



THE PLOT THICKENS

EPISODE SIX: THE BEST MOVIE WE EVER MADE

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Not everyone had made the move to Los Angeles. Eric Schwab had stayed behind in New York. Eric was the second unit director, Brian's protégé.

Eric and his crew were in planning mode. They were contemplating his big shot. The one of the Concorde—a luxury plane—that would land at John F. Kennedy airport. The shot would have to be spectacular.

Eric and Brian had made a \$100 bet on whether the shot would make it into the movie. Eric took their bet very seriously. Not because of the \$100, but because he wanted to prove himself to Brian. And to himself. He'd been thinking about how to do the Concorde shot all spring.

ERIC SCHWAB: We had to wait for the sun to move to the exact position we wanted. So we knew you know, probably two or three months ahead of time that we had to wait until this actual day to do the shot.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: He found this special calculator to help figure it out.

ERIC SCHWAB: And it came with some very complicated compasses and elevation devices. So you could measure in any spot on the globe at any day, at any time of the day exactly where the sun was. So I calculated, okay, where did I want the sun to be at a sunset to do this shot, and when it's going to be best with the skyscrapers in the back and everything. So it came out to be a certain day, at a very precise time.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: 8:26 p.m. on June 12, 1990. That would be the time when Eric would have 30 seconds from the time the sun appeared in the camera frame until it dropped below the city skyline.

Finally, the day came. Eric Schwab was going to see if his bet would pay off.

ERIC SCHWAB: I'm very nervous because I knew the shot was expensive. And I knew it was a gamble. And I did know that everything I'm shooting, all the execs at Warner Bros are watching.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Besides all the technical problems that could develop, there was something else that was totally out of Eric's control. What if it rained?

When Eric got up that morning, he checked the forecast. Clear skies! He and the crew got to the airport early. Like very nervous travelers. There was work to do, preparations to make. They had to close the runway, and get the crew set up outside. Then... There was nothing to do but wait.

ERIC SCHWAB: And then I remember, probably half hour before, as the sun starts to come down, there are a couple of little clouds around there, and then, so you think, okay, this might be okay, this might be okay. It's not totally cloudy, it might be okay.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Eric kept staring at the sky through his binoculars, waiting for the Concorde to appear. He was beginning to think it was too late. The sun was starting to sink. Why was it falling so fast?

Then out of the sky, it appeared. Eric clutched his binoculars. He prayed it would all come together as he had imagined. Then the Concorde touched down and rolled to a stop. For a moment, there was silence.

ERIC SCHWAB: No one's saying a word. And then I think one of the camera operators looked at me and he said, That's the best shot I ever did.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Capturing that shot had been like trying to catch a moonbeam. And... Eric caught it.

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

JULIE SALAMON: I'm Julie Salamon. And I was to witness it all. I was a film critic at *The Wall Street Journal*. But in 1990, I spent a year on the set of "The 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 Six: *The Best Movie We Ever Made*.

JULIE SALAMON: It was the day after Eric Schwab had captured the Concorde shot. Brian De Palma was out in California, on the set. I was there too. We all sat down to watch the dailies.

When the plane landed on screen, I heard this weird noise. Brian had started to howl. A wild cackle of a laugh. Vilmos Zsigmond, the cinematographer, was in the screening room, too. Brian yelled out, "Vilmos, we can retire now. This is a young man's game. Look at that!"

In all the years Eric had worked for Brian, the highest praise he'd gotten was, "Good, Eric." When Eric got back to his hotel room in New York that night, there was a message waiting for him. It was from Brian. "You're doing a great job," it said.

This was Eric's chance to move up the ladder. One step closer to that dream shared by almost everyone on the crew. He got his shot at showing what he could do. And it worked.

Bruce Willis just had a couple of scenes left to shoot before he had to leave for Europe for his next film. An action picture called "Hudson Hawk." He would be paid over \$12 million dollars for it—more than double his salary for "Bonfire."

In one of his final scenes, Peter Fallow—Bruce Willis's character, the reporter—is having lunch at a fancy Manhattan restaurant with Arthur Ruskin, an old guy who's a wheeler dealer.

"BONFIRE" CLIP: Well, I just want to thank you again for seeing me on such short notice, Mr. Ruskin. Peter Fallow? Fallow, yeah.

JULIE SALAMON: Ruskin is played by Alan King, a famous Jewish comedian with a Borscht Belt kind of humor. He's the star of this scene.

"BONFIRE" CLIP: I'm not supposed to drink, but I love a sidecar.

JULIE SALAMON: Alan King and Bruce Willis sit side by side on a banquette while Alan King's character spins a long-winded story about his latest venture.

"BONFIRE" CLIP: I was on the plane, we were going to the mecca...

JULIE SALAMON: As he talks, the comedian's character keeps throwing back brandy and wheezing. All of a sudden he starts coughing uncontrollably. Then, his head slams down on his plate. He has literally talked himself to death.

"BONFIRE" CLIP: Mr. Ruskin, Mr. Ruskin?

JULIE SALAMON: The scene is a complicated bit of farce, with waiters yanking tables, someone trying to do a Heimlich maneuver. Bruce Willis's character ends up holding the dead man in his lap. Then the maître d' brings the check—and informs him, the restaurant doesn't take credit cards.

The pacing had to be perfect. The scene had to capture the absurdity of the situation without lingering on it. They did take after take. Brian De Palma seemed to have endless patience. Almost every time Alan King delivered his monologue, Brian burst out laughing.

After 27 takes of the monologue—you heard that right, 27 takes—Brian was finally happy with it. But the rest of the scene still wasn't working. While the camera and lights were being rearranged, Brian sat there thinking. What was missing?

Then Bruce Willis spoke up. Not to Brian. But to his fellow actors. "I think it should go twice as fast," Bruce Willis said. "We're dyin' here."

Everyone glanced over at Brian to see how he would react. It was one thing for an actor to give his opinion to a director. It was something else for the actor to take over. To tell the other actors how to play the scene. Brian made a quick calculation and decided to ignore the incident.

But then, after the next take, Bruce Willis piped up again. "First half of that take was really good," he said to the actors playing the waiters. "The second half was a little slow."

Then it started to escalate. The guy playing the maître d' was rehearsing yanking the table out. Bruce Willis jumped up. "Can I show you one time?" he asked. He stood up and yanked the table out fast.

Bruce Willis knew he was breaking a code. But if he felt confident about anything, it was his own comic timing. On "Moonlighting," for four years, that's what he did—deliver patter. Funny and fast.

Later, I asked Bruce Willis about his decision to step in.

JULIE SALAMON: And what's the dynamic of doing that. Is that like a challenge to the authority? Or—
BRUCE WILLIS: It depends on your position in show business at the time.

JULIE SALAMON: It depends on your position in show business at the time, he says. And Bruce Willis knew: He was valued at \$5 million for the picture. Brian was not.

In the moment, Brian had to make a fast calculation. He had to establish that he was in charge, not Willis. I remember watching that scene unfold. There was a queasy feeling in the air. What would Brian do?

It didn't take long. He hoisted himself out of his director's chair, and in a calm, quiet voice, he instructed the waiters to speed everything up.

After the take was over, Brian turned to Bruce Willis. Together, they stepped off the set. Brian told Willis that he would take his ideas into consideration. But he also tried to make it clear who was in charge.

MONICA GOLDSTEIN: Yeah... Brian was not thrilled about that.

JULIE SALAMON: I recalled that moment recently with Brian's assistant, Monica.

MONICA GOLDSTEIN: If Bruce had a comment, the right thing would have been is to pull Brian aside and say, you know, I'm just feeling really, as an actor, I'm feeling uncomfortable, because the scene's going too slow, or whatever his issues were. But he didn't, he kind of like, bypassed Brian. And he gave his comments directly to the other actor, which was like a no-no.

JULIE SALAMON: Bruce Willis got the message. When he talked to me about it later, he made a point of acknowledging whose film it was.

BRUCE WILLIS: This is Brian's film. My job here is really just to service his vision.

JULIE SALAMON: This is Brian's film, Willis said. He knew that his job was just to service Brian's vision.

Bruce Willis's attitude and behavior could be off-putting. But I have to say, however I felt about him personally, he worked hard. And he cared about his work.

BRUCE WILLIS: It's never been about who's right or who's wrong because eight months from now on this film is on the screen, nobody's gonna give a shit who was right or who was wrong or who made the call...

JULIE SALAMON: He knew that when the movie came out, nobody was going to care about who was right or wrong, or how it was shot. All they would know, is if the scene works—or if it doesn't.

But the public would never even see that scene. All those takes with the waiters going faster and faster... Later, they would end up on the cutting room floor. All that kerfuffle for nothing.

After they finished the restaurant scene, the crew broke for lunch. For once, Brian didn't disappear into his trailer for a nap. He had a guest. His old friend Steven Spielberg dropped by. It's kind of a moviemaking ritual, to visit a friend's set.

The two of them went to the Warner Bros' commissary, where everyone ate lunch. I tagged along. As usual, I sat there scribbling in my notebook.

Brian said he hadn't been to the commissary in 20 years. Not since he worked on his last Warner Bros movie. That was back in 1970.

BRIAN DE PALMA: So when I went to Hollywood at Warner Bros, Marty was out there, and I sort of introduced him around and then there was George and Francis and Steven.

JULIE SALAMON: That's Brian in the documentary "De Palma." He's talking about Marty Scorsese, George Lucas, Francis Coppola, Steven Spielberg. They were the movie brats of their era.

BRIAN DE PALMA: The thing about Steven I think he was the first person I ever saw that had a phone in his car.

STEVEN SPIELBERG: Trying to call Brian de Palma, New York City. Hello, Brian. This is Nancy and Amy and Steve. It's 1976, Brian, we're photographing this on 8mm sound film.

BRIAN DE PALMA: This was the whole Warner Bros youth group. And we were all very supportive of each other and passing the scripts back and forth and looking at each other's movies.

JULIE SALAMON: It was a good time for Brian. Really exciting. And fun! At least it was fun until he started filming his first Hollywood picture for Warner Bros. It was called "Get To Know Your Rabbit."

"GET TO KNOW YOUR RABBIT" CLIP: You too can enter this world of glamour and excitement. "Get To Know Your Rabbit."

JULIE SALAMON: The movie starred Orson Welles and Tommy Smothers.

"GET TO KNOW YOUR RABBIT" CLIP: I could work 24 hours a day if necessary.

JULIE SALAMON: Orson Welles was this famous genius, of course.

"GET TO KNOW YOUR RABBIT" CLIP: To work that hard would be unfair to your rabbit.

JULIE SALAMON: Tommy Smothers was a big television comedy star at the time.

"GET TO KNOW YOUR RABBIT" CLIP: Up yours, fella!

JULIE SALAMON: He was anti-establishment, anti-Vietnam.

Let's just say... the movie didn't go well. Orson Welles wasn't learning his lines. Tommy Smothers up and left in the middle of filming.

Finally, they finished the movie. But Brian wasn't happy with it, or with Warner Bros.

BRIAN DE PALMA: I was devastated. I was finished. So I went back to New York.

JULIE SALAMON: Brian left the project, and the studio executives brought someone else in to finish up. It was a terrible experience for him. Really traumatic.

When Brian told Spielberg that he hadn't been to the Warner Bros commissary since that time, Spielberg looked shocked, like he couldn't believe his ears. "You mean you don't eat lunch in the commissary?" he asked Brian.

Brian said, "I go to my trailer and sleep."

When Spielberg said he liked to hang out with the actors at lunch, Brian just rolled his eyes. Spielberg laughed and said, "I enjoy this process more than you do."

I had a chance to talk to Spielberg one on one about his relationship with Brian. He invited me to his house. It was beautiful, up in the Pacific Palisades. Cary Grant once lived there. Though Spielberg quadrupled its size.

JULIE SALAMON: Well, I've just been to Xanadu with Mr. Spielberg.

JULIE SALAMON: The house was huge—20,000 square feet. But it was also homey. Kind of like Spielberg—totally Hollywood, but also down to earth.

JULIE SALAMON: No butler, no maid. Steven comes up in his ratty jeans, his T-shirt.

JULIE SALAMON: He told me he and Brian were like the Odd Couple.

STEVEN SPIELBERG: He's Oscar and I'm Felix. I furnish the house and he messes it up. When I first met Brian, he brushed right past me and walked into the room and checked out the Westbury hotel, checked out the room I was staying in. And if it's comfortable, he sits in the chair and sometimes doesn't get up for hours. That's what I love about him.

JULIE SALAMON: This was when they were both just coming up, in the struggling phase of their careers. They were close. Together, they'd drive around town in Spielberg's car, the one with the phone in it. Brian saw it as an opportunity to impress possible dates.

STEVEN SPIELBERG: He opened up his little black book and he'd find some girls who he knew. This is like, in the early '70s. We go over to their house. We call them up from their driveway, outside their house, try to get them to go out with us. And if they finally said, Yes, what time will you pick us up? We get out of the car and seven seconds later would ring the doorbell. It kind of wore off after a couple of weeks when the word got out that's how we were getting dates.

JULIE SALAMON: But as we talked, Spielberg made it clear to me—Brian wasn't just a buddy, somebody to hang out with.

STEVEN SPIELBERG: Brian was sort of even then a kind of paternal figure. You know, I like Brian, I'd look, I'd look up to him.

JULIE SALAMON: Brian was only six years older than Spielberg. He was more like an older brother. And Spielberg really valued Brian's opinion.

STEVEN SPIELBERG: Brian's my most honest friend. Brian and George Lucas are my two most honest peers who would just come right out and tell me what they think and know that we'll still be friends, even if they hate it and me.

JULIE SALAMON: In the years that followed, Spielberg became maybe the most famous director on the planet. And a shrewd businessman.

He knew the studios felt financial pressure. And he understood where it came from. They were spending so much, they had to make back even more.

STEVEN SPIELBERG: There's panic in the streets because of what films are costing in the 90s. And I'd be panicking if I were running a studio and having to make 15 films a year, of which half those films are over \$35 million. Films are just costing so much the stakes are so high, every film has to almost make \$100 million to pay off.

JULIE SALAMON: Those were big numbers then. Now, they're even higher.

Spielberg saw the tension between Brian and Warner Bros. He suspected the studio executives saw Brian a certain way.

JULIE SALAMON: Because they look at him still as that underground or semi underground...?

STEVEN SPIELBERG: Brian's still, from an executive standpoint, has the scent of you know, film noir. Maverick. Auteur. Upstart European, even though he's from Philadelphia.

JULIE SALAMON: But Spielberg also saw Brian's side. He understood the essential problem Brian was wrestling with.

STEVEN SPIELBERG: Now suddenly Brian is making a Warner Bros picture. That's different than a film that Brian writes, produces and directs, that comes from his soul. That comes from who he is.

JULIE SALAMON: "Bonfire of the Vanities" wasn't a Brian de Palma picture. Spielberg knew, it could have been directed by a lot of people.

STEVEN SPIELBERG: It could have been made by Sydney Pollack. It could have been made by Robert Benton. "Bonfire of the Vanities" could have been made by Roman Polanski. It could have been made by John Schlesinger. It could have been made by Sidney Lumet. And each of these people would have made it differently, but they could have all made "Bonfire of the Vanities." None of those people could have made "Obsession." None of those people could have made "Dressed to Kill," or "Blow Out," or "Sisters." None of them. That is strictly Brian's style. But Brian is stepping into shoes that can be worn by other filmmakers. And when he does that, he's caught up in the machinery of the studio system. And he has to live with it. We all do. I live with it.

JULIE SALAMON: Yeah.

JULIE SALAMON: Once Brian signed his contract with Warner Bros, he became a part of that studio system. If being a Hollywood director was his devil's candy, he had to figure how to live with the deal he had made.

And Warner Bros had to live with Brian. Once again, it was the budget. Warner Bros felt they had completely lost control. The costs were adding up. For things as small as... an elevator. Dick Sylbert, the production designer, was building one for a scene.

The elevator was meant to be in Sherman McCoy's house. It would open into his penthouse apartment. Making that elevator... It cost \$100,000.

Fred Caruso, the line producer, recalled what happened.

FRED CARUSO: I remember a studio executive came to me and said, what the F is that you're spending \$100,000 on? You got to tell Dick Sylbert. He can't spend the 100,000 buh buh buh buh buh. I said, You know what, why don't you come with me? And why don't you tell Dick Sylbert that he can't spend the \$100,000 and I'll be with you. Is that okay?

JULIE SALAMON: Fred and the studio executive went and found Dick Sylbert.

FRED CARUSO: He says, Dick, we were thinking about this elevator, it was very expensive and you're only going to see three walls and so on. Can't you have a \$50,000 elevator instead of a \$100,000 elevator? And Dick said, You know, now that not only think about it, you're absolutely correct. There could be a \$50,000 elevator. But not in this movie. And walked away.

JULIE SALAMON: Now, in the 11th hour, the studio people decided they'd had enough. They were going to finally put a stop to all the cost overruns. They sent Brian a memo. And then Lucy Fisher asked for a meeting with him to discuss it. That meeting didn't go well. Probably no surprise.

When Brian told me about it, all he remembered was the way it ended. He accused Warner Bros of nickel and diming him. He said they were acting like a low-budget schlock distributor. And then... he walked out the door.

But Lucy Fisher wasn't thrown off. The two of them had had fights before. When I asked her about it later, she sounded almost amused.

LUCY FISHER: We've had two storms. Then he calls up and he does, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Lucy, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

JULIE SALAMON: Lucy jokes that during their first fight, she asked Brian for his mother's phone number. So Lucy could call her, and tell her what a bad job she did.

LUCY FISHER: That gives you an idea of how mad I got.

JULIE SALAMON: Did you really say that to him?

LUCY FISHER: He said, Well she already knows!

JULIE SALAMON: Brian told Lucy, she already knows that.

That fight might've blown over soon enough. But there was a bigger meeting Brian had to worry about. That was with the Warner Bros Chief Operating Officer. The COO. He was second in command at the whole company.

Ten days before the movie wrapped, Brian scheduled a break in shooting for 3 p.m. He would have the COO and some other executives over to his trailer on the lot.

Right before the meeting, Aimee Morris, the PA, found Brian in his trailer. He was emptying ashtrays. He called her in, and asked her to help straighten the place up.

Then at the last minute, Aimee's walkie talkie crackled. The executives called. They were going to be at least a half hour late. Brian was upset. They'd put all this pressure on him not to go over schedule. And now they were making people—including him—sit around and wait.

Finally, they arrived. They all crowded around the little table in the trailer's kitchen. Nearly an hour into the meeting, they started talking about one scene in particular. The opera scene.

In this scene, Sherman McCoy goes to see an opera after the hit and run. He watches a libretto that feels like it's written for him. It screams REPENT, REPENT.

The executives wanted Brian to promise that the scene wouldn't cost more than \$75,000. The amount it was budgeted for. Brian assured them, the opera scene would stay on budget.

The COO smiled at Brian. Could Brian GUARANTEE the cost wouldn't go above \$75,000? That word—guarantee—hovered in the air.

Brian sat listening. It hadn't sunk in yet what exactly the guy meant.

He explained. If the cost went over that number, Warner Bros wouldn't pay the excess. It would be Brian's responsibility to cover it.

After the meeting, Brian was furious. He called up his agent. "This is a cheap shot!" he yelled. "I'm not an investor in this movie!"

When I talked to Lucy Fisher about that meeting, she remembered the discussion similarly—up to a point.

LUCY FISHER: From our point of view, it was a true thing. If he felt he could deliver it at that budget, it was fine with us. We didn't want to pay twice that amount. That was his number.

JULIE SALAMON: That was his number.

LUCY FISHER: That was his number that he said he was gonna do it for. So we said, Good. Do it for that number then.

JULIE SALAMON: Lucy Fisher—she really was a nice person. But she hadn't risen that high in the executive ranks for being nice. She was also tough.

Lucy had made her point. That when it came down to it, the studio held the power. Not all the power, but enough. And where it counted. With the money.

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

"BONFIRE" CLIP: While his entire life hung in the balance, Sherman put on his tie and went to the opera.

JULIE SALAMON: Ten days later, as planned, Brian De Palma filmed the opera scene. And he kept it on budget.

The scene showed Sherman McCoy watching "Don Giovanni." All Tom Hanks had to do was pretend to watch an opera. He was supposed to look miserable as he listens to the chorus telling Don Giovanni to repent.

Tom Hanks had been part of this movie longer than almost anyone else. No one worked harder than he did. And he worked equally hard at being Mr. Nice Guy. But that wasn't why people liked him. They respected him.

Monica, Brian's assistant, captured it well.

MONICA GOLDSTEIN: Tom was very much his own man. He didn't need a bodyguard, you know, he drove himself to set. And he was, if he didn't want to be approached, you know, he made it apparent, but he wasn't mean, he just was very confident. And he knew how to handle people.

JULIE SALAMON: When the final scene was done, Chris Soldo, the first assistant director, addressed Tom Hanks and Kim Cattrall, who was playing his wife.

"Finished in the movie," he said with a flourish. The crew yelled bravo. They waved. Tom Hanks kissed Kim Cattrall's hand. And then they were gone.

I felt a little pang of sadness. Shooting was ending. And for me, this was an adventure that wasn't likely to be repeated. Even Brian seemed a little emotional. Or maybe I was projecting. But I don't think so.

I had heard that when "The Untouchables" wrapped in Chicago, he just disappeared. Without saying a word to anyone. On "Bonfire," it was different. A couple of crew members were preparing a little behind-the-scenes video about Brian.

On that last day of shooting, they turned the camera to him. He asked for his line. Someone whispered in his ear. He smiled. "I'm going to Disneyland," Brian said into the camera.

Then he proceeded to shake the hand of every single person standing nearby. This was his Super Bowl championship moment.

Most of the crew dispersed after that. For them, it was over. But for Brian, the movie was far from finished.

He took a brief vacation—of course he didn't go to Disneyland. But he did spend a week in the Caribbean with his girlfriend, Beth Broderick. Then he was back in New York, in the editing studio.

For Eric Schwab, Brian's protegee, it had been a heady summer.

The Concorde shot had been a major success. Brian wasn't the only one who'd loved it. Lucy Fisher, the Warner Bros executive, had seen it too. And she was so impressed, she wanted to set up a meeting with Eric as soon as he got to Los Angeles.

LUCY FISHER: Eric's been doing a great job. We love his Concorde shot.

JULIE SALAMON: I know.

LUCY FISHER: Did you see it yet?

JULIE SALAMON: I did see it.

LUCY FISHER: Fantastic!

JULIE SALAMON: When Eric flew back to LA for his meeting with Lucy, one of the first things he did was to go shopping. He went to the Gap for new khaki slacks and a crisp white shirt. I remember when he showed up on the set, you could practically see the sales tags dangling off his clothes. Everything was so fresh off the rack.

He consulted with Ann Roth, the costume designer. She thought the casual ensemble—including sneakers—was fine. But she suggested Eric add a jacket to show that he appreciated how important the meeting was.

Brian was standing nearby. He chimed in to veto the jacket.

Poor Eric was a nervous wreck by the time he got on the set at 4 p.m., just to find out his meeting was postponed by a day. To calm himself down he stopped at The Gap to buy another set of clothes, so everything would be fresh again.

The meeting with Lucy Fisher went well. She was so impressed with Eric that she told Marty Bauer, Brian's agent, "Sign Eric as a client!"

And then, after that success, Brian gave Eric yet another chance to show his stuff. When Brian got back from his Caribbean vacation, he decided that he didn't like the opening shot of the movie. It was the very first

image people would see, during the opening credits, right before the Steadicam shot. It was the shot that would set the tone for everything that followed.

Brian wanted something that would instantly convey the sense of New York as the majestic city, the center of power. So, he called up Eric. He had an assignment for him.

ERIC SCHWAB: And Brian said something like, Oh, it's got to be great. And I said, Yeah, it'll be great, you know, and he said, This has to be better than your Concorde shot.

JULIE SALAMON: Brian still hadn't paid Eric the \$100 bet he'd made about the Concorde shot, which definitely was going to be in the movie. So Eric decided to up the ante, partly as a joke...partly to remind Brian that he already owed him.

ERIC SCHWAB: And I said, Okay, then let's go double or nothing on the \$100 bet. And he said, Fine, double or nothing.

JULIE SALAMON: That was good news for Eric. After his successful meeting with Lucy, and now this big new assignment—it was hard not to feel optimistic about prospects ahead.

There was one Warner Bros executive who never understood the appeal of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*—the book version—in the first place.

JULIE SALAMON: Had you read the book before all of this?

ROB FRIEDMAN: Yes.

JULIE SALAMON: You had and what did you think of it?

ROB FRIEDMAN: I was not a fan.

JULIE SALAMON: That was Rob Friedman.

JULIE SALAMON: You were not a fan. That's interesting. Because?

ROB FRIEDMAN: I read so much for my work, when I read, I want to have a good time. And I did not have a good time reading the book. I didn't find anybody redeeming. That there was nobody in the book for me with the—I didn't get it, maybe, is probably the problem.

JULIE SALAMON: Rob Friedman was the President of Worldwide Advertising and Publicity. He was a company man. He'd started in the mailroom at Warner Bros twenty years earlier.

Now he was in charge of the destiny of every Warner Bros movie. He was responsible for selling those movies to the public. It was Friedman who had to convince people that “Bonfire of the Vanities” was THE movie they wanted to see at THAT moment. And THAT moment happened to be Christmas, the most competitive movie time of the year.

Friedman’s job was one of psychology. What images would catch people’s eye? What snippets of dialogue would be intriguing? What tagline would rise above the noise?

He told me about his reaction to Sherman McCoy, the main character in Bonfire, the book.

ROB FRIEDMAN: So for me, Sherman McCoy. I didn’t care what happened to Sherman McCoy. I started to applaud what was happening to Sherman McCoy because I thought he was such a Putz.

JULIE SALAMON: Yeah.

ROB FRIEDMAN: But that’s because I probably didn’t get it, you know.

JULIE SALAMON: How was Friedman—a guy who hated Sherman—going to make people care about this character? This character who actually left the scene of a hit and run?

The Warner Bros executives weren’t scheduled to see the movie until September 11. But that wasn’t soon enough for Friedman. He kept telling Brian he needed it sooner. Otherwise, how could he market it? But Brian didn’t want Friedman—or anyone else—to see the movie until it was finished.

You could tell Rob Friedman didn’t like Brian. And the feelings were reciprocated. Brian thought the publicity man was condescending. He guessed Friedman looked at filmmakers as petulant children who had to be tolerated until they delivered the goods to the grown-ups.

And who were the grown-ups? I think for Rob Friedman, the grown-ups were the studio executives. The rational ones, who had to turn creative impulses into money. And sometimes—or maybe always—that was not easy to do.

Finally, the big day arrived. The day all the studio executives would sit down and watch Brian’s movie. It was September 11. It also happened to be Brian’s 50th birthday. This was the first time anyone—anyone besides Brian and the editors—would see a rough cut of the movie.

All the top people from Warner Bros were there. Lucy Fisher, of course. But also the chairman of Warner Bros, and the company's president. Their reaction was over the top. The chairman, who had a reputation for never liking any Warner Bros film, told Brian that he loved it. Words like "masterpiece" were thrown around.

Afterwards, the executives made phone calls. Lucy Fisher called the stars, then Ann Roth and Dick Sylbert and Fred Caruso. A different executive told Fred, "This is the best movie we ever made, even though it was a nightmare."

All that praise did nothing to relieve Brian de Palma's anxiety. Executives always said the film was wonderful. How many times had they said "masterpiece" when they saw the film, and then disappeared when preview audiences weighed in with a different—negative—opinion?

In Brian's experience, that happened a lot. And preview screenings were set to begin the very next day.

Rob Friedman, the marketing man, was honest with Brian. When he saw the film, he only had a few words to say. And they were not comforting.

ROB FRIEDMAN: Well what I did was I stood up and I said to Brian, You son of a bitch, you've made a good movie. And it's going to be impossible to market.

JULIE SALAMON: For Brian, it was getting harder and harder to see a happy ending.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In the next episode of *The Devil's Candy*... Brian and the actors start their press rounds before opening night. Their job is to make it sound exciting.

MELANIE GRIFFITH: Um, I think that it's a really nice Christmas present, that people should go see it and go see it with a friend because there'll be a lot to talk about after you see it.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: And then came the reviews.

NEWS CLIP: The question I have is for Brian de Palma. If you want to make this film, why make it this way?

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/the-plot-thickens. It has info about each episode and tons of great photos. Again, that's tcm.com/the-plot-thickens.

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