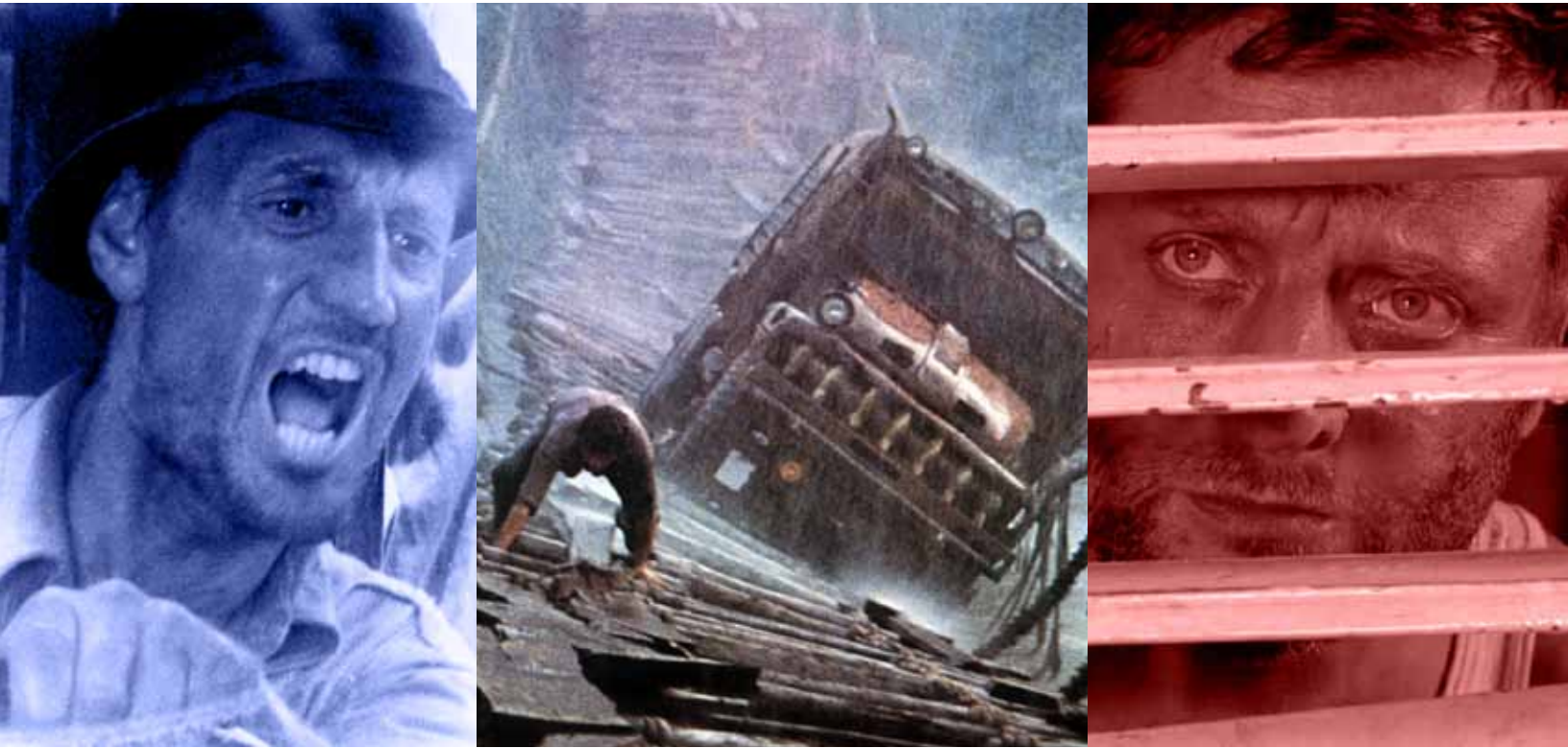


NOIR...OR NOT?



SORCERER

Kelly Vance

Hollywood director William Friedkin, a veteran sensationalist, made two of the most stylish and influential genre pics of the modern era, the police actioner *The French Connection* (1971) and *The Exorcist* (1973), a genuinely terrifying horror movie. Film noir and its neo-noir descendants, however, don't quite fit into his wide-ranging filmography. The mannerisms, perhaps, but not the underlying story themes. Case in point: Friedkin's monumentally misunderstood 1977 thriller,

Sorcerer, now released in a restored-version Blu-ray disc by Warner Bros.

With the box-office-boffo exploits of Popeye Doyle and little Regan MacNeil under his belt, Friedkin was on top of the world when he set out to remake Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Le Salaire de la peur* (*The Wages of Fear*), a nerve-wracking 1953 Yves Montand vehicle about a crew of international misfits transporting nitroglycerin in rickety trucks across treacherous mountain roads to an oil field in an unnamed Latin American country. One slip, one too many jolts on the road, and *kaboom!*

The remake co-scripted by Friedkin and

screenwriter Walon Green (*The Wild Bunch*, *Hill Street Blues*) fleshes out the back stories of the little band of outsiders in its opening minutes, particularly dwelling on Jackie Scanlon (Roy Scheider), a New Jersey criminal on the run from both the police and the mob following the holdup of a gambling racket operating out of a church. Jackie and his three new on-the-lam comrades—a Mexican hit man named Nilo (Francisco Rabal), Palestinian terrorist bomber Kassem (French-Moroccan actor Amidou), and Manzon, a corrupt French businessman (Bruno Cremer)—all need the hazardous-bonus money to buy passports and split the



Scanelon (Roy Scheider) has a few last words with Vinnie (Randy Jurgensen) before heading to South America

country. En route with the explosives, they get into more or less the same white-knuckle situations as Clouzot's fall guys, with anxiety levels and the hectic visuals turned up to eleven.

There's a lot to admire in *Sorcerer*. Scheider is appropriately typecast as the wiry urban tough guy we recognize from *The French Connection* and its follow-up, *The Seven-Ups* (not to mention *Jaws*). The rest of Jackie's Bottom-of-the-Barrel-Club are suitably desperate and unshaven, although not quite in the same category as Charles Vanel, Peter van Eyck, and Folco Lulli in the original film. In his casting as well as scene-setting and production values, Friedkin obviously—some might say disastrously—gets caught up in a game of “top that.” The strategy works about 50 percent of the time.

The poor, filthy village where the desperados congregate—shot in the Dominican Republic—is *really* dirty, exaggeratedly repulsive. Rotting vegetables, random corpses on the street, feral animals, ugly-mugged townfolk, etc. Such carefully chosen character actors as Ramon Bieri (*Badlands*) and Joe Spinell (Willi Cicci from *The Godfather*) fill out the ranks of the forlorn working stiffs, mostly drifters and petro-roughnecks. There was no CGI in those days, so the numerous explosions and man-versus-nature predicaments are all the more impressive.

The thematic links to terrorism and sabotage arguably resonate more intensely today than they did in 1977—check the burnt-to-a-crisp oil workers, victims of on-the-job negligence, and their angry reception by the villagers. The natives have had it with the country's dictator and his gringo concession-

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aires. Any resemblance between the movie and the real-world troubles of Bolivia and Ecuador with oil companies is undoubtedly intentional, and speaks well to the newsy instincts of Friedkin, who began his career as a documentarian in his native Chicago.

The film's centerpiece is the curiously edited sojourn across a ramshackle jungle bridge, in driving rain, staged twice, once for each truck. Friedkin likes to cut away from action—you'll get used to it. The scene with the insurgent *rebeldes* carries welcome echoes of B. Traven's jungle novels. The soundtrack music is wonderfully unpredictable, from Tangerine Dream's score to moody jazz by Charlie Parker and Keith Jarrett. The cinematography of DP Dick Bush (who walked off the arduous production) and his replacement, John M. Stephens, comes out razor sharp on Blu-ray, in keeping with the documentary look Friedkin favored.

Scheider's Jackie does indeed bear a slight resemblance to the classic noir protagonist. Frantic, check. A fugitive, yes. At the end of his rope, certainly. Near the end of the movie Friedkin places his antihero, now left alone to finish the touchy delivery assignment himself, in a desolate “moonscape” of arid desert peaks and eerie, unnatural lighting, the ideal place for Jackie's dreamlike series of flashback regrets. The scene seems forced, hastily added-on, at odds with Friedkin's hyper-realism. The way we understand the essence of film noir, the man (or woman) holding the bag has run out of options, partly because of bad luck, partly due to his own failings, and partly—this is the hardest to achieve—from what is written on his own face, a look that proclaims: I'm screwed and there's nothing I can do about it. Scheider can't quite put



Francisco Rabal as Nilo, the Mexican assassin. He was Friedkin's original choice to play the “French Connection”



Scanlon is amazed to find himself the sole survivor of another deadly obstacle on the road—a highjacking by rebel guerillas

that last detail across in the same way as, say, a Richard Widmark or a John Garfield. He's simply not in their class. Not even when Jackie ends up sitting in the Café Corsario with an ashen-faced, doomed expression do we fully buy the idea that he's finished. Maybe that's the reason Friedkin felt the necessity to show the mob hit men arriving in the village to put the cap on their own little job, killing the guy who ripped off their boss. Widmark or Garfield, let alone Tom Neal as *Detour's* Al Roberts, wouldn't need such an obvious coda tacked on to prove they were going to hell. Despite Friedkin and Scheider's best efforts, *Sorcerer* seems impersonal.

Clouzot's movie, adapted from Georges Arnaud's novel by Jérôme Geronimi and the director, may fail the Noir Litmus Test as well, but after viewing the two home videos side-by-side (we confess to having just seen *Sorcerer* for the first time this Spring, after admiring *The Wages of Fear* for years)—we prefer the Clouzot. Maybe it's the dim-bulb insouciance of Montand's Mario, or the presence of Véra Clouzot (real-life wife of the filmmaker and star of *Diabolique*) with her sexy songs in the Corsario barroom. Or perhaps it's the matter-of-fact gruesomeness of Monsieur Jo's (Vanel) lethal bath in a pool of oil, a poetic, metaphorical, nutshell history of the past hundred years in the developed world. The establishing shots of the decrepit village, through Clouzot's eye, achieve the newsreel-style realism that Friedkin sought

in vain. Equipped with none of the technical prowess of the 1970s, Clouzot's grit-in-the-teeth truck-driving ordeal nevertheless shines with sweat, muscle, and authentic danger.

Sorcerer's box-office flop is well documented, notably in the director's autobiography, *The Friedkin Connection*, and in the liner notes for the Warner Home Video Blu-ray, excerpted from the book. The production mishaps were near-biblical, rivaling even Francis Ford Coppola's ordeals while shooting *Apocalypse Now*. Yes, it was a poor idea to title the movie *Sorcerer* and then sell it as "From the director of *The Exorcist*." People were confused. The film also had the bad luck to hit theaters at the same time as the first *Star Wars*. But Friedkin's hubris obviously played a part as well. The results of his strategic miscues did nothing to dissuade legions of remake-happy Hollywood filmmakers from going down the same highway, over and over again.

Maybe we're biased toward the Gallic approach, but it seems the French have an intrinsic understanding of film noir, having invented the concept. Cinéaste Bertrand Tavernier's re-positioning of the Jim Thompson novel *Pop. 1280* into a colonial African setting—another crummy outpost in the middle of nowhere—for the 1981 feature *Coup de torchon* is a sterling example of how to harness the same dynamite that blew up in Friedkin's face, the story of a cynical outsider trapped in a tropical wasteland. Watching

both *Sorcerer* and *The Wages of Fear*, we flash on Tavernier's ultra-noirish cult hit, as well as *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*.

Friedkin's top films represent some of the finest work done in this country since the post-studio Hollywood golden age of the 1960s–1970s. *The French Connection*, *The Exorcist*, *Cruising* (1980), and *To Live and Die in L.A.* (1985) belong on anyone's list of thrilling genre items—all with the distinctive visceral storytelling we've come to expect. *Sorcerer* comes close. With *Bug* (2006) and *Killer Joe* (2011), a pair of adaptations of edgy stage plays by Tracy Letts, Friedkin again reinvented himself as the thinking person's shockmeister. The milieu suits him.

It would have been helpful if Warner had included a director's commentary in the Blu-ray release—especially since any ostensible surviving outtakes or "making of" footage from the original Paramount production got left behind when the heavily lawyered film finally went to Warner Bros. for its restoration. There are, in fact, no special features at all on the disc. That's usually a drawback, but in this case we have Friedkin's book to rely on. And we can draw our own conclusions. The restored, director-approved *Sorcerer* reeks with the on-location, emulsion-based realism of the era's most exciting cop flicks and blaxploitationers. Best of all, we've got haunted Roy Scheider and the hot-shot boy genius Billy Friedkin of 1977 for another go-round. ■