



THE PLOT THICKENS

EPISODE THREE: THE WAR ZONE

CHRIS SOLDO: The first time I knew Bonfire was going to be sort of an overfed, maybe slightly indulged feast was in our first tech scout lunch

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's Chris Soldo. Chris was the first assistant director. It was his job to orchestrate crowd scenes, help with scheduling, and generally keep order on the set.

He realized, early on in production, that everything about Bonfire was going to be outsized. All the usual problems of making movies would be just a little bit bigger.

Chris had this revelation before filming began. It happened at lunch. The scouting crew went to a restaurant on Arthur Avenue in the Bronx, a place famous for its huge Italian feasts.

CHRIS SOLDO: We sit down, within moments, six plates of fried calamari and antipasti are laid out before us, right? Just to get started. Arugula salads, mozzarella and tomato. Then, pasta, sausage, pasta and meatballs.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: At this point, everyone's kind of groaning, looking around at each other. It was really time to get back on the road. Then came the second course.

CHRIS SOLDO: Pork chops, steak. All this veal, all these meats start coming out, you know, choreographed, being brought by like, these waiters.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Poor Brian de Palma. He was still watching his weight.

CHRIS SOLDO: And I'm sitting next to Brian and Brian's going, Oooh, it's like, What are you kidding me, more food? And that's when I knew, you're on a big movie, Chris.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: With Bonfire, there was this feeling right from the beginning that this wasn't just another movie. For Brian, that would be unacceptable. To make something ordinary.

Brian had five days until April 13, 1990. A Friday. Friday the 13th would be the first day of filming. What were they thinking?

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.

JULIE SALAMON: I'm Julie Salamon. I was there to witness it all. I was a film critic for *The Wall Street Journal*. But in 1990, I spent a year on the set of *Bonfire of the Vanities*, with a notebook and a recorder. Barely anyone noticed me, but I noticed just about everything.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: This is Episode Three: The War Zone.

JULIE SALAMON: Richard Sylbert was the production designer on *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. He was a Hollywood legend. Nominated for an Oscar six times, with two wins.

He made it to the big leagues in the 60s and 70s, when movies were changing. And he hung out with the trendsetters—the ones driving that change.

RICHARD SYLBERT: Buck Henry, Mike Nichols, Warren Beatty, Jack Nicholson, Joan Didion and John Dunne. That was the gang. I mean it was like a family. We spent years together.

JULIE SALAMON: In those years, Dick Sylbert was living a glamorous life. And he dressed the part, too. His closets were filled with hand-tailored suits from Savile Row in London.

But all that was over by the time *Bonfire* came along. He was 61 at that point—still tall and slender and charming, in a world-weary way. He usually looked tired, like he hadn't slept the night before. Or the night before that.

By then, he'd moved away from tailored suits in favor of... safari jackets. Lots of pockets, meant for carrying compasses and other items that you might need in the African bush. Almost every day he came to work looking like an ad for J. Peterman. All that was missing was a pith helmet. Naturally, he smoked a pipe.

Safari suits had become Sylbert's uniform. Like his hero, the director John Huston. He wore safari suits too. And like another director. Brian de Palma.

It was one of the things that made Sylbert want to work with Brian. They were both safari suit men. The only difference was that Dick Sylbert's was tan, Brian's was khaki green.

Which is a pretty funny image: two grown men, standing on a Hollywood film set, dressed for the jungle. But for Sylbert, the uniform had a specific purpose.

RICHARD SYLBERT: You know, I wear a uniform, this uniform—what it always meant to me is that a movie is a war.

JULIE SALAMON: A movie is a war. And in war, Sylbert says, a uniform is necessary.

RICHARD SYLBERT: The war is between the people with the ideas, and the people with the money. And it's the only war there ever is.

JULIE SALAMON: I saw what Sylbert meant. The directors? They're the generals. They have to get the troops on board, to fight the fight. Whatever it is. Budgets. Executives. The Press. Angry judges.

It may seem out of proportion. This wasn't a war after all, it was a movie. One of a bunch of pictures that would be crowding into theaters before Christmas.

And yet? You could feel it on the set. This sense of urgency, this feeling that Bonfire would be one of those movies that really was larger than life.

The movie's \$29 million budget was climbing toward \$40 million. And not a foot of film had been shot. Things were getting pretty tense.

Poor Lucy Fisher, the studio executive. She thought they were all supposed to be on the same side. They all wanted the same thing, didn't they? A great movie. Preferably one that made tons of money.

But executives and filmmakers—they often have very different ideas about how you get there. And how much you're willing to pay to get there. That's where the skirmishes begin.

Lucy Fisher was at Warner Bros, out in Hollywood. But even from across the country you could feel her eyes on Brian. She knew the budget was ballooning. She knew there were already problems. And she knew shooting was starting in a few days.

So she and a colleague decided to fly to New York. They wanted to sit in on Brian's rehearsals with Bruce Willis. Brian... he didn't want that. He froze them out. Didn't take their calls. He just sent back one word: No.

I asked Lucy Fisher about it.

JULIE SALAMON: Were you sort of turned off that he wouldn't let you into rehearsals and stuff?

LUCY FISHER: Oh, you heard about that? We've had two giant fights. That was one of them.

JULIE SALAMON: Right. Is that normal, though? On a movie?

LUCY FISHER: Apparently it is for me and it isn't for him. Because I'm always the director's friend. And I've never been excluded in that way, and apparently for him, it's the worst possible thing you could ever imagine.

JULIE SALAMON: Lucy felt personally wounded. She thought she and Brian had been getting along really well. Much better than she thought they would.

LUCY FISHER: It sounds like some weird marriage, doesn't it?

JULIE SALAMON: It does. I think it does sound like some weird marriage.

JULIE SALAMON: Well, because you're very intim—you know, you're very intimate.

JULIE SALAMON: Brian didn't see it that way. He didn't want to worry about whether he was hurting Lucy Fisher's feelings. And he didn't want the studio people to see any of his vulnerabilities.

BRIAN DE PALMA: Once you give up your control that's already perceived as weakness.

JULIE SALAMON: He told me that once you give up control it's perceived as weakness. That you need help. He says, "You have to take on a facade of 'I know everything.'"

BRIAN DE PALMA: It's like being naked in front of a large group of people.

JULIE SALAMON: Brian was nervous. Who wouldn't be, with that much on the line? He didn't want the executives looking over his shoulder. And remember, on a normal set, there'd be a producer, running interference. Brian had to do it all on his own.

And one of his biggest battles was yet to come. The one with the media. It shouldn't have surprised him. Media hype was partly what "Bonfire of the Vanities" was all about. And moviemaking was a business that always lived and died by publicity.

Still, he didn't expect the onslaught from the New York press. But they were always primed and ready for a little bloodletting. Especially when Hollywood came on their turf.

The gossip columnists came first. They'd noticed that a bunch of New York socialites were interested in "Bonfire." Actually, interested in being in "Bonfire." They'd started coming out to audition for roles as bit players—mostly in the fancy party scenes.

Especially the party that was going to be filmed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the Temple of Dendur. They wanted to be at that party, playing themselves. The gossip writers loved this. Even The New York Times picked up the story. They covered the socialite auditions in the newspaper. The headline was "Vanities Galore."

Right around then, a Warner Bros executive received a handwritten note, from a woman named Joan Tisch. She was the wife of a business tycoon. Somehow that nice, thick, cream-colored notecard... it ended up in my backpack. I really can't remember how! But I found it in the box with my tapes.

Mrs. Tisch had good handwriting, and an even better sense of humor.

"Dear Mr. Canton," she wrote. "It was with great interest that I read in the Sunday, April 1 New York Times that your film company is auditioning for bit roles in 'Bonfire of the Vanities.'"

Then she started listing the advantages of casting her. She wouldn't need a hotel—she owned one! She wouldn't need air transportation—she had her own plane! And then, she wrote: "You wouldn't even have to provide space at the Metropolitan Museum of Art as I have my own wing."

And then there's this bit toward the bottom, where she brings up Nan Kempner. She was this famously thin socialite. She wanted to play herself in the movie. Joan Tisch wrote: "P.s. Should Nan Kempner need an understudy, I am prepared to lose 50 pounds."

The whole thing was hilarious. It was all just silly, and kind of fun to watch it go down.

Until the museum people got tangled up in it. The board of trustees there, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art—they didn't think it was so funny. They didn't like all of this "outside activity." They got cold feet. They said, You can't film here.

So Brian's team had lost a major location. Again. But I've got to say—what happened with the socialites? It was nothing compared to what was happening in the Bronx.

Sometimes, a studio will invite in a reporter—a friendly reporter—to visit set during production. The idea is to generate a story that will get potential viewers excited about the movie.

But that didn't happen on "Bonfire." The book was really divisive. There were a million essays about what the book was—and what it wasn't. Was Tom Wolfe reporting on realities of class and race, or was he exaggerating things, making them worse?

The Warner Bros marketing people felt the less they said about the movie in advance, the better. They even sent out a memo telling everybody on the set not to talk to the media. Anyone who broke the rule would be fired.

Of course, I guess Brian broke the rule even before the movie started, by bringing me onto the set. But the studio would have to deal with me later. They were worried about the press that the movie was getting then, in real time.

NEWS CLIP: Now that borough president Fernando Ferrer has seen the script, he says it's Bronx bashing at its worst.

FERNANDO FERRER: When we got to the script, the script tended to accentuate all of those aspects of the Bronx that are generally considered stereotypical...

JULIE SALAMON: Fernando Ferrer was the Bronx borough president. He was only 40 years old, pretty young for a politician. And he was a progressive.

Back then, crime was high all over New York City—all over the country. To him, "Bonfire of the Vanities" felt like another unfair swipe at the people who lived in the Bronx.

FERNANDO FERRER: When you talk about a community, you must take care. There are 1.2 million people living in the borough of the Bronx, that don't consider themselves hustlers or pimps or

prostitutes or media hounds. They are people who have worked over the course of years to make their lives here, to educate their kids, to bring up their families. And they deserve some recognition as well.

JULIE SALAMON: Tom Wolfe understood there were two faces of the Bronx, but he argued that the crime was what you heard about.

TOM WOLFE: It doesn't take a great deal of criminal behavior to cast a pall over an entire, uh, area. And all you have to do is wake up in the morning as many people do to a station called WINS and you'll just get a catalog of shootings in the Bronx every morning.

NEWS CLIP: This is WINS. We're coming off the bloodiest year in the history of New York.

JULIE SALAMON: The Bronx was different back then. The whole city was. There were six times as many murders in 1989 as there were three decades later, in 2019.

But Ferrer was making a different point. Bonfire's vision of the Bronx was a caricature. One that ignored the lives of the actual people who lived there.

Ferrer thought the movie version of "Bonfire" should somehow acknowledge that. He was a shrewd politician. He made his case publicly, in a press conference that was televised.

NEWS CLIP: Ferrer is demanding a disclaimer which would mention some good things about the Bronx.

FERNANDO FERRER: At least a few seconds at the end of the movie, at the end of the movie, telling people, Oh, by the way, the Bronx isn't exactly Calcutta or the murder capital of the face of the planet.

JULIE SALAMON: That press conference by the Bronx borough president was covered everywhere: on radio, TV, newspapers all over the world. The New York Post ran it on the front page. They even printed part of the movie's script.

Brian was annoyed by it all. He thought the press was being ridiculous.

BRIAN DE PALMA: I mean, it was reported at exhaustive lengths. Like it was the most important thing in the world. “‘Bonfire’ does this, ‘Bonfire’ does that.” And, in relationship to us it was like, is this all they have to report?

JULIE SALAMON: “Bonfire” had become a lightning rod.

For Brian, the battles would last a few months and then he would move on. For Fernando Ferrer, the battles were his real life. Probably it seemed to him, they would never end.

JULIE SALAMON: We’re in the Bronx. It’s April 23, I’m talking to Brett Botula.

BRETT BOTULA: I understand where these guys are coming from.

JULIE SALAMON: Yeah.

BRETT BOTULA: We just had a meeting with Fernando Ferrer, the Bronx borough president.

JULIE SALAMON: Brett Botula had been scouting locations in New York ever since he spent a couple of years at NYU film school, about a decade earlier. He was trim, a friendly looking guy with these round, boyish cheeks.

His job was to find the locations for each scene, then get permission to use them, and then get Brian on board. It wasn’t an easy job. You just had to figure things out, even if the demands seemed impossible sometimes.

BRETT BOTULA: Everything they say, you say yes. No matter what they say, you say yes. If they say, Can we blow up the Brooklyn Bridge? You go, Yes! And then you run around and you find out if you can blow up the Brooklyn Bridge as fast as you possibly can.

JULIE SALAMON: Brett was working really hard. Trying to balance the demands of a tough boss and an even tougher city.

BRETT BOTULA: I’m walking a thin line, because I don’t have any fucking control if Brian De Palma decides he wants a blah blah blah. I mean, they could mow me over and he doesn’t even know who I am.

JULIE SALAMON: Brett was only 29 but he talked like someone who had been around forever. He explained the ropes to me—figuring out how to break the rules, go places you weren’t supposed to go. And who knows what else.

BRETT BOTULA: Basically everything that we do is illegal or unheard of or blasphemous or preposterous in one form or another to somebody. You cannot bring a guy from Los Angeles or Idaho, or anywhere else, and drop them into New York and get that done.

JULIE SALAMON: But when it came to Bronx locations, Brett sympathized with the borough president, Fernando Ferrer.

BRETT BOTULA: These guys are trying to bring back vital neighborhoods that are totally trashed, right? This is, this is the classic problem. Everyone comes to New York to either shoot the diamond draped halls of Park Avenue, or to shoot the burned out buildings of the Bronx. That is classic. That's every movie.

JULIE SALAMON: Brett Botula may have understood the big picture. But right now, he had a specific job. That job was to find a courtroom.

He had one general to report to. And that was Brian De Palma.

Dick Sylbert had been building this beautiful courtroom on a set, in Los Angeles. But casting Morgan Freeman as the judge—that had jumbled everything.

Now, Brett Botula needed to find a courtroom on the east coast for Morgan Freeman's scenes. Close to New York City, if at all possible. And he had less than two weeks. That's when they'd be shooting those scenes.

Timing was tight. And it was a tough assignment—most judges weren't eager to turn their courtrooms over to movie crews. Brett Botula hired another location scout just for the search. The team checked out 50 courtrooms, or buildings that could double as courtrooms.

They traveled to Boston, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Baltimore, D.C., and other, smaller cities in Ohio and Delaware. Brett's office was overflowing with folders holding pictures of courtrooms.

He felt like he knew every courthouse from Boston to Baltimore like the back of his hand. And every last one of them was wrong.

He told me he was no longer measuring "Bonfire" by the number of folders he had, but by the amount of aspirin he'd taken. He figured he had taken so much aspirin that if he piled it up, it would reach the top of the World Trade Center.

It was like the Greek myth of Sisyphus: The stone the crew was pushing up the hill was Morgan Freeman and the top of the hill was a courtroom. Every time they thought they'd found a location, it vanished. It didn't work out.

Then... Brett found one that might work. And it was actually in the Bronx. And it was being offered up by someone you wouldn't expect. Judge Roberts.

You remember Roberts—he was the judge who the character was based on. He auditioned, and in my opinion, he probably should've gotten the part. He was still annoyed that he hadn't been cast. But he was willing to stay involved. He thought, Well, maybe I can't be in the movie, but my courtroom can be.

It was Brett Botula's job to convince Roberts to let the crew use it. So Brett and I went over, on a scouting trip.

BRETT BOTULA: This Judge Roberts man, he's a, he's a tough cookie.

JULIE SALAMON: Now, why do you have to deal with him? To get into the court?

JULIE SALAMON: Brett and I were standing on the steps of the Bronx County building. It was an imposing monument of a place, made of granite and limestone.

BRETT BOTULA: Because he has to give the okay for us to work here. Because for this simple reason, we cannot disturb the functioning of the courthouse, of the justice system. Alright? That is a total judgment call. If he chose, he could say this disturbs the functioning of the courthouse.

JULIE SALAMON: So you gotta shmooze him.

BRETT BOTULA: I hate the word shmooze. Like I said before. Schmoozing, to me, has the connotation

JULIE SALAMON: Of a negative.

BRETT BOTULA: Of misrepresentation.

JULIE SALAMON: Brett pointed at a row of parking spots in front of the courthouse.

BRETT BOTULA: You want to hear something funny? Part of the negotiation with him is the justice's parking spots. Where the judges park. This seems like a silly thing. But I'll tell ya what, if we came in this morning, we didn't have those parking spots right there, I would be out of a job. See how it's clear there?

JULIE SALAMON: Sometimes the things that seem mundane are the most important. Like parking spots.

The Warner Bros executives, they may have been out in Hollywood. But they were watching the search for a courtroom closely, too. The budget was now officially 30 percent over and still climbing.

Lucy Fisher knew it would be wildly expensive to shoot the courtroom out of town. And she felt she was never getting a straight story.

LUCY FISHER: Every day, I would say where is the location? Where is the location? You know, I am a dog with a bone. I repeat everything 2,000 times. I will say where is it, the location? Where is it? Do you have it? And he'll say, yeah, yeah, we have it, we have it. And I'll say, Is it signed and sealed? And they'll say yes, yes, yes, they're done, they're done, they're done. Well, maybe they're 99% done, but 1% isn't done, or maybe they're 80%. I'll never know what percent was really done. But I know they weren't done.

JULIE SALAMON: So for the second time that month, she and another studio executive decided to fly back to New York to see what was going on.

JULIE SALAMON: Fred's on the phone with Brian.

JULIE SALAMON: I was with Fred Caruso when he told Brian.

FRED CARUSO: She wanted to know whether you will be available to meet with her tomorrow, or speak with her tomorrow, or have dinner with her tomorrow, and I said, I don't know, I'll pass it on.

JULIE SALAMON: This time Brian took the meeting. He managed to calm Lucy down, at least for the moment. But the fallout from casting Morgan Freeman... it was sinking in.

JULIE SALAMON: Had you known what the Morgan Freeman situation was going to mean in terms of—

LUCY FISHER: I can't answer. I don't know. I'll tell you in January.

JULIE SALAMON: So it would've been cheaper?

LUCY FISHER: I'll tell you in January. No, we did not realize how much it would affect everything. Financially.

JULIE SALAMON: Through all of this chaos—finding the right courtroom, losing the MET—every once in a while I would stop and think, where's Brian?

Then I'd see him, sitting in the middle of it all, wearing that safari jacket. Looking remarkably calm. Even peaceful, with a smile on his face.

Then I realized he had his Walkman headphones on his ears. He was listening to one of the operas he loved.

BRIAN DE PALMA: You have to block out everything. You have to see it in the frame.

JULIE SALAMON: That's what artists have to do, or they would never create anything. They have to block everything out. To create the illusion that what they are doing matters more than anything. And to keep their focus.

If they lose that tunnel vision, whatever they were trying to do... It wouldn't get done.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Season 2 of *The Plot Thickens: The Devil's Candy* will be back, right after this.

JULIE SALAMON: One of the things I remember most about the Bonfire set was the social status ladder. Like the military, there was a hierarchy. And it felt like everyone was always angling for a better role.

The camera operator wanted to be a cinematographer. The cinematographer wanted to direct. The secretaries? They wanted to be associate producers. The production assistants—they wanted to be anything that wasn't lowest rung on the ladder.

And everyone—I mean everyone—was working on a script.

Sometimes people broke through the ranks. But it was rare.

Though there was one guy who seemed to be outside the hierarchy. Who could break rank. And who could break through to Brian. His name was Eric Schwab.

ERIC SCHWAB: Anyway, let me let me start the, I'm going to start the recorder.

JULIE SALAMON: And I started mine, too. Now, Eric, don't talk too fast.

ERIC SCHWAB: Well, just tell me to slow down whenever you want me to because I speed up without realizing it.

JULIE SALAMON: When I met Eric on the “Bonfire” set, we hit it off. People sometimes asked us if we were related. We had a similar look, a similar way of talking too fast when we got excited about something.

We’ve stayed in touch over the years. But I hadn’t spoken to him for a while when I called him up in February. We quickly fell back into our routine, me acting like a bossy sister.

JULIE SALAMON: So I know you've told me this before, but start with when you actually first met Brian.

ERIC SCHWAB: I first met Brian on “Body Double.”

JULIE SALAMON: “Body Double” was Brian’s erotic thriller. The one that starred Melanie Griffith. Eric was 26 at the time. Doing Brett Botula’s job. He would drive around with Brian, scouting for locations.

ERIC SCHWAB: I remember one time him and I were looking at a location. We were walking along the aqueduct. And he kind of looked at me and he goes, What’s your story? You know, he kind of just wanted to know what my background was, you know, where I came from, if I studied film, things like that, so. But he only did that in small groups.

JULIE SALAMON: Brian hired Eric again for “The Untouchables.” But it was “Casualties of War” that really changed things for Eric. He told Brian he would only work on the film if he could shoot second unit—and get into the Director’s Guild.

The second unit is a separate crew, with its own director. It’s used on large films to shoot the less important shots, usually ones that don't require the main actors.

Surprisingly, Brian said yes. He gave Eric the job. And he even sponsored his application to the union. The studio resisted, but Brian went to bat for him.

ERIC SCHWAB: Brian basically told them if you don’t get Eric in the union and direct second unit, I'm not doing this film. And so he did. He actually told them that.

JULIE SALAMON: Eric had gone to film school, but Brian gave him a completely different kind of training. More like an old-fashioned apprenticeship. The training that Eric needed to become a director himself.

They bonded over the way they saw the world through the frame of a camera lens. Fred Caruso, the line producer, he saw it.

FRED CARUSO: Eric was very cerebral and could sit and listen and talk to Brian. And they got along, and Brian felt comfortable. Not that Brian wasn't comfortable with me. But if I didn't have anything to say, I wouldn't go to Brian just to chat and talk about the weather or politics or movies or whatever. Whereas Eric had a special relationship with him. And Eric had a very good eye, he had Brian's eye.

ERIC SCHWAB: I had more freedom, because I was off on my own with my second unit. And so I could do shots that I could experiment with more, and do things that we didn't even discuss, that hopefully he would be pleased with, which he did, which he ended up using.

JULIE SALAMON: And then there were the times when Eric didn't quite pull it off. Brian noticed.

ERIC SCHWAB: he said something to me, like, I'm gonna put that shot in the movie, so every time you see the movie, you're gonna know you should've done it better, or something like that. I don't think he actually did. But just to kind of remind me these things are permanent, you've got to get it great, you know.

JULIE SALAMON: After "Casualties of War," Eric decided it was time for him to make his own movie. To strike out on his own. But then something else happened. Eric's father died.

Around the same time, Brian sent word to Eric about "Bonfire of the Vanities." Eric was grieving. His head was swirling. There was so much to think about... and he didn't want to think about any of it.

So rather than waiting around for his own movie, Eric decided to battle his grief with work. He told Brian, yes. He would be the second unit director on "Bonfire." Just like on "Casualties of War," he'd have his own crew, his own shots to take care of.

It was his fourth movie with Brian. By that point, they were really bonded. On set, it was obvious to everyone. I remember Brett Botula, the location scout, talking to me about their relationship.

BRETT BOTULA: One thing that is great about this film, is that Eric Schwab is like Brian De Palma's eyes and ears. You listen to Eric and Brian talk, and no one would dare. I mean Eric goes, Brian, no that's all wrong. Those guys are like, I don't know if they're like brothers or father and son or whatever, but the point is, is that if Eric says, I think Brian would like this or Brian wouldn't like that, it means something.

JULIE SALAMON: I was intrigued. How had this young guy broken through to Brian? Got past that wall of self-protection? I figured I should go to the source.

So at the time, I interviewed Eric's mother, Faye Schwab. Every reporter has their schtick. I guess mine? It's interviewing people's mothers.

FAYE SCHWAB: He's a very clear-headed thinker. And he's also a long-range planner. He doesn't just think of the moment. He builds for the future.

JULIE SALAMON: She told me Eric's infatuation with film began with a class he took at Harvard Prep. That's a fancy private high school in Los Angeles. Now it's called Harvard-Westlake.

FAYE SCHWAB: He read everything there was to read on film. He saw every movie that was ever made, either locally or on tape. He particularly loved Japanese filmmaking, and used to go, there was a Japanese film festival at the Sherman Theatre in Sherman Oaks. He used to go there for weeks on end seeing every Japanese film that was ever done.

JULIE SALAMON: Eric was obsessed with film—just like Brian. But it was something else Mrs. Schwab said that helped me understand Eric's relationship to Brian.

FAYE SCHWAB: Eric is prepared in every detail. When he goes into something, he has a vision of what he wants it to be. He is the youngest of my four sons. But he's the rock. He's the one that if I want to get some advice, I'll go to Eric.

JULIE SALAMON: She was saying Eric was an old soul, someone you could rely on in a way you wouldn't expect from a young guy. Brian saw that.

Eric was proud of his work on "Bonfire." He valued his role. He valued his relationship with Brian. But sometimes it felt to him like people didn't seem to see him, and his talent, directly. When Eric described it to me back then on set, he seemed a little... defensive.

ERIC SCHWAB: People have no idea what I do. People do not know the difference between what I do and an assistant director.

JULIE SALAMON: He told me that the one thing that drove him crazy was people not understanding that he was a director of his own unit. Even if it was the second unit, not the first.

If Brian was the general, Eric was the lieutenant. It was a good spot to be in! People on set—people like Brett Botula—they would've killed to have Brian's ear the way Eric did.

But sometimes that bond—it could also be a liability. Was he ever going to step out of Brian de Palma's shadow?

When Eric signed on to *Bonfire*, he and Brian sat down together and flipped through the script. They were deciding which moments could go to Eric's second unit.

Eric stopped at one shot. It was of a plane landing. It sounds like the biggest cliché ever. Character about to enter scene: show a car pulling up, a plane landing. It gets the job done but—so boring!

Brian said to Eric, The day I have a shot like that in one of my movies? That'll be the day I retire.

But Eric saw it differently. For him, the plane was an important moment.

He was right. It was like a drum roll, announcing the entrance of Maria. Maria is Melanie Griffith's character—the mistress, the devil's candy.

Eric decided he could make that entrance memorable. He knew Brian was skeptical. And he took it as a personal challenge. They sat there, poring over the scene, arguing over the shot.

ERIC SCHWAB: He said, No, no, I'm not going to put a shot of a plane landing. We've seen it in too many films. And I said Brian, let me just get a great shot. And he said, Okay, I'm going to bet you it won't be in the movie. \$100. And it was, we said, okay, we'll make \$100 bet that the shot won't be in the movie.

JULIE SALAMON: The bet upped the ante for Eric. Not because of the money. It was the principle. Getting that shot into the movie became his devil's candy. That temptation, that impossible thing!

It was almost a game. Even Brian got into it. They agreed that a character like Maria—a social climber—she wouldn't fly back from Europe on a normal plane. She would take the Concorde.

The Concorde was a supersonic jet. It could fly at twice the speed of sound. It was noisy, and extremely expensive. In the 1980s, flying on the Concorde—that was a sign that you were very, very rich.

ERIC SCHWAB: Probably no one in the audience had flown that way. So this showed you, there are people that you know, don't wait in lines, don't have to do what you do, don't have to trudge through the traffic like you do. And hopefully just gave this film the theme that something's wrong with this, that there is people like this.

JULIE SALAMON: Eric's Concorde shot became a standing joke around the production office.

Fred Caruso liked Eric. He was amused by his obsession. And the bet. But Caruso also had to help with the logistics. And the obstacles—they were obvious right from the start.

FRED CARUSO: It took at least three or four or five or six weeks to get permission. No, you can't do it. No, it's not possible. No, you can't go on the runway, and no, you can't, and so on, and so on, and so on.

JULIE SALAMON: And actually capturing the shot? It'd be close to impossible. Like trying to catch a moonbeam.

Eric wanted to shoot it just as the sun was setting behind the New York skyline. He would have literally seconds to film the Concorde landing. Everything had to line up just so.

FRED CARUSO: The exact moment that the sun and the moon and the stars and the planets, and, and, and the air and the oxygen and everything about when that plane can be seen in the sky over Manhattan, and puts its nose down and ready to land. And what was going to happen if on that day, it was cloudy? And what was going to happen on that day if it was raining? And what was going to happen on that day if something...

JULIE SALAMON: IF, if, if. "If" became the operating word on "Bonfire." If things worked out, there could be Oscar prospects. Maybe a shot at upward mobility for everyone. Maybe even a plane landing in a Brian de Palma movie.

But nobody was oblivious to the other outcome. The other if. If things didn't work out, one person would pay the highest price. That would be the director.

When a big battle is lost, people mourn the soldiers who are wounded or die. They blame the general.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: On the next episode of *The Devil's Candy*, shooting finally begins... with some casualties.

LARRY MCCONKEY: My assistant is bleeding now, badly, a big gash, and the nurse after every take would open up the partially healing scar tissue because she didn't want it to close until they got into the hospital and get stitches, which was a good eight hours away from then.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: And the stars grow crankier by the minute.

MELANIE GRIFFITH: I felt really, second rate. I mean, I waited around for like, nine days in New York before I started shooting, something like that. When they made me get on a plane the next day after finishing "*Pacific Heights*" because I had to be there. And then I didn't shoot! And it was like that the whole fucking time.

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

It was hosted and written by Julie Salamon. Natalia Winkelman is the producer. Story editors are Joanne Faryon and Angela Carone. Editing by Mike Voulgaris and Maya Kroth. The associate producer is Julia Press. Fact checking by Callie Hitchcock. Mixing by Glenn Matullo.

Production support from Yacov Freedman and Suzana Zapeda. Special thanks to Megan Mazier, Matthew Ownby and David Byrne. Thomas Avery of Tunewelders composed our theme music.

At Campside Media, the Executive Producers are Josh Dean, Vanessa Grigoriadis, Adam Hoff, and Matt Shaer.

TCM's Director of Podcasts is Angela Carone. Charlie Tabesh is the executive producer. TCM's General Manager is Pola Chagnon.

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