



THE PLOT THICKENS

EPISODE FOUR: WIRE WITHOUT A NET

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The pressure on Brian De Palma was mind boggling. When it all got to be too much he'd just stop and sit down with his Walkman. Opera music was his respite.

It was hard to imagine that Brian ever thought it was fun to make movies. But it seems like he once did, when he was younger... and maybe less was at stake.

BRIAN DE PALMA: I used to, at our assemblies, used to run, you know, the Friday afternoon, you know, promo for the football game or something.

DICK CAVETT: Ran the projector?

BRIAN DE PALMA: No, no, no, skits. I'd make up little skits for what was coming up on the weekend. You figure out where to put the camera, if you know anything about still photography, and then it's not such a big jump from that.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That Dick Cavett interview reminds me of what excites the best directors: where to put the camera. It sounds so obvious. But very few directors know how to create a distinctive look.

BRIAN DE PALMA: A dirty word to me is coverage, you know, "two-shot, over the shoulder," you know, stuff you see, you know, all the time. It drives me crazy, because this to me is not directing. You have to think about where the camera is in relationship to the material.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That was Brian decades later, in an interview from the Criterion release of "Blow Out." He was discussing the work he's done with Vilmos Zsigmond.

Zsigmond was a highly regarded cinematographer who Brian had used on "Blow Out" and "Obsession." Brian would also bring him on to shoot "Bonfire." Zsigmond would go to crazy lengths to capture the perfect shot. Brian liked that. He needed that to bring his ideas to life.

Like one scene in "Obsession," a melodrama about a man who loses his wife and then becomes infatuated with a possible replacement.

"OBSESSION" CLIP: "What was she like?" "She was very much like you." "Like me? She was Italian?"
"No, she looked very much like you."

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In the scene, two characters meet at an airport and embrace. Brian didn't just shoot it as a wide shot. He captured the intensity of their emotion by spinning the camera around and around them.

BRIAN DE PALMA: Vilmos and I are racing around them faster and faster and faster. It's fun. If you can pull it off.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: It's funny looking back at this, at least in the context of "The Bonfire of the Vanities." On "Bonfire," Brian de Palma wasn't having any fun.

Everything was a mess. Everything was a headache. On big movies like "Bonfire," something is always going wrong somewhere. It's inevitable.

But then there are those moments of spontaneity. The ones that remind Brian of the fun of making movies. When—even for just a moment—everything seems to go right.

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. And I was there, and witnessed 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 Four: Wire Without a Net.

AIMEE MORRIS: I remember Brian never saying a word to me. Ever. You know, always just looking at me and I'm like, oh you know, hi.

JULIE SALAMON: That's Aimee DeBaun. When she worked on "Bonfire," her name was Aimee Morris. She was a 22-year-old film school graduate. "Bonfire of the Vanities" was her first real experience as a production assistant, or PA.

Her job was to get the stars where they needed to go. It was simple, but pretty exciting stuff for a young person who came from a small town in New England.

AIMEE MORRIS: There was sort of this like natural high from, like, holy cow, I'm working on this big movie with these people, you know, and going, I'll just be myself, and whatever happens, happens.

JULIE SALAMON: Aimee was tall, with long, wild curly hair. She was smart, and confident—well, at least, that's how she seemed on the outside. She was particularly good at dealing with the actors. Knowing how to respect their limits while ushering them wherever they needed to go.

She was also in charge of getting snacks. Lots and lots of them. She'd go to Dean & DeLuca, a fancy grocery store in the neighborhood. She'd buy raisins, nuts, designer water. No junk.

One day after a food run, Aimee had her arms full when she ran into Tom Hanks. He was on his way to rehearsal. They both stepped on the elevator going up. Tom Hanks reached over. He wanted to help her with the grocery bags.

AIMEE MORRIS: He's like, Gimme those. And I'm like, No, I got them. He goes, Those will cut your hand, Give me those and I'm like, No! I'm like, horrified. I'm like, Oh my god, there's no way I can get off this elevator with Tom carrying one of these bags, I'll be doomed. I'm like No, you're going to make me lose my job. Don't touch my bags!

JULIE SALAMON: Tom Hanks was always friendly to Aimee. Whenever there was downtime during filming, the two of them would even play cribbage. It's a board game with playing cards. One day many years after "Bonfire," Aimee ran into him on the sidewalk.

AIMEE MORRIS: And I saw him I said, Tom, I go, it's your old cribbage buddy from "Bonfire." And he stopped and he came over and he gave me the biggest hug. And he was like, Aimee, and I'm like, how are you? It was such a wonderful moment.

JULIE SALAMON: But keeping the other stars happy? That wasn't always as easy as playing board games with them.

Take Melanie Griffith. She needed a lot. When she was being picked up at the airport, she asked for an extra car just to carry her luggage. And when she got to her camper on the set, she decided it wasn't big enough and that she needed a new one.

MELANIE GRIFFITH: It's hard making movies. And if you surround yourself with what makes you comfortable, it makes it easier for everybody.

JULIE SALAMON: But Aimee—she wasn't put off these prima donna moves. She empathized with the pressure Melanie was under.

AIMEE MORRIS: Melanie had a genuinely big heart. Very sweet, very kind, very conscientious.

JULIE SALAMON: Bruce Willis—he was a different story. Aimee told me that when she and Bruce Willis first met in an elevator with Brian, he ignored her. Looked right through her. Then Brian introduced her by name. Suddenly, Bruce Willis acknowledged her presence.

AIMEE MORRIS: And it was just a very sort of interesting moment. Like, you know, it was like, I didn't exist until Brian introduced me to him. I think one of the things that makes me sad with any famous person is that there's the balance of protecting yourself, and then being able to find a certain level of humility.

JULIE SALAMON: Bruce Willis certainly wasn't unique in his behavior. It's a personality type. Some people—they don't take well to celebrity. He wasn't a kid. He was 35 years old. And he'd been famous for five years, but it was like he still hadn't adjusted to it.

He had recently married Demi Moore, one of the decade's most popular actresses. They were considered a hot young couple, and the press loved them.

NEWS CLIP: You know, to me, this is the best America has to offer...

OPRAH WINFREY: One of the hottest sex symbols in Hollywood... Off the screen, he's recently gone from a bad, bad, bad playboy of Hollywood to marrying his beautiful wife, actress Demi Moore.

JULIE SALAMON: Later on, Bruce Willis became catnip for the paparazzi, because he gave them what they wanted. When they taunted, he couldn't just walk away. He got into it with them.

On “Bonfire,” he even got into it with me. I was a critic, not a paparazzo. But he still made it clear that he wasn’t a fan of what I did for a living.

When I was walking around set, he made a point of not talking to me, even though I saw him all the time. Or, maybe he just didn’t see me. The same way he didn’t see Aimee. Or anyone he didn’t think was important. I had to go through his PR person to interview him.

It was noisy when we talked—there were crew members moving stuff around in the background. It wasn’t the most convenient setting, but I was happy to take what I could get.

JULIE SALAMON: And then you might lose your composure back.

JULIE SALAMON: He told me that all the attention started after “Moonlighting.” Some guy’s girlfriend would see him on the street and say how good of an actor he was, or how cute he was. And then the guy would walk up to him, and just start taking swings.

BRUCE WILLIS: It’s happened to me. You know, somebody’s girlfriend goes on about how good of an actor I am or about how cute I am, and the guy gets upset. Guys have walked up to me and just taken swings.

JULIE SALAMON: So, he said, he had to have somebody between him and that guy.

BRUCE WILLIS: It’s an unfortunate situation. I’ve got to have somebody between me and that.

JULIE SALAMON: That somebody—that was a bodyguard. Bruce Willis was the only actor on “Bonfire” who had one. The guy would stand posted outside Willis’s trailer. He was a big, hulking man trained in the Israeli army.

The bodyguard was one reason Willis wasn’t liked much by the crew. For all of his talk of being just a Jersey boy who made good, he kept himself apart. Willis told me the bodyguard was there for protection—not so much to keep people from threatening him, but to protect him from... himself.

When Bruce Willis was growing up, hitting people was a natural instinct for him. But as a famous person, he just... couldn’t anymore.

BRUCE WILLIS: I can't hit anyone anymore. When I was growing up it was a very natural instinct, that if someone threatened me or hit me, that I would hit him back.

JULIE SALAMON: As we talked, I remember thinking, I'd met other actors like him. The kind who claims to hate celebrity, hate being famous, but then just won't shut up about it.

BRUCE WILLIS: I'd like to think I'm still enough of an ordinary person inside of me, anyway. You know, that I can scratch my ass in public. You know, I don't care.

JULIE SALAMON: He even told me that there was a study done a couple years earlier, that showed that putting his face on the cover of a magazine would sell more magazines.

BRUCE WILLIS: And so what I have become is, in effect, a commercial for their, for the National Enquirer or for the Daily Cocksucker or whatever you are.

JULIE SALAMON: It sounded... a little grandiose. But honestly, I kind of give him credit. He didn't even try to be polite to me. I was just another cog in the machinery that kept the spotlight on him.

The epic search for a courtroom was finally over. Finding one on short notice hadn't been easy. It took ages, and it was wildly expensive.

The courtroom was important—it would be the location for the movie's biggest scene, the showcase for Morgan Freeman, who was playing the noble judge, the only upstanding character in the entire story.

Judge Roberts had offered his courtroom in the Bronx, and they'd almost used it. But then, at the last second, they found a better one, out in Queens.

But if the hunt for the perfect courtroom had been a headache, filming the scene wasn't going to be much easier. The courtroom they chose was being used until 6 P.M. every day. The crew had to wait until trials finished. Then they'd swoop in and set up.

Morgan Freeman was working on another project during the day. He was rehearsing for Shakespeare in the Park. And after that, he'd have to come to the courthouse at night for his "Bonfire" scenes.

I talked to Fred Caruso about it. He was the line producer. He had to oversee all these logistics.

FRED CARUSO: Morgan came in at 11 o'clock at night and filmed until he was tired, because he had to go back to sleep. And at the end of the day, at six in the morning, we had to strike the set, take every light, every grip stand, every camera, every prop, away from the courtroom in order for them to go back in session.

JULIE SALAMON: They ended up shooting 14 nights. And every morning they had to strike the set so court could be in session. That meant it took twice as long to do half the work for double the cost.

They needed an extra crew to make the courtroom look like it was daytime. They hired extra lighting people called grips and extra electricians—15 in total. That was on top of the regular crew. Everyone was paid double time.

It wasn't easy. But Brian didn't feel he had to apologize for wanting to shoot in a real courtroom. And, he also thought it was right to cast a Black actor in the role of the judge, even though the judge was written as Jewish in the book.

The judge character was tough and uncompromising. He had to scold the Black defendants. To Brian, it made more sense for that scolder to be Black too. Here's how he described it in a TV interview.

BRIAN DE PALMA: There was something that worked better dramatically for me. You know, I'm an Italian and I can make jokes about other Italians, and no one will get offended. But if a Jewish guy makes a joke about an Italian or an Italian makes a joke about a Jewish guy. It's a whole other thing.

JULIE SALAMON: During the day, the Queens County courtroom was filled with real plaintiffs and real defendants. At night, the movie people invaded. A lot of movie people.

All the stars had to be there. Plus a couple of 100 extras. There's always a lot of down time making a movie. Sitting around, waiting. It's boring during day shoots. At night, it can be excruciating.

Bruce Willis and Melanie Griffith went to their trailers when they weren't needed. Melanie—she was so frustrated she wanted to scream.

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, and then tell me that Come on, get ready, You're on.

Tom Hanks—he organized card games with the crew and other cast members. And Morgan Freeman... he circulated. Talked to everyone. Sometimes it looked like he was running for office. I asked him about it one day on set.

JULIE SALAMON: No but you were mingling, you know, like you're Mr. Popularity among the extras.

JULIE SALAMON: I told him, you seemed like Mr. Popularity among the extras!

MORGAN FREEMAN: I know a lot of these people, they're New York actors, they're friends of mine.

JULIE SALAMON: I know a lot of these people, he says. They're New York actors. Friends of mine. He starts rattling off names of the extras, actors whose whole job on "Bonfire" was just running down a hallway. He says he'd known those extras for 10 years. In some cases, 20.

MORGAN FREEMAN: I mean but these people I've known for a minimum of 10 years. And in some cases, 20.

JULIE SALAMON: So they just do this to pick up extra money in between?

JULIE SALAMON: Then he starts talking in the third person.

MORGAN FREEMAN: Yeah, I mean all of us are not having this incredible rise to glory like Morgan Freeman is having, here. I'm a major standout. Me and Denzel.

JULIE SALAMON: He says, "I mean, not all of us are having this incredible rise to glory like Morgan Freeman is having, here. I'm a major standout. Me and Denzel."

At the time Morgan Freeman was turning 53. And he'd only just become incredibly famous. From his role in "Driving Miss Daisy." He was almost 20 years older than his co-stars. His problems—they were different than theirs.

MORGAN FREEMAN: For one thing I've never had mobs of people trying to get to me. Like Sly Stallone, Tom Cruise, Bruce Willis, they do these kinds of movies and make zillion dollars. Like what made Bruce Willis a superstar?

JULIE SALAMON: "Moonlighting."

MORGAN FREEMAN: No.

JULIE SALAMON: "Die Hard."

MORGAN FREEMAN: "Die Hard." My point is, my agent said to me, you're getting to the level where you have to be careful. You know, because you become a movie star. And you won't have to act anymore.

JULIE SALAMON: Morgan Freeman didn't think he was at that level of stardom—the "Die Hard" level. But he knew that once you got there—you had to be careful.

He said that once you're a movie star, you don't have to really act anymore. At least, not in the same way. And for a theater guy like him, that was a distinction he didn't want to forget.

His schedule was grueling. But he still looked like he was enjoying himself. He told me that "Bonfire" was nothing compared to Taming of the Shrew, the Shakespeare in the Park play he was in.

What made the two projects different? For Shakespeare, he had to memorize the lines. He said it was easier with movies.

MORGAN FREEMAN: You don't even have to learn them until they shoot.

JULIE SALAMON: Why?

MORGAN FREEMAN: You just look at the page and do it.

JULIE SALAMON: "You just look at the page and do it," he says.

Well, Brian didn't quite have the same feeling about that. He really liked Morgan Freeman. But the line thing irritated him. They kept having to reshoot. Take after take. Because Morgan Freeman kept screwing up his lines. Those lines he didn't have time to memorize. All this while they had \$30,000 worth of extras sitting around waiting.

Brian felt like the biggest pressure was on what they all called the Decency Speech. The Decency Speech was Morgan Freeman's big, important monologue about ethics and virtue.

"BONFIRE OF THE VANITIES" CLIP: Justice is the law. And the law is man's feeble attempt to set down the principles of decency. Decency! And decency is not a deal. It isn't an angle or a contract or a hustle. Decency...decency is what your grandmother taught you. It's in your bones.

JULIE SALAMON: This was the movie's big climactic moment. It's the moment when the judge tells the outraged spectators at Sherman McCoy's trial they have to accept the verdict. No matter how unpopular it is. It would be close to the final scene in the movie.

Brian hated speeches in movies. But the screenwriter loved it. And so did another important group: the Warner Bros executives.

Tom Wolfe, though—he was on Brian's team. He was just surprised the speech was even there. Wolfe had originally written Bonfire as a series of articles in Rolling Stone Magazine. That's where the screenwriter had found the decency speech.

But that speech—it hadn't even ended up in Bonfire the book. Tom Wolfe had removed it. He didn't think it was true to life. People, not even judges, they don't walk around giving speeches. I talked to Wolfe about it.

JULIE SALAMON: There's this big, the big justice speech. Which was in the original Rolling Stone article, it's the Kovitsky speech on justice, what is justice. And it's not in the final book.

TOM WOLFE: That's right.

JULIE SALAMON: And why did you take it out?

TOM WOLFE: ...It was important to me that all this be plausible, be true to life. They mentioned the decency speech, I said what decency speech? I couldn't remember it.

JULIE SALAMON: When the movie people mentioned the decency speech, Tom Wolfe said, "what decency speech?" He couldn't even remember it!

The whole thing was yet another reminder: The movie was going to be very different from Tom Wolfe's bestselling book.

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

JULIE SALAMON: Endings are important. So are beginnings. The opening sequences of a movie—it sets the tone for the whole thing.

Before production started, Brian had met with Eric Schwab to discuss what that opening might be. Eric was the second unit director. Brian's protégé. Eric was the one who was going to film the airplane landing. The Concorde. Brian had already bet him \$100 it would never make it into the movie.

The Concorde shot was one of Eric's two big chances to showcase his talent. The other was going to be "Bonfire's" opening shot. They came up with an opening that would show New York as the glittering city.

ERIC SCHWAB: It was going to be a series of shots to kind of show the jewel that New York is and the way it works on such a high level. That it's a unique place, not just a big city, but this sort of fantastical, magical, you know, Wizard of Oz sort of place.

JULIE SALAMON: Eric had gone through stacks of books on architecture and then gone with a location scout all over the city. They stopped at nothing.

ERIC SCHWAB: I was purposely getting on top of buildings to try to find these amazing shots that could be used and would probably end up being maybe 10 shots, which were quick shots, but hopefully, each one would be spectacular in capturing the magnificence of the city.

JULIE SALAMON: There had been months of planning. His location scout had already cleared a bunch of the locations they'd need for the 50 angles on Manhattan. That in itself was huge. Given how hard it is to clear locations in New York City.

At one point I remember Eric telling me the opening would cost more than \$250,000. That's as much as Brian's first five films put together. For a three minute sequence! Ridiculous perhaps. But so exciting.

ERIC SCHWAB: I had very good location people that got me anywhere and enjoyed it. You know, as a challenge. Because we were autonomous, we were just trying to do a great thing.

JULIE SALAMON: While he was doing his own work, Eric tried to show up as much as he could for dailies. That's the raw footage that had been filmed the day before. Dailies are an important part of production. Every night, the team gathers to watch them.

Then, one night on the way to viewing the dailies, Eric bumped into Brian. For once, Brian seemed to be in a good mood. He was lit up. He had a new idea about how to start the movie.

ERIC SCHWAB: Brian came up with a different idea of how to start it off, and so it kind of negated what I had been working on.

JULIE SALAMON: Eric couldn't believe it. He just stood there, trying not to let his face fall as Brian laid out the movie's new opening. That meant that Eric's opening sequence, that glittering Wizard of Oz montage of the city—it was erased.

ERIC SCHWAB: A lot of work into it, and we pretty much had it all refined, so of course I was disappointed.

JULIE SALAMON: I felt so bad for him. He knew that with a big film like "Bonfire," he had a chance for his work to be noticed. Now it felt like even more was riding on that Concorde shot—not just the \$100 bet they'd made.

ERIC SCHWAB: This was a big prestigious picture. So this was a film which was getting a lot of attention, and this was not going to be something that's going to go under the radar. So, you know, that's good and that's bad.

JULIE SALAMON: Even worse, Brian told Eric he was in charge of finding a location for the new opening. Oh, and they needed it in three days.

Larry McConkey was the steadicam operator on "Bonfire."

LARRY MCCONKEY: I have to make a serious objection to the way you described it, because it's not even close to what I had to do.

JULIE SALAMON: That's him, complaining about how I described him in my book.

But before I tell you what I said about him, let me tell you what a Steadicam is. And why you use one. A Steadicam is a kind of metal mount for the camera. The Steadicam operator—that's Larry here—straps the whole thing onto his body. That way, he can walk around, holding the camera. While keeping it steady.

To say it's difficult? That's an understatement. The thing can weigh anywhere from 40 to 100 pounds and half the time the operator is walking backwards. It takes a lot of core strength and coordination to keep the motion fluid.

A good Steadicam shot turns out smooth and beautiful. But watching the Steadicam operator at work? It isn't exactly pretty. While Larry McConkey was hooked up to the Steadicam, for some reason his walking reminded me of... the waddle of a pregnant duck. So I wrote that into my book.

When we talked recently, he really objected to the description. So I asked him, how would you describe it? I won't tell you his entire answer. That would take a whole episode. Here's the short version.

LARRY MCCONKEY: If you want to go forward, you lean forward slightly, if you want to slow down, you lean back, if you want to stop, and then you come forward if you want to go left, right, so constantly doing that dance. You actually have to walk like a tightrope walker.

JULIE SALAMON: So I guess, one person's tightrope walker is another person's pregnant duck.

Either way, Brian was in awe of Larry McConkey. Larry was the best in the business. He was the one who held the camera for the famous Copacabana long take in Martin Scorsese's film "Goodfellas."

"GOODFELLAS" CLIP: Every time I come here, every time you two!

JULIE SALAMON: He'd also worked with Brian on "Casualties of War."

But the new opening Brian had dreamed up, it would test McConkey's skill, for sure. It would be one extended long take that would go on for nearly five minutes. Audiences might not know the difference. But people in the business, they knew just how hard this was to pull off.

LARRY MCCONKEY: Everybody's on double time, triple time, and when I started thinking about it realize this is by far the single most expensive shot I've ever been a part of by times 10, times 50! I don't know, like millions for one shot, which is the opening. The other thing I already knew about Brian: There is no plan B. This is what we're doing.

JULIE SALAMON: The new opening was based on a memory of Brian's. Brian had been at a literary dinner one time when Truman Capote walked in—a little inebriated. It's the kind of thing that's both funny and well, embarrassing.

"Bonfire" would play on that. It would open with Bruce Willis's character—Peter Fallow—drunk, at an awards ceremony.

Brian had given Eric Schwab three days to find a location for the scene. A place big enough and grand enough to house an awards gala. And Eric did it. He found the perfect place to shoot—in a big room at the World

Financial Center. It was right across the highway from the World Trade Center. This was 1990. The Twin Towers were still standing.

The room was called the Winter Garden. It was very glamorous—a big open space. There were marble floors, and palm trees growing inside.

And most importantly—there was this whole maze of concrete hallways beneath it. To get up to the Winter Garden, you could start in an underground parking lot, and then weave your way around to an elevator that would open up into the space.

Brian wanted to use that underground maze in the Steadicam shot. The camera would trail Bruce Willis from a limousine, through those long underground hallways, into an elevator and out into the fancy gala.

The first part is simple: Bruce Willis rides for a few hundred feet on an electric cart—like one that you'd see driving around airports. Larry McConkey, the Steadicam operator—he sits at the front, facing the rear, so he can capture Bruce Willis on camera.

But once they get off the cart, the rest of the shot is on foot. Larry has to walk backwards, holding that very heavy camera.

And so much happens. Bruce Willis chugs whiskey and champagne, moves past an ice sculpture, flirts with women, staggers, changes clothes, swipes a big hunk of salmon mousse with his bare hand—and all in one, uninterrupted shot. A shot that goes on for almost five minutes. In film time, that's an eternity.

Brian couldn't just stand behind a monitor and direct. The action was occurring down a long, dark corridor. There wasn't enough room. And Brian didn't want to miss a beat. So he did something he usually didn't. He put himself in the shot. Just like Alfred Hitchcock used to do.

BRIAN DE PALMA: Because this shot is so complex, the only way to observe it was to be in it. This is not a Hitchcock move. This is basically in order to watch the shot.

LARRY MCCONKEY: He came to me, Larry, how do I look? And he had shaved his beard. Never seen him without that. And he cap on, like a security guard. He had his little outfit. How do I look? And it's like, down so far his ears are sticking out.

JULIE SALAMON: Brian would play a security guard who rides in the cart with Peter Fallow. That way, he could direct the shot second by second.

The only time they could shoot at the Winter Garden was a weekend. Memorial Day weekend. They rehearsed for two days, then prepared to get the shot that second night.

Rehearsals went well. But once they started shooting, it got a lot more complicated. Especially during one part. The ice sculpture part. As Peter Fallow stumbles along, he passes a huge hunk of ice shaped like a lion, being wheeled along on a cart. Larry McConkey, who was filming the whole thing, was supposed to navigate around it.

That ice sculpture—it hadn't been around for rehearsals. They'd been practicing without it. And they didn't anticipate how heavy it would be. Nearly 100 pounds. They set up for the shot. The first part went OK. But then they got to the ice sculpture. It was so heavy that it slowed down the whole caravan.

LARRY MCCNOKEY: And they didn't come and I'm slowing, slowing, I'm getting further and further behind the group...and somebody hit the door, and that blocked somebody else, and somebody else tripped and then my assistant who was right behind me, he fell and I fell on him, which was good. Because it gave me a nice soft cushion.

JULIE SALAMON: It was like a domino: Larry's assistant fell. And then Larry toppled down on top of him, with all of that equipment. For a second, they just lay there.

LARRY MCCNOKEY: Then I remember Brian coming over me as I was struggling. Okay, take that. Yes. Thanks. Are you ready? I'm going to let go. Okay, yours. Okay. Somebody take my arm. And then this face came down. And it was Brian. And he said, I didn't think you could fall.

JULIE SALAMON: The assistant was bloody. His face had smashed into the concrete floor. Larry was concerned about him. But there was something else he was even more concerned about.

LARRY MCCNOKEY: I was thinking like, Oh my god, how's the camera? And my assistant is bleeding now, badly, a big gash, and he said, Yeah I think it's probably okay, I softened the blow.

JULIE SALAMON: They all tried to convince his assistant to go to the hospital. But, he insisted he was fine. He wanted to keep on working. So they started setting up to shoot again, take after take. Luckily, there was a nurse on set ready to jump in.

LARRY MCCNOKEY: The nurse after every take would open up the partially healing you know, scar tissue, because she didn't want it to close until they got him to the hospital and get stitches, which was a good eight hours away from then.

JULIE SALAMON: The assistant did end up getting stitches eventually, after they wrapped. But Larry was grateful he stuck around to nail the shot.

LARRY MCCNOKEY: We could not have done the shot with another assistant, and had it be perfect, which it was.

JULIE SALAMON: You couldn't really tell what the shot would look like. But you could tell something exciting was happening.

Being there—it felt kind of like a big party. I never saw Brian that animated at any other time on the film. Even when he was casting the scene. He kept muttering, “Wire without a net.” “Wire without a net.” Like they were all tightrope walkers, with nothing to catch them if they fell.

The following week, the “Bonfire” crew was back in the Bronx. It was the final night of shooting before they moved to LA to finish the film.

That last night—it had a surreal quality to it. It was the perfect ending to the New York shoot. Once again, they were filming at night. But not inside a courtroom—they were out on the street. They were filming the scene where Sherman McCoy and his mistress Maria get lost and end up hitting a teenager.

For the scene, the creative team wanted to show the Bronx the way Sherman and Maria saw it, as ominous and threatening.

“BONFIRE OF THE VANITIES” CLIP: Oh, Jesus Christ, Sherman, we're in the middle of a goddamn warzone and you're worried about doing the right thing?

JULIE SALAMON: To do that, they attempted to push the boundaries of caricature.

“BONFIRE OF THE VANITIES” CLIP: Hey baby, we having a party?

JULIE SALAMON: But those depictions go way beyond caricature. They are offensive and racist.

The street was filled with burning cars and actors in bright clothing. Some played drug addicts, stumbling around. And one man playing a pimp was bare chested, decked out in gold chains.

This time the moviemakers were very faithful to the book. Tom Wolfe, a white man, had been criticized for stereotyping the people of the Bronx. And those stereotypes were amplified when you could actually see them.

BRIAN DE PALMA: Well, we wanted to portray the Bronx, you know, like it is, but you know, even push the kind of wasteland aspect to it. So we wanted to make it bleak. And you know, we just took every kind of journalistic cliché and just piped it to the max.

JULIE SALAMON: The actors weren't the only ones at the shoot that night. The streets were crowded with people—with real Bronx residents. The people who lived and worked in the community. They were trying to get a look at what was going on behind the police barricades.

I remember it looking absurd. The people from the neighborhood? They were dressed in jeans and T-shirts, just like the crew. And then there were the actors playing them, wearing these wild costumes. That juxtaposition drove it home. The reality of the Bronx was very different from the way it was portrayed in movies, television, and the evening news.

That night on the street—it was noisy. Lots of radios playing and people talking and yelling. Then in the middle of it all, you could hear these small flat sounds. Ping. Ping. Splat. They were eggs. People were throwing them from the perimeters.

CHRIS SOLDO: The egg throwing incident was just funny.

JULIE SALAMON: Chris Soldo, the first assistant director, recalled the scene.

CHRIS SOLDO: I had to tell my PA's, You look at that side of the street, you look at that side of the street, try to figure out where these eggs are coming from. It was just funny. They were eggs, you know, they were eggs. It's like, somebody's throwing eggs at us. Okay.

JULIE SALAMON: I remember one of the camera operators was up on a crane, wearing a raincoat and holding an umbrella to protect himself from flying eggs. People were throwing light bulbs, too.

And then Soldo reminded me of the time someone actually snuck onto set, at a different Bronx location. It was a man who was upset about the fact that there were no Black crew members on the film. He got past the barricade, and walked up to Brian.

CHRIS SOLDO: He went on a tirade about the lack of Black crew members on this film. And I'll never forget it because Brian became as stoic and still as a portrait in the National Portrait Gallery. He just listened, his face went blank, he listened. And then finally, this man was sort of taken away.

JULIE SALAMON: I didn't see this happen. But as Chris told me about it, 30 years later, he empathized with the man's frustration.

CHRIS SOLDO: And in retrospect, the guy had a point. He did have a point. We're doing this with an all-white Hollywood crew, you know.

JULIE SALAMON: It was the last week of shooting in New York. Brian was exhausted. And moving the movie to Los Angeles, to the gated community of the Warner Brothers lot... that would present a whole other host of problems.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: On the next episode of *The Devil's Candy*, Melanie Griffith shows up in Los Angeles with something that left the wardrobe team scrambling.

JULIE SALAMON: So Melanie, what is this article in *Movieline* about your new breasts?

MELANIE GRIFFITH: No! Is there really? What does it say?

JULIE SALAMON: There's a whole article about new breasts.

MELANIE GRIFFITH: Oh my god.

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

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