



MEMBER PICKS

Sorcerer

After the global successes of *The French Connection* (1971) and *The Exorcist* (1973), director William Friedkin mounted the riskiest film of his career – an adaptation of Henri Georges Clouzot's 1953 classic *The Wages of Fear*. Based on a novel by Georges Arnaud (aka Henri Girard), Clouzot's film followed four disparate Europeans, variously stranded in South America, who agree to drive two truckloads of volatile nitroglycerin over treacherous terrain for financial reward. With *The Wild Bunch* screenwriter Walon 'Wally' Green, Friedkin recast the key characters as a Mexican hitman (Francisco Rabal), an Arab terrorist (Amidou), a French businessman (Bruno Cremer) and an American gangster (Roy Scheider). Requiring two studios – Universal and Paramount – to cover its expanding budget, *Sorcerer* (1977) was a gruelling masterpiece. Yet the results proved fatally out of step with audiences flocking to see *Star Wars*. A critical and commercial failure when it opened 40 years ago, the film has since been reassessed, and is now considered an overlooked gem.

After The Exorcist, you could have done anything. Why did you opt for a remake of The Wages of Fear?

Wally Green and I used to work together at Wolper doing documentaries for the ABC network. We were talking about the world situation; that if there was no way for world leaders to get together, we were probably going to be the generation that blows up. And we started talking about *The Wages of Fear*. We both remembered and loved the film from 1953. It had not been widely seen in America. We thought it was a great film that perfectly captured this notion of the separate countries of the world either co-operating or dying together. So we took that premise and ran with it. Then Wally, who spoke five or six languages fluently, got the novel, which hadn't been translated into English. It wasn't great – it was good pulp, which often makes the best movies. We decided to create our own characters, different from the ones in Arnaud's book and Clouzot's film.

Then I went to France to do some press for *The Exorcist*, and I met up with Clouzot. I told him I was interested in taking the premise of *The Wages of Fear*. He didn't seem very happy about it – understandably so – but he wasn't against it. But it turned out he didn't have the rights to it anyway – they were with Arnaud, who hated Clouzot's film. He was crazy – a very ornery old guy. He hated my film too! Anyway, we bought the rights from him for very little money, and we set out to make it in our own way.

You originally had Steve McQueen in mind for the lead. What happened?

I talked to Steve about the film, and sent him Wally's script. Two days later he called and said, 'This is the best script I've ever read.' Then he said, 'I've got a favour to ask. I just married Ali MacGraw and you're gonna be off in some jungle for six months. Would you consider writing a role for her?' I said, 'Steve, you just told me it's the best script you've ever read. There are no women in it. There's a very small part for a French woman, but it's not a part for Ali.' So he said, 'All right, make her an executive producer, or an associate producer.' Back then, I was really an arrogant punk. If Steve McQueen had asked me that today, I would have immediately agreed. But I said, 'Steve,

that's a bullshit credit. Don't you have more respect for your wife than to give her some bullshit credit? I'm not gonna do that.' And he said, 'All right, then find locations where you can shoot it in the US.' I just said, 'Steve, I'm very happy with the locations I have.' I was just an arrogant moron. So he said that under those conditions he couldn't do the film. Now, with McQueen I had commitments from Marcello Mastroianni and Lino Ventura. But when I got Roy Scheider instead of McQueen, neither Mastroianni nor Ventura would take second billing.

The shoot of Sorcerer was famously gruelling. What was the most difficult thing about it?

Almost everything that physically could go wrong did go wrong. We built this bridge, which was hydraulically operated, that looked like a rickety old wooden bridge. We built it in the Dominican Republic over a rushing river that was about six feet high, and which had never gone down during the months that we were going to shoot. So we built the bridge over this river, at a cost of a million dollars, because it was going to be the big set piece of the film. And gradually the river went down and down and down, until there was less than a foot of water flowing through it. Impossible. We had weather experts and all kinds of meteorologists telling us, 'This is impossible! This can't happen!' But it happened.

So [production designer] John Box found a similar location near Tuxtepec, in Mexico. They had totally similar topography, about the same-sized rushing river, that again had not diminished in living memory. So we took the bridge out of the Dominican Republic, broke it into pieces, and shipped it all the way to Mexico. Then we rebuilt it over this vast rushing river... which proceeded to go down and down and down.

In the mornings you had this overcast, perfect even light, but then at about noon the sun would come out and burn everything off. Every day. So like when we were shooting in Iraq for *The Exorcist*, we had to shoot a split schedule. Sometimes, in order to disguise the sky, we had to make it rain. I wasn't planning to do the bridge scene in the rain – I thought the bridge swinging over a fast-moving river was enough. But now we're getting tips of sunlight everywhere, so we had to bring in these rain-making machines. Then people began to get sick. People got gangrene. I got malaria. We had these Mexican labourers who built the bridge, 20 or 30 of them. I was very friendly with them. There was one guy in particular I liked very much. And one day he whipped out a Federales badge. He was an undercover cop. He said, 'Señor Bill, you have people on your crew who are doing drugs. You're a very nice man and I like you, otherwise I would arrest all of these people. But I like you, so I'm not going to arrest them, but they have to leave this country tomorrow.' This included stunt men, key grips, make-up artists, special effects guys. So I lost about 20 members of the crew. Those were just a couple of the problems I can remember.

How long did you end up shooting for?

Oh God, I think it was like ten months, maybe more.

And when you were shooting it, did you think, 'This is tough, but the results are really good'?

I thought it was all great! But when we were in the jungle we couldn't see the footage, there was no way to get the dailies. Dick Bush, the great British cinematographer who did *Mahler* and *Tommy* for Ken Russell, had shot all

this wonderful footage in Paris; Jerusalem; Elizabeth, New Jersey; and a little in Vera Cruz. But when he got to the jungle, Dick was lost because the light in the jungle constantly changes. And Dick just couldn't manage it. He couldn't find places to put lights and he wasn't skilled at using reflectors. In the end I brought in John Stephens, who was a commercials camera operator, and who was wonderful at building rigs for the camera. He and I had worked together on documentaries at Wolper along with Wally, and he did all the jungle stuff.

Tell me about Tangerine Dream's music.

I met them in Germany when I was on tour for *The Exorcist*. The local Warner Brothers guy took me to an abandoned church in the Black Forest at midnight. There were no lights except the lights from their electronic instruments. You couldn't see the musicians. They started to play what sounded like the music of the spheres, and I thought it was extraordinary. Synths were a very new thing then – they were popularised later by Giorgio Moroder, who scored *Midnight Express* for Alan Parker.

Anyway, I met with [band leader and founder] Edgar Froese and I told him that this stuff was great, and although I didn't know what my next film was going to be, I wanted them to do the music. Later I sent him Wally's script and we spoke on the phone. I asked him to write some music based on our conversation. Months later, a package of audio tapes arrives in Tuxtepec. It was terrific. I immediately saw how to cherry-pick what they had recorded, and use it in the film.

Where did the title Sorcerer come from?

I originally wanted to call the film 'Ballbreaker' – that was the first title. And [Universal boss] Lew Wasserman said, 'Absolutely no way.' Then I thought of calling it 'No Man's Land', but as you know Harold Pinter wrote a play with that same title. So I was listening to an album by Miles Davis called *Sorcerer* and I just thought the word was powerful. It later occurred to me that the sorcerer was an evil wizard, and in this case the evil wizard was fate.

The Exorcist was about faith, and this was about fate – in the lives of four different guys who really screwed up.

Do you think there's anything about the times we're in now that makes Sorcerer more relevant than it was in 1977?

Well, the world situation is much worse today than it was then. But I'm not sure people want to be reminded of that. I don't want people to look for the metaphor, even though that was something that motivated me. Only the story matters. I thought it was a damn good action adventure that was 'acoustic'; it's not made with digital effects. Everything you see in the film, we had to do! As in *The Exorcist*. I just think it's a wonderful story.

William Friedkin talking to Mark Kermode, *Sight & Sound*, December 2017

SORCERER (AKA WAGES OF FEAR)

Director: William Friedkin
Production Companies: Film Properties International N.V., Universal City Studios, Paramount Pictures
Producer: William Friedkin
Associate Producer: Bud Smith
Unit Manager: Gerard Murphy
Production Manager: Roberto Bakker
Production Accountant: Charles A. Ogle
Assistant Production Accountant: Paul Roedl
Production Secretary: Nanette Siegert
Assistant to the Producer: Luis Llosa
1st Assistant Director: Newt Arnold
2nd Assistant Directors: Al Shapiro, Miguel Gil Jr, Mark Johnson
Secretary to the Director: Toni St. Claire Lilly
Script Supervisor: John Franco
Casting Director: Lou Digaiimo
Screenplay: Walon Green
From Novel Le Salaire de la peur: Georges Arnaud
Directors of Photography: John M. Stephens, Dick Bush
Lighting Gaffer: Patrick R. Blymer
Best Boy: Mike Weathers
Key Grip: Gaylin Schultz
Grips: Bernie Schwartz, George Resler, Bill Kenny, Jim Sheppherd
Optical Effects: Marv Ystrom
Film Editors: Bud Smith, Robert K. Lambert
Assistant Editors: Ned Humphreys, Jere Huggins, Cynthia Scheider
Production Designer: John Box
Art Director: Roy Walker
Set Decorator: Bob Laing
Draftsman: Leslie W. Tomkins
Property Master: Barry Bedig
Assistant Property Master: Gene Anderson
Construction: Ken Pattenden, Doug Millett
Costume Designer: Anthony Powell
Make-up: Ben Nye Jr, Robert Norin, John M. Norin
Hairdresser: Verne Caruso
Titles: Jean-Guy Jacques
Original Music Composed/Performed by: Tangerine Dream
Music Editor: Robert K. Lambert
Musical Effects: Ron Nagle, Scott Mathews

Sound Recordist: Jean-Louis Ducarmé
Re-recordist: Bob Glass, Dick Tyler
Dubbing Mixer: Buzz Knudson
Sound Effects Editor: Charles L. Campbell
Stunt Co-ordinator: Bud Ekins
Transportation Co-ordinator: Whitey Ellison
Technical Adviser: Marvin Peck
This film is dedicated to: H.G. Clouzot
Helicopter Pilot: Richard Holley
Studio: Estudios Churubusco

Cast

Roy Scheider (Jackie Scanlon, ‘Juan Dominguez’)
Bruno Cremer (Victor Mazon, ‘Serrano’)
Francisco Rabal (Nilo)
Amidou (Kassem, ‘Martinez’)
Ramon Bieri (Corlette)
Peter Capell (Lartique)
Karl John (Angerman, ‘Marquez’)
Friedrich Ledebur (Carlos)
Chico Martinez (Bobby Del Rios)
Joe Spinell (Spider)
Rosario Almontes (Agrippa)
Richard Holley (Billy White, helicopter pilot)
Anne-Marie Descott (Blanche) *
Jean-Luc Bideau (Pascal) *
Jacques François (Lefevre) *
André Falcon (Guillot) *
Gerard Murphy (Donnelly) *
Desmond Crofton (Boyle) *
Henry Diamond (Murray) *
Ray Dittrich (Ben) *
Frank Gio (Marty) *
Randy Jurgensen (Vinnie) *
Gus Allegretti (Carlo Ricci) *
Nick Discenza (Father Ricci) *

USA 1977
121 mins

* Uncredited

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Tue 6 Sep 18:00 (Online)
Behind the Scenes: Meet the BFI Inclusion Team
Wed 21 Sep 18:15
Member Exclusive: Archive Tour
Tue 27 Sep 10:30–13:00

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