

Bob McCabe, *The Exorcist: Out of the Shadows*,
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CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

LOLAPAZUZU

The American ratings board, the Motion Picture Association Of America (MPAA), screened a rough, uncut of *The Exorcist* on 3 October 1973 and passed it with an 'R' rating meaning 'Restricted', i.e. no one under seventeen was to be admitted without a parent or adult present.

"There was no problem with getting an 'R' rating at all," Friedkin explains. "The ratings board was then being run by a very sensitive, intelligent guy named Aaron Stern. He had a very strong control over his board. Stern went to see *The Exorcist* with his board and he called me a half hour after they finished screening it and he said 'Congratulations. I think it's a great film. We're going to give you an 'R' rating with no cuts. We're not asking for one frame to be cut.' Warners and I thought the whole film would be cut to ribbons to get an 'R', which we had to do. We could not release it as an 'X' picture—they wouldn't do it. So I anticipated a lot of editing as a result of the ratings screening. But he said 'We're gonna give you an 'R', no cuts. I think we're gonna get a lot of heat for this and I think you will as well. But this film should be seen as you made it. It's deserving and good luck to you.' No subsequent ratings board would have given it an 'R' without cuts."

Still the spectre of the new obscenity legislation hung over the movie and Blatty found himself constantly defending the movie

WILLIAM PETER BLATTY'S THE EXORCIST

Directed by WILLIAM FRIEDKIN



Something almost beyond comprehension is happening to a girl on this street, in this house
...and a man has been sent for as a last resort. This man is *The Exorcist*.

ELLEN BURSTYN · MAX VON SYDOW · LEE JACOB
KITTY WINN · JACK MACGOWRAN · JASON MILLER as Father Karras
LINDA BLAIR as Regan · Produced by WILLIAM PETER BLATTY
Executive Producer NOEL MARSHALL · Screenplay by WILLIAM PETER BLATTY based on his novel
From Warner Bros. Warner Communications Company

R RESTRICTED Under 17 Requires
Accompanying Parent or Adult Guardian

before its release, while he was promoting his new book *I'll Tell Them I Remember You*, a reminiscence of his late mother. "Let me tell you how *The Exorcist* novel was received," he told one interviewer. "The former Chancellor of the Catholic Church for the City of New York, who is now pastor at Sacred Heart, made *The Exorcist* required reading for his parish. In fact, the novel was taught by nuns in some Catholic high school. Nuns! Any community that decides that it wants to ban *The Exorcist* deserves the punishment of never seeing the film, unless they leave their grubby little towns. You'll find the novelty of the act vanishes, and then the little minds will no longer be interested. Furthermore, this picture could never be construed as appealing to prurient interests."

Something else started happening in the run-up to the release of *The Exorcist*. More and more stories began to appear in the press, not just more inflated, fanciful pieces about the so-called 'curse' behind the movie, but stories about the making of the film, its budget overruns, the alleged infighting. Lalo Schifrin talked to *The Hollywood Reporter* about his dismissal from the film: "My score, I stand by it, is one of the best I've ever done. I had not the opportunity to record it. He [Friedkin] only listened to three or four cues, and he walked off. Everybody there loved it. I was applauded by the musicians, which happens very seldom in Hollywood."

The rift between Blatty and Friedkin, and the former's supposed barring from the editing process, also became the stuff of tabloid fare, with talk of Blatty taking legal recourse. Executive producer Noel Marshall told *The Hollywood Reporter* that Blatty was indeed taking legal action over "the firing of Schifrin and other differences, presumably including his alleged barring by Friedkin from post-production editing and dubbing." Even the possessory credit on the film – Blatty wanted it billed as 'William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist*' although normally the director takes such a credit – was making the news. Before anyone had seen it, *The Exorcist* was becoming an event. The movie itself was now the story, not the story of the movie. It didn't matter what was true, just as it didn't matter later who did or didn't faint, throw up, etc. whilst watching the film. *The Exorcist* was

moving movies beyond simple entertainment. Now they were news and cinema would never be the same again.

The film was previewed, a few days before its release, at a screening held at the Directors' Guild of America. Present were a mix of public, Warner Brothers' executives and the movie's publicist Joe Hyams. (As the screening began, the final reel wasn't there as Billy was still mixing it down the street. It arrived just in time.) "Shortly after the film started somebody screamed some obscenities from the first row and at that point I remember getting out of my seat and moving to the back of the theatre," Hyams told the BBC. "Now at a certain moment in the film – it's when the girl's having her examination – the first person comes past me heading for the rest room. And he gets sick in the rest room. I asked him if he was feeling better and he said 'Yes, I am. I should not have had Mexican food.' A couple of minutes later another person comes running out and I ask them if they had Mexican food. Now after a while, five or six people physically get sick. Other people could not watch it and were just white and faint. I just thought: how do we keep this story from spreading? The last thing we want is a film that is making people sick. And my management was all in one row and I remember their heads were turning, watching what was happening. The film ends and seven or eight of our top executives are seated alone in the theatre. One gentleman, a high-level executive, suggested that it might be best if we shelve the film and never distribute it. He thought it was just totally obscene and should not be shown to people. They talked about it for about five minutes and shot down the idea. Then they said 'What happened here tonight Joe?' I said 'I don't know.' They said 'Why were people running up and down the aisles?' I said 'They were getting sick.' They said 'We have to put a lid on this, people getting sick at this film.' Then I said 'Fellas, I don't know what happened tonight. I saw the same film. All I can tell you is the other 900 people who saw this film are all congregated outside this theatre talking about it. Not one person has gotten in their car to leave yet. You can't get into any of the bars across the street because they're packed with people. That's what you got fellas, *that's* your movie.'"

When the film was released, the day after Christmas 1973, it didn't disappoint. The end justified the hype and propelled it to unheard-of levels. "We literally finished *The Exorcist* three days before it opened," Friedkin said at the time. "Frankly, if there hadn't been an opening date I'd still be working on it. Given the chance, I'd have had all the actors in the booth on opening night with microphones, changing and fine-tuning it. Actually, I'd still be working on *The French Connection* if somebody hadn't said 'Get it out of here and into the theatres.' I just always want to make it that much better."

Despite mixed reviews, and Friedkin's perfectionism, the movie that opened was greeted with unprecedented audience reaction. People came, they saw, they threw up, they fainted, in one case they miscarried a baby, in others they sought psychiatric aid or spiritual counselling. Then they queued up outside the theatre for up to four hours to do it all again. Playing in just two theatres – one in New York, one in LA – the film took a record \$94,003.50 from 28,183 admissions in its first week.

"I was present the first time somebody fainted," recalls Blatty. "It was at the first preview in New York. I was nervously standing at the back and this woman came up the aisle, with her hand over her face and she kept murmuring 'Jesus, Jesus.' And I remember thinking 'I hope that's not Pauline Kael.' I thought we were in deep trouble. But the point that she walked out on was the scene at which I never look – the arteriogram scene. I only watched it once when I had to see it on the movieola in the rough cut. I've never looked at it since. And actually, that's the scene that caused most of the getting weak and fainting. When the head spins and whatever, they're having a wonderful rollercoaster ride."

Cinema managers were forced to lay on smelling salts. Frank Kveton, a cinema manager in Oakbrook claimed "My janitors are going crazy wiping up the vomit." A minister in the same town proudly noted "We turned them away in hundreds from my *Exorcist* sermon" as church attendance rose dramatically. Heart attacks whilst watching the film were reported. In Berkeley a man was

injured as he charged the screen attempting to "get" the demon; in Boston several young men paraded naked before the screen insisting they *were* the Devil. In New York they lit fires on the street to keep warm whilst waiting several hours to get in. Ticket touts were charging up to \$50 for a pair of tickets; one cinema security guard claimed he was offered bribes of up to \$110 to let people in. Box office records fell, and continued to fall, as more and more theatres were added to meet the demand. In Washington the 'R' rating was overturned and no one under seventeen was allowed in; in Boston the film was given the dreaded 'X' rating. And in Chicago, six people were reported to have ended up in a psychiatric ward after seeing the film. Still the people came. Donald Rugoff, president of the Cinema 5 chain, said "I don't think there's been anything like it in the history of the business." The *Toronto Medical Post* reported that, after viewing the movie, four women were confined to psychiatric care. A Chicago psychiatrist publicly declared "There is no way you can sit through that film without receiving some lasting negative or disturbing effects." The film crossed all social boundaries, attracting a large black audience in the inner cities, something that Warners hadn't anticipated. (Jason Miller later told Mark Kermode about visiting a black friend of his in Harlem who dragged him along to a cinema showing the movie: "I said 'Are you kidding me? I don't wanna go and see *The Exorcist*.' He said 'No, you gotta see this. I don't want you to see the film. I want you to see the audience.' So we go in and there's like maybe 200 blacks in the audience – and they've got lunches. And they've got beer and they're passing joints, and *The Exorcist* is on. It was like this colony of people, they went and they spent all afternoon watching this film, bringing lunch in, bringing pizza in, talking, yelling, reading lines. And that probably to me was the epitome of the power of the film. That for these people they had to be around it. It was like being around the totem pole, something sacred to them.")

"I would say the first five, six, seven, eight weeks of the showing of the film the same reaction occurred as happened that night we showed the film at the Directors' Guild," says Joe Hyams. "Some

people leaving the theatre, becoming sick and so on. Then after seven or eight weeks, it kind of settled down. People were braver and whatever created that phenomenon kinda went away at that time. Did I play it up? Sure, I played it up in the sense that people wanted to know how many people got sick last night. I would inflate the figures. That was my job. There was nothing I could do to kill that picture, so I'd lie a little. But that was the extent of it. There was really nothing we had to do that wasn't happening by itself. Which is what happens on an event movie. It just transcends everything and anything publicists and marketing people can do."

Six months after its release, Warners expanded its run to 110 theatres in the New York area, bringing in a first week sum of over \$3 million, and forever changing the nature of film distribution in America, by taking quality movies and opening them on more and more screens, something that was to prove a hugely important factor in the release of such subsequent event movies as *Jaws* and *Star Wars*, and the blockbuster era that *The Exorcist* gave birth to. Still the hysteria continued. Evangelist Billy Graham went as far as to say that there was evil present in the actual celluloid of the movie.

Blatty, for one, was stunned by the whole reaction: "Completely. And to this day I do not understand it. I look at Billy Graham's comments that there was a power of evil in the film and I thought that he was mad. But you know, he was on to something. I think what he was trying to express is that there is an explosive power in the film and the fact is that it is greater than the sum of its parts. It's that X factor. I don't know what that is. People say things like 'Ah, there are subliminal images, they're brainwashing us. There are things that our consciousness does not see but our unconsciousness is comprehending and that's the secret of the power of the film. It's none of that; there are no subliminal images. If you can see it, it's not subliminal."

In trade bible *Variety*, Rabbi Julius G. Neumann was quoted as saying: "This movie is adding to the frustration and confusion of our youth by claiming that whatever they do, contrary to accepted religious or society's norm, is not really of their own making but that

of the Devil inside of them." Blatty responded to the hysteria by saying "There are a lot of neurotic people. I may well be one of them. If they read the book, or see the film, neither experience makes them neurotic. To my mind, they were neurotic to begin with. Now they have a name for their neurosis. They say 'I'm possessed.' Anyone who is mentally unstable should not see the film, whether it's a child or an adult."

Warners proudly predicted that the film would outgross the \$34 million haul of *My Fair Lady*, up until then the company's biggest ever money spinner; industry pundits predicted it would outgross the \$85 million made the previous year by Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*, making it the biggest movie of all time.

The New York Times got on line for an extensive report from the queue outside one New York theatre where 'people stood like sheep in the rain, in cold and sleet for up to four hours to see the chilling film about a twelve-year-old girl going to the Devil.' *The Times* found a wide cross-section waiting in line – from a sixty-eight-year-old woman ("I have never stood in line for any movie or any restaurant before in my life"), to a forty-six-year-old housewife ("I haven't stood in line since the time I saw Frank Sinatra"), to a large contingent of teens and twentysomethings, including Jack Fletcher, a nineteen-year-old student, who said "You feel contaminated when you leave the theatre. There's something that is impossible to erase. I've had nightmares ever since I've seen it." Another person interviewed on 'the line' was the actor William Hurt, then a twenty-three-year-old Julliard drama student 'who talked more like a sociologist' when quizzed about his reasons for standing on line: "It makes the movie better, right? The more you pay for something, the more it's worth. And it also has to do with telling your friends that you've seen it."

Harvard sociologist Howard Reisman, author of *The Lonely Crowd*, argued that standing in line in such a manner was a good way for strangers to meet in a city: "Standing in a movie line doesn't commit you to having a motive. It's a relationship that doesn't ask too much. In a singles bar there is a motive, and people who go there are subject to interpretations and misinterpretations. For example, a

single woman at a singles bar might feel that people will think she's there as date-bait. The 'standing on one foot' conversation that she might have with a stranger in a movie line might be more comfortable for her."

Events on 'the line' weren't always so convivial. One cinema was forced to close its doors when the crowd, fearing that after hours of waiting they would not make it into the last screening of the day, started to riot. This astonishing reaction to *The Exorcist* was repeated worldwide, although news reports took a distinctly darker tone when the film arrived in Europe. John Power, a sixteen-year-old London boy, suffered a fatal epileptic fit the day after seeing the film with his girlfriend, prompting numerous 'Boy Dies After Seeing *The Exorcist*' style tabloid headlines. Seventeen-year-old Nicolas Bell claimed he had become 'possessed' after seeing the film and killed nine-year-old Sandra Simpson. Bell said in his defence: "It was not really me that did it. There was something inside me. I want to see a priest. It is ever since I saw that film, *The Exorcist*. I felt something take possession of me. It has been in me ever since." In West Germany, nineteen-year-old Rainer Hertrampf's suicide was blamed on the movie, leading to calls for it to be banned. Back in England, screenings of the film were picketed by an unspecified evangelical organisation who handed out leaflets proclaiming "We can't stop you seeing this film, but you should know the film bears the power of evil". The front of their four-page booklet featured a quote attributed to the Western Psychiatric Institute of Pittsburgh, USA ("after admitting twelve new patients"), "Some people who never before needed mental treatment were falling apart after seeing this film." Over the page an unnamed twenty-three-year-old Cambridge graduate insisted that "anyone who sees this film runs the risk of serious mental and spiritual danger and disturbance."

Billy Friedkin had set out to make a provocative film, but even for him, things got out of hand: "I remember reading that a classmate of Prince Charles saw the film and immolated himself on the altar of a church in England. Then there were also stories like James Cagney the actor. I met him at an American Film Institute lunch and he told

me that he hadn't seen *The Exorcist* but his barber had. This man was his barber for twenty-five years. He saw the film, quit being a barber and went off to enter the priesthood. There were a lot of stories like that. The reactions were much more extreme than I thought. I thought the reactions both pro and con did get a bit extreme."

Blatty found himself on the receiving end of the hysterical reaction to the film on several occasions: "I used to appear quite frequently on the *Tonight Show*," he explains "And there were stories of pictures falling off walls when I would appear, or marble tables cracking in two, and on and on and on. And I would yawn . . . but there were two appearances on the *Tonight Show* back to back in which the first time they lost the picture, and Johnny Carson leaned over and told me that this had never happened before. Of course we were talking about *The Exorcist* at the time, and the next time, they lost the sound. And then somewhere in that period, I was invited to dinner by Richard Pryor, and there were a lovely group of people there and after dinner my wife and I were sitting on the sofa facing the fireplace. And above the mantle was an enormous oil painting that hung from a very thick ingot that must have been about four to five inches long and affixed by a strong leather band. Now Richard Pryor is offering me coffee, standing there with a tray with cream and sugar on it, and suddenly there's this massive crash behind him. He looked and the painting had come off. There is now dead silence in the room, nobody speaks and everybody's trying not to look at me, until Richard says 'Sugar?' We then examine this thing – the ingot is in place; the leather band that held the painting in place was unbroken. It was very bizarre."

Needless to say, now that it was out there, the film bred more controversy. The United States Catholic Conference publicly criticised the MPAA for allowing the film its 'R' rating. In Boston, Mrs Rita Warren took the film to court in an attempt to get it banned, citing it as obscene and blasphemous: "We are the community. The community has been offended by this film and it must be stopped." The action was eventually dismissed.

In Washington, where the movie had filmed, a seventeen years

and older restriction was accompanied by police action, with threats to arrest anyone who attempted to take a minor into the cinema, or sell a ticket to a minor.

The New York Times ran an article also criticising the MPAA's rating, forcing MPAA President Jack Valenti to issue a rebuttal: "Ratings come from what viewers see, not what they imagine they see. In *The Exorcist*, there is no overt sex; there is no excessive violence. There is some strong language, but it is rationally related to the film's themes and is kept to a minimum. *The Exorcist* deals in the metaphysical unknown, always terrifying because it cannot be defined or readily comprehended."

It was through another piece in *The New York Times* that Mercedes McCambridge threw her oar in. Dissatisfied with what she saw as a betrayal by Friedkin over her lack of credit on the movie, McCambridge went public, outing herself as the voice of the Devil and criticising Linda Blair into the bargain. "Her vocal performance was laughable," the actress said. "I gave the most difficult performance of my life and then Warners didn't give me a single credit on the picture or in the advertising. The man who supplied the *jewels* got a credit. I *cried*. Billy Friedkin promised me a special credit – 'And Mercedes McCambridge.' He broke his promise – it's heartbreaking when someone you thought was a *friend* does that. I put my father's crucifix against my forehead just twenty minutes ago. It was ice-cold, and I thought 'God has deserted me. Shall I go off on an ocean cruise?'"

"I'm a product of sixteen years of convent education and I am still a devout Catholic, so speaking those vile blaspheming words was an *agony* for me. . . . So you see, after all I went through why I'm mad at Billy Friedkin for not getting me on those credits. Any child could have wiggled on the bed. *If there was any horror in the exorcism, it was me!*"

Billy Friedkin replied angrily to the story: "In our conversation I said 'Now if you really do this thing right, no one will realise that the voice was dubbed,' and she agreed. Her contract called for no credit and she admitted that it wasn't important. When the picture came

out and was this enormous success, she evidently changed her mind and did that hysterical interview with someone at *The New York Times*. She seemed to be saying that she thought God was punishing her for doing the demon's voice, but it could be all put right if she got a credit.

"I agree she was entitled to credit," he continued, "But where she is off the mark and wrong, and where she has committed the most unprofessional action I've ever seen, is where she tries to diminish Linda Blair's contribution. Linda Blair worked on that film for over a year. She did every scene in that film herself, created the role, worked at it. I mean every actor and every technician that was there can verify that.

"All of a sudden it was everything about Mercedes McCambridge," Blair told the BBC. "She did the voice so they tried to pull my nomination for an Academy Award. It was an awful time after the film was released because everything was 'Did Linda Blair really do the film?' So I'd gone through everything I'd gone through, and it's quite obvious beneath the make-up it's me, and the voice is a mixture of Mercedes and I. And my hat's off to Mercedes for the work that she did. I know what she went through and doggone it, yes, she should be recognised for that. But I was very much a part of that."

Blair's contribution to the movie was called into further doubt when her double – Eileen Dietz – decided to speak up next, this time in an open letter to *Variety*, petitioning the Screen Actor's Guild 'simply for the right to talk about the work I filmed.' Friedkin, eager to stand up for his young star, attacked Ms Dietz's claims on the *Barry Gray* radio show: "Linda Blair's stand-in – Eileen Dietz – decided to build a career on the false claim that she played some of the demonic scenes in the picture. She was a stand-in and a photo double in a handful of scenes that last a few seconds on the screen. Her contributions – ten shots – totalled twenty-eight seconds in a film that lasts two hours. It's like when you see a film in which the guys are playing poker and there's a close-up of the hands. You use a double for the hands. It's a common practice."

Blair spoke up for herself soon enough, instructing her lawyers to

petition the Screen Actor's Guild to arbitrate the matter, forcing Dietz to back away. "Nobody could have anticipated the kind of horrendous attention that Linda got after making the film," says Ellen Burstyn, "And how difficult it was for her to handle. I think we were all protective during the making of the film – we all saw that as a difficult thing for her – but that turned out to be the easy part. The hard part was, I think, the fame that came from it."

Just to add to the litigious fervour, Warner Brothers also got involved, taking action against *Newsweek* magazine which broke Friedkin's embargo on printing pictures of Blair in demon make-up, which they had obtained by snapping them directly off the screen in a local theatre.

Inevitably, as the various controversies surrounding the movie grew, so did the stories about it's so-called curse.



William Friedkin