



THE PLOT THICKENS

EPISODE 7: You've Got to Be a Genius to Make a Movie This Bad

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In September 1990, Warner Bros held the first screening of "The Bonfire of the Vanities." It was a kind of test - to see what audiences thought of the movie.

This was one day after a studio executive had said, "This is the best movie I've been involved with in the history of my administration."

Now, it was time to see if the public agreed. The movie was not totally finished. But studios always test pictures in front of audiences before final editing. That's the point. To use their reactions to make changes. The test audiences are carefully selected.

And then, after the screenings, they're handed cards and asked to rate the movie. Did they think it was "excellent" or "very good"? What did they like? What did they not like?

The whole process - as you can guess - isn't foolproof. But it is a fairly reliable predictor of how a movie is going to do. If 90% of a preview audience rates a movie "excellent" or "very good" -- and says they'd recommend it -- the movie had a good chance of being a hit. And a low rating—50 percent or lower—that spells disaster.

The first preview for "The Bonfire of the Vanities" was in San Diego. Brian De Palma flew there from Burbank, a short flight on the Warner Bros jet. The instant Brian walked into the theater he felt a little sick. The audience was the opposite of diverse. Lots of blond hair. Lots of golf slacks. What were they going to make of this New York story, with its racial tension and class hostilities?

Brian found out soon enough. There were 500 people in the audience. Only five of them walked out -- that's not bad. At one point, some people even cheered. It certainly wasn't the worst preview Brian de Palma had ever been to. But he could feel it: The audience didn't get it.

His intuition proved to be spot on. Only 59% of the audience said the film was excellent or very good. And remember, the number they were looking for was 90%. Still, there was time. Editing to do. Changes to make. Things could get better. Or they could get a lot worse.

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. I was there to witness it all. I was the 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 Seven: You've Got to be a Genius to Make a Movie This Bad.

JULIE SALAMON: Bill Pankow was one of two editors Brian de Palma brought in to work on "Bonfire." Pankow was a born and bred New Yorker. He was a sweet man with a mischievous mustache. It had a handlebar twist.

"Bonfire" was the seventh Brian De Palma film he'd worked on.

BILL PANKOW: Just about every film I've ever worked on, I think it's gonna be great. Plus it was a Brian de Palma film. Any Brian de Palma film to me, is a big event.

JULIE SALAMON: Film editing is an artistic skill and a technical one. Editors have to sort through raw footage and figure out how to assemble these bits and pieces into scenes. It's not easy. A great editor can be a director's secret weapon, the behind-the-scenes person who makes it all work.

Nowadays, editing is mostly done on computers. But back in 1990, the editors had to hunch over splicing machines, cutting film and putting it back together again. Pretty much the same way they'd been doing things since the very beginning of motion pictures. Putting it all together was exacting work.

BILL PANKOW: As I edited the film through the Moviola, I'd make a mark and cut it and move to the editing table which had rewinds on it, and a synchronizing machine that was in the center of the table...

JULIE SALAMON: Their assistants would clip long strips of film over a bin -- like drying laundry on a laundry line. These trims were pieces of film that might be used later. There could be hundreds of them. All recorded in a log in case they were needed.

As Bill Pankow pieced the story together, he was impressed. Bonfire looked... good.

BILL PANKOW: Yeah, they looked great. That opening Steadicam shot, and the overhead shots. I mean, it just you can go on and on about, stylistically, how the film looked. I thought it was quite effective, too.

JULIE SALAMON: Of course, Pankow was an optimist. A glass half full kind of guy.

Bill PANKOW: I'm always hopeful that the audience is going to embrace it, and enjoy it and react in the way you always you'd like them to react or the director would like them to react.

JULIE SALAMON: His experience had taught him—sometimes painfully—that audiences didn't always see what he saw, feel what he felt.

He had realized that not long before Bonfire, on another Brian De Palma film, "Casualties of War."

BILL PANKOW: With "Casualties of War," it was a very emotional film. I was having tears in my eyes for quite a long time, and I had never experienced that before. It's very emotional. And I was hoping that the audience would feel the same way and embrace the horrors of war, and the horrors of what happened in that film. But anyway, they did not.

JULIE SALAMON: But even the previews for "Casualties of War" had been better than with "Bonfire."

BILL PANKOW: Afterwards, when the cards are great, and the numbers are great, everybody's happy and they go to dinner. And in the case of "Bonfire of the Vanities," it was more like a meeting, you know, where they'd come out of the theater, and they'd wait for the scores to be tabulated. And then the executives would huddle with Brian, and they talk a little bit.

JULIE SALAMON: The day after the preview in San Diego, the Warner executives gave Brian a more detailed analysis. How the film might be recut to make audiences more receptive.

Brian put on his game face. He listened to what the executives had to say and took the memo they'd prepared. He acted as though everything was OK.

But he wasn't really okay. The next day, he went back to Burbank. Only this time, he didn't take the company jet. He drove. When he got home, he took some Valium and went to bed. He didn't come out of his house for five days.

I talked to Rob Friedman, the Warner publicity man, about the previews. Friedman was the man who once told Brian he'd made a great film but he, Friedman, didn't know how to market it.

JULIE SALAMON: Were you surprised by the results of the screening? Or did you have any anticipation going in?

ROB FRIEDMAN: Actually I - well, I don't want to say this for the record

JULIE SALAMON: Oh come on, this is for a year from now.

ROB FRIEDMAN: Yeah, I had a concern going in that the audience unless properly set up for the uniqueness of Brian's vision would have a problem with it.

JULIE SALAMON: Beforehand, you felt that?

ROB FRIEDMAN: I personally had a problem, yeah.

JULIE SALAMON: Did the other executives feel that way?

ROB FRIEDMAN: There were concerns. But you know, in this process what you say is, great, I hear ya, now let's go see if it's true. I mean, this is what it's all about. This is the critical work period in a movie's life, post production. This is where Brian as a filmmaker, and the studio can cooperate with each other in trying to make changes. I mean, that's the beautiful and magical thing about film. You can change things constantly.

JULIE SALAMON: He made it sound smooth and effortless. But we both knew better.

And Friedman didn't get that top publicity job for nothing. He knew how to spin things. He found an example of a movie that had lousy preview results and then managed to overcome them. That movie was "Goodfellas."

"GOODFELLAS" CLIP: As far back as I could remember I always wanted to be a gangster.

JULIE SALAMON: The Martin Scorsese picture that had been released just a couple of months earlier.

ROB FRIEDMAN: There are a lot of movies that don't necessarily have great previews. The preview process - see, that's one of the things that bothers us, as studio marketers, or production people is that the preview process is not a test. I mean, it's not a score that you should publicize. Okay, and the guys who get straight A's are always the winners, and the guys who get D's are always the losers. It

isn't true. "Goodfellas" is a prime example. If you rated it on an A to F scale, it got at best a C- in the preview process, maybe worse.

JULIE SALAMON: And it's doing quite well.

ROB FRIEDMAN: It's an A! I mean, critically, financially, it will be fine. It'll be a very profitable movie. Critically, it's an A movie. And by the way, it's going to be a big contender at Oscar time.

JULIE SALAMON: Yeah.

JULIE SALAMON: I found the preview process mesmerizing... and disturbing. Wouldn't this reduce every work of art to the least common denominator? Smooth off every rough edge to the point of blandness? But Friedman wasn't interested in having a philosophical discussion.

ROB FRIEDMAN: So the preview process is not something to be shared with the media, because they don't understand it.

JULIE SALAMON: Because you won't let anybody explain it.

ROB FRIEDMAN: No, but it's not you. I'm talking about the reporters who are writing.

JULIE SALAMON: I understand that, but part of what I'm trying to do in this book is explain this process.

ROB FRIEDMAN: I don't need them to explain the process. I couldn't - you'd have to take a whole book to explain the process. Or at least a chapter.

JULIE SALAMON: It would be a chapter. It is a chapter.

ROB FRIEDMAN: But we're not in the business of training the media about our business.

JULIE SALAMON: I understand that, but I'm doing it anyway, you're getting it for free, you don't have to train me.

ROB FRIEDMAN: No, but you want to know something, you won't be able to do it. You won't. Because it's too - it changes. Just like movies change.

JULIE SALAMON: As far as Friedman was concerned, the preview process was something that should NEVER be discussed with the media. Including me. Period.

Anyone who has created anything, or worked on a big project of any kind, has probably experienced the jitters of anticipation. This thing that's consumed you for weeks or months or years... will people think it's brilliant or a joke? Or maybe worse, not even notice it at all.

For most people, the glory and the humiliation are personal, of not much concern outside your immediate circle. But for those who dare seek a bigger stage, there's nowhere to hide.

It's actually kind of the central theme in "Bonfire of the Vanities."

"BONFIRE" CLIP: A Master of the Universe. A great height from which to view the rest of the world. A great height from which to fall.

JULIE SALAMON: No one knew that better than Brian De Palma. He'd experienced both—glory and mortification.

For Brian, the test screenings were the beginning of an awful end. That's what he told Charlie Rose later. The TV host asked him:

CHARLIE ROSE: When did you know this was not gonna turn out good?

BRIAN DE PALMA: I guess basically, when we started to preview it, and you know, we sort of got all kinds of negative responses from the audience

JULIE SALAMON: Yet despite the difficult production, despite the lukewarm previews...he still had hopes for "Bonfire." That the critics would see what he was trying to do.

Then, in mid November, he opened The Los Angeles Times to the Calendar section, the arts pages. He zeroed in on an article about the box office prospects for Christmas. The reporter handicapped the films by category. He looked for "Bonfire" and found it. It was in the category titled "Longshots."

Less than two weeks later, New York Magazine took its turn at handicapping the holiday movies. Bonfire was in the category of "Oscar Hopefuls." That part was promising. Then Brian read the short article, quoting people who had seen the movie at previews. And his heart sank.

"The absolute stinker of the season," it said. "Every decision they could have made, they made wrong." There was nothing Brian could do but wait. And hope that all those handicappers had gotten it wrong instead.

Three weeks before the release date for "The Bonfire of the Vanities," Warner Bros hosted the press junket for the film. That's when the studio flies in film journalists to help promote the movie. "Bonfire" had gotten a huge response: 51 television reporters and 72 print reporters showed up. The junket was held at the Bel Age Hotel, just off the Sunset Strip.

On the 1st day of the junket, Brian walked into the lobby of the hotel wearing his trusty safari jacket. That day was reserved for television interviews. Brian was escorted to his suite, where a pot of cappuccino waited for

him. There was also a large plate of fresh fruit and an ashtray. Two cameras were set up. One camera faced the interviewer and the other faced the interviewee.

INTERVIEWER: Which says it all, I guess!

JULIE SALAMON: Brian had done this many times before. He was familiar with the process. It was sort of like being trapped in a corner at a cocktail party and forced to answer the same six questions, over and over. Fifty-one times, to be exact. That's the number of TV reporters he would talk to that day.

On the junket for "Casualties of War," to relieve the boredom, he brought a video camera to the interviews. He would turn the camera on and start asking the reporters questions! But that Saturday, on the "Bonfire" junket, he behaved himself.

INTERVIEWER: Brian De Palma, the director of "Bonfire of the Vanities," I wonder if I should describe you as the person sort of stoking the flames of this bonfire. As a director, do you sometimes feel like you're building a blaze of some sort?

BRIAN DE PALMA: We tried to build a bonfire that was very hot and high.

INTERVIEWER: And a bonfire has combustible elements and I guess the contrast of haves and have nots and Wall Street and Bronx, is that the kind of contrast the director hungers for?

BRIAN DE PALMA: Well, it's very dramatic and if you can bring characters like that in conflict within a satiric drama, sparks fly.

JULIE SALAMON: Brian seemed relaxed and in good spirits for most of the day. He laughed when a reporter from Seattle told him she wanted to ask an original question - and did!

"Where did you get your socks?" she asked.

Brian stretched out his leg so he could see his brown argyle socks. He looked like he was really thinking about it, more than he'd thought about any of the questions about the movie. Then he answered. "At the Beverly Center."

Then the same reporter pushed her luck. She asked him how he felt about how the movie turned out. Brian looked perplexed, and then he lost his cool.

"That's a strange question," he snapped. "I just spent a year and a half making this movie. Of course I like it." The reporter turned red. As she left the room, she apologized.

Bruce Willis and Tom Hanks were also at the Bel Age that day. Installed in separate suites, doing what they could to sell the movie. Tom Hanks wore a black button down shirt under a black blazer. He assured people in the middle of the country that this was not just a New York story.

TOM HANKS: It's a story about certainly, yeah, it takes place in New York City. But at the same time, you don't have to live in one of the five boroughs of Manhattan to relate to what's going on.

JULIE SALAMON: Bruce Willis was wearing grey coveralls. He talked about his favorite subject—himself, and what the movie would do for him.

BRUCE WILLIS: I'm still waiting to hear whether people think I, you know, did a good job in this thing.

JULIE SALAMON: Melanie Griffith was off in London, filming her next movie. Still, she participated in the junket—via satellite. She looked demure in a red turtleneck under a black blazer, a black headband holding back her hair.

Even from that distance, she sensed a certain...lack of enthusiasm for "Bonfire" from the interviewers.

MELANIE GRIFFITH: Did you like the movie?

INTERVIEWER: Well, you know, it - I don't know if you say you like it. It's such an unsettling movie. Isn't it? I mean the subject matter...

JULIE SALAMON: But like Brian and her fellow actors, Melanie was a pro. She knew her job was not really to answer the questions, but to sell the movie. And sell she did. When the interviewer asked her for a final comment, she was ready.

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.

JULIE SALAMON: She was right. A LOT to talk about.

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

JULIE SALAMON: The Monday before the movie opened, Brian could no longer avoid the possibility. "The Bonfire of the Vanities" could be a catastrophe.

That morning, Brian picked up the trades. Those were the publications whose reviews measure a film both artistically and by its box office promise. He started with the industry Bible, Daily Variety. He didn't have to read past the first paragraph.

"The Bonfire of the Vanities' is a misfire of a thousand inanities." That was enough. He turned to The Hollywood Reporter. It was death by metaphor.

"Brian De Palma douses Tom Wolfe's The Bonfire of the Vanities with enough incendiary cinematic devices to keep 50 toxic dumps in perpetual fiery rage." It went on and on like that until the final sentence. "Bonfire" will be quickly extinguished at the box office."

Then he read the news magazines. Time said a couple of nice things about the cinematic style, but concluded the ending was "dreadful." The critic focused on the decency speech, that speech that Morgan Freeman delivers in the courtroom. The critic said that the ending "manages to travesty all the tough-minded things Wolfe tried to say."

Two days later, the TV critics weighed in.

NEWS CLIPS: This is not just a bad movie. This is a failure of epic proportions, Ishtar of the Vanities...De Palma's direction is hopelessly heavy handed...Director Brian DePalma soft-pedals the whole story and has made a very bad film here, I'm very disappointed.

JULIE SALAMON: Maybe the worst slam came from the critic on Good Morning America.

"You've got to be a genius to make a movie this bad," he said.

That night, two days before the movie opened, Warner held its industry screening for the movie in Los Angeles. There was a giant searchlight outside the theater. Paparazzi gathered outside, cameras at the ready, hoping to spot a major celebrity.

At these screenings, if the buzz on a movie was good, it would be packed with high level studio executives, major dealmakers and stars. If the buzz was bad, the seats would be filled by secretaries, junior agents and minor actors—people who had been handed invitations by their bosses.

A few stars showed up. Tom Hanks was loyal to the very end. He came with his wife, Rita Wilson. And their friend, the actor Steve Martin. Kim Cattrall was there, too. But Bruce Willis, Morgan Freeman, and Melanie Griffith - they didn't attend. Although Melanie did send her husband, and her mother, Tippi Hedren.

There was no sign of Peter Guber, the original producer, the one who'd told me all those months before that Maria had to be-

PETER GUBER: This woman's the devil's candy!

JULIE SALAMON: "The devil's candy." The guy who insisted Tom Hanks play the main character Sherman McCoy.

PETER GUBER: "Tom Hanks, Tom Hanks, Tom Hanks, I called them every day."

JULIE SALAMON: The guy who had decided he could make this movie, knowing how difficult it would be. At one point, Guber said this was a movie premiere he wouldn't think of missing!

Brian De Palma didn't even go to the screening. But he did show up at the after-party. I was there too. Warner Brothers rented out Eureka. It was a hip new restaurant that was a kind of brewery and beer garden. It looked like a happy occasion, full of congratulations and smiles and friendly chatter. People kept coming up to Brian to tell him how much they liked the movie.

Brian had a smile on his face as he looked across the room at all those industry people laughing and talking, eating and drinking. But when I asked him later what he was thinking, Brian said, "They can afford to be friendly. I'm out of the competition."

On Friday, December 21, "The Bonfire of the Vanities" opened on 1,373 screens across the country. That morning, the print reviews came out. They were unanimously awful.

The critics piled on with a sense of personal outrage. As if Brian De Palma had assaulted them. When really, all he did was make a movie they didn't like. Not a detail was left unchallenged by someone.

The New York Times even noticed Melanie Griffith's breast enhancement. The critic wrote that "Miss Griffith's body appears to be so perfect as to look surgically reconstructed."

Still, the Warner studio executives hoped the movie might do reasonably well opening weekend. People would be drawn by the stars, or curiosity. If it made between 6 and 7 million dollars in ticket sales - that was enough to be respectable.

But another thing happened that Friday. A record cold fell across the West. Just north of Los Angeles, it snowed for the first time since 1942. Not great weather for driving to the movies.

By Monday, "Bonfire" took in just a little more than three million dollars in ticket sales. The final indication that "Bonfire" would be a flop - with audiences, with critics and at the box office. There were no silver linings to be found. The picture was a bona fide disaster.

CHARLIE ROSE: So, you make this Bonfire of the Vanities and except for a few people that love you dearly, not many people liked it

BRIAN DE PALMA: Not even the ones that love me dearly.

JULIE SALAMON: It would take Brian a long time to recover from "Bonfire." He talked about it publicly on Charlie Rose, a year after Bonfire was released.

CHARLIE ROSE: So what is Brian de Palma do then, what do you do? Where do you go what do you say? Do you want to hide? Do you want to go away for a year? What do you want to you want to, you know,

BRIAN DE PALMA: Basically go in bed and pull the covers over your head knock him out as long as possible

BRIAN DE PALMA: You know, you basically want to hide because, you know, it's like all your instincts seemed wrong, nothing you did worked out, you get incredible negative reviews and the picture bombs. So the business thinks you're completely hopeless. And you begin to wonder if you know anything anymore.

JULIE SALAMON: Over the Christmas holiday, Brian took a skiing lesson and pulled ligaments in his knee. It was like history was repeating itself. Less than a year and a half had passed since he sprained his ankle, right after "Casualties of War" bombed.

But this time, instead of getting dumped by his girlfriend, he asked the woman he was dating to marry him. It wasn't Beth Broderick. They'd broken up during post production. The woman was Gale Anne Hurd.

NEWS CLIPS: The award-winning producer behind “The Terminator” and “Aliens” ...The producer of “Aliens” is Gale Anne Hurd.

JULIE SALAMON: Gale Anne was one of the most successful producers in Hollywood. Famous for horror and sci-fi movies.

GALE ANNE HURD: I really enjoy the genre. I think that women prefer that fantasy element, so they can extrapolate and enjoy the experience without feeling personally threatened.

JULIE SALAMON: Together, Brian and Gale Anne decided to leave the New York-Hollywood axis. They moved to northern California, near Palo Alto, and got married the following summer. They had a baby in the fall.

“Bonfire” has remained a painful memory for Brian. But almost all the people I reconnected with for this podcast reported fond—or at least nostalgic feelings—about “Bonfire” and about Brian.

Like Monica, Brian’s old assistant. Bonfire was the first time she got credited as an associate producer — a title Brian decided to give her.

MONICA GOLDSTEIN: Ultimately, for me, I felt like I was just going to school, film school. Like, I couldn't have learned from anybody better truthfully, because movies are visual stories and everything was visual to Brian, everything. And so just to be like a fly on the wall. I was pinching myself. I was so beyond grateful.

JULIE SALAMON: Aimee Morris, the production assistant who got her start on “Bonfire,” had similar feelings. And she was sad too - sad that the movie didn’t work out as they’d hoped.

AIMEE MORRIS: I, honestly when I think about it, I think how lucky I was, I mean, honestly, how lucky I was to have been able to work on it. You know, it makes me sad that it was such a fail.

JULIE SALAMON: Eric Schwab, the second unit director, felt proud of his work in the movie—the Concorde landing, of course. But also the perfect opening shot that he captured: a gargoyle jutting out of the top of the Chrysler Building.

When the movie came out, Eric was stunned by how vicious the attacks were - on the movie and on Brian. He felt so bad about it, he decided not to remind Brian of their bet—the \$200 Brian was supposed to pay Eric if both his shots ended up in the movie.

When I talked to Eric recently, I couldn't remember what happened with the bet. I asked him if he ever got that \$200.

ERIC SCHWAB: You don't, you don't remember what happened?

JULIE SALAMON: No, you've got to remind me!

ERIC SCHWAB: Here's what happened. So, Julie, you saw Brian once, and he gave you the 200. And he said, Give this to Eric. And you gave it to me. You said Hey, this is from Brian. I said what? And so he remembered, and he gave me \$200 bills. He remembered that we had made the bet he paid me and I never said a word about it. But he actually did give me the \$200 which I saved. I didn't spend.

JULIE SALAMON: You still have it?

ERIC SCHWAB: I do somewhere. Yeah. Yeah.

JULIE SALAMON: Eric spent years trying to capitalize on his breakthrough in "Bonfire." He ultimately directed two small films—a thriller called "The Learning Curve" and a sweet family movie, called "My Lucky Elephant." He also continued a successful career as a second unit director. And he married a Thai woman, who he met while shooting "Casualties of War." They have a son.

It's been a good life. Not easy. But that's the movie business. Eric reminded me of that during our last conversation.

He brought up how excited he was, all those years ago, when Brian helped him get into the Directors Guild. It was right before they shot "Casualties of War." At the time, Eric ran into the movie's producer and told him the news.

ERIC SCHWAB: Art was there, and I said, Hey Art, hey, guess what, I just got into the Directors Guild. And he said something like, congratulations, now you can have a shitty life like the rest of us, or something like that...which, looking back I realized, oh, he knew what he was talking about.

JULIE SALAMON: But I don't think you've had a shitty life. I think you've had a pretty good life.

ERIC SCHWAB: No, it's been an interesting life. It's been an interesting life, but it's not a life that's halfway. I mean, it really does consume your life, you know, you live a very strange life. I mean, you know, I'm often traveling for like a year at a time and often, you know, with a day's notice getting on a plane and going somewhere, you know, so it's not a life that you can anticipate or predict.

JULIE SALAMON: But can you imagine doing anything else?

ERIC SCHWAB: No, I couldn't. I couldn't.

BRIAN DE PALMA: Endings are tough. They're always tough in your career, if you can get two or three great endings to your movies, it's a miracle.

JULIE SALAMON: That's Brian in the documentary "De Palma," talking about "Snake Eyes." It was a movie he made several years after "Bonfire." But it's relevant to this story—maybe to every story.

When "Bonfire" died at the box office, I had the ending to my story. It was time for me to start writing—at warp speed. I had hundreds—possibly thousands—of pages of notes and transcripts I'd collected for a year.

My publisher was eager to bring the book out the following fall, to capitalize on all the publicity surrounding "Bonfire's" demise.

I named my book *The Devil's Candy*. The drumbeats started well in advance. Three weeks before publication, *The New York Times* called *The Devil's Candy* the most talked-about book in Hollywood.

It was an amazing experience, kind of overwhelming. The book hit bestseller lists. My photo was in *Fortune*, *The New York Times*, *People*. I was on TV talk shows.

INTERVIEWER: "Bonfire" ended up costing just under \$50 million, had brought in just under \$8 million. But what I didn't know is that the film critic for the *Wall Street Journal*, Julie Salamon got permission from director Brian De Palma, and from the studio, to be there on the set at meetings in the cutting room throughout the entire project. I asked her when she knew *Bonfire* was going to be bomb-fire.

JULIE SALAMON: You know, I didn't. I hate to admit it. But the truth is, up until the reviews came out. You know, when you watch a movie being made, you see all these little pieces being put together. And it's all, for me, it was all fascinating. You know, that's interesting. You get caught up in the whole magic and momentum of it.

JULIE SALAMON: My publisher threw a big release party at a bookstore in the Winter Garden, where the opening scene of "Bonfire of the Vanities" was filmed.

I felt a bit like a reporter version of Cinderella. I was used to working behind my computer, not out on center stage. I also felt a little bit like Peter Fallow -- Bruce Willis's character -- who gets honored there in the movie. At least I didn't stumble in drunk. I was proud of the book and grateful for all the positive attention.

I can't emphasize enough how generous Brian De Palma was to me. Even after "Bonfire's" painful reception, he continued to talk to me about it while I was writing. I pestered him about missing details, he helped me with notes and numbers. I was disappointed he didn't want to participate in the podcast. Even so, he was helpful.

And it was great how many crew members were happy to talk about their experience on set. We reached out to some of the stars, too. At the time, they weren't interested, or didn't respond. We actually just reached out again. You never know.

I'll be surprised if Bruce Willis shows any interest. He was bitter about Bonfire -- and about my book -- for quite awhile. Four years after *The Devil's Candy* was published, I received a phone call from a reporter at Entertainment Weekly.

I was not quite alert; my second child, Eli, was a few months old at the time. The reporter was calling for comment on something Bruce Willis had said. He was apologetic and warned me it was pretty awful.

Willis had described me as "whoever this chick is who wrote the book" and then went on to say he hoped I got so famous I was threatened, and had to sleep with a gun by the bed every night.

And then, this is a direct quote, that "one night she finally realized the sick life she was living and she just put the gun in her mouth and blew her f...in' brains out." Then he added, "I thought that a few years ago. Now I wish her all the best."

I had gotten my share of mean comments over the years for reviews and articles I'd written. But nothing like that. I was actually shocked. I asked the reporter to give me a few minutes. And then I sat at my computer to put together a response that was calm, but had a little edge.

I wrote: "I certainly had no ax to grind with Bruce Willis. But I do think he should talk to somebody about having those kinds of violent reactions to people."

Eventually, my being an object of Bruce Willis's scorn became a family joke. I remember Roxie, my daughter, eight or nine years old at the time, seeing a poster for one of his movies, maybe "Armageddon." She turned and asked, "Isn't that the man who hates Mommy?"

Certainly his career survived both "Bonfire" and me.

Melanie Griffith continued to appear in movies and on television. But as she had feared, her moment of stardom was brief and didn't survive into middle age. But she has had the chance to appreciate her daughter, Dakota Johnson's fame.

INTERVIEWER: Joining me now, Melanie Griffith and her little girl, Dakota Johnson. This is the coolest mother daughter date night ever.

MELANIE GRIFFITH: I know, I don't want to say I'm so proud I've said it so many times but, I am so proud.

JULIE SALAMON: Morgan Freeman did become a supersonic movie star, whose career has kept flourishing.

NEWS CLIPS: And the Oscar goes to Morgan Freeman...It is my pleasure to present the Screen Actors Guild Award to Morgan Freeman.

MORGAN FREEMAN: Thank you very much, thank you.

JULIE SALAMON: Morgan Freeman told a British reporter in 2015 that he never saw "Bonfire."

And Tom Hanks continued his upward trajectory, while maintaining his status as the nicest guy in Hollywood.

DAVID LETTERMAN: You know the good thing about this guy, he's just a nice, decent guy. And whenever he's in the movies, you sense that. And well, he's talented too, on top of that. Ladies and gentlemen, here he is, little Tommy Hanks.

JULIE SALAMON: Putting this podcast together gave me an extra appreciation of Brian's dilemma, as he made "Bonfire."

My book - *The Devil's Candy* - is more than 400 pages long, packed with characters and situations and—I hope—insights into the movie business, that dangerous collaboration between art and commerce. How do you condense that into 7 episodes? So many storylines and characters had to be cut.

And Brian's task was further complicated by Tom Wolfe's book - how controversial and inflammatory it was. Today, it would make far more sense to produce *Bonfire* as a limited series. The book's complexity—and even its unlikable characters—could work. There wouldn't be the pressure of having to create a mainstream product.

Books and movies can last, but people do not.

MARTY BAUER: I'm 74 years old... I got my first shot... I'm living in quarantine. Going stark raving mad.

JULIE SALAMON: Okay!

JULIE SALAMON: I talked to Marty Bauer -- Brian's old agent -- in February. We were both holed up at home.

MARTY BAUER: Two things, Julie. One is, call me if you need anything else.

JULIE SALAMON: Thank you.

JULIE SALAMON: And two is, send Brian my best. Tell him I'm still alive.

JULIE SALAMON: During our conversation, he was dynamic. Full of life. He made me and my producer laugh the whole way through.

A few months later, he died, at home in Los Angeles.

A lot of the important characters I met during the writing of *The Devil's Candy* have also died, just in the last twenty years. Tom Wolfe, the production designer Richard Sylbert, the cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond, the casting director Lynn Stalmaster.

As for Brian, after "*Bonfire*," he continued to make movies, alternating as he always did—between the films he loved to dream up and the big Hollywood pictures.

In 1996, Brian directed the first "*Mission Impossible*" movie with Tom Cruise—a hit. And then "*Mission to Mars*," not a hit. At that point he was 60 years old. He came to a realization.

BRIAN DE PALMA: The Hollywood system we work in - it does nothing but destroy you. There's nothing good about it in terms of creativity. So you're battling a very difficult system. And all the values of that system are the opposite of what goes into making original, good movies. And when I finished that movie, that's when I got on a plane and went to Paris. I said, I don't want to make movies like this anymore. So "*Mission to Mars*" was the last movie I made in the United States.

JULIE SALAMON: He has stayed true to his word. The five movies he completed after that were mostly filmed and financed abroad.

Brian celebrated his 80th birthday in 2020. I attended his birthday party on Zoom, along with the other guests, including his two daughters, now adults.

For the past several years, he's lived with a wonderful woman. I had a hand in setting them up. They even have a cat and two dogs! Our friendship has survived, and in some ways that's a miracle.

When my book came out, I cringed when I read one review. It was in Newsweek. It summed up an undeniable truth: "De Palma's misfortune is Salamon's gain."

It hurt to hear this put so bluntly. But it was true. Whether the movie succeeded or failed, my story wouldn't have been all that different. Every movie has tons of things that go wrong - or just seem absurd. That was what I wanted to write about. About how hard it is to catch lightning in a bottle - how much work it takes to find that touch of magic.

I know "Bonfire" still wounds Brian. But he's had an amazing career, and "Bonfire" was a small part of it. He has to know that. Maybe one day he'll feel it, too.

There was something about the way Brian threw himself into a project with all his being that gave the work a jolt of excitement for everyone involved.

That desire to be part of something extraordinary... that Devil's Candy.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: I'm Ben Mankiewicz, and you've been listening to Season 2 of The Plot Thickens: The Devil's Candy. Stay tuned as we'll have a bonus episode coming soon. Our whole team is so happy you listened.

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 and Tim Pelletier.

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

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