



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Last Temptation of Christ

Scorsese on 'The Last Temptation of Christ'

Barbara Hershey, who plays Magdalene, gave you a copy of The Last Temptation of Christ in 1972. Did you read it then and know immediately you wanted to make a movie of it?

No! It took me six years to finish it! I'd pick it up, put it down, reread it, be enveloped by the beautiful language of it, then realise I couldn't shoot the language. I read most of it after *Taxi Driver* (in 1976) and then finished it while I was visiting the Taviani brothers on the set of *The Meadow* in October 1978. And that's when I realised that this was for me. I'd often thought about doing a documentary on the Gospels – but Pasolini did that.

By now it's 1983. And the budget is starting to climb from \$12 million to 13 to 16, and the shooting schedule is getting longer, and we're going to shoot in Israel, where we're a day-and-a-half's flight from Hollywood if anything goes wrong, and they're not exactly crazy about the casting – Aidan Quinn they could accept as Jesus, but some of the others made them nervous. And then the religious protests started, and a theatre chain said it wouldn't show the movie. Well, if you have a picture that's pretty expensive by now, and you're not sure it's going to be profitable, and you can't show it in a lot of theatres, and you're getting flak from organised groups...

So they dropped it. Then Jack Lang, the French Minister of Culture, tried to help finance it with government money. And there was a big storm over that, over there. Meanwhile, my agent, Harry Ufland, kept shopping it around to other studios. He kept the idea alive, he kept my hope alive, for three years. That's why he's listed on the credits as executive producer. He was great. But he was involved with other projects. Then I got Mike Ovitz in January of 1987, and within three months we had a deal at Universal.

Kind of ironic, since Universal has this rep as the black suits and black hearts of the movie business.

I never thought I could make a movie like this for a place like Universal. They represented a certain kind of filmmaking. But from the moment I met Tom Pollock and Sid Sheinberg, I felt a new attitude, a new openness. I've never felt such support from any studio. They never said change one thing. They made suggestions; everybody made suggestions. And they knew it was a hard sell. But from the very first screening of the three-hour cut, they were moved, they were teary-eyed, they just loved it. I just hope they get through everything. But the toughness you used to hear about Universal against filmmakers, that's how tough they're being in defence of this movie. The more they get slapped, the more they hit back.

Maybe they fought harder because of the charge that the film would fan the flames of antisemitism.

Of all the things that come out: antisemitic! I was totally shocked by this turn. I couldn't believe it. I mean, if they have problems with a businessman trying to make money, then he's a 'businessman'! He's not 'Jewish'. It's disgusting. Obviously it just shows them for what they are. And even Rev. Hymers later apologised for his tactics.

But the whole point of the movie is that nobody is to blame, not even the Romans. It's all part of the plan. Otherwise, it's insane. I mean, the Jewish people give us God, and we persecute them for 2,000 years for it!

At least the controversy helped bring your film to a wider audience.

I do hope the controversy doesn't keep this movie from being shown on cable. When even Bravo, the very best cable channel, buckles under to 30 or 40 protest letters and withdraws Godard's *Hail Mary* from its schedule, you have to be concerned about the life of your movie. You have to be concerned about a lot of things when that happens.

Answer a few points of contention, if you will. Some people, seeing the early scene in Mary Magdalene's brothel, think that Jesus is watching Magdalene perform in a sex show.

Jesus and the other men are not voyeurs. They're waiting, they're not really watching. Some of them are playing games; two Black guys are talking; Jesus is waiting. Magdala was a major crossroads for caravans, merchants would meet there. And when you were in Magdala, the thing to do was to go see Mary. But the point of the scene was to show the proximity of sexuality to Jesus, the occasion of sin. Jesus must have seen a naked woman – must have. So why couldn't we show that? And I wanted to show the barbarism of the time, the degradation to Mary. It's better that the door is open. Better there is no door. The scene isn't done for titillation; it's to show the pain on her face, the compassion Jesus has for her as he fights his sexual desire for her. He's always wanted her.

At the Last Supper, Jesus says, 'Take this and drink this, because this is my blood.' And when the cup is passed to Peter, he tastes blood.

That's the miracle of transubstantiation. And in a movie you have to see it. Blood is very important in the church. Blood is the life force, the essence, the sacrifice. And in a movie you have to see it. In practically every culture, human sacrifice is very important, very widespread. When I was in Jerusalem, Teddy Kolley, the mayor, showed me the Valley of Gehenna, where the Phillistines sacrificed their children.

The Last Temptation is one of a long, normal, and still basically sinless life. Except that Jesus commits adultery with Mary's sister Martha.

I don't know that it's adultery. It might have been polygamy. There is some evidence of a Hebrew law at the time regarding polygamy for the sake of propagation of the race. But remember again, this is the Devil doing fancy footwork. 'You can have whatever you want. And look, I'm sorry about what

happened to Mary Magdalene. Really sorry, won't happen again. In fact, this time, take two! You need more than one – take two!

In the Gospels, does Jesus know from the beginning that he's God?

Maybe, maybe not. There are hints both ways. In Matthew, the first time you see Jesus, he's being baptised by John; and God's voice comes out and says, 'This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.' But I think that was more to emphasise Jesus over John the Baptist. Because John was the one getting all the attention. I mean, this man had a presentation! He knew how to draw the crowds. But except in Luke's gospel, where the 12-year-old Jesus is presented to the elders, the question of when Jesus knew he was divine is cloaked in mystery. So we're not saying this is the truth, we're just saying it's fascinating, it's so dramatic, to have the guy make a choice. As if he could make a choice – I mean, if he's two natures in one, he has no choice. But the beauty is that it gives the impression of choice. And eventually he has to say, 'Take me back, Father.' It's wonderful.

The final words of the movie – Jesus' final words – have baffled translators for centuries. How did you decide which words to use?

Very hard to translate and get the power and the meaning. 'It is finished.' 'It is completed.' 'It's over.' Can't use that – too Roy Orbison. What was the translation we were taught in Catholic school? 'It is consummated.' The Kazantzakis book used 'It is accomplished.' Because Jesus had accomplished a task, accomplished a goal. I shot three different versions. What I wanted was a sense of Jesus at the end of the temptation begging his Father, 'Please, if it isn't too late, if the train hasn't left, please, can I get back on, I wanna get on!' And now he's made it back on the cross and he's sort of jumping up and down saying, 'We did it! We did it! I thought for one second I wasn't gonna make it – but I did it I did it I did it!'

So how do you feel after a decade of trying to get this temptation on film?

I thought for one second I wasn't gonna make it. But I did it I did it I did it!

Richard Corliss interviewing Martin Scorsese

THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST

Director: Martin Scorsese
Production Companies: Universal Pictures, Cineplex Odeon Films
Executive Producer: Harry Ufland
Producer: Barbara De Fina
Unit Manager: Marco Valerio Pugini
Production Accountant: Paolo Piria
Location Managers: Antonio Gabrielli, Ahmed Darif
1st Assistant Directors: Joseph Reidy, Fabio Jephcott, Ahmed Hatimi
Script Supervisor: Rachel Griffiths
Casting: Cis Corman
Screenplay: Paul Schrader
Based on the novel by: Nikos Kazantzakis
Director of Photography: Michael Ballhaus
2nd Camera Operators: David Slama, David Dunlap
Gaffer: Mario Schiavone
Key Grip: Sergio Serantoni
Stills Photography: Mario Tursi
Visual Effects: Industrial Light & Magic
Editor: Thelma Schoonmaker
Production Designer: John Beard
Art Director: Andrew Sanders
Costume Designer: Jean-Pierre Delifer
Make-up Supervisors: Manlio Rocchetti, Luigi Rocchetti, Mario Michisanti, Maurizio Silvi
Hair Supervisor: Aldo Signoretti
Title Design: Lon Kirschner, Joe Caroff
Music: Peter Gabriel
Music Supervisor: Todd Kasow
Folk Music Research: Lucy Duran
Choreography: Lahcen Zinoune
Recordist: Douglas L. Murray
Sound Mixer: Amelio Verona
Boom Operator: Aldo De Martini
Re-recording Mixer: Tom Fleischman
Supervising Sound Editors: Skip Lievsay, Phillip Stockton
ADR Editors: Marc Shaw, Lisa Levine
Foley Artist: Ron Bochar
Stunt Co-ordinator: Franco Salamon
Special Thanks: Boris Leven, Leo Marks

Cast

Willem Dafoe (*Jesus Christ*)
Harvey Keitel (*Judas Iscariot*)
Barbara Hershey (*Mary Magdalene*)
Harry Dean Stanton (*Saul/Paul*)
David Bowie (*Pontius Pilate*)
Paul Greco (*zealot*)
Steven Shill (*centurion*)
Verna Bloom (*Mary, mother of Jesus*)
Roberts Blossom (*aged master*)
Barry Miller (*Jeroboam*)
Gary Basaraba (*Andrew apostle*)
Irvin Kershner (*Zebedee*)
Victor Argo (*Peter apostle*)
Michael Been (*John apostle*)
Paul Herman (*Phillip apostle*)
John Lurie (*James apostle*)
Russell Case, Mary Sellers,
Donna Marie (*people at sermon*)
Leo Burmester (*Nathaniel apostle*)
Mohamed Mabsout, Ahmed Nacir, Mokhtar Salouf,
Mahamed Ait Fdil Ahmed (*apostles*)
André Gregory (*John the Baptist*)
Peggy Gormley (*Martha, sister of Lazarus*)
Randy Danson (*Mary, sister of Lazarus*)
Robert Spafford (*man at wedding*)
Doris von Thury (*woman with Mary, mother of Jesus*)
Tomas Arana (*Lazarus*)
Alan Rosenberg (*Thomas apostle*)
Del Russel (*money changer*)
Nehemiah Persoff (*rabbi*)
Donald Hodson (*Saducee*)
Peter Berling (*beggar*)
Juliette Caton (*girl angel*)

USA 1988
164 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Léon Morin, prêtre (Léon Morin, Priest)

Mon 28 Mar 17:50; Thu 7 Apr 20:40; Sun 24 Apr 12:00

Lourdes

Tue 29 Mar 20:50; Thu 7 Apr 18:10; Wed 20 Apr 20:50

Ordet (The Word)

Wed 30 Mar 17:45 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large);
Sun 10 Apr 15:30; Fri 15 Apr 18:10; Sat 23 Apr 11:50

Black Narcissus

Thu 31 Mar 21:00; Tue 12 Apr 20:45; Tue 19 Apr 18:10; Sat 30 Apr 15:00

Babette's Feast (Babettes Gaestebud)

Fri 1 Apr 18:10; Sun 10 Apr 12:10; Sat 16 Apr 12:20; Tue 26 Apr 20:50

Aguirre, Wrath of God (Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes)

Sat 2 Apr 20:40; Fri 8 Apr 18:15; Tue 19 Apr 20:50; Mon 25 Apr 18:10

The Seventh Seal (Det Sjunde Inseplet)

Sun 3 Apr 15:20; Mon 18 Apr 15:20; Fri 22 Apr 20:50

The Miracle Woman

Mon 4 Apr 18:20; Fri 15 Apr 20:50; Thu 28 Apr 18:10; Fri 29 Apr 18:10

Stalker

Tue 5 Apr 20:00; Sat 9 Apr 17:30; Thu 21 Apr 20:00; Sat 23 Apr 20:00

My Night with Maud (Ma Nuit chez Maud)

Wed 6 Apr 18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large);
Thu 14 Apr 20:30; Fri 22 Apr 17:50; Mon 25 Apr 20:45

Une Femme douce (A Gentle Creature)

Wed 6 Apr 21:00; Wed 13 Apr 18:20 (+ intro by independent filmmaker
and critic Alex Barrett); Mon 18 Apr 13:10

The New World

Sun 10 Apr 17:30; Sat 30 Apr 19:50

The Gospel According to Matthew (Il vangelo secondo Matteo)

Mon 11 Apr 18:00; Sun 17 Apr 14:40

The Last Temptation of Christ

Fri 15 Apr 14:15; Sun 24 Apr 17:40

Sebastiane

Sat 16 Apr 14:50; Tue 19 Apr 20:30; Wed 27 Apr 17:45 (+ intro by
BFI curator Simon McCallum)

I Confess

Sun 17 Apr 12:00; Wed 20 Apr 18:00 (+ intro tbc)

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