



THE EXORCIST (Director's Cut) (USA-1973) (132 minutes)
Eden Court Playhouse Cinema.
8:15pm, Tuesday 30 October.

Directed by William Friedkin; written by William Peter Blatty, based on his novel; cinematography by Owen Roizman; original music by Jack Nitzsche; production design by Bill Malley. Starring: Ellen Burstyn, Max von Sydow, Jason Miller, Linda Blair, Lee J. Cobb, Kitty Winn, Jack MacGowran and the voice of Mercedes McCambridge.

The Exorcist was a cultural phenomenon upon its release in 1973. Based on William Peter Blatty's novel, William Friedkin's horror classic about a young girl possessed by a demonic force famously shocked audiences across the globe. Part of the media frenzy surrounding the film derived from rumours that the movie itself was troubled. A series of tragic incidents befell the cast, crew, and people connected with them, leading many to believe the film itself was cursed. The Exorcist was riddled with problems from the start. As shooting began in 1972, the set used as the home of Regan, the girl taken over by the devil, burned down when a bird flew into a circuit box. Eerily, the only part to remain untouched by flames was the room used for filming the actual exorcism scenes. "This set the production back significantly, and led to a draining shooting period of over a year," explains film historian and horror expert Sarah Crowther. The shoot was hit by further tragedy when a series of deaths rocked the cast and crew. Actors Jack MacGowran and Vasiliki Maliaros, whose characters also die in the movie, both passed away shortly after shooting wrapped. Linda Blair's grandmother and Max Von Sydow's brother died suddenly during the course of production, and Jason Miller's son was nearly killed in a freak motorcycle accident. As many as nine from the total cast and crew members are rumoured to have died during filming. Ellen Burstyn sustained a permanent spinal injury while filming a violent possession scene. As the unexpected problems piled up, the production extended well past its projected deadline. Friedkin even had the set blessed by a priest acting as a technical advisor for the film, though he refused to conduct an exorcism. The so-called curse was also said to have followed the movie on its release into cinemas, on Boxing Day 1973. "A release date over the period of a major religious festival gives you some indication of the studio's intent to spark controversy and debate," says Crowther. "The Warner Brothers press office spread speculation of the curse prior to release. It was an extremely hot topic in global media when it hit cinemas." Warner Brothers drew on sinister rumours surrounding the film's production to pique audience interest. "Column inches and television news screens were filled with stories of audience members fainting and vomiting, and walking out in large numbers at early

screenings,” notes Crowther. In Rome, fans were forced to travel to the cinema in a torrential downpour. As the film began, lightning reportedly struck the church opposite the cinema. Reactions to the disturbing film only served to bolster The Exorcist’s burgeoning reputation as shock cinema. “One woman passed out and broke her jaw, for which she sued the studio. In the UK, St John’s Ambulance staff attended screenings,” adds Crowther. “US televangelist Billy Graham went so far as to claim that the very celluloid of the film itself was cursed and that it contained subliminal messages.” The hype around the movie helped fuel record-breaking box office figures. It would go on to earn more than \$441 million (around \$1.862 billion in today’s money) and became the first horror to be nominated for a Best Picture Oscar. “Marketed on its extremity,” Crowther believes that stories of *a curse* were a useful tool for those promoting the film. “In the 50s and 60s filmmakers such as William Castle were employing fake nurses to attend screenings of their films, providing sick bags, and offering life insurance in the event that an audience member died at one of their screenings. As for The Exorcist itself, Friedkin is a notoriously difficult director who pushed his cast and crew to extremes. Any shoot of such intensity over such a long period of time must have felt like a curse in itself for the cast and crew.”

It may come as a surprise that many officials of the Catholic Church praised the film upon its release. Not only did it drum up plenty of interest in Catholic tradition, it highlighted Catholic priests as heroes performing a time-honoured ritual that dates back to the New Testament. The Church credits the film with a huge rise in applications for the priesthood.



13 brief reflections on the Exorcist.

1. The young priest who gave Father Karras confession at the end of the film was a Catholic priest (Reverend William O'Malley). In order to make him visibly shocked in the final scene, the director William Friedkin slapped him across the face unexpectedly and yelled “action!” The director also had the habit of firing a gun on set, just to capture the reactions of his actors, their fear on display.
2. On the first day of filming the exorcism sequence, Linda Blair’s delivery of her foul-mouthed dialogue so disturbed the gentlemanly Max von Sydow that he forgot his lines. In the disturbing scene where Regan is masturbating with the crucifix, another actress, Eileen Dietz, was used for the shot where Regan belts her mother across the face. Friedkin felt they needed someone with more heft physically to perform the stunt, and the double was shot from the back. The crucifix scene was filmed with Linda Blair, who says she wasn’t totally aware of what she was doing or the implications of the vulgar acts.
3. Ellen Burstyn received a permanent spinal injury during filming. In the sequence where she is thrown away from her possessed daughter, a harness jerked her hard away from the bed. She fell on her

coccyx and screamed in pain – this was caught on film and adds to the realism of that scene. Typical of Friedkin to use the agony of one of his leading actors in the finished film.

4. The refrigerated bedroom set was cooled with four air conditioners to create arctic conditions. It was so cold that perspiration would freeze on some of the cast and crew. On one occasion the air was saturated with moisture resulting in a thin layer of snow falling on the set before the crew arrived for filming.

5. When originally released in the UK a number of town councils imposed a complete ban on the showing of the film. This led to the bizarre spectacle of “Exorcist Bus Trips” where enterprising travel companies organized buses to take groups to the nearest town where the film was showing.

6. A filmgoer who saw the movie in 1974 during its original release fainted and broke his jaw on the seat in front of him. He then sued Warner Brothers and the filmmakers, claiming that the use of subliminal imagery in the film had caused him to pass out. The studio settled out of court for an undisclosed sum. The film affected many audiences so strongly that at many theaters, paramedics were called to treat people who fainted and others who went into hysterics.

7. Due to its controversial material, this movie was not available on video in the UK until 1999 when the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) approved an uncut version.

8. The substance that the possessed Regan hurls at Father Damien Karras (Jason Miller) is thick split pea soup. Specifically, it’s Andersen’s brand pea soup. The crew tried Campbell’s but didn’t like the effect. The sound of Reagan projectile vomiting was produced by a recording artist who regurgitated mushy apple and raw egg.

9. Director William Friedkin asked technical advisor Reverend Thomas Bermingham to exorcise the set. He refused, saying an exorcism might increase anxiety. Reverend Bermingham wound up visiting the set and gave a blessing and talk to reassure the cast and crew.

10. Gonzalo Gavira was called on to create many of the special sound effects after William Friedkin recalled his work on the cult film *El Topo* (1970). One of the more memorable sounds, the 360-degree turning of Regan’s head, was actually made by twisting a sound crew member’s old leather wallet in front of a mike. The scream of the demon being thrown out of Linda Blair was actually created by recording squealing pigs being driven into slaughter.

11. William Peter Blatty based his novel on a supposedly genuine exorcism from 1949, which was partially performed in both Cottage City, Maryland, and Bel-Nor, Missouri. Several area newspapers reported on a speech a minister gave to an amateur parapsychology society, in which he claimed to have exorcised a demon from a 13-year-old boy named Robbie, and that the ordeal lasted a little more than six weeks.

12. Linda Blair received her Best Supporting Actress Oscar nomination before it was widely known that previous Supporting Actress winner Mercedes McCambridge had actually provided the voice of the demon. By Academy rules once Blair was given the nomination it could not be withdrawn, but the controversy about Blair being given credit for another actress’ work ruined her chances of winning the award. Due to death threats against Linda Blair from religious zealots who believed the film “glorified Satan”, Warner Brothers had bodyguards protecting her for six months after the film’s release.

13. For the vomiting sequences, it was again Eileen Dietz who doubled (uncredited) for Linda Blair, and later sued unsuccessfully for the puking credit. Makeup veteran Dick Smith rigged Dietz’s facial contours with sheets of heat-formed plexiglass that were secured at the corners of her mouth and behind her head. A camouflaged nozzle anchored in Dietz’s oral cavity provided the apparatus through which the “vomit” could be forcefully discharged, fed by supply tubes discreetly embedded in the plexiglass on both sides of her face. Such was the complexity of the set-up that Dietz could barely swallow or close her mouth.

Our fourth and final film of our Difficult Shoots Season:

THE WIZARD OF OZ. (USA-1939) (102 minutes)

Directed by Victor Fleming and starring Judy Garland.

Eden Court Playhouse Cinema. 7:15 pm, Tuesday 13 November.



“We're off to see the Wizard
The wonderful Wizard of Oz.
We hear he is a wiz of a wiz
If ever a wiz there was.
If ever a wever a wiz there was
The Wizard of Oz is one because
Because of the wonderful things he does...”

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