

ACCLAIMED
CINEMATOGRAPHER
OWEN ROIZMAN
RUMINATES ON
CRAFTING THE
LOOK OF
The Exorcist.

High Holy Light

by JOHN W. BOWEN

I

EW CINEMATOGRAPHERS HAVE HAD SUCH A HIGH SUCCESS RATE AS FIVE-TIME OSCAR NOMINEE OWEN ROIZMAN.

Along with *The Exorcist*, Roizman's credits include *The French Connection*, *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three*, *The Stepford Wives*, *Network* and *Tootsie*, plus various collaborations with directors as diverse as Woody Allen, Sydney Pollack, Robert Redford and Lawrence Kasdan. Roizman, who's featured prominently in the new documentary features on Warner Bros.' Blu-ray release of *The Exorcist* details capturing evil at 24 frames-per-second.

Friedkin has described his filmmaking style from that period, which includes The Exorcist and The French Connection, as "induced documentary." Is this accurate?

As far as *The Exorcist* goes, we never talked about a documentary look. We just talked about making it look real, with the intent that if you keep it real – looking real, feeling real – it helps suck the audience in a little more, like they're not just watching some hyped-up horror film, that they're actually feeling a part of it.

What was the most difficult sequence to shoot?

Well, the only effects that were difficult for me to photograph was anything that involved Linda [Blair] being on wires – when she's floating up off of the bed during the exorcism and, of course, the old famous spider walk [re-introduced to the film in the 2000 re-release] which didn't work at the time because we just couldn't hide the wires well enough. Hiding the wires when she levitated was a challenge too, but fortunately I'd had some experience doing that from when I was shooting commercials, so I knew what to do – a couple of little tricks that I'd learned.

How about the most iconic image in the film: Father Merrin getting out of a cab in the fog and standing in front of the house, silhouetted in a shaft of light. That was the biggest challenge of the movie, no question about it. We came out there to shoot the scene and Billy had made a rough little sketch on a piece of paper. We discussed what he was looking for and he said, "Okay, see you later," and took off. I took the shade that was on the window and just pulled it up and put a big light back in there and some smoke in the shot. It was pretty simple and straightforward. We got it lit up and he came back and said, "Wait, you can't do that – we have to have the shade down." I said, "Well, how can a beam of light come through the shade?" He said, "You figure it out." So we actually had to wrap that night – didn't even shoot it. Came back a second night and we took the frame of the window out, moved [the window and the shade] back about eight feet or something, put the light next to the shade and shone it out the window. Then we lit the street in two directions and had the cab drive up. But when

you see that iconic image in stills, that was actually taken during a rehearsal – the still photographer jumped in and shot that picture.

Friedkin's bad behaviour is legendary, with cast and crew reporting verbal and occasionally even physical abuse. Yet, they all seem to forgive him. How would you describe the atmosphere on set?

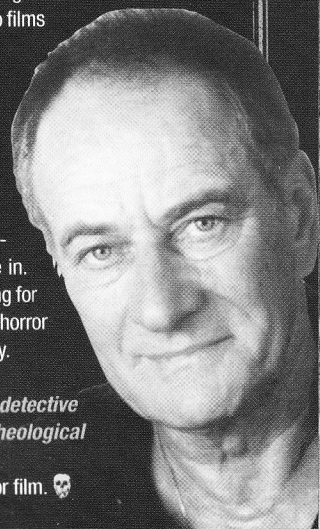
He was never abusive to me, so I can't, from a personal standpoint, relate to that. As far as forgiving him? He was a taskmaster and he drove people really hard and he insulted a lot of people. By and large, let's face it, people forgive people in this business for one reason: they need to work. And there were times on *The Exorcist* – many times – when I just thought, "This isn't worth it." But in my case, it was early in my career and I figured I could use another good credit. I couldn't survive on just *The French Connection*. So I stuck it out, and was glad I did. I'm probably the only cinematographer who's done two films with Billy!

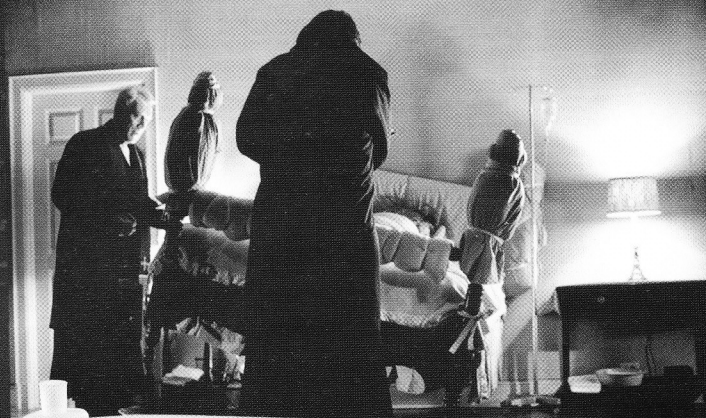
Where do you rank The Exorcist among your films?

If somebody thought that I was a flash in the pan after *The French Connection* – I never did hear that, but let's say somebody did think that – then *The Exorcist* would have solidified things because it was a completely different looking film, which I took great pride in. ... The funny thing is, with *Rue Morgue* magazine being for horror fans, Billy never referred to *The Exorcist* as a horror film. He always referred to it as being about spirituality.

William Peter Blatty has called it a "supernatural detective story" and Linda Blair now describes it as a "theological thriller."

Well, I have to tell you, I always thought it was a horror film. ☠





Divine Intervention: (top to bottom) On set with (left to right) Jason Miller, Blatty and Ellen Burstyn, Chris' assistant Sharon (Kitty Winn) returns from Regan's room, the rite in progress, and (inset) Regan (Linda Blair) possessed.

first was that, being a superb maker of documentary films [much of the director's early work was in this field], he would give the film the strong sense of realism that was needed. Without this, my screenplay could have been translated into something not awesome, but ludicrous. As for my second reason, I've for years been quoted as saying the film had to be directed by either a Catholic – even a lapsed Catholic – or a Jew, for chances were that only one or the other would have the emotional sensibility to truly understand the deadly reality of possession and the power of exorcism, a ritual frequently practiced by Christ himself.”

Deadly serious as the subject at hand may have been, Blatty couldn't entirely escape his roots in comedy, resulting in some much-needed levity mainly during the earlier stages of both the novel and the film, such as the scene in which Father Merrin

is offered some brandy for his coffee, to which he replies, “The doctors say I shouldn't, but thank God, my will is weak.”

“Everyday life is neither Olsen and Johnson [a famously chaotic Vaudeville duo] nor *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* 24-7, so if you want to build credibility you must always have some smiles along with the frights, and the tragedies and the tears, and so, yes, it was part of my plan. ... When I sat down to write the novel, I had no confidence that I was capable of writing a page, a paragraph, or even a line without a touch of the comedic.”

Among other things, *The Exorcist* stands out as a fantastically loyal book-to-movie adaptation, but in an ironic twist it was the director who vetoed an early version of the script for straying too far from the novel. The original draft was 172 pages; in it, Blatty edited down the events leading to the possession to a mere 30 pages in order to make room for the subplot in the novel involving Elvira, the drugged-out daughter of Karl, the servant. (Several other red herrings in the book – including the desecration of a nearby Catholic church – are also given short shrift in the film.)

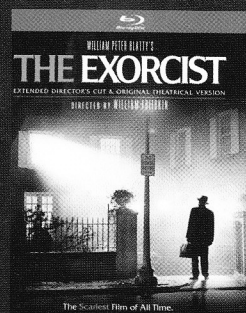
“It meant a lot of flashy camera and expository tricks, and it was to this that Billy objected,” recalls Blatty of the changes, “and what I believe he meant when he told me my script wasn't faithful to my novel.”


Once the men agreed on a script, it was time to cast the film. Marlon Brando and Jack Nicholson both coveted the role of tragic hero Father Damien Karras but were turned down by Friedkin, who feared that a huge star would bring too much baggage to the part; Gene Hackman was also briefly considered before Blatty settled on Stacy Keach, but Friedkin ultimately held out for the virtually unknown Jason Miller after seeing him in a Broadway play. Actresses considered for (and expressing interest in) the character of Chris MacNeil included Anne Bancroft, Jane Fonda, Audrey Hepburn and Blatty's close friend Shirley MacLaine (on whom he had based the character in the novel) before it went to Ellen Burstyn, who had recently enjoyed critical acclaim for her turns in *The King of Marvin Gardens* and *The Last Picture Show*. Thirteen-year-old Linda Blair, an unknown, was cast as Chris' demonically possessed daughter, and the ensemble was rounded out with Von Sydow (who was in his mid-40s at the time but was convincingly made up by now-legendary effects genius Dick Smith to look several decades older), Lee J. Cobb as a gently acerbic homicide detective and Kitty Winn as Chris' assistant.

The actual shooting of the film is well covered in Warner Bros' two-disc Blu-ray (out October 5), which proves just how enduring the production is. The set features a new Extended Director's Cut of the film with even more previously discarded footage restored by Friedkin (with commentary), however purists will undoubtedly rejoice that a remaster of the 1973 theatrical version is present as well. Brand-new extras include the 30-minute documentary *Raising Hell: Filming the Exorcist*, featuring behind-the-scenes footage and interviews with Blatty, Friedkin, Blair and cinematographer Owen Roizman (see sidebar). The retrospective was written and directed by go-to guy Laurent Bouzereau, probably the most prolific creator of DVD extras in the history of home video. There are shorter features as well: *Faces of Evil*, in which Friedkin and Blatty discuss different versions of the film, and *Georgetown Then and Now*, a tour of some of the film's locations, including, naturally, the infamous house on Prospect Street. Trailers and TV and radio spots from both 1973 and the 2000 theatrical re-release abound, but the true gem in this set remains *The Fear of God: 25 Years of The Exorcist*, a superb feature-length 1998 BBC documentary that was originally included on the DVD release of the theatrical cut.

Given that the film still garners that much interest today, it's impossible to overstate the media frenzy it created upon its release on December 26, 1973. Certain classic horror films

of previous decades had provoked some strong and often alarming audience reactions, but absolutely nothing – not *King Kong*, not the classic Universal monsters, not *Psycho* and neither *Night of the Living Dead* nor *Rosemary's Baby* – had ever had such repercussions. Cases of viewers fainting, vomiting





Evil Incarnate: Father Karras (Jason Miller) confronts Pazuzu in the film's climax, and (below) Detective Kinderman (George C. Scott) under the gaze of Patient X, from *The Exorcist III*.

and running screaming from theatres soon gave way to reports of Catholic clergy and psychiatrists being bombarded with would-be cases of demonic possession. The film was discussed and debated on news and talk shows probably at least as often as it was reviewed by actual film critics; Reverend Billy Graham, the closest thing to a sane voice evangelical Christianity has ever known, claimed that not only was the film evil, but that an actual evil entity was physically present in the reels of celluloid.

It was nominated for ten Oscars but won only two: Best Adapted Screenplay (Blatty) and Best Sound (Robert Knudsen and Christopher Newman). Happy as he no doubt was to take home the hardware, Blatty made no bones about his displeasure that Friedkin and various other cast and crew members were passed over, remarking to the press at the time, "The Academy should fold its tent and go back to baking apple strudel or whatever they can do well."

Critical notices were generally positive, although there is widespread suspicion that a small handful of bad press from certain high-profile reviewers was rooted in personal grudges. Pauline Kael, who was already becoming notorious for turning against filmmakers who failed to stroke her ego sufficiently, was particularly scathing, charging among other things that Friedkin and Blatty showed insensitivity toward the plight of the possessed young girl and her traumatized mother. It's a complaint that most viewers agree is completely unfounded.

"My recollection," Blatty says, "is that reviews were at least 90 percent positive, the standout negatives being Kael, Judith Christ, and *Time Magazine's* Jay Cocks who, perhaps interestingly, had asked Billy Friedkin to consider his wife for the part of Chris MacNeil's secretary. Billy did interview her but cast Kitty Winn."

Although sequels to hit films were less standard than they are today, adding another chapter to *The Exorcist* was pretty much inevitable, and even by sequel standards, 1977's *Exorcist II: The Heretic*, which starred Linda Blair and Richard Burton but involved neither Friedkin nor Blatty (it was directed by Boorman), was a spectacular and costly bomb.

Thirteen years would pass before Blatty would wade back in, as both writer and director of *The Exorcist III*, based on his own novel, *Legion*. To

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everyone's shock (except perhaps Blatty's), this "proper" sequel turned out to be a wonderfully accomplished piece of work. Although considerably more low-key than the original, the film is fantastically creepy, and bolstered by superb performances and no shortage of Blatty's caustic one-liners. George C. Scott brings considerably more bluster to the role of Detective William Kinderman than his predecessor Lee J. Cobb; the veteran homicide cop investigates a series of gruesome murders in Washington that appear to have been committed by a long-since-executed serial killer (Brad Dourif in possibly his best performance ever), who may have taken up residence in the body of the late Father Damien Karras (Miller, reprising his role).

"The one bit of subtle reshaping George did," Blatty says, "was to flatten out the deliberately Yiddish rhythms in Kinderman's speech pattern. Other than that, he was the Kinderman of my dreams and a rock I could lean on while shooting. He was often keenly interested in my views about God's existence."

Critical reception of *The Exorcist III* was positive. "The *New York Times'* Vincent Canby and several other critics thought it better than the original," Blatty says, a tad incredulously, hastening to add that this was "a view that, of course, did please me but one which I most profoundly and definitely did not, and do not, share."

The only other film that Blatty has directed is 1980's *The Ninth Configuration*, based on his novel about an old castle converted into an asylum for soldiers (Jason Miller co-stars in it). Given the success of *The Exorcist III*, it begs the question: why didn't he get behind the camera again? Simply put, the offers just weren't there.

"The only other time I have ever been offered a directing job was when I got a call from the makers of *Pumpkinhead 4*," he says. "They asked if I would be willing to direct it; start of photography was to be in six weeks. I didn't do it, nor have I much confidence in how well I would do when directing somebody else's screenplay."

After *The Exorcist III*, another fifteen years would pass before the debacle known as *Exorcist: The Beginning* limped onto movie screens after a troubled production that saw director John Frankenheimer



Final Act Mail

THE LAST EXORCISM

Starring Ashley Bell, Patrick Fabian and Louis Herthum
Directed by Daniel Stamm
Written by Huck Botko and Andrew Gurland
Lionsgate

Anyone looking for *Exorcist*-style histrionics and head-spinning may be disappointed by *The Last Exorcism*, for it's simply not that type of film. Eschewing the supernatural pea soup-drenched approach for a more earthly, psychological one, the film tells the tale of Reverend Cotton Marcus (Patrick Fabian), an evangelical preacher who no longer believes in God but will gladly perform exorcisms for a price. His guilt catches up with him and he decides to perform (wait for it...) one last exorcism, during which he will be followed by a film crew that will document his every sleight of hand. Though it's Marcus' intent to prove that all exorcisms are bunk (and dangerous to boot), he runs into real danger when he arrives at the Sweetzer farm, where sixteen-year-old Nell (Ashley Bell) has been acting oddly — you know, slaughtering the livestock and swearing.

Unlike *The Exorcist*, there are no definite answers in *The Last Exorcism*, and the film will have you guessing right up to the end about Nell's affliction — is she really possessed, or is she suffering some other very real trauma? Both possibilities are explored as Marcus' faith vacillates and Nell's story is revealed. It's a smart psychological horror film, enhanced by Bell's remarkable performance as the troubled girl. There's no CGI or ghoulish makeup at play here; every dislocated shoulder and unnatural backbend owes to the actress' extraordinary physicality. It keeps the movie grounded in an extremely uncomfortable reality, which is far more disturbing than any computerized wall-crawling could hope to be.

The Last Exorcism is a very strong, very frightening film that's unfortunately undermined by a shockingly derivative ending that asks more questions than it answers. Sure, you'll talk about the film long after it's over, but is that on account of the philosophical questions that arise, or because of the numerous plot holes? The topic of man's relationship with religion is in question, but also "Who unearthed this found footage? Why was there perfectly timed, scary music in a 'documentary'?" And that ending... it made no sense, right?" When all is said and done, your relationship with *The Last Exorcism* could easily go one way or the other — much like the story of Nell Sweetzer.

STACIE PONDER



Little Girl Green: Sharon shows Father Karras a message written on Regan's stomach, and (inset) a prop Linda Blair head used during the climax of the film.

abandon the project in pre-production due to health issues. Paul Schrader (director of *Cat People*, although probably best known as the screenwriter of *Taxi Driver*) stepped in and completed the prequel, only to have it rejected by studio Morgan Creek for not being gory enough. It was subsequently handed off to Renny Harlin (*A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master*, *Deep Blue Sea*) for re-shooting.

The finished product was roundly trashed by critics and Blatty is very much in agreement with that consensus, although quick to leap to the defence of long-time critical whipping boy Harlin. "I in no way blame Harlin. From past experience with Morgan Creek, I have very little doubt that the vile, disgraceful and embarrassingly ludicrous end sequence of his version was forced upon him."

Schrader's version, *Dominion: Prequel to the Exorcist*, was later released straight to video and, not surprisingly, fared somewhat better with fans and the press. In an interview with the *Houston Chronicle*, Blatty himself called it "a handsome, classy, elegant piece of work."

He is adamant, however, that his own involvement with any further *Exorcist* films is unequivocally over, and flatly states his wish that no one else attempts another sequel: "I pray the rosary every night that this never will happen, especially as sequel rights are in the hands of Morgan Creek."

Blatty certainly doesn't need another kick at the franchise, seeing as he's one of the busiest octogenarians in the entertainment industry. Although he never had another hit on par with *The Exorcist* — and complains that its success basically destroyed his career as a comedy screenwriter — he remains prolific, with two novels published this year and more to come. One of them may even lead to him re-teaming with Friedkin.

"*Dimiter*, a supernatural suspense thriller set mostly in Jerusalem, is a novel that's

been out and around since mid-March. Billy Friedkin is eager to direct it as a film, which would be our one and only other teaming since *The Exorcist*," says Blatty, who flat-out proclaims the book his best work to date.

"*Crazy* will be in the bookstalls November 9," he adds. "[It's] a total departure from demons and terror. Hard to describe it — let's try *Portrait of Jennie* meets *The Catcher in the Rye*. It's in the voice of a grammar school boy who meets a girl named Jane Bent, who disappears for years and then shows up again as a five-year-old in a Coney Island funhouse before disappearing yet again until the end of the narrator's life when she appears in a startling and heartwarming ending."

Don't think Blatty has given up on the genre, though, or on *The Exorcist* entirely.

He reveals, "One [upcoming project] is the 'novel of terror' I'm currently working on for my publisher, Tom Doherty of Forge Books; a second is a stage version of *The Exorcist* that I commissioned the wonderful John Pielmeier [*Agnes of God*] to write that will open next year at The Alley Theatre in Houston before moving from there to Broadway."

Thirty-seven years later and it seems that *The Exorcist* will always haunt Blatty in one way or another, but that's okay with him. Though mindful that changing times and certain external influences may colour the way new generations of fans view this classic film, he's gratified that the final effect on most audiences remains largely unchanged. "For a time, after a million comedy riffs had been done by Richard Pryor — 'The bed... is on... my foot!' — and on *Saturday Night Live*, young teens would giggle at certain iconic scenes. Though by the end," he says with unmistakable satisfaction, "the audience is deadily quiet and sometimes stunned." 🤘

