

SHOT DOWN: Brian De Palma (centre) on the New York set of *The Bonfire Of The Vanities*. "I wanted comedic actors much like Kubrick used in *Dr Strangelove*; the book is caricature, larger than life, and you need actors who can play funny and also make things real. It's a difficult type of acting to find."

AT THE MOVIES

Hanks, but no thanks

Loved the book, loathed the film. Tom Wolfe's prescient bestseller, reworked by Brian De Palma, has flopped in the New York of the Nineties. What went wrong with *The Bonfire of the Vanities*? **Karen Moline** reports

Boooooo! Boooooo! It was unbelievable. But it was real.
Tom Wolfe, *Radical Chic*, New York Magazine, June 8, 1970.

TOM HANKS is relaxed, engaging, personable — all the qualities that made him a movie star and the same qualities that stunned Hollywood when director Brian De Palma announced he had found his Sherman McCoy.

Criticism of Hanks' casting was vociferous; he doesn't have what Wolfe described as a "noble head, Yale chin, big frame and \$1,800 British suit" but this didn't stop De Palma casting him in his \$45 million picture.

It was the first of many choices that left the Schadenfreude-driven critics in the Bonfire peanut gallery hissing — much as spectators in the Bronx courtroom let rip at the climax of the most emblematic novel of the Eighties.

Rarely has a film been judged and found guilty on all counts — in the same manner as its fictional protagonist — as *The Bonfire Of The Vanities*. The novel was ultra-timely with its wicked depictions of the New York haves and the have-nots of the late Eighties.

New Yorkers who travelled in the same social sets Wolfe had skewered took a delight in imagining the real role models for the politics and lawyers (the book is dedicated to both Bronx Supreme Court Justice Burton Roberts, the alleged model for Judge Myron Kovitsky; and former Bronx assistant district attorney Ed Hayes, who resembles Sherman's feisty attorney Tommy Killian), the social X-rays, and the inebriated British hack, Peter Fallow (widely assumed to be Vanity Fair contributor Anthony Haden-Guest, an identity Haden-Guest firmly denies) who brings about Sherman's downfall to bolster his sagging career.

Adapting such a novel was deemed near impossible. "These are venal, con-

niving characters — that's the material," explains De Palma. "In the book everybody's like that — women, men, blacks, whites, Jews, Italians ... nobody gets off." Finding that fine edge in a film was an Herculean task.

Furthermore, the book, with its pre-Wall Street Crash publication date in 1987, had itself become almost unbelievably prescient not only as social satire but as a two-way mirror into the growing quagmire of deteriorating race relations in New York: the political corruption and sentencing of corrupt borough politicians under former Mayor Ed Koch ... the sudden appearance of the oversize, outspoken Reverend Al Sharpton (thought to have inspired the novel's Rev Reginald Bacon), who manages to accuse the accusers at every high-profile, racially-motivated court case ... the cold-blooded murder of a black teenager looking to buy a used car in an Italian neighbourhood in Brooklyn ... the hysterical outbursts of venom from families of the defendants and near-riots in the courtroom when the guilty verdicts were announced in the Central Park jogger case (where a group of black teenagers out "wilding", raped and battered a white woman and left her for dead) ...

Given the volatile nature of the material and the humming cicadas of dissent about its film-worthiness, Warner Brothers' — who'd bought the film rights for producers Peter Guber and Jon Peters for \$750,000 — choice of Brian De Palma as Bonfire director was, however, not illogical.

Known for stylish and gore-splattered thrillers like *Carrie*, *Dressed To Kill*, *Scarface* and *The Untouchables*, De Palma began his career in the late Sixties with two savagely funny counter-culture satires, *Greetings and Hi, Mom!*, both starring a young Robert De Niro and already complete with the swirling neo-Hitchcockian camera tricks and over-the-top sensibility that have since become his trade mark. Having been shot by a cop after stealing a motorcycle when he was younger and ending up in jail, he also knew what happens to anyone faced with doing time in the slammer.

Yet the critical furore intensified when De Palma chose Bruce Willis as Fallow, Melanie Griffith, the Holy Body of his *Body Double*, as Sherman's devout southern mistress, Maria and Morgan Freeman as Judge Kovitsky (now, obviously, black). New York magazine

went so far as to publish a hypothetical re-cast: for instance, Mike Nichols directing Harrison Ford, Jack Nicholson and Meryl Streep.

"It's the particular problem with this project," De Palma says, shrugging. "People who've read the book have all those set ideas of what they think it should be. Some thought it was a very serious, insightful, hard-edged, neo-realistic thing. I read the book and found it very funny, satiric, ironical — it's black comedy and that's what I set out to make. And because it's a satiric farce I wanted comedic actors much like Kubrick used in *Dr Strangelove*; it's caricature, larger than life, and you need actors who can play funny and also make things real. It's a difficult type of acting to find."

DE PALMA was also concerned that the yin and yang of Sherman and Fallow's avariciousness be softened. "If you're going to make a dramatic piece from a novel you have to first make the play work and then you have to make one or two of the characters a little more likeable so the audience seems to care about what happens to them, to be able to get involved in Sherman's tragedy — his fall as Fallow rises.

"I did not play up the aspect of the icy cold Wasp aristocrat because that would detach the audience from his dilemma; the nature of film form is to bring the person through the experience of the principal character, which means making them more humane. There are enough gargoyles in this picture as it is. And Sherman is not George Amberson. One of the problems with *The Magnificent Ambersons* is that when George gets his comeuppance it's not a great tragedy because he'd been a snotty guy who needed a good whack at the beginning of the movie. I didn't want that to be the problem with Sherman."

Hanks says: "I guess I'm lucky that everybody had a very diverse opinion about who Sherman should be. Fifty per cent of those I spoke to saw him as a despicable human being, just a man who deserved exactly what he got and he didn't get enough. The other 50 per cent thought he was a chucklehead, and what a dufus for going through what he did. So it's either Arnold Schwarzenegger or Arnold Stang. I fall somewhere in the middle."

Eyebrows also raised on the Jewish Judge Kovitsky, who was to have been played by Alan Arkin (although the real Judge Burton Roberts did audition and nearly made the cut), was abruptly changed to a black judge named White, and Morgan Freeman was hired.

"I thought that it would be better to have a black man addressing another black man at the climax, rather than racially polarising the scene; the issues were more important than the racial colouring," says De Palma. "And the speech about morality" — one of the few in the film — "is very difficult to bring off and I needed an actor of Morgan's stature and talent to make it work."

Society columns were soon buzzing with the delicious news that real-life social X-rays could be found auditioning as — what else — themselves. In the end, however, few were seen in the film. "They were marvellous," De Palma says, laughing, "and we cast a whole bunch of them. But when we were about to shoot the scene they were going to be in they were all on their summer vacations in Greece and Istanbul and wherever else. We couldn't find them."

After all the rumbly, few were surprised when the actual eight-week shooting of the film in New York City ignited into its own bonfire of the banalities. "This material was always hounded by controversy. The book was hounded by it and with a big movie company there the same criticism was recycled, except we were a little more visible," says De Palma with uncharacteristic understatement.

A news conference was called by the Bronx borough president, Fernando Ferrer, after filming tied up traffic near the Bronx County Courthouse for several days, to talk about "what is clearly an effort to tell a story," he claimed, "by employing Bronx-bashing."

"I have no intention of trying to impede the making of a motion picture," he added, "but by the same token the city and this borough do not have an obligation to help a company make a motion picture that goes out of its way to denigrate the Bronx." He asked for an extensive disclaimer to run at the film's credits, superimposing a scene from a nice part of the Bronx, like the famous zoo and then claimed Warner Bros offered to insert a shorter disclaimer as well as a \$10,000 donation to a community group, a charge Warner's denied.

"Of course the press blew it all out of proportion," says Clint Roswell, press secretary to Mr Ferrer, who is no longer speaking to the media about the film. "It's a great thing, Hollywood versus the Bronx, fiction versus fact. It was almost like a chapter from the book — given to hyperbole."

"The borough president's real complaint at the time was that a detail of 24 policemen was sent over to the location, so in essence the city was paying for private security. Cabbies were being shot in the Bronx and there were our cops watching newscaster Geraldo Rivera trip over Bruce Willis." He laughs. "At least it did have its moments."

"No, we do not show off the Bronx in a particularly flattering light, but we do show it in a particular light," says Hanks. "That light exists in the Bronx, I'm sorry. Let's not pretend that it's the garden spot. It's not."

No sooner had that ruckus died down than Robert Wilenz, chief justice of the state of New Jersey, refused to allow a production crew to shoot a scene in the Essex County courthouse, demanding instead that certain script changes be made because he worried that the film would "erode the confidence of black citizens in our system of justice". A donation of \$250,000 had been planned for the courthouse restoration fund.

"We would hope that the judge would recognise the First Amendment rights of this picture, based on a work of fiction, to be made as our filmmaker's have envisioned," said Rob Harris, the film's production publicist. Finding another courthouse at such short notice in Queens tacked on millions to an already inflated budget. Other planned locations off-limits. Worse, director Spike Lee, who'd read the script, told Tom Wolfe that the film was going to be "racist," and that the book's ending (or, rather, non-ending) had been changed to a sardonic coda where the teenager hit by Sherman's car in the Bronx arises from his near-fatal coma and walks out of the hospital. No one notices. No one cares.

This ending was allegedly too ironic for American preview audiences. De



NICE WORK: Hanks and Griffith were both controversial choices

Palma also considered, as he explains, "a very dynamic sort of crowd-pleasing ending when Sherman knocked over the statue of justice and picked up a sword and just started whacking everybody. It was really good, but it was just another ending."

"I talked with Tom Wolfe about the problems dealing with this material," he adds, "and I told him my choice for the ending and he was very interested. He rewrote the ending a lot — he was never happy with it."

Rumours abound that Wolfe is very unhappy with the film. Upon its release in America, *The Bonfire Of The Vanities* was not received kindly by most of the influential critics. Many claim it is incredibly racist and venal, despite intents to the contrary. Yet it is not a bad film, and certainly never a boring one. It's simply not the mortifyingly savage freeze-frame of an era that, as one lurches towards the terrifying abyss of recession, seemed to have happened eons ago, not a scant few years.

The "greed is good" ethos of the Gordon Gekko character in *Wall Street* is, thankfully, no more. One can imagine that what fans of the book would have wanted to see is perhaps best played out in the privacy of their imaginations rather than in the neighbourhood cinema. It's impossible to imagine a *Bonfire* film that would have pleased any of them.

HOWEVER, those unfamiliar with the book are more likely to be amused rather than chagrined. What De Palma has chosen to create is a broadly edged, broadly played comedy in which all the subtle nuances of Wolfe's ferocity cannot possibly be portrayed.

For a man capable of such deliberately over-the-top film excesses as the drill scene in *Body Double* or the mountain-of-cocaine scene in *Scarface*, much of De Palma's *Bonfire* is curiously lacking in fuel; one almost wants the social X-rays to be even more hideously ridiculous than they are already.

It can be argued that however well Hanks acts, his inherent likeability so permeates Sherman's persona that he never comes over as a true Master of the Universe.

"I think it's amazing," Hanks says, "that we're looking at a man who cheats on his wife, who has this hideous job, who has no relationship with his daughter whatsoever, who lies to everyone he's ever come across, and loses everything, and he's seen as a sympathetic character because I'm the guy playing him." He shakes his head. "Yeah, so people cheer at the courtroom scene because he finally gets justice — by lying. But what they don't do is hiss and boo when they see him calling his mistress and inadvertently getting his wife on the phone. *That's* the difference. And if that's because I'm the guy who played him, well, that's beyond my control. I can't change that. I think he's a man of relatively reprehensible morals at the beginning of this film and at the end he has without question regained the soul he never had."

"I tried to keep the edge of the book," says De Palma. "Some people find satiric stuff funny and others find it in bad taste." He laughs. "I guess it's all in the eye of the beholder."

"And," De Palma hastens to add, "there will be moral outrage as long as the only motive for anything is profit. That will never change. If you can't do something about it — at least you can observe it." **G**

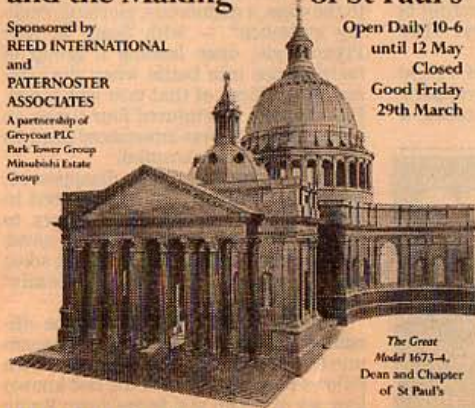
The Bonfire Of The Vanities opens in London on April 12.

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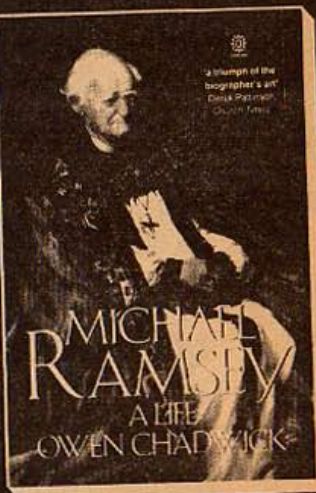
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