

TCM THE PLOT THICKENS

EPISODE 3: AN ACTOR PREPARES

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam Grier was 21 years old when she flew from Los Angeles to the Philippines to make her first movie. A 17-hour flight. To be an actor. Which was never her plan. She never even auditioned before.

But what she lacked in experience, she made up for in hard work. And the film's producers saw something else.

PAM GRIER: They just felt I looked like the character who had been in prison and couldn't get their hair done. OK? Didn't get their eyebrows plucked because I couldn't afford it. I had a unibrow and a mustache

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The movie was called The Big Doll House. The director was Jack Hill. A veteran of low-budget exploitation movies. He'd made 10 of them so far. His biggest hit was a film named Spider Baby.

SPIDER BABY TRAILER: Spider Baby! Has the seductive innocence of Lolita and the savage hunger of a black widow.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The whole production had a fly-by-night feel.

JACK HILL: So the funny part about that is when I was in Manila, we I didn't know who was who were coming until I got off the plane. But fortunately, Pam was one of the girls who got off the plane.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam had a book with her, sort of a bible for actors. It was recommended to her by the movie's producer, Roger Corman. Roger was the king of low-budget cult films.

PAM GRIER: So, Roger, we go in and he says, Well, I'm glad you decided to, you know, to take the job. I said, Roger, you can't fire me. He says, I will not fire you. Here's what I want you to. I want you to read this book How the Actor Prepares by Constantine Stanislavsky. You get that book, you read it,

and it'll help you become an actor. You will know what's going on. And the one thing I said to my mom and Roger, if I quit all these jobs to become an actor, I better be really good at this. I better find a way to always study and be better and be all those inspirations that I've read about and seen

BEN MANKIEWICZ: It was a lot of pressure. If she failed, she didn't know whether her five part-time jobs would be waiting for her back in Los Angeles.

And if she made it as an actor – the decisions were even harder. Could she give it all up to marry her boyfriend, a young basketball star named Kareem Abdul Jabbar.

THEME MUSIC

BEN MANKIEWICZ: I'm your host Ben Mankiewicz. You're listening to season four of The Plot Thickens, a podcast from Turner Classic Movies.

This season – Pam Grier. And how she rose to become the queen of Blaxploitation films and Hollywood's first female action hero.

This is Episode Three: An Actor Prepares

THEME MUSIC

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam arrived in the Philippines just 5 days after a devastating typhoon. It destroyed the harbor and airport facilities in Manila. Pam landed in what was left of it.

It didn't take long for Pam to find a friend.

PAM GRIER: The first thing I did was my driver found a little kitten in the gutter. And I adopted a kitten.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: She spent the night sleeping off her jet lag. The kitten slept in her luggage. She was expected on set the next day. Her first day as a working actress. She was all nerves.

PAM GRIER: It's not easy, it's daunting to a person who's never done it before, not even been an extra when they're all of a sudden they're acting and they're watching, you know, what do I do? You just can't do it. And I just didn't want to fail because I really wanted to go to school.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The Big Doll House was a women-in-prison film. Part of a growing genre of cheaply made exploitation movies.

JACK HILL: Exploitation basically means instead of having a pre-sold book, novel or stars, you have an idea. You have an idea that's controversial that the big studios with their big budgets would be afraid to touch.

THE BIG DOLLHOUSE TRAILER: Women, locked behind walls of concrete and steel, guarded by barbed wire and guns in a tropical hell. They call it -- The Big Dollhouse!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam played a character named Grear, Helen Grear. She was bisexual and tough. It was a big role. A loud role.

THE BIG DOLLHOUSE CLIP: God Dammit! Listen you toady bitch. I'm going to get you out of here but I can't do it with you yelling your fool head off. Now forget about you getting your crud tonight because there's no way! Now shut your filthy mouth!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam had one outfit throughout the whole movie – a yellow top just long enough to masquerade as a dress. Sometimes she wore an orange shirt over it. The shirt said "Prison" on the back. I guess that's in case the audience forgets the women are locked up.

It was a physically demanding role. Her character gets into a mud fight with another actress, survives a sexual assault, and has a grueling death scene. Pam relied on that Stanislavski book. She read it constantly. She wouldn't go out at night with her castmates. She'd stay in and rehearse her lines.

On set, Pam had questions. She wanted to know about lighting and special effects. And about acting. A lot of the crew in the Philippines didn't speak English. So she asked director Jack Hill.

PAM GRIER: He's white with a beard. And skinny and scratching. He just had this it is this habit of scratching his beard and just thinking, hmm hmm, like Freud, you know, so like, why are you scratching your beard? You're making me scratch.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Jack was a laid back director. He was patient with Pam, he encouraged her. When she had a scene, he told her exactly where she needed to be.

PAM GRIER: Pam, you do this and I want you to stand over here and light the cigarette. The lights will be on you. You'll stand here by the bed. I was so impressed that I thought if I have someone like him in every film, then I'll be okay. And I just giggled a lot and just played myself. I was just like a kid in a sandbox. And he liked it. And I thought he would say, "No, don't do that. You know, don't do that." Not one time. And I am like out there and my fro is big. And that's what Jack liked, that I was in their face. What? You know what? And I didn't have to curse. I just stepped in your face, you know? And it brought the other actresses out. So I think that's what he and Roger saw, that I had this rawness that I brought to the work.

JACK HILL: I don't want to spoil an actor's performance by trying to impose something on them or even ask him what they're doing. I prefer to be surprised.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam comes into this situation with no acting experience and all of that. Did you help her?

JACK HILL: Yes and no. Actually, Sid Haig helped her a lot as actors do, working with each other.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Sid Haig was tall and bald, with the textured, pockmarked face of a character actor. He was often cast as the heavy or villain. He had plenty of acting experience too, especially in low budget movies.

SID HAIG: I was really taken by Pam Grier the first time we met, which was in the Philippines. We were doing *The Big Dollhouse*, and she just was this striking woman who had a magnetism to her that just compelled you to focus on her and want to know more about who and what she was.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam and Sid hit it off right away. Their chemistry showed up on screen too. Sid played a local named Harry who sold produce at the prison. In one scene, Pam reaches through the bars of her cell and snatches a pack of Harry's cigarettes. She lets him get real close and pretends to seduce him.

THE BIG DOLLHOUSE CLIP: Forget it, Helen, I know you dig girls. I'm not this way because I want to be. It's this place. Pretty soon a girl gets strange desires. And it creeps up on you like a disease. But it's curable. What does it take? A real man. Like you.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Sid mentored Pam on set, coaching her through daylong rehearsals.

PAM GRIER: Sid would guide me saying, okay, you're fantastic. Are you sure, Sid? Did I do okay? He says. I don't know how to tell you, but you did better than okay. He says, I don't know where you get it from. But we can't take our eyes off of you. And that made me even more nervous. And I told him, I said I didn't think I was going to be an actor. I was just going to make three or four movies, make tuition money and go to school. And he said, you'll be making a big mistake. That's what he told me.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Sid saw something in Pam. It was what Jack Hill called "authority." It gave Pam that edge. She also had discipline. She was so afraid of screwing up, she prepared late into the night. Studying lines and thinking about how she would approach a scene. That combination eventually catapulted Pam from obscurity to stardom.

The Big Doll house was made on the cheap – that meant fast. No frills. That's why they were shooting in the Philippines.

QUENTIN TARANTINO: They can do it cheap, like their dollar will be like \$3 in America. And the fact that, like, the Philippines is fucking gorgeous. You know, if you're doing a jungle picture, you've got it made.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's Quentin Tarantino, the Oscar-winning screenwriter and director of movies like Pulp Fiction and Inglourious Basterds. Today, he's one of the most signature filmmakers of his generation. He's also an expert on exploitation movies, which in the 60s and 70s was a genre defined by Roger Corman.

QUENTIN TARANTINO: Roger Corman was starting New World Pictures. He quits AIP and starts his own company, New World Pictures. And so he needs a like a slate of films, not just one or two or three. He needs like 12 movies, you know, to really set his company up. Okay. So if I'm going to leave Los Angeles and I'm going to send a couple of actors to a location because I actually think it's picturesque enough for us to shoot, well, since the most expensive thing is paying for the actors' plane tickets to go over there, while I'm there, I might as well shoot two movies. If the locations are that picturesque, why not do two?

BEN MANKIEWICZ: And that was the plan. After The Big Doll House wrapped, Roger Corman would use many of the same crew, and the same costumes, and the same actors, to make more movies.

The crew was made up of mostly locals. And according to Jack Hill – they were pretty good. But the on-set safety standards were different.

JACK HILL: What was really weak was the things that they never thought of, like wardrobe, you know, props. They had machine guns that kept jamming every time you fired them, you know? Oh, and we had a scene where we had to have our guy set on fire and in the States they do a lot of protective stuff. There, they just light him up and he jumps in the water when he gets hot. And I'm not kidding.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: They put some sun like a human being on fire and then he jumps in the water.

JACK HILL: Yeah, well, they put, you know, whatever chemicals in his clothes to make the fire, but the water is right there so he can jump in if it gets hot.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: If it gets hot.

JACK HILL: When it gets hot. Yeah. (laughs) The best thing about working in the Philippines was the cost. In terms of time, your number of days is the most expensive item in the budget. In the Philippines, that's your cheapest item. You got all the time you want to do anything. So I was able to really do a lot of stuff that I wouldn't have been able to do on a tight schedule.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Jack – and Pam – quickly learned that there were a lot of rules about filming in the jungle.

PAM GRIER: Don't do this and don't go over there. There's cobras over there and don't do that.

JACK HILL: In the Philippines, they're used to handling cobras. They got people who who have been inoculated against the venom by surviving, having been bitten. And the trainers, they're very, very good. They know how to get the snake and I kind of let them do their thing.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Everyone pitched in on set, including the actors. Sid Haig did his share of manual labor.

SID HAIG: I can remember pushing trucks up a hill and stuff like that when we did the big Dollhouse because we were in an area that was overgrown and we had to go in with machetes and chop down bamboo and stuff so we could trucks through and and, you know, we were all there. There was no star system, trust me. Okay? There were no limousines. There were no bright lights. There was no champagne or caviar. It was snails cooked inside of coconut shells. Mmm. Delightful.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam had to do her own makeup on set. Her castmates taught her how. They also taught her how to fight on camera. You can't punch too fast or it won't look real.

PAM GRIER: And one thing they told me is that Pam, you know, when you go to swing at someone, can you slow it down because we can't capture your strike, your hitting on film. I've got to slow down a punch? Yeah, I said, I can't. I'm going for the kill, you know, or they're going to kill me. That's how you really fight. And they go, Well, okay, we just need to slow it down. And I said, How do I slow that down and not look hammy and campy and stupid?

THE BIG DOLLHOUSE CLIP: You're the— oww! You're the boss. And don't forget you said that.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's your first movie because there was no "Pam Grier" yet.

PAM GRIER: No.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: As we knew it.

PAM GRIER: It wasn't going to be, because the audience wouldn't accept a black person as a heroine yet.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Right, but that would very soon change because I think that's the last onscreen fight you ever lose.

PAM GRIER: Exactly.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The Big Dollhouse had mud fights, food fights, communal shower scenes. They were staples of exploitation movies. They might seem silly today, but they gave Pam the chance to find her voice, to start getting comfortable in front of the camera.

QUENTIN TARANTINO: She's kind of coming from a long line of exploitation actors and actresses that really made an impression in the sixties and seventies. They're not coming from this learned acting place. They're naturals. They're absolute naturals. And they've just got a sense of fun and they have a great, quirky personality and they're able to get it. And it doesn't get stifled when the cameras roll, it comes up.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Nudity was common in "women in prison" films. It was one of the things that separated these movies from big studio pictures.

JACK HILL: Yeah. You know, I've been criticized for the idea of having nudity as being really gratuitous. But you know, the fact is that was it was a requirement of the genre. It wasn't something I never really approved of, but had to do it.

RACQUEL GATES: It's all about the kind of the illicitness, the voyeurism of like watching these women in prison do illicit things. So there's drugs, there's lots of nudity.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's Racquel Gates, a film professor at Columbia University.

RACQUEL GATES: I don't think we called it softcore porn then, but I would say this is a film that like in the eighties would have been labeled like softcore porn essentially.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam learned that her character would be topless when she read her script for the first time.

PAM GRIER: It was on the page.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: It was on the page, so you knew, Oh, I'm going to have to, at least from the top up, I'm going to be naked.

PAM GRIER: If you just be the character, that's all I wanted to do. Just be the character.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Rather than shy away, Pam saw this as an opportunity.

PAM GRIER: I felt very comfortable making it normal. Black, female, feminine sexuality, which was so oppressed and not appreciated. We weren't in the magazines, we weren't centerfolds and weren't on the covers. We weren't considered the object of attraction and advertisement.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: This was the early 70s. Nudity was part of pop culture. Woodstock was still fresh in people's minds. Playboy magazine, at least to some, was considered high class. Casual sex was common in movies, even mainstream movies. Nudity was – everywhere.

Still, it wasn't common to see women fighting naked. That was a new twist.

PAM GRIER: You don't fight very comfortably when you're nude or topless.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's what I find. I'm a terrible nude fighter.

PAM GRIER: It's just your nipples get in the way? I'm sorry.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Amen, you're preaching to the choir.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: All joking aside, Pam was comfortable doing nude scenes. But there were scenes that were harder to shoot. They were sleazier, more violent.

Like when Harry, played by Sid Haig, rolls up to the women's prison with a cart full of produce. Harry bribes the guard to get into the cellblock. All the women call out to Harry, but he stays a bit longer at Pam's cell.

RACQUEL GATES: He approaches the women's cell and she's in there with a group of women. He approaches them and he says, I have a letter,

THE BIG DOLLHOUSE CLIP: Hi Harry, got anything for me today? Got a smuggled letter. What you gonna give me for it? Nothing! Okay. Alright. Come here.

RACQUEL GATES: -And so Pam Grier's character basically lets him feel her up, you know, in order to get the letter. And she does. And, you know, she's fairly stoic about it.

THE BIG DOLLHOUSE CLIP: Okay, that's enough.

RACQUEL GATES: But then, she realizes that the letter wasn't for her, it was for someone else. And she's been tricked and she breaks essentially.

THE BIG DOLLHOUSE CLIP: You son of a bitch! This is for Bodine!

RACQUEL GATES: And for me, that scene is so evocative because as a viewer, you immediately think, how much stuff has this woman within this narrative been putting up with? Has she been pretending to be okay with? You realize the toughness is not literally who she is, but a mask that she has been wearing in order to deal with the incredibly horrific conditions of being in prison.

THE BIG DOLLHOUSE CLIP: You're rotten Harry! You know why? 'Cause you're a man! All men are filthy. All they every want to do is to get at you. For a long time I let them get at me. That's why I'm in this dump! But no more, you hear me? I'm not going to let a man's filthy hands touch me again!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Every now and then I have to remind myself that before *The Big Dollhouse*, Pam had never acted. Not even in a school play. But here she was, 21 years old, stealing scene after scene.

I wanted to see how she did it. And I knew exactly where to turn. To the book. *An Actor Prepares*, by Constantin Stanislavski. It's still in print.

One part caught my eye. It's on page 182 in my edition. Stanislavski writes about what he called emotion memory: "Just as your visual memory can reconstruct an inner image of some forgotten thing, your emotion memory can bring back feelings you have already experienced."

This "emotional memory" is an important acting tool. Pam clearly knew how to use it, even when she was just a novice actor. She learned, from the book, how to reach into the past, find a difficult memory, and use it to create a performance.

All the emotions Pam suppressed with her tough exterior became tools in her acting toolbox. They were easy to surface. Now that she finally had an outlet.

THEME MUSIC

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Coming up, Pam worries about her future with Kareem.

PAM GRIER: But the fact that I was willing to lose my life for someone who has a doctrine that I'm excluded, I don't. I'm messed up.

-----AD BREAK-----

PAM GRIER: (singing) Who shall dwell in thy holiest, none but the pure and heart, none but the pure and heart.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Before rehearsals, Pam used to warm up by singing gospel. One morning, on the set of *The Big Dollhouse*, Sid Haig heard her singing. He was astounded.

PAM GRIER: He says, what are you doing? I said, Well, Stanislavsky says I have to sing and vocalize my instrument and warm up, he says, Yeah, that's warming up. He says, I do it all the time. And he

would have just chills, tearing up and he says, I just love gospel music. You know, he says, it just does something to my soul. And I said, yeah, it really does.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam and Sid started warming up together. By singing.

PAM GRIER: He'd harmonize. He could really sing. He I said, Did you ever do a doo wop? Did you ever do street corner doo wop blues? He says, Yeah. And he encouraged me.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Word got out about their singing. The cast and crew would stop what they were doing and watch.

Roger Corman also found out. He might have been a little annoyed that people weren't working. But it also gave him an idea. He approached Pam with a song – a song written for The Big Dollhouse.

THE BIG DOLLHOUSE CLIP: I'm a longtime woman, and I'm serving my time...

JACK HILL: And she actually recorded the title song, as I'm sure you know that Les Baxter wrote, with a little input from me.

PAM GRIER: They said, we wrote it for you. I said, it's an octave too high. Can you lower it? You know, it's like too high for me and they couldn't, uh uh, straining.

PAM GRIER: I would have I would have arranged it differently.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Oh, you would have?

PAM GRIER: Yeah. I'm a long time woman and I feel no pain here. I'm a long time woman. And I lost my game.

It would have been different on a bus, but they made it more Hollywood, Jazz, they made more Vegas.

JACK HILL: And it turned out that the Black radio stations in places like Chicago had taken that soundtrack off the film and were playing it over the radio.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The song hit the airwaves. And The Big Dollhouse became a hit.

When the movie was released, Pam was sent to Chicago for the opening. She and her co-stars posed for publicity pictures – in a cage. Again, Quentin Tarantino.

QUENTIN TARANTINO: The girls are really funny and they have a really good camaraderie. You like them. You like you really like rooting for them, especially at the end. You know, you want them to get away. You're totally rooting for these girls. And Roger, apparently he told me this himself that when he saw the big dollhouse, he thought Jack Hill went too far. He thought it was, like, too sexual. He thought it was too violent. And he just said it was too much. Then it became the biggest hit that they ever had. And so he completely changed his mind about that.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The Big Doll House made more than five million dollars at the box office. Remember, this was back when tickets cost a dollar apiece. Roger Corman's production company started getting letters.

ROGER CORMAN: You don't normally get fan mail for a little picture such as this, but we got a whole lot of fan mail. We were really amazed. And almost all of it singled out Pam Grier.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: This is Corman on the DVD of The Big Dollhouse

ROGER CORMAN: When we did The Big Doll House, we were not thinking of the Black market at all. We were just making a "woman in prison" picture. But when we saw the reaction to Pam and we realized that these Black-oriented films were doing so well, we featured her in an attempt to get both markets."

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Roger asked Pam to stay in the Philippines to shoot a second film, Women in Cages. Another women-in-prison movie.

WOMEN IN CAGES TRAILER: Meet the dolls of devil's island. Women in Cages! The sensational new motion picture that rips the veil off the dirtiest racket ever conceived by the minds of vicious men.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Women in Cages was shot in the northern mountains of the Philippines. It was more remote. Lots of flooded rice fields. Pam's flight there had nowhere to land.

PAM GRIER: It was fucked up. We had to jump out a damn plane.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The plane never stopped. Pam was told, quite literally, to jump out and her luggage would meet her on the ground.

PAM GRIER: There was no landing strip, I'm like, I'm going to die here in the Philippines. I can see that - being bitten by a cobra, fall out of a plane, get hit by my luggage. I can see that.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam plays Alabama, a sadistic lesbian prison matron. She had a large wheel where she would strap naked prisoners - and then torture them.

WOMEN IN CAGES CLIP: No one escapes from my prison. No one!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Women in Cages has even more nudity and more violence than The Big Dollhouse. It was also shot by a different director.

QUENTIN TARANTINO: And that's directed by a well-known director named Gerald de Leon. And he only did one movie for Corman. And he just did this one and this is the antithesis of what the Jack Hill ones are like. It's not funny. It's not funny at all. It's very grim. And it's very downbeat.

WOMEN IN CAGES TRAILER: Innocent young girls held in cruel bondage, sold to the highest bidder to satisfy strange desires.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Women in Cages was harder to shoot than The Big Dollhouse. The terrain was more tropical. Pam always felt like something was crawling on her. Insects. Leeches. Snakes.

WOMEN IN CAGES CLIP: There was a snake, it was crawling all over me!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: But Pam stuck it out. Soon she moved to a nicer hotel. And she got a pay raise, a small one. She was making more than \$500 a week.

PAM GRIER: It went up. The fee, the salary, the budgets, a few dollars, maybe an extra lunch or something, but not much. But I had no intention of doing any more. Maybe the first one? Yes, the second one. Oooh, that's some tuition. The main thing is hang on to the job because I let the other ones go. So I really needed the tuition. I really wanted to get into UCLA Film School.

ODIE HENDERSON: I don't think she really thought about that she could act until she went out there and did those movies in the Philippines, those first movies.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: This is film critic Odie Henderson.

ODIE HENDERSON: She is fearless. She did her own stunts. She didn't mind nudity. She was a powerful force on the screen, even when she wasn't saying anything. This is what makes you a star.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: These first two films in the Philippines put Pam Grier on the map, even if she was just a tiny island on the map.

Pam made \$8,000 for three months of work. The day Pam was set to leave the Philippines, Roger Corman asked her to stay and shoot another movie.

But Pam wanted to go home to Los Angeles. She missed Kareem. She gave her kitten to her driver and headed to the airport. On the long flight, Pam considered the unexpected twists her life had taken.

PAM GRIER: I got the confidence to go to the other side of the world to figure out who I was as a young woman, it was the best experience ever and Roger didn't fire me because I had studied that book, and it gave me an entire different idea of what the actor does.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam realized she had learned things in the Philippines she could never learn in school. And she thought about Kareem.

PAM GRIER: Do I love him or does he love me? What does love mean at that moment in time? That's when I started opening up.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Would she give up film school for Kareem? Would she convert to Islam and marry him? Or she thought, maybe there was a third option. Maybe she was an actress after all.

When Pam got back to the States, she made a stop in Denver to tell her mom about her adventures in the Philippines. Then it was back to Los Angeles and Kareem. He lived in Malibu when he was in town. Pam often stayed at his condo. One weekend, some of Kareem's friends came over. Pam was asked to leave the room.

PAM GRIER: When he's in the room where Muslim men are in the room, he's pretty Orthodox and women have to leave. And they said, But make us a tuna fish sandwich and leave it here and, you know, and then come back and clean up.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam decided to go for a drive. She reached into the glove compartment and took out a silk scarf and wrapped it so her head would be covered.

PAM GRIER: And I was going to drive and see what it's like to, you know, see how people react to me, see how I feel driving with this scarf on my head. And it really affects you.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: She was driving on a winding two lane highway called Malibu Canyon Road. The windows were down so she could enjoy the breeze.

PAM GRIER: Well, the wind from the window came and blew the scarf down over my eyes, and got entangled in my face and I couldn't get it off. I almost drove off the cliff. I said I could have lost my life. But the fact that I was willing to lose my life for someone who has a doctrine that I'm excluded - I'm messed up.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam drove to the beach and went for a walk. She was in love with Kareem and she believed he loved her too. But she struggled to reconcile her feelings with the life Kareem wanted to lead. When Kareem's friends left the condo, they saw Pam walking on the beach, wearing cutoff shorts.

PAM GRIER: And I was on the beach thinking to myself and with the head scarf off. And they saw me and it was his teacher.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: One of them called Kareem and told him what he'd seen. When Pam got back, Kareem wasn't happy.

PAM GRIER: And I was just shaking, trembling, and I kept asking questions. I said, Do you really want me to walk behind you? Do you really want me to serve you?

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam remembers Kareem saying yes.

We invited Kareem Abdul-Jabbar to talk to us for this podcast, but he politely declined.

Pam was depressed in the weeks after their fight. When Kareem left to go to Milwaukee, she didn't go to the airport to see him off.

THEME MUSIC

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Next on The Plot Thickens, a birthday and a wedding. We'll be right back.

-----AD BREAK-----

BEN MANKIEWICZ: It was May 26th. 1971. Pam's 22nd birthday. She planned to spend the day relaxing at home.

PAM GRIER: I was in this kind of house condo that I got to stay in until I found an apartment. It was in California, Los Angeles and I was in the living room on a sunny day.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam had been answering birthday calls all day, so she wasn't surprised when the phone rang. This time it was Kareem.

PAM GRIER: He was very friendly and up, and it was strange and I thought it was about my birthday, he was calling to wish me happy birthday. And he said, well, first of all, happy birthday. Great. Okay. So I want to talk to you. And I said okay. Are you going to commit to Islam, you know and convert? So we can get married? I said, yeah, eventually, but I just need more time. You know, you had three years, I've had three months and I have more questions that you feel uncomfortable answering.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: It was a conversation they'd had often. But this time, something felt different.

PAM GRIER: He says, well, if you don't commit to me today, then I'm going to marry someone who was prepared for me. I, um, to articulate how I felt, it's very complicated, very complex because there's so many emotions. All these things and I said, OK. So maybe I wasn't the only one, maybe there was more. But he's getting married to someone else if I don't commit. And he said, Yeah, she's been prepared for me. I said prepared? What do you mean, prepared? Like a sandwich? And I was not being nice. I should have been more respectful. I understood what he was saying.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam thought back to the book Kareem gave her about being a Muslim woman, and all the conversations they'd had about Islam.

PAM GRIER: And he was preparing me. And I didn't want to be prepared. I didn't say no or scream or be defensive. Didn't come up with any drama. I just said, OK. I remember just lying down and looking up at the ceiling and not really breathing. Because he started out as a best friend and not until later did I think like I dodged a bullet or - wow, he set me free, I stood my ground. I felt a sense of freedom, my own earned freedom. I lost the love. And I did love him.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam spent the rest of her birthday crying. Two days later, at four o'clock in the morning on May 28th, Kareem got married.

PAM GRIER: I couldn't make him happy. That made him happy.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The newlyweds went on a honeymoon tour of Africa. Kareem sent Pam a postcard from Egypt: "Pam, I hope this note finds you well. This place is out of sight, but I'm glad to be going home. Peace, Kareem."

Pam threw herself into work. By the fall of 1971, she was on a plane back to the Philippines to shoot three films for Roger Corman.

PAM GRIER: So that's three jobs and tuition money. I thought it was something else, like going to school. But I learned so much from the Filipino production, which love American movies so much. They knew dialog, they knew equipment. They were just enamored about American filmmaking

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The first movie they shot was called Twilight People, made by Filipino director Eddie Romero.

TWILIGHT PEOPLE TRAILER: Half-man, half-beast, all monster - the Twilight People!

ODIE HENDERSON: it's based on the island of Dr. Moreau, the H.G. Wells story, where Dr. Moreau wants to create a better race of people by kind of merging with animals.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam plays the Panther Woman. This is film critic Odie Henderson.

ODIE HENDERSON: Well, I enjoyed every time she attacked somebody. But I like horror movies and I'm a gore person, so I enjoyed her just coming out of nowhere and attacking folks. If you think about it, they weren't any black monsters. You know, the beast must die has the first black werewolf and then Blacula, the same year, has black vampires. And we have Pam Grier, as you know, as black cat woman. So. It was a little bit ahead of its time, I think, in terms of the casting.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: It was a very physical role and once again, Pam did a lot of her own stunts. Partly because they didn't have the right stunt team to double for her.

PAM GRIER: And then when they they said, OK, Pam, here's your stuntman. He was half my size covered in brown makeup with a rug over his head to look like an afro. I was like, What the fuck? That does not look like me?

BEN MANKIEWICZ: After running around the jungle as a panther, Pam shot another 'women in prison' movie with Jack Hill. The Big Dollhouse had been such a hit, Roger and Jack decided there was more money to be made.

THE BIG BIRD CAGE TRAILER: Abused by savage degenerates!

JACK HILL: So I wrote a sequel called The Big Bird Cage where I used Pam Grier and Sid Haig and I wrote the role specifically for them. She and Sid Haig became my Tracy and Hepburn.

QUENTIN TARANTINO: Her first real performance performance doesn't really happen until The Big Bird cage

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Again, here's Quentin Tarantino.

QUENTIN TARANTINO: That's her first real terrific performance. And I think partly it's because she's teamed up with Sid Haig the way she is, and they're almost like they're playing these Bandito kind of revolutionaries and they're dynamite together. And she's just such an amazing character. And she really, really becomes a character. And I do think it's a situation by that point, she had gotten really comfortable. She had gotten better and better and better. She knew what she was doing.

PAM GRIER: One thing Constantine Stanislavski says, learn your lines and be in character. So when they first see you, they see that character and they can add on or add less. But that's what they see.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The third film Pam shot was called Chains of Hate, also directed by Eddie Romero. AIP would eventually change the title to Black Mama White Mama.

PAM GRIER: It was a takeoff of the Tony Curtis and Sidney Poitier movie.

THE DEFIANT ONES CLIP: Get off my back I aint married to you! You married to me alright, joker. And here's the ring, but I aint going South on no honeymoon now.

ODIE HENDERSON: This is basically a rip off of The Defiant Ones. You have prisoners, one black, one white, and they are handcuffed together and they escape and they don't like each other.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam spends the shoot handcuffed to a blonde actress named Margaret Markov.

ODIE HENDERSON: They did their own stunts. They fought. They were both physical people. They were equally matched. They have good chemistry together.

PAM GRIER: And I add the humor. And whatever Margaret Markov did, you know, I did the complete opposite of it. So we were like Mutt and Jeff, we were the first buddy, you know, female buddy pair.

BLACK MAMA WHITE MAMA CLIP: Who put you in charge? You'd be in a cell if it weren't for me. Yeah, but what have you done for me lately?

BEN MANKIEWICZ: While Pam was in the Philippines, studio executives back in Hollywood were trying to cash in on a new trend: movies made for a Black audience. There were reasons for that. The country was changing.

JACQUELINE STEWART: This is a moment where white flight from urban centers to the suburbs had really changed the demographics of the core areas of, you know, most cities in this country.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Jacqueline Stewart is the director of the Academy Museum, and one of the hosts of Turner Classic Movies.

JACQUELINE STEWART: And so these massive movie palaces, that've been built in, you know, every major city, sometimes two- or three-thousand seats, they were starting to decay. And one reason they were allowed to decay is because that white audience wasn't the core audience anymore. Black audiences were going to many of these theaters. So it was a real business opportunity for the industry to think about how to exploit a black audience and that term exploit, you know, sounds negative. But it's like a business concept of exploiting a market.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Hollywood saw dollar signs after watching the success of an independent director named Melvin Van Peebles. He made a movie in 1971 called Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song.

JACQUELINE STEWART: It was made very cheaply, independently. But he wanted to do something that was not co-opted by, dictated by white Hollywood.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The budget for Sweet Sweetback was \$500,000. It made \$15.2 million at the box office. Another movie arrived a few months later proving that kind of success, and profit margin, was not just a one-off.

SHAFT TRAILER: Shaft's his name. Shaft's his game.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Shaft was a detective movie from MGM starring Richard Roundtree, with a soundtrack by Isaac Hayes. It was directed by a photographer named Gordon Parks, who was the first Black director to make major motion pictures in Hollywood. Shaft was a runaway hit. It earned \$13 million at the box office, enough to save MGM from bankruptcy.

RACQUEL GATES: So every time that Hollywood is broke, they just they suddenly remember that black people exist.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's Columbia University film professor Raquel Gates.

RACQUEL GATES: You couple that with the wake of the civil rights movement, the rise of the Black power movement, the 'Black is Beautiful' aesthetic, the popularity of soul music. And you combine all of those things and you get Blaxploitation.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's what some people were starting to call these Black action movies: Blaxploitation films. The lead roles were going to Black men. That was about to change.

The low budget movie studio where Pam had once worked, American International Pictures or AIP, asked Jack Hill to make an action movie starring a Black actress.

And Jack knew just the woman for the job.

THEME MUSIC

BEN MANKIEWICZ: On our next episode:

COFFY TRAILER: My name's Coffy. [gunfire]

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam lands her biggest role yet – and becomes a sensation.

PAM GRIER: I couldn't walk on the street. There'd be 5000 people.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Her movies sell millions of tickets – and generate considerable controversy.

CICELY TYSON: There has to be a change because all of the films are too negative.

PAM GRIER: I'm literally sailing into a storm with no sails and it's dark and the waves are hitting me in the face and how I'm, like, surviving. That's what it was like.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Angela Carone is our Director of Podcasts. Story Editors are Joanne Faryon and Shari Okeke. Audio Editing and Sound Design by Mike Voulgaris. Scriptwriting by Yacov Freedman, Rachel Pilgrim, Angela Carone and me. Yacov Freedman is our Senior Producer. James Sheridan is our Researcher and Fact Checker. Mixing by Glenn Matullo and Tim Pelletier. Production support from Julie Bitton, Mario Rials, Susana Zepeda, Liz Winter, Allison Firor, Phil Richards and Reid Hall. Web support by Betsy Gooch.

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TCM's general manager is Pola Changnon.

Check out our website at tcm.com/theplotthickens. It has info about each episode and photos from throughout Pam's life. Again, that's tcm.com/theplotthickens.

I'm your host Ben Mankiewicz, thanks for listening. See you next time.