

Patrick Fabian on conducting "THE LAST EXORCISM"

Written by Pat Jankiewicz

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One reason Daniel Stamm's THE LAST EXORCISM is the year's scariest film is it takes the time to set up its hero. The evangelical minister Cotton Marcus has a family, wants a job with benefits and, after a medical emergency involving his son, has quietly lost his faith.

Cotton is conducting the last exorcism he'll ever do. He doesn't believe in them anymore, thinks they are dangerous, especially when they involve kids, and plans to expose the sham to Iris (Iris Bahr) and her documentary crew. Picking a letter from a slush pile, he hears from Louis Sweetzer, a desperate Louisiana farmer. Cotton agrees to go exorcize the man's daughter, Nell (Ashley Bell) on camera. Once there, Cotton realizes he is facing a demonic force and instead of running, decides to make a stand.

While Cotton could easily have been an detestable character, a boorish fraud- Patrick Fabian makes him easily likable. For Fabian, who made memorable appearances in shows like MILLENNIUM, FREAKY LINKS and 24, this was his first full-fledged horror film...Outside of playing the ill-fated hairdresser Jay Sebring in HELTER SKELTER! Because we like Cotton, we feel for him when he steps into a truly horrific situation and when Cotton is genuinely scared and feels out of his league, the audience does too.

"Cotton's a good guy," Patrick Fabian asserts. "He's a good guy trying to make amends. Ultimately, he's a Man of God, he grew up in that. While he has soured on some of it, Cotton is a Man of God and when the rubber hits the road, God exists and that is what compels him to try and save Nell. Because Cotton Marcus is a family man, when push comes to shove, he will stand up and say what he believes in."

Doing the film, the actor says "Daniel encouraged a lot of improv. We didn't read the script until the days before shooting. Daniel said, 'Would you mind working with a girl who is troubled? That was Ashley Bell, playing Nell. I was also told to have a ten minute sermon prepared. We would take a block of wood--each scene--and shave it down; Daniel trusted Ashley and I in the scene. I'm a theater-trained actor, so I am like a dog that is eager to please.

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"I love to say I am a really good actor, but when Ashley does her demonic thing in that bloody dress, I was really scared. Ashley Bell honestly scared me, with her voice and the way she scrunched herself up. Listen, if the possessed girl in a movie called THE LAST EXORCISM doesn't scare you, we would all be in big trouble!

"Ashley was very convincing...To be in a sweltering Louisiana night, in the lower Ninth Ward with more crickets than I could believe that God ever made, Ashley and I were in an old barn making this film. She was very believable and her performance is disturbing in the best way. Cotton, like the audience, is wondering 'Is she or isn't she?' When Ashley pulled that voice out, it was creepy and cringe-inducing. There's no CGI monkeying around in the movie until the very end."

"Besides Ashley, I had a lot of scenes with Iris Bahr, who plays Iris the documentarian. Although you don't see her or the cameraman too often, they were always there and Iris was an important scene partner. Louis Herthum, who plays Nell's father, was also really good."

While the film uses THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT's mockumentary approach, the cameawork is a lot less shaky. "I really have to thank Daniel and our cinematographer, Zoltan Honti, for that. Zoltan showed such restraint in not using rickety camerawork. Daniel as director and Zoltan as cinematographer kept it steady so that you, as an audience, can get on board for the journey and the scares."

Cotton on screen sometimes recalls the preacher-turned-actor Marjoe Gortner. That's no accident. "As preparation, Daniel Stamm gave me some books on Exorcisms and the (Oscar-winning) documentary, Marjoe. Watching it, I started to think he was a fake. What made me think he was a fake is that he reminded me of an actor I watched as a kid...and then I realized watching the documentary that he was the actor! Marjoe hung up the cloth and became an actor! I didn't realize he had been a preacher, but I knew I had seen and liked him on KOJAK or EARTHQUAKE! In playing Cotton, you think about Elmer Gantry, Jim Baker and that preacher from the mega church in Louisiana.

"My main influence as Cotton was listening to my director, as well as Eli Roth's enthusiasm and Huck & Andrew's screenplay. Playing the character, I started to sense what Daniel was looking for and what he wanted to avoid. I watched Elmer Gantry and wrote my own sermon and I did

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so much preaching, I lost my own voice! I told the locals in Louisiana during the church scenes, 'I'm an actor, not a preacher. I need help!' They were good Baptist folks--when they gave you an 'Amen', it rocked the church!

"I didn't see the film until the Los Angeles Film Festival (LAFF), which showed it outdoors at The John Anson Ford Theater on a big drive-in screen. Daniel and Eli told me not to go see it til the LAFF screening and I was glad I listened...The place went nuts--you could see every jump and hear every scream," he says proudly. "It's funny and creepy, so it was very rewarding that the audience 'got' that."

Fabian had a really great two-episode appearance on 24, where he's infected with a grotesque virus. "Doing 24 was awesome...Nothing is cooler than to be a guest on a show you love," he says happily. "I was 'Sweaty Virus Guy' for two days on the set of that. My only regrets were that I was not killed by Jack (Kiefer Sutherland) and nobody on set wants to eat with a gross-looking 'Sweaty Virus Guy'!"

As for the future, "I have plans, big plans," Patrick Fabian jokes. "I'm packing my bags for THE LAST EXORCISM 2 in Paris!"

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