



THE PLOT THICKENS

EPISODE ONE: LIGHTING THE FIRE

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In the summer of 1989, Brian De Palma was feeling defeated in every way. The woman he was in love with broke up with him. He'd sprained his ankle at a film festival in France.

And the movie he'd dreamt of making for 10 years—a war epic set in Vietnam—had flopped.

Then, on Labor Day, De Palma flew to New York. It was a week before he turned 49. His agent called and told him to get back to work. He'd been offered the project of a lifetime. A film adaptation of "Bonfire of the Vanities."

NEWS CLIP: Since it appeared in 1987 Tom Wolfe's New York novel "The Bonfire of the Vanities" has become not only a major bestseller but also a work symbolizing the end of a decade.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: You can't exaggerate what a big deal "Bonfire" was when published in 1987.

NEWS CLIP: A lacerating satire of money, power, and New York life in the '80s.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The book wasn't just a massive hit. It became a metaphor for everything that was wrong with New York in the decade it was written. Greed. Racial politics. The criminal justice system.

It was an instant sensation in a way that's hard to imagine a book becoming today.

NEWS CLIP: A new Wolfe book is both a cultural and social event.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Its author, Tom Wolfe, was one of the most famous writers in America.

NEWS CLIP: One reviewer said of him, he understands the human animal like no one else.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Bonfire was 659 pages long, a social satire with multiple layers, a complicated plot line.

It follows an investment banker on Wall Street. A guy at the top of the world... with a long way to fall.

It seemed like there was no way a book like that could be made into a movie. But some temptations... They're just too juicy to resist. Especially in Hollywood.

I'm Ben Mankiewicz, and this is season two of The Plot Thickens—a podcast from Turner Classic Movies. Each season, we'll bring you an in-depth story about the movies and the people who make them.

This season we partnered with Campside Media to bring you The Devil's Candy. The story of a Hollywood fiasco and the director who made it.

The movie was "Bonfire of the Vanities." The director, Brian De Palma.

Here to tell the story is Julie Salamon. In 1990 she spent a year on the set of Bonfire of the Vanities. At the time, she was a film critic at the Wall Street Journal.

She planned to write a book about the production. A chronicle of modern moviemaking. It was the reporting chance of a lifetime...

NEWS CLIP: Salamon, a Wall Street Journal film critic was given total access to director Brian De Palma.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: About a movie production that was doomed from the start.

"DE PALMA" CLIP: I knew what could go wrong with it, and the irony is, it still bombed. I made a lot of compromises and it was a disaster. And Julie Salamon wrote every move in it.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: This is The Devil's Candy, Episode One: Lighting the Fire.

JULIE SALAMON: I'm Julie Salamon... I was there and witnessed it all. Journalists, like me, we're usually on the outside, looking in. For the first time, I was going to be inside. Seeing what actually happens.

I wasn't exactly under cover. It was just easy to fit in. Another person in a hoodie carrying around a notebook. Barely anyone noticed me. But I noticed just about everything.

JULIE SALAMON: Fred's got a yellow legal pad filled with numbers, addresses, names.

JULIE SALAMON: Every day I showed up to set. I wandered around, taking it all in. And when they'd let me, I'd stop people, and ask them questions.

JULIE SALAMON: No, the question is: How much more accurate, ultimately, is this highly scientific collection...

JULIE SALAMON: Sometimes I scribbled in my notebook. Sometimes I'd hold up my recorder and tape them on mini cassettes.

BRUCE DE PALMA: Is it voice activated?

JULIE SALAMON: No, it's working.

BRUCE DE PALMA: those are microcassettes there, yeah...

JULIE SALAMON: The tapes—they'd just been sitting in a box in my storage unit. I didn't even know they were there. They'd been there 30 years. Just falling apart. Gathering dust.

Until now.

I dug them out, and was amazed to hear how many of those voices from the past had survived. Some better than others.

BRUCE WILLIS: If people want to make a career out of writing that Bruce Willis scratches his ass, then who's the asshole?

MELANIE GRIFFITH: Just tell me what the fuck is going on. Don't make me come here and get made up and sit in my goddamn wardrobe for six hours...

JULIE SALAMON: What is Brian's thing with women?

BETH BRODERICK: Wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute. I think we have to go off the record again.

JULIE SALAMON: Okay...

JULIE SALAMON: Let me start at the beginning. November 30, 1989. The day I gave birth to my first child, Roxie.

I was in my hospital bed, holding that cute little stranger in my arms. Feeling happy and a bit dazed. I looked up to find Brian De Palma standing there. "Bonfire of the Vanities is starting in six weeks," he told me. "Get ready to start reporting."

The hospital thing wasn't as weird as it sounds. I knew Brian. We had some history. I'd just started working as a film critic when Brian's movie Scarface came out.

"SCARFACE" CLIP: Al Pacino... Scarface.

JULIE SALAMON: This was 1983.

"SCARFACE" CLIP: Say hello to my little friend!

JULIE SALAMON: There was a big controversy over whether the movie should get an X rating for violence.

"DE PALMA" CLIP: I submitted it three times and it kept on getting X's. And then I said, absolutely, I'm not changing it anymore. And everybody was very unhappy with me.

JULIE SALAMON: I did an article about it. I didn't know Brian at all. But I was fascinated by his movies. I figured the person who made them must be terrifying. Maybe a little crazy.

Then about a year after Scarface, his PR woman called up. She said, Oh, I want you to meet Brian de Palma. He has a new thriller coming out. A film called "Body Double."

"BODY DOUBLE" CLIP: I'm sorry, I can't hear you, can you speak up?

JULIE SALAMON: I'd already seen Body Double. Let's just say it was not my favorite Brian De Palma movie. In one scene, a man literally drills through a woman's nearly naked body. With a very big drill.

I told the PR woman that I'd rather meet Brian some other time. To talk about a movie I liked. But the PR woman was the notorious Peggy Siegal. Peggy was a woman who simply did not process the word "no." So I said, okay. I'd see him for a quick coffee.

We met at a restaurant near Washington Square Park. I got there early. I sat there feeling annoyed at myself for letting Peggy talk me into this. And I was nervous. Brian made really scary movies.

He showed up right on time. He was a large man, imposing. He had a bald spot and a short, graying beard. He was wearing a safari jacket.

At first he was terse. He stared at me like he was thinking: Why do I have to do this? Probably as annoyed as I was to be there. We chatted politely. Then he just looked at me and said: Why are you doing this? And I said, What do you mean? He said, Why are you interviewing celebrities?

I'd interviewed a lot of famous people by that point. Not a single one of them had ever asked me a question. I was so taken aback, that I just told him the truth. That I really wanted to write a book one day. It sort of broke the ice.

After that, whenever he was in town, we'd meet for lunch or breakfast at this neighborhood restaurant called the Elephant and the Castle. He'd pester me about writing that book.

He started calling me to talk about Bonfire of the Vanities when I was 7 or 8 months pregnant. He said it was going to be big - a good movie production to write about.

While I listened to him talk, I stared at "What to Expect When You're Expecting." I had the book propped up on my belly.

What was he talking about? I was about to have a baby! Plus I had a full time job. I didn't say any of that to him. I just said, Oh yeah, sounds good.

Then... he showed up at the hospital. To tell me "Bonfire" was starting.

I think I just burst out laughing. It seemed completely insane. But I wasn't going to argue with him. He was giving me the kind of chance that comes along almost never.

JULIE SALAMON: Monday, Martin Luther King Day...

JULIE SALAMON: So, when my daughter Roxie was six weeks old, there I was—at Brian De Palma's office in Greenwich Village. It was Day One.

JARED: You want some coffee?

JULIE SALAMON: No thanks.

JULIE SALAMON: It was freezing cold and I was exhausted.

JULIE SALAMON: Oy, my whole life is four hours. I have a baby. I have to run home and feed the baby, run out.

JULIE SALAMON: Sleep was a distant memory. But Brian was holding a casting session. If I was even thinking about doing this book, I had to see it.

Brian was there with the casting director. They were trying to find the perfect Maria. Maria was a mistress of the movie's main character, this rich guy named Sherman McCoy. Maria was the movie's seductress.

Sherman McCoy was already cast. Tom Hanks had accepted the role. Now, they had to find the type of woman that Tom Hanks's character wouldn't be able to resist.

Later, I talked to Peter Guber about the essence of Maria. Who was she?

Guber was the producer. The one who puts a project together and is kind of the mediator between the studio and the filmmakers. Bonfire was his baby. Guber described Maria's character as the devil's candy...

PETER GUBER: This woman's the devil's candy. This woman's the devil's candy! The apple in Little Red Riding Hood.

JULIE SALAMON: The devil's candy, the apple in "Little Red Riding Hood," he says. When we see her in the audience, the guys have gotta go—and then he makes this very weird noise...

PETER GUBER: The guys have gotta go, 'unnnggh! I think I might risk my career, my business to get into that.'

JULIE SALAMON: I think I might risk my career, my business to get into that.

Guber told me this out in Hollywood. He showed up for our meeting wearing moccasins. He had wild, wiry black hair that was tied back in a ponytail. He saw himself as an artist. I guess, he was an artist in his way. A master of sizzle.

I got what he was saying about Maria. She was supposed to be the kind of woman you'd destroy your life for. At least, if you were a certain kind of man.

Brian had already suggested Melanie Griffith for the part of Maria. And Warner Brothers had liked the idea. Melanie's career had taken off with the movies "Something Wild" and "Working Girl."

"WORKING GIRL" CLIP: I expect you to call me Tess...

JULIE SALAMON: But before that, it was Brian who put her on the map when he cast her as a porn star in "Body Double."

"BODY DOUBLE" CLIP: I do not do animal acts. I do not do S&M or any variations of that particular bent. No water sports either.

JULIE SALAMON: The movie hadn't done well. But it was a breakthrough role for Melanie Griffith. She was in the process of negotiating her contract for Bonfire with the studio.

Then, Brian had a different idea. Maybe Maria should be played by Uma Thurman. At the time, Uma Thurman's career was just beginning. People didn't really know her. Uma had been in "Dangerous Liaisons" the year before, and had gotten great reviews for it.

GLENN CLOSE: But he forced you?

UMA THURMAN: No...

JULIE SALAMON: She played this innocent girl seduced by an older man.

UMA THURMAN: But I found it almost impossible to defend myself.

GLENN CLOSE: Why was that? Did he tie you up?

UMA THURMAN: No, no he just has a way of putting things.

JULIE SALAMON: That cold Friday afternoon in Brian's office, Uma Thurman was going to audition. For the part of Maria. She would perform a lovemaking scene with Tom Hanks. To see how they connected.

The office was a comfortable old apartment on Lower Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. It was a small sunny room. No frills. There were a bunch of books, a formica desk holding a computer and a telephone. The only personal touches were some movie posters and a plaster Madonna. It had been a prop in one of Brian's movies.

I was sitting on a couch off to the side when Uma Thurman entered the room. She was very tall and very slender. Her face had the ageless beauty of a classical sculpture. But she seemed self-conscious. She didn't look anyone in the eye. Like a teenager. Which she was. She was only 19 years old.

Tom Hanks was polite when she came in. But it was all kind of awkward. Tom Hanks had just met her and he barely knew Brian De Palma. I realized later, when I heard Tom Hanks being interviewed about Bonfire, he must've been intimidated by Brian.

TOM HANKS: He is, I think, the most headstrong director I have ever worked with as far as knowing exactly what he wants. As far as telling you, the actor, what this has to be. It's not that he doesn't want to say hello to you in the morning. It's that in his mind, he's already jumped so far ahead of that, that he just glosses over.

JULIE SALAMON: They got to work. When Thurman began to say her lines, she immediately became someone else. A sexy, self-confident woman called Maria. She started slithering all over him while Tom Hanks just looked uncomfortable.

She'd memorized the lines. And had her part down cold. Tom Hanks was reading from a script.

Brian revealed nothing as they went through the scene. He had light green eyes that seemed like they could look through you. Plus, he had this ability to sit very still. He was like a big, watchful cat. Or a psychiatrist, taking it all in without revealing anything.

The actors went through two scenes several times. Uma Thurman was slithering away, Tom Hanks looked really uncomfortable.

Brian and the casting director muttered a word now and then. After 40 minutes, Brian said, "That was very good, Uma."

It was clearly a dismissal. All of a sudden, it was like she was a nervous teenager again.

She grabbed her bag and yanked on her coat. Then she shook hands with Hanks and the casting director. She kissed Brian on the cheek. Then she was gone.

The three men started to discuss Uma, pro and con. They said she was sexy and funny. But maybe not as naturally funny as Melanie Griffith. They said Uma had freshness and beauty. But Melanie had that adorable squeaky voice and comic timing.

Also, Melanie was 32, Uma was 19.

As I listened to these three men talking about the two actresses, I felt like they were counter guys at a butcher shop comparing chickens. It was so clinical, just sort of looking at them strictly for their body parts.

BRIAN DE PALMA: With Uma, you have no question in your mind, why this character is cheating on his wife. Not for a second, not for a second. And she's more like a kind of elegant, sophisticated, she brings that to it. Melanie, you're going to get more of your, kind of lower class kookiness, which is what Melanie does.

JULIE SALAMON: The issue of Melanie Griffith's shape came up. She'd recently had a baby. My ears perked up at that one! But mostly, Brian was worried Melanie would be... moody, unpredictable.

BRIAN DE PALMA: The thing that disturbs me about Melanie is that you know, Melanie is an accident waiting to happen. Always. Now, if anybody can handle her, I can handle her. But it does concern me a little bit.

JULIE SALAMON: Brian made a decision. Uma Thurman should fly out to Los Angeles. She should do a screen test with Tom Hanks. Let's see how they look together in front of the camera.

But the following Tuesday, Brian gets a message from the studio. It was about Tom Hanks. He doesn't want to do the test with Uma Thurman.

Brian was not happy. He called one of the production executives at Warner Brothers. Of course she couldn't be reached right away. It was part of the game.

I was there in his office when all this was going on. So he says, well, I'm not going to sit around waiting. He said, let's go to lunch. We went to one of his favorite places, Il Cantinori.

JULIE SALAMON: At Il Cantinori. Guy leads us to the table, tells Brian he looks fantastic. All true.

JULIE SALAMON: It's really charming, and rustic...and expensive enough to keep the riff-raff out.

JULIE SALAMON: Ok. Isn't this fun?

BRIAN DE PALMA: No it's very normal.

JULIE SALAMON: Brian had recently lost a lot of weight.

BRIAN DE PALMA: I'll have a cappuccino. What kind of soup, do you have soup today?

JULIE SALAMON: He didn't want to gain it back, so he was watching his diet.

BRIAN DE PALMA: I'll have the minestrone.

JULIE SALAMON: He was in a bad mood. He was a real grump about Tom Hanks.

JULIE SALAMON: Didn't you just have dinner with Tom Friday night and his wife at Orso?

BRIAN DE PALMA: Subject never came up.

JULIE SALAMON: At all? He didn't talk about Uma at all?

BRIAN DE PALMA: No, he talked about her afterwards, you are there

JULIE SALAMON: Right, and he seemed very enthusiastic

BRIAN DE PALMA: Yes he did.

JULIE SALAMON: After lunch, Brian just had one thing on his mind.

JULIE SALAMON: Back at Brian's office. Gonna get Lucy Fisher on the phone.

JULIE SALAMON: Lucy Fisher was the Warner production executive in charge of Bonfire.

So, this doesn't really sound that good, but Brian let me listen to his side of the conversation with Lucy. She didn't know I was sitting there. Or recording it.

BRIAN DE PALMA: Hello? Hi. Okay. Yeah. Uh huh. Well, there are a couple of disturbing things about me: Number one is Tom should communicate these things to me directly. I had dinner with him on Sunday, I didn't hear a word. Number one. So I'm going to have to have a talk with him directly about this. I do not like hearing information via his managers through you back to me. Please, I know how to deal with Tom Hanks, but it annoys me this is the way he's doing things. Number two is, I don't want you to close any deal with Melanie until I tested Uma. Because I think Uma has a whole different approach to this material. And I know what Melanie's approach is going to be and I think we should see it.

JULIE SALAMON: Brian had spent many years wheeling and dealing in the movie business. He knew how to make a studio executive anxious. He used scheduling... Then he played the budget card.

BRIAN DE PALMA: Plus, we've got to move our schedule around to deal with it, which can only wind up being a little expensive.

JULIE SALAMON: Brian won that round. Uma Thurman did fly to Los Angeles for her screen test with Tom Hanks.

Some people loved her. They thought she was astounding. Others didn't.

The only opinion that mattered, though, was Tom Hanks. The studio had asked him what he thought, and he told them. "I just can't act with Uma," he said.

So Melanie Griffith it was. She would be Maria. I was seeing how elusive it was, this business of casting.

I wondered how Melanie might have felt if she knew someone else was being auditioned for this role—this role she thought she had in the bag. By a director she told me she trusted.

MELANIE GRIFFITH: The relationship between the director and the actress is a real tender thing. And with Brian, it's like the best relationship I have with a director. I mean, I feel really safe with him and really taken care of, and watched out for, and pushed and challenged.

JULIE SALAMON: I'd been a film critic for six years when I sat in on that casting session with Tom Hanks and Uma Thurman. I'd written many stories about Hollywood. I'd interviewed a lot of famous people.

None of it compared to what I would experience on “Bonfire.” I knew I was seeing things no outsider could normally see. I was hearing things no outsider could hear.

It's important, at this point, to know a little about the book the movie was based on. And the man who wrote that book. Tom Wolfe.

He had no mercy in print. His satire was ruthless. But in person? He was this polite Southern gentleman, like someone from a different era.

TOM WOLFE: I don't know what People Magazine is...

JULIE SALAMON: We met at the dining room of the Carlyle Hotel. He loved that place. The Carlyle was iconic. Home away from home for legends like Frank Sinatra, Princess Di, Jackie Kennedy. It was a place to be seen—but very discreetly. It was on the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

Wolfe was dressed in a three-piece plaid suit. Fancy shoes. I remember thinking he was like the writer version of a rocker with style.

We had a very long breakfast. Wolfe ate three bowls of grain cereal with stewed fruit. I kept my recorder on the table while he explained why he didn't think a film version of Bonfire was a good idea.

TOM WOLFE: I wanted there to be all these slices of New York life, sort of one after another...

JULIE SALAMON: It seemed impossible to him. The book had too many layers. He couldn't imagine writing the script for it.

But he would never express his doubts about the movie in public. That would be rude. After all, he was paid \$750,000 for the rights to his book.

TOM WOLFE: It would be very bad manners for me to be sharply critical of it...I did cash the check.

JULIE SALAMON: I did cash the check, he said.

The book was wildly popular. Producer after producer in Hollywood was interested. But when you hear the basic plot, Tom Wolfe's doubts make sense. “Bonfire of the Vanities” tells the story of a rich guy, Sherman McCoy. He's out with his mistress, Maria.

Sherman and Maria get lost driving in the Bronx, and then hit a Black kid with their car. They don't know if he's dead or alive—but they leave him lying there and speed off.

“BONFIRE” CLIP: Go car, go!

JULIE SALAMON: That rich guy, Sherman, he's the star of the story. The author Tom Wolfe made fun of him. He wrote that Sherman thought of himself as a “Master of the Universe.”

Today, we would call Sherman part of the 1%. The type who thinks he can get away with anything just because he has money.

The book was big, complicated and inflammatory. In Hollywood, every executive claimed to love it. But no one was willing to put money on the table. No one wanted to take the risk of actually buying the rights.

Almost no one.

PETER GUBER: I realized that there was part of me in Sherman McCoy.

JULIE SALAMON: The one man who saw potential was Peter Guber, that producer who told me Maria was "the devil's candy." He decided he wanted to make a movie out of *The Bonfire of the Vanities* the minute he read it.

PETER GUBER: It was a hot property, but there wasn't anybody yet striking.

JULIE SALAMON: Peter Guber had an exclusive deal at Warner Bros. So he convinced the studio that "Bonfire" was a good idea.

Guber—he could talk circles around anybody and he would talk in circles even when there was nobody to talk around. His genius? It was his ability to convince people that nothing was impossible.

He was crude and shrewd and said exactly what he wanted—and then he left it up to you to figure out what it was he'd said.

PETER GUBER: Here was a story with a tiny little event, the pea at the bottom of the mattress. The little pea, tiny event, unrolled the whole carpet, the whole entire fabric, unrolled by one tiny little event, almost an innocuous event, an event that would otherwise go unnoticed, an event that for any other, ordinary person, it might not have been pursued.

JULIE SALAMON: Wait, is he calling a hit and run an "innocuous event"? That's seriously awful... disturbed, even.

But, in the moment, I wasn't really comprehending what he was saying. I was just thinking, How can anyone talk like this? It was just one metaphor after another... I remember listening and being completely mesmerized.

Here's how he described Sherman.

PETER GUBER: Here was a fellow who lost his soul to get it all and gave it all up to get a soul back. He became the meat on the bone, he became the barbecue. One little act of redemption at the end, one recognition of it all, allowed him to become worthwhile in our eyes. That's a difficult film to execute. Difficult film to execute.

JULIE SALAMON: Guber was right. A difficult film to execute.

The studio reached out to Mike Nichols and Norman Jewison. They sent the script to Steven Spielberg. They tried Martin Scorsese and James Brooks.

None of them worked out.

The book was insanely popular. But think about it. What were one million readers, or even two or three? That would make for a literary phenomenon. But it wouldn't even register a movie's existence. Those numbers weren't impressive in Hollywood.

Peter Guber was losing patience. "What about Brian De Palma?" he asked the Warner executives.

PETER GUBER: I wanted someone who understood New York. New York is a character in this story. We wanted a director who could excite actors. We wanted a director who the media and the press would say, I don't know what it's gonna be, but it's gonna be interesting.

LUCY FISHER: So starting around the time Peter bought it, suddenly there was a lot of commotion.

JULIE SALAMON: That's Lucy Fisher, the Warner Bros exec. She liked the idea of Brian de Palma.

LUCY FISHER: People were afraid of how would they shrink it down? How would they make it not a miniseries? And how would they make it so it wasn't so controversial their life became unpleasant? And Brian had no fear on either front. He came in and said, I don't worry about any of these things. I know exactly how to do this. I know exactly the tone I want. I don't think it's racist. I don't care if some people think I am. So he was our guy.

JULIE SALAMON: Right.

JULIE SALAMON: By the time Bonfire rolled around, Brian De Palma had already made 19 movies.

When he started out in the '60s, he was seen as friendly and fun. This kind of quirky guy, part of the counterculture. He wrote and directed a movie called "Greetings," and a sequel called "Hi Mom." They were comedies. But they were political, too. They were low budget. Both starred Robert De Niro back when he was starting out.

"HI MOM" CLIP: Oh, be gentle with me. I will, Judy, but not now...

JULIE SALAMON: But then Brian went in a different direction. He became obsessed with Alfred Hitchcock. He started gravitating toward suspense and horror.

There was "Dressed to Kill"—

"DRESSED TO KILL" CLIP: Do you find me attractive?

JULIE SALAMON: "Blow Out"—

"BLOW OUT" CLIP: Screaming...

JULIE SALAMON: And "Carrie"—

"CARRIE" CLIP: Mama please, talk to me!

JULIE SALAMON: These were violent stories that dealt with obsessive love, sexual anxiety, confused identities. They were bloody movies. But they were also weirdly poetic. They were full of passion... but also distant.

As a filmmaker, Brian was starting to become a cult figure. But he was also starting to become controversial.

BRIAN DE PALMA: I've had it my whole career. Whole career, either battling with the ratings board or being accused of a Hitchcock rip off. A hack. You name it.

MARTY BAUER: I think Brian wanted to be a Hollywood director very badly. But also liked making these avant garde, Brian De Palma movies.

JULIE SALAMON: That's Marty Bauer, Brian's former agent. When we talked he was retired, living in Los Angeles. We caught up on a Zoom call.

JULIE SALAMON: It's been very strange going back through all of this so many years later.

MARTY BAUER: Well, you haven't aged, I have.

JULIE SALAMON: It's the Zoom lighting. It's very good.

MARTY BAUER: Oh, well I don't look so good. But that's okay.

JULIE SALAMON: Back in the 80s and 90s, Marty was a bigwig in Hollywood. He co-founded United Talent Agency, or UTA, in 1991.

Later, he became its president.

Back then, Marty had two prize possessions. One was Brian de Palma. The other was Sunny Blossom, a thoroughbred race horse. Sunny Blossom got Marty trophies. They were all over his office. But it was Brian's name that got him tables in fancy restaurants.

Marty remembered his days with Brian well. He reminisced about the filmmakers that Brian hung out with. It was a group made up of young guys who, in the '70s, were shaking up the business.

MARTY BAUER: Francis Coppola, George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, and Martin Scorsese.

JULIE SALAMON: Those were Brian's best friends. The directors who made "The Godfather," "Star Wars," "Jaws," "Taxi Driver."

But Brian never really felt that comfortable in Hollywood. Not the way Spielberg and the rest of that group did.

MARTY BAUER: Brian doesn't play well with others. He's not a bad man. He's a good man. But he's got these kind of quirks that make it difficult for people to relate to him the way they relate to Scorsese or Spielberg, who kind of have a very polished persona.

JULIE SALAMON: Brian had no illusions about relationships in Hollywood. And he understood his place in the filmmaking universe. He alternated between success and failure—and learned the hard way what success meant.

Here's how he described it during a talk at Lincoln Center in New York.

BRIAN DE PALMA: That's the false sense of what you're doing that you get in Hollywood. If your movie makes a lot of money, you're a genius. You don't care if it's crap. I mean, everybody tells you My God, that's great, let's make 10 more of those.

JULIE SALAMON: In 1987 Brian got it all with "The Untouchables." Critical praise. Good box office. It starred Kevin Costner and Sean Connery—Sean Connery won his only Oscar ever for that movie.

"THE UNTOUCHABLES" CLIP: You wanna get Capone? Here's how you get him. He pulls a knife, you pull a gun. He sends one of yours to the hospital, you send one of his to the morgue. That's the Chicago way.

"DE PALMA" CLIP: we kind of blew everybody away the first weekend. You know, The Untouchables was another one of those magical movies and very few happen in your career. Then I get them to make a movie nobody wanted to make...

JULIE SALAMON: For a decade, Brian had been trying to make a movie out of a New Yorker article that haunted him.

It was this true story, about a squad of American soldiers in Vietnam. They kidnapped and raped a Vietnamese girl, and then they murdered her to erase the evidence.

"CASUALTIES OF WAR" CLIP: You probably like the army, don't you Erickson? This ain't the army, Sarge. Michael J. Fox. Sean Penn. "Casualties of War."

JULIE SALAMON: "Casualties of War" was powerful—maybe it was too powerful. Brian realized that when the studio screened it for preview audiences.

"DE PALMA" CLIP: I mean, the material is so emotional and so depressing. What's a preview going to tell you? 'I don't want to see the movie'? 'It disturbed me too much, I don't know what to tell my friends'? I find it hard to look at it myself.

JULIE SALAMON: I thought *Casualties of War* was amazing. Pauline Kael, the *New Yorker* critic, loved it. There were only a few of us, though. The rest of the reviews were mixed, at best.

"DE PALMA" CLIP: Nobody went to see it. It was a terrible disappointment after all that work. And it was a lot of work.

JULIE SALAMON: Then came a break-up with the woman he loved, and that sprained ankle at a film festival in France.

BRIAN DE PALMA: I felt kind of abandoned by everybody. By my girlfriend and the movie. And the world.

JULIE SALAMON: I remember talking to him after he got back from Deauville, the festival in France. He was really, really in the pits. I felt so bad for him. He pretty much went into hiding, moping around in his room.

And then he got a call from his agent. From Marty Bauer. Marty told Brian he should get to work again. Warner Brothers was interested in him for *Bonfire of the Vanities*.

MARTY BAUER: It had Tom Hanks in it. I mean, I hate to be to be philistine. But there was a big pay day. It was a big studio movie. And he had just come off of a bomb. It was the most famous book in the world. But I think he was the wrong director for the movie. And I never said anything.

JULIE SALAMON: That decision—it didn't have a happy ending for Marty.

A few years later, Brian moved on to a different agent. He stopped talking to Marty. And in interviews he never mentioned him.

MARTY BAUER: I never existed... my feelings were really hurt. I have to be honest with you. Because I consider myself very attached and devoted to Brian. I really went out of my way to please him and to do a good job and I think mostly I did and he never even mentioned my name, he mentioned Mike Ovitz's name ... because I think somewhere deep down Brian's a starfucker.

JULIE SALAMON: 47:55 Wow... I mean...

JULIE SALAMON: The pain in Marty's voice really caught me off-guard. Clearly this wasn't just business for him.

MARTY BAUER: I mean tell him if you talk to him that he really hurt my feelings. Tell him.

JULIE SALAMON: Marty... he died in April of this year. It was just under three months after we caught up. He was only 74.

I never did get the chance to tell Brian what he said.

[MUSIC]

JULIE SALAMON: Okay...this is working.

JULIE SALAMON: Maybe it was inevitable that Brian would end up in a high-profile, and nasty business like filmmaking. A business where accomplishments are judged publicly and often harshly.

VIVIENNE: Brian was a mistake. I mean, I didn't really want to have another child

JULIE SALAMON: That's Brian's mother, Vivienne. I always talk to the mothers. It tells you a lot.

VIVIENNE: He was a premature baby. He weighed four pounds when he was born. I was in labor for three days, too. When he couldn't talk, he'd scream. I think he had to do it. It must have been really tough for him competing with Bruce and Bart.

JULIE SALAMON: Bruce was the oldest brother, Bart, the middle, and Brian, the youngest. During the making of Bonfire, I interviewed the whole De Palma family.

I talked to Bruce at his home in Santa Barbara, California.

JULIE SALAMON: Overlooking the ocean. Large house with a pool. In the backyard, modern medieval furniture.

JULIE SALAMON: Bruce was an odd man. He had invented this thing called the N-machine. I couldn't begin to explain it—but supposedly it produced great quantities of energy. It wasn't accepted by mainstream scientists.

Bruce was five years old when Brian was born.

BRUCE DE PALMA: Brian was what they call a headbanger. Certain children get on their hands and knees, and then they bang their head into the headboard of the bed bang, boom, boom, boom.

JULIE SALAMON: That banging would cause the bed to scootch across the floor, right up to the wall.

"Then my father would go in," Bruce says. "And there would be quiet."

Their father was aloof and demanding, a renowned orthopedic surgeon in Philadelphia. Their mother Vivienne was depressed and needy.

For most of Brian's early life, up until he was six, his father was away at war. Vivienne was young. And she was caring for those three boys alone.

The boys often competed with each other, to be the smartest, the best, the favorite. Especially Brian and Bruce.

The two of them actually looked a lot alike, except Bruce had a noticeable birthmark above his right eye.

When I talked to Bruce, it was obvious he still felt competitive with Brian.

BRUCE DE PALMA: I got 100 on the Physics final in high school, when the class average was something like 32, something like that. Now, I don't know why anybody would want to hold that against me. I was interested in it, I liked doing it. And Brian, if he has some kind of, you know, inferiority complex over that, that's his problem.

JULIE SALAMON: The other brother, Bart, was a classic middle child. He tried to stay out of the way. He told me, for him, mealtime was "a horror story."

BART DE PALMA: It was all this psychological and verbal one upmanship, usually colored by my older brother, who sort of presided over this stuff, and he protected by my mother.

JULIE SALAMON: This wasn't Bart's imagination. Their father, Dr. Anthony De Palma, told me the same thing.

And he confirmed what Brian had always told me: that Bruce was held up as the genius and Brian didn't quite measure up.

ANTHONY DE PALMA: He was always contending with Bruce. And Bruce was the, happened to be a very intellectual youngster from the very beginning. And intellectually, Bruce went in one direction, Brian went in another direction.

JULIE SALAMON: When he was in his teens, Brian began to suspect that his father was cheating on his mother. He was so suspicious he started following his father to the office where he worked.

Bruce told me about it.

BRUCE DE PALMA: So one day he went over there let himself in and he said, I know somebody's here. My father said, No, there's nobody there. And Brian searched the place from the cellar to the attic. And when he got up to the attic, he pulled open this closet door and there standing in her slip was my father's suture nurse, who he eventually married, Trudy.

JULIE SALAMON: Bruce says: There, standing in her slip, was my father's suture nurse, who he eventually married. Trudy. At that point, he almost killed Brian.

I mean, talk about family drama! Brian internalized it. Later on, he used it as material.

In 1980, he directed a film called "Home Movies." It was about a film student with a philandering father. And in the film, the boy uses a movie camera to catch his father in the act of cheating.

"HOME MOVIES" CLIP: Wait a minute, that's it! I'll shoot my father in the act for the maestro, and get mom's divorce evidence at the same time!

JULIE SALAMON: Brian's films were often eerie. Cold. Clearly influenced by Hitchcock.

But they were also clearly influenced by his own life. If you squinted, they started to look like a running autobiography.

And those parallels—the ones between his movies and his childhood—they weren't lost on his family.

BRUCE DE PALMA: Watching Brian's movies is like going into a wing of a house of your family home that you had never been into but had been decorated and you know, sort of set up just like the home would be. But you'd never been in there before.

JULIE SALAMON: Bruce told me that he saw different facets of their home life in Brian's movies. There were the same lamps, fixtures, people, places...

Then he said something really eerie.

BRUCE DE PALMA: Have you ever seen "Dressed to Kill" with the psychiatrist in the office and everything, Michael Caine? Well that's the street we used to live on.

JULIE SALAMON: His childhood explains a lot about Brian.

Over the years, I've seen many sides to him. He runs hot and cold, depending on the situation. And at some level—definitely while he was making Bonfire—that wounded child still existed... not that he invited anyone to see it.

One thing was consistent. Whatever side of Brian you experienced, you felt that you were in the presence of a commanding force.

He was 49 when he made Bonfire. He had a deep reservoir of knowledge... and survivor's instincts. After more than 20 years in the business, he understood what it took to be a director. How to wield power.

He had this ability to make everyone feel, at least at that minute, that this film was the most important thing in the world. That this could be the big one—whatever it was that meant.

It should have been clear right from the beginning that nothing would be easy about making Bonfire of the Vanities into a movie. Before pre-production had even begun, Peter Guber, the producer on the film, he left Warner Bros to run Sony Pictures.

Producers are supposed to mediate between the director and the studio. Now, Brian was the movie's de facto producer, as well as the director.

Without Guber, Brian was on his own.

The pressure was obvious. He had 14 months to make script revisions, cast more than 100 speaking parts—including the leads—hire a crew, find locations, build sets, shoot and edit the film and oversee its marketing.

And now there would be no buffer between him and the studio.

I talked to Brian before we started this podcast, to see if he wanted to participate. He was helpful. He pointed me to interviews he'd done about Bonfire. And he did tell me he had listened to Season 1 of *The Plot Thickens*. And he liked it.

But he told me he had talked enough about Bonfire over the years. Including with me. He just didn't want to talk about it anymore.

It was a painful episode in a long, successful career. It's not what he wants to be remembered for.

Over the years people have asked me when exactly I knew the film was going to be a disaster. The truth is, I didn't. I never knew.

But I do know this. "Bonfire" was never allowed to be simply a movie. Not by me, not by anyone. It was certainly not the masterpiece they'd hoped it would be. But it wasn't the worst movie ever. Not by a long shot.

What I remember most is the thrill. The thrill of watching talented people trying to create magic—and that? That's almost always against the odds.

That's what I was trying to write about.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: On the next episode of *The Devil's Candy*... Brian De Palma begins pre-production on the movie that could make or break his career. At least, that's what his mother thought.

VIVIENNE: I'm worried about Bonfire.

JULIE SALAMON: Because?

VIVIENNE: It's a great story. You know, I've read the book twice. But it has to be successful. I think it will, I think it will destroy him if it's not.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Season 2 of *The Plot Thickens* was produced by Campside Media in partnership with Turner Classic Movies.

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Check out our website at tcm.com backslash the plot thickens. It has info about each episode and tons of great photos. Again, that's tcm.com backslash the plot thickens.

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