'm not kidding, unbelievable. It was so awful that I almost couldn't, we started laughing. And I had to restrain myself not to laugh. And George, who was standing right behind me, goes, [snort] just once. And we got through it. And I do, I do. We ran out the door, 'cause we were screaming with laughter. We ran down the circular staircase, and the three of us were laughing, like insanity. It was so funny. And that's what I remember about the wedding.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Peter was doing a lot of writing about movies. In 1961, the Museum of Modern Art asked him to write a monograph, basically a long essay focused on a single subject. They wanted him to write about Orson Welles and curate a film series to go along with it. Peter was thrilled.

PETER BOGDANOVICH: And I wrote the monograph, which is my first published work, a cinema of Orson Welles. and curated the show, we got all his films. Even Mr. Arkadin which nobody had even seen in the United States. And, it was very successful.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The museum paid Peter \$125 bucks and it was a big success. So, Peter pitched another, this time on Howard Hawks, the director of Rio Bravo, The Big Sleep, and His Girl Friday, the fast-talking screwball comedy starring Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell.

HIS GIRL FRIDAY CLIP: I am fond of you, you know. That a girl. Often wish you weren't such a stinker.

PETER BOGDANOVICH: And I was a big fan of Hawks by this time. And had seen virtually all his films by then. And, um, I went to Museum and I said, if I can get Paramount to pay for it, would you do a Howard Hawks retrospective? And let me write the monograph? They said, in a heartbeat.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Peter had been writing movie reviews for Ivy magazine, which went to all the Ivy league colleges, so he had a contact in Paramount's publicity department.

PETER BOGDANOVICH: So I called a guy I knew at Paramount and I said, if I get the Museum of Modern Art to do a retrospective of Howard Hawks would you guys pay for it? And he said, yeah. I got paid \$250 a week. Curated all of his films and wrote a monograph. And went to California and met with Howard Hawks and then interviewed him for the monograph.

PETER BOGDANOVICH: Howard Hawks interview second tape. Most of your films have a very fast pace.

HOWARD HAWKS: Especially after talking pictures came in, they use to be rather slow and I thought it would be wise to step up the pace, and we stepped it up about 20% I would say.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Peter kept all of his recordings with directors in individual boxes. Between those notecard reviews he kept from his teenage years and these recordings, Peter was building a personal library about film history.

PETER BOGDANOVICH: We are rolling now.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The museum let him do another series a year later on Alfred Hitchcock. Peter was becoming a regular cottage industry of museum monographs – maybe the only cottage industry of museum monographs.

PETER BOGDANOVICH: I want to make sure its working. Hitchcock interview side one.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: They Talked about how Hitchcock storyboarded all his shots, about how he worked with actors and they talked about food.

PETER BOGDANOVICH: Do you really hate eggs, Hitch?

ALFRED HITCHCOCK: Oh, I really do yeah.

PETER BOGDANOVICH: [LAUGHTER]

ALFRED HITCHCOCK: I think the smell of a hard-boiled egg is the most horrible thing in the world. How people can eat them? I knew a very big man, he was a producer, theatre producer, and we used to have lunch together. And the Hors d'oeuvres trolley would go by, and without the trolley stopping, he'd stretch a hand out,, pick up a hard-boiled egg, and pop it into his mouth. Oh, really it was miserable.

PETER BOGDANOVICH: [LAUGHTER].

ALFRED HITCHCOCK: If he popped a sardine or something it might have been different, but an egg.

PETER BOGDANOVICH: But you don't mind eggs in a soufflé or something like that?

ALFRED HITCHCOCK: No, as long as they are disguised

BEN MANKIEWICZ: This gives me an idea. When we are finished with Peter, our next podcast: Breakfast with Hitch.

Anyway, Polly would often go with Peter on these trips, sitting in on the interviews. She'd take notes and share them with Peter. They weren't making much money, but they were meeting their film heroes. Each interview seemed to lead to the next one and the next. Then, at a dinner party, Peter met Harold Hayes, the editor of Esquire Magazine. He called Hayes up a week later.

PETER BOGDANOVICH: And I said, uh, well I wrote this piece about Hollywood. Would you like to read it? I think it might interest you. He says, yeah, send it over. He not only bought it for \$600 bucks which was a lot of money for me. And he used it as the lead piece in the August issue. And he assigned me to do another piece about Jerry Lewis, a profile.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: This was a big deal. Peter loved Jerry Lewis since he was a kid. He'd been doing Jerry Lewis impersonations for years. He flew to LA to meet him. They had dinner at Lewis' mansion in Bel Air.

PETER BOGDANOVICH: Well, it was funny 'cause he would do schtick, you know. He went to the bathroom and came back and there's almost a whole roll of toilet paper around his feet. Dragging it in, it's just crazy.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: He also watched Jerry Lewis on set, in a film directed by Frank Tashlin called *It's Only Money*.

IT'S ONLY MONEY CLIP: I'm not a private investigator. You want Pete Flynn. You're not Pete Flynn? No but I could fix your TV set. Sex Maniac.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: When Peter wasn't writing, he and Polly were trying to get a play called *Once in a Lifetime* produced off-broadway in New York. Peter was directing, but it didn't turn out well and Peter got depressed.

PETER BOGDANOVICH: *Once In a Lifetime*, it was a flop. Frank Tashlin the director who I met when I was doing the Jerry Lewis piece came to New York and came to visit us in our little apartment on Riverside Drive. Frank just said it flat out. He said, what do you want to direct theater or movies? I said, movies. He said, what are you doing here? We make 'em in L.A. And 4 months later we moved.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: When we come back.... A road trip.

[AD BREAK]

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In 1964, Peter and Polly packed their belongings into a beat-up, 1951 Ford convertible, it was bright yellow. They were broke and it only cost them \$150. It had to get them to California: five days, across country.

PETER BOGDANOVICH: We started, "bye, everybody, bye, bye, we'll see you." We drive about an hour and the car is overheating like crazy, bubbling up and we took it in somewhere and we had to go back because you couldn't drive it.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: They got the car fixed, or so they thought, and set out again on the road.

PETER BOGDANOVICH: And the car overheated constantly. So what happened is, we would get to a hill and we would put it in neutral and roll down the hill in neutral so we could cool off the car. And we did it all the way across the country till we got to Kansas. No hills in Kansas. It was sort of fun, yeah. The car was full of a dog, her dog, a puppy, black dog with one eye.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: When they got to LA, Peter and Polly rented a small house on Saticoy street in the San Fernando Valley. The bright yellow Ford was embarrassing, so they spray painted it black, which wasn't much better. They got in touch with the people Peter had written about including Jerry Lewis.

PETER BOGDANOVICH: One day he says to me, "I don't want to see that fucking car of yours, that piece of shit car in my driveway anymore. I want you to take one of my cars. Take a Mustang." I said, "I can't take your Mustang." "Why? I got four of them." [laugh]

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Polly and Peter pulled out of Lewis' driveway in a brand new red Mustang, which they drove for about a year before they got a car of their own.

Their social life was busy - lots of dinners with friends. Peter and Polly weren't big partiers, but every now and then, they went to the trendy spots, including a bar called Whiskey A Go Go on the Sunset Strip. Peter wrote a satirical essay about it for Esquire. Back in 1965, it was the birthplace of go-go dancing. Peter remembers watching the actress Mamie Van Doren dancing wildly with a big black bow in her hair while go-go dancers were suspended in cages. And, of course, they went to film screenings. It was at one of those screenings that Peter met Roger Corman.

PETER BOGDANOVICH: We both ended up going to the same performance of a French movie. He said, I read your stuff in Esquire. Would you be interested in writing a movie? I said, yeah.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: I'm starting to wonder if Peter is just incredibly lucky, or just good at making connections and putting himself in the right situations...either way, this was good for Peter. If you wanted a crash course in how to make a movie quickly and inextensible, Roger Corman was your man.

MONTAGE OF ROGER CORMAN FILM TITLES

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Roger Corman has produced hundreds of low-budget movies. He's also given some of our biggest directors in the business their first shot. Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Ron Howard. They are all Graduates from what they call the Roger Corman school of filmmaking. Roger remembers talking to Peter after that film screening.

RODGER CORMAN: He was simply, if there could be such a thing as a 19th century renaissance man, he would have would have been that - he had interests and opinions. Peter always had an opinion on just about anything

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Roger invited Peter to his office and after they talked some more, he hired him as an assistant. And in Roger's world, that meant much more than getting coffee.

RODGER CORMAN: It's the development of screenplays but it's beyond that. It's scouting locations, casting, working in production, working in pre-production, working in post-production. Essentially you name it. It's everything

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Peter began working on Wild Angels.

WILD ANGELS CLIP: Alright everybody. We race them to that end of the canyon.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: A 1966 biker movie starring Peter Fonda and the real Hells Angels motorcycle club. It inspired a whole generation of biker films through the early 70s. Peter ended up re-writing the script and shooting what's called second unit. Which in his case meant directing background action and some stunt sequences.

WILD ANGELS CLIP: Let's get him. Wait a minute we've got to bury him first

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The Hells Angels didn't make things easy for Roger or for Peter.

PETER BOGDANOVICH: So, they would pretend that the bike wouldn't start and things like that.

WILD ANGELS CLIP: Take it easy.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: This was Peter's first time working on a film set, thinking about camera placement, leading a crew, directing actors on camera. Kind of a tough gig when, first time at it, you're a skinny, 26 year old film buff giving orders to a bunch of rebellious bikers.

RODGER CORMAN: The climax of the film the Hells Angels get into a big fight with the townspeople. And there weren't enough townspeople I said I really need some more people and I said Peter get in there and join the fight. Unfortunately, Peter had said something disrespectful to the angels and the Hells Angels set out to beat him around a little bit. It was a tough initiation.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Critics didn't care for Wild Angels, but audiences sure did. It was the 16th highest grossing movie of 1966.

That same year, Peter and Polly got invited to a party at John Ford's house. By then, Ford was part of the old guard in Hollywood, a revered director known for westerns like Stagecoach and The Searchers. Peter was working on a book and documentary about Ford. It was at this party that Peter and Polly met Frank Marshall.

FRANK MARSHALL: Wow. I've known Peter since 1966. I guess so that's fifty-three plus years.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Today, Marshall is one of the top producers in Hollywood. He produced the Indiana Jones movies and many of Steven Spielberg's films. Back then, though he was anything but famous. He was a college kid. At a John Ford party. With his parents.

FRANK MARSHALL: I was kind of wandering around and seeing all these incredible actors and but not really talking to anybody and down the stairs came this perky little blonde with a you know, kind of a pixie haircut and very cute and we started talking about all the people that were there and it was Polly Platt. and Polly said to me, Oh well if you love movies like you sound like you do, you need to meet my husband. and I said Oh really? Your husband? yeah sure. All right.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: I'm not into this all of us sudden.

FRANK MARSHALL: That's what I want to do, your husband. Sure. So, anyway she took me into the room and there was Peter. He was 27 and he was holding court in the corner of this room.

PETER BOGDANOVICH: He must not have known Ford's reputation or maybe he did.

FRANK MARSHALL: And I thought he was fascinating.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Polly introduced them, and Peter told Frank about shooting second unit on Wild Angels.

FRANK MARSHALL: I had no idea what that meant but he was so excited about it that it was infectious.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Then Peter said Roger Corman was going to give him an entire movie to direct.

FRANK MARSHALL: And I said well hey, it sounds like fun. You know, if you need any help give me a call. And about three months later, around Easter of 1967, I think, I got this call from my

dad and he said did you meet somebody named Bugslonovich or something at the Ford party, and I said, yeah, why, he said well he wants you to call.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Frank called Peter back from a payphone in the UCLA dorm.

FRANK MARSHALL: He said, well I can't pay you, but I can pay your expenses if you want to come work on this movie and I said, well what do you want me to do? He said, I don't know. I've never made a movie before. Just come over.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Peter and Polly still needed help navigating LA. And Frank had lived there all his life.

FRANK MARSHALL: Peter and Polly were from New York. So they didn't quite know how to fit in out in the Valley, because they lived in an apartment, they didn't have a lawn, they didn't have a house to take care of, and I grew up out there, I kind of knew how to do everything. So, you know rent a car, get a this get a that where this was. And so, I kind of when I look back, I was kind of becoming a junior producer, in taking care of what the director needed to get their vision up on the screen.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That vision Peter and Polly were trying to get up on the screen? It would become the movie *Targets*.

Targets trailer Clip: *Targets*, A movie about a war. Inside a man's head.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Famously, Roger Corman never lets anything go to waste, especially when he could turn left over footage into money. He had an idea...

PETER BOGDANOVICH: He calls me up and he says, Boris Karloff owes me two days work.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Boris Karloff was the king of horror films, most famous for playing Frankenstein's monster. And, he has a very recognizable voice...

HOW THE GRINCH STOLE CHRISTMAS CLIP: Then he growled with his grinch fingers, nervously drumming. I must find some way to keep Christmas from coming.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's right. Karloff was the voice of the Grinch in the holiday special *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. Around the same time he would have recorded the Grinch, at age 80, he was being enlisted in a Roger Corman scheme for a new film.

Peter remembers the call from Roger going something like this:

PETER BOGDANOVICH: I'd like you to shoot 20 minutes with Karloff in those two days. You can shoot 20 minutes in two days. I've shot whole pictures in two days.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Then Roger wanted Peter to use 20 minutes of a Karloff movie called *The Terror*, giving them 40 minutes, roughly half of a movie. Roger continued his pitch...

PETER BOGDANOVICH: And then I want you to shoot with some other actors and film the other 40 minutes and, we got a new Karloff picture. Are you interested? And I said, yeah, sure.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Roger offered to pay Peter \$6000 to make the movie and said Polly could work on it too. So, they got to work trying to figure out how to make Boris Karloff - this classic horror star - relevant to a 1960s audience. Peter had an epiphany one morning while shaving. They would make a thriller and the first scene could be set in a movie theater where *The Terror* is playing on the screen and Boris Karloff is watching himself from the seats.

PETER BOGDANOVICH: And when the lights come up Boris is sitting next to Roger Corman and he turns to Roger and says, that is the worse movie I've ever seen. And I laughed, and I thought, wait a second, if he's an actor he doesn't want to make those kinds of movies anymore. He wants to quit. There's a beginning of the picture.

TARGETS CLIP: I'm not making any more films Marshal.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Then Polly thought they should add a modern killer, and Peter remembered something his *Esquire* editor had said to him. That he should make a movie about Charles Whitman, a former marine who – in 1966 - climbed a tower at the University of Texas in Austin and fired on a crowd.

NEWS REPORTER: One of history's worst mass murders occurred here in Austin today, by official count tonight 49 persons were hit by gunfire.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: For 18 years it was the worst mass shooting by a lone gunman in US history.

Peter decided to weave the story of Boris Karloff's aging horror actor with a *modern* horror story of a homicidal sniper who goes on a shooting spree. Filming began in the spring of 1967. Roger put up the money to make it, \$130,000. They had to move quickly because they only had 23 days to shoot the whole movie.

FRANK MARSHALL: It was day and night. I fell in love with making movies. I almost flunked out of class. I remember. I never went to class that semester. But you know, I got to do

everything I got to build some sets. I acted in it, I shot some of it, I went and found set dressing. I learned really how the movie goes together.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Polly worked as the production designer, her first official gig. She made nuanced choices, like having Karloff surrounded by warm tones, and the young sniper in cold shades of blues and whites.

RODGER CORMAN: And I think her ability, particularly visually, designing sets wardrobe and so forth helped Peter a great deal.

TARGETS CLIP: All the good movies have been made.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Peter cast himself in the role of the young director working with Boris Karloff's this fading star of old horror movies.

PETER BOGDANOVICH: I wrote the part in Targets for a friend of mine, George Morfogen. and he couldn't do it. He had a problem, So I said, oh fuck it, I'll just play it myself. Because I had written it very much for George. And I thought ah, there isn't anyone else that I like that much so ill just do it myself.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Frank was shocked at how decisive Peter was for a first-time director.

FRANK MARSHALL: It was incredible because he always knew what he wanted. in fact and that's what made it possible for us to do the movie for a price, because he could articulate what he wanted.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Frank and Peter learned a lot on the Targets shoot – notably, how to break the rules.

FRANK MARSHALL: Yeah, it's shoot and apologize later.

PETER BOGDANOVICH: Well you learn a lot about how to steal shots. If you can't get it legitimately, steal it. Guerrilla style film making, you know?

BEN MANKIEWICZ: They stole some of those shots on a busy LA freeway. The cinematographer Laslo Kovacs was behind the camera.

PETER BOGDANOVICH: You're not allowed to shoot on the freeway at the freeway, we just did it. We had two cameras. One with a long lens, one with a wide angle lens and we shot all this stuff on, on the freeway with me on a walkie-talkie.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The scene had the sniper shooting at drivers from a tower alongside the freeway. Peter and crew needed to move quickly. They had to communicate with the team on the tower and the stuntmen in the cars. Walkie talkie radios were key.

FRANK MARSHALL: And we'd just say bang on the radio and the person in the car would swerve.

PETER BOGDANOVICH: They'd say, okay, we're, we see you. You're coming up on Sherman, Sherman Way. I see you, I see you. Okay, keep coming, keep coming. You got him Laszlo? Uh, Kovacs was shooting. You got him, okay, okay. Ready, ready 1, 2, 3, bang. And that's when the person would react like he's been shot.

[GUN SHOTS]

PETER BOGDANOVICH: Uh, we actually brought a girl onto the freeway, on the freeway. She got out of her car in the story. And we went bang, and she fell, got shot in the back and fell. And that's when the cops came. There, there was a bunch of cops came. And we, we got out of there pretty fast. We never got caught.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: None of this worried Roger Corman, who is incredibly nonchalant about breaking the law to get a shot.

RODGER CORMAN: That's our normal style.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: After the shoot was done, Frank went back to school. Peter and Polly had a baby girl in November of 1967. They named her Antonia, after Peter's brother who died in that horrible kitchen accident before Peter was born.

Targets Did not get a wide release. I came out in August of 1968, the same year as the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy. The movie became part of a rallying cry for gun control. Not many people saw Targets because of the limited release, but the critics were impressed by how much Peter accomplished as a first time director, with very little money.

Peter invited his parents to a screening of Targets in Arizona, where they had moved. Afterwards, they weren't effusive. That wasn't their way. His mother, Herma, hugged him and said "it's very good." Peter saw his father across the room.

PETER BOGDANOVICH: He just looked at me and nodded. And there was something in his eyes that was very tragic. Like he really understood the movie on a very profound level and he also understood that I was a good filmmaker. And it was all in that look. A nod and a look.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The power that, uh, fathers have over us is...

PETER BOGDANOVICH: That's the best review I ever got. Just a look. And a nod.

[THEME MUSIC]

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In our next episode, Peter makes the movie that will define his career

PETER BOGDANOVICH: And he said it's also the best film by a young American director since Citizen Kane. Whew, I said, you're kidding? He says no that's what it says.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: And Polly wonders if her marriage to Peter will survive.

POLLY PLATT: I really believed that every director would have an affair with his leading lady. And my husband was not going to be an exception.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's all to come on The Plot Thickens...

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I'm your host Ben Mankiewicz, thanks for listening...see you next time.