

TCM THE PLOT THICKENS

EPISODE 6: I'M GONNA DIE FOR PAUL NEWMAN

RICHARD PRYOR: There really is a difference between white women and Black women. And I've dated both. Yes I have.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: During the 1970s, Richard Pryor was the biggest comedian on the planet.

RICHARD PRYOR: But white women take more shit. Like you be at home, getting ready to go out and you say "I'm going out baby, take it easy." "Okay. Have fun. Toodle-oo!" [laughs] You say that to a Black woman, the bitch start dressing too! [laughs]

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Richard delivered that joke in 1975. The next year, he met Pam Grier. Freddie Prinze introduced them.

PAM GRIER: First time I met him, it was with Freddie. We went to see him and get some liquid cocaine.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Richard was a known womanizer. Pam piqued his interest. The feeling was not mutual.

PAM GRIER: He had acne. Bad acne. I wanted to say, but I didn't, You're a lot smaller than I thought you were and a lot skinnier.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Richard Pryor owned guns. He spent time in jail. And he had a drug problem.

RICHARD PRYOR: I snorted cocaine for about 15 years. With my dumb ass. I must've snorted up Peru. [crowd laughs]

BEN MANKIEWICZ: His comedy was about drugs, crime, police, and sex.

RICHARD PRYOR: And you get weird sexual fantasies too when you be on coke.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: He mocked both bigots and the Black community. He did skits about slavery. No topic was taboo. No words were off-limits. He was totally unpredictable.

ROCCO URBISCI: Richard was a performer who didn't write. But what he did do is he had a lot of we'll call them premises. Okay. Rich worked off a bullet points.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: This is Rocco Urbisci. He produced Richard Pryor's TV specials.

ROCCO URBISCI: So when you wrote for Richard, you gave him premises and he would take it another level. He'd explode it to another level.

THE RICHARD PRYOR SPECIAL: Ladies and gentlemen, Richard Pryor.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: His albums sold millions. His TV appearance were legendary. And in 1977, he got his first lead role in a movie. He played Wendell Scott - a bootlegger who became the first Black driver in NASCAR.

GREASED LIGHTNING TRAILER: Warner Bros. presents Richard Pryor in Greased Lightning.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Greased Lightning was a big-budget production, and a huge opportunity for Richard. He could have cast anyone he wanted as his co-star. He wanted Pam Grier.

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 Six: I'm Gonna Die For Paul Newman

THEME MUSIC

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In *Greased Lightning*, Pam was cast as Mary, the wife of racecar driver Wendell Scott. It was a supporting part, but it was her first role for a major studio, Warner Bros.

The movie was shot in the South, around an hour outside Atlanta. When Pam landed in Georgia, the producers asked her to go visit Richard Pryor. Say hi to the star. When she got there, he was throwing a party for the crew.

PAM GRIER: He rented a big house, a farm with a pond. It had like crappies and sunfish and bass, maybe some bass or something. And he was teaching the crew and cast how to catch fish for a fish fry.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam wasn't in a partying mood. But she knew how to fish. Apparently Richard - did not.

PAM GRIER: I knew that he was not teaching people how to tie hooks on to lines and sinkers. So I went over and showed him how to do and he said, Do you know how to do that? Yeah. You know. Have you ever been fishing for catfish in the North and Platte River or this and that where you're fishing for sunfish, crappie or blue eagles? He goes, Wow, wow. You know, he was so impressed that I knew about that. He said, I don't know any black women that knew anything about fish. And I said, Well, you do now.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: By the time Pam joined the production, *Greased Lightning* was already several weeks behind schedule. The main reason was Richard Pryor. He'd show up late to the set - or not show up at all. When he was there, he didn't know his lines.

The studio fired the director, Melvin Van Peebles. In came a new director, Michael Schultz, who had worked with Richard before.

MICHAEL SCHULTZ: I think they were about at least one third or maybe half finished shooting. And when I get there on location, Melvin is addressing the crew and introducing me. And the crew wants to walk because they're backing Melvin. And Melvin said, No, no, no, this is a good brother, you know, stay here, finish the film. And then Richard presents me with a gift. Right. A 30-30 rifle, you know, the kind that in Westerns where you cock the thing and it's. And it's engraved. I hope you shoot this better than you shoot movies because we're in Georgia, boy.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Michael Schultz had no idea what he'd gotten himself into. Richard Pryor was only one of his problems. The locals didn't want this Hollywood production – with a Black director and Black cast and crew – in their backyard.

MICHAEL SCHULTZ: So my very first day of shooting where we're shooting in the house and I'm working with Richard and I'm working with Pam and Beau Bridges, and the house was a couple of doors down from an automobile repair facility. And every time they would hear action, they would rev up the engines and they would make as much noise as they could. And so I had to change the routine. So I told the crew, when I say cut, that's action. And when I say action, that's cut. And we got through the day of shooting without the good old boys figuring it out.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: One day, they were supposed to shoot a wedding scene, a short moment in the film where Pam and Richard get married. Pam's wearing a white, floor-length wedding dress. Long sleeves. Heavy fabric.

The location was a small church. No air conditioning. The extras had fans to cool themselves. Pam was stuck holding a bouquet of flowers.

PAM GRIER: I'm on the set waiting for Mr. Pryor. Where is he? We're waiting for Mr. Pryor. Why? Go get Mr. Pryor. Get him out here now. He comes out to the set. Everyone's hot and fatigued. He comes on the set. Hey, hey, hey. Okay. You ready to rehearse? Yeah, sure. No.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Richard didn't know his lines. He could tell Pam was fuming.

PAM GRIER: So he picks up a cooking fork that's in the kitchen. And he does like this to my face. In my eyes.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam is gesturing with an imaginary fork. Richard waved the fork right in front of her, poking it in her direction.

PAM GRIER: He's like that far away from my face. And I explode on him in front of everybody. I knock it out of his hands. And I curse his ass out. And I say, How dare you keep us waiting for you all day? Who do you think you are? You're going to put all of us out of work. I read him the riot act. And I said, Go learn your lines. And I'm leaving this set, and I'll come back when you're ready. I walked off the set and the crew applauded. "I guess she told me."

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam goes straight to her trailer. She slams the door and strips off the wedding dress. It's covered in sweat.

PAM GRIER: All my clothes are hanging up everywhere. Trying to dry out. And so I get a knock on the door. Miss Pam. Miss Pam. Richard Pryor said he's ready. So I hurriedly get dressed before he changes his mind.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Richard is waiting for her at the altar. He's in costume, wearing a tuxedo. The crew is silent. Waiting to see what happens next.

PAM GRIER: And he didn't apologize when he says, I'm ready. He said, I'm ready. I learned my lines, I'm ready to go. Then he he started calling me like, you know, Coffy, Foxy Brown. He's like, you know, he's getting his on. He was doing his thing. And I just stood there and I said, Uh-Huh. Let's go. Let's do it. And if you do this again, don't worry about me coming to the set. I ain't playing with your ass. And that's when he said, That's when I fell in love with the bitch!

THEME MUSIC

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Coming up – opposites attract when Pam tries to save Richard from himself.

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

GREASED LIGHTNING CLIP: They're gonna kill you Wendell and that's the truth! The truth is Mary, I'm tired of lying to you and I'm tired of lying to myself. I'm going to be a racecar driver.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: After the wedding scene, Pam started to respect Richard. She enjoyed his company – especially in the morning. He was gentle, humble. That's before he went to his trailer and got high with his friends.

They were playing a married couple. A sure-fire recipe for romance. Their scenes together were electric.

MICHAEL SCHULTZ: Well, they had the chemistry, so they all they had to do was say the right words. I don't think they worked hard to hide it. (laughs) Oh, yeah. No, they were, they were a hot item.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Their affair wasn't planned – but it certainly helped the movie. To win Pam's heart, Richard behaved like a professional.

MICHAEL SCHULTZ: I think that Pam was like the organic queen. She was really cleansing Richard, and he was all into it. I mean, he was so in love with her that she stopped him smoking and he wasn't drinking. He was on a real healthy kick. And I'm looking at this and saying, Wow, this is great. I hope it keeps up, you know? She was a real good influence on him.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: When Greased Lightning wrapped, Pam and Richard kept seeing each other. They were an unlikely couple. Pam, the country girl who was happiest with her horses. And Richard Pryor, who told jokes about his cocaine addiction.

RICHARD PRYOR: I started off snorting little tiny pinches, so I know I aint gonna get hooked. Not on no coke, you can't get hooked. My friends have been snorting fifteen years, they aint hooked. I was snorting little teeny, didn't even make noise. Six months later, [snorting noises].

MICHAEL SCHULTZ: Richard's greatest talent, I think, was finding a way to express in humor very painful things that were going on in his life. And he was able to laugh at it and make you laugh at it and it crossed all racial barriers and went right to the heart of human condition. Richard was very, very vulnerable.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In 1977, Richard Pryor was at a crossroads. He was only 36, but he'd been doing drugs for decades. His body couldn't take the abuse anymore. He told Pam – he wanted to get clean.

Richard Pryor had a difficult childhood. His mother was a sex worker, his father a pimp.

RICHARD PRYOR: We lived in what I guess you'd call a brothel. We called it a whorehouse.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: This is Richard on the Dick Cavett show.

RICHARD PRYOR: I had a problem with finding out people lived another way. When I got grown and moved and met kids who didn't know about that at all. And didn't talk like I talked. I couldn't understand it. It took me a while to stop hitting on their mothers. [laughs]

BEN MANKIEWICZ: He was raised by his grandmother – she owned the brothel. He was deprived of things most kids take for granted.

PAM GRIER: I had a bike on the bike rack of my car. My Jaguar. And he said. You know, I never had a bike. I would love to have a bike. I would. I want to learn how to ride a bike. I say okay, let's go down a bit and buy you a bike. So we went down to Venice Beach to a bike shop. And I told this young man that, you know, can you fit him up with a bike? And we did. And when he got on that bike. And wanted to try in front of me knowing he's going to fall. And the guy held the back while he pedaled. In that instant, he found his balance and he looked like he wouldn't stop. He just kept cycling. And everyone in this shop, we were just like seeing him change. Let's go, let's go down the bike path. Come on, let's go. Let's ride. But don't tell my homies you saw me on a bike. I said, I won't tell 'em. But he loved that.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam put Richard on a strict routine. No more sleeping until 2 in the afternoon. From now on, they got up at 7:00, had a balanced breakfast, played tennis.

It may sound strange, but biking and eating oatmeal together helped Richard open up to Pam. It brought them close.

PAM GRIER: He accepted my gift of teaching him. And would he have done that with a man? No. He didn't. He allowed me in. So that made me feel connected.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam learned things about Richard that he had kept secret. Like the real reason he never knew his lines.

PAM GRIER: I found out Richard could not read. He could only learn his lines phonetically. So he had a problem with rehearsing and reading his lines and over and over and over again.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam helped Richard learn to read. But Richard wasn't always easy to be around. He was temperamental – and competitive. Time Magazine reported that Pam once beat Richard in tennis, two games in a row. After that, he wouldn't speak to her for a day. And he had a habit of isolating the people he loved.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Were you in love with him?

PAM GRIER: At times, not consistently, there are days that you just say, I choose you and days, I don't choose you today.

ROCCO URBISCI: Okay, I'm going to share a story with you.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: This is Rocco Urbisci, Richard's TV producer.

ROCCO URBISCI: I got a call on a Sunday afternoon. So my phone rang. And he said, I hear, Rocco. Rocco, can you come out and visit? I said sure, you okay, Rich? Yeah. Come out. Can you? Sure. So I drove out to Northridge. The gate is open. I pull into the driveway. There's no cars there, just his yellow Rolls-Royce. I walk into the house, I take the stairway up to the little office we used to write in. And as I'm walking up the stairs, I hear "We're off to see the Wizard, the wonderful Wizard of Oz." I walk into the room, he's facing the TV laying down on the couch, and on my desk, where I used to meet with him, was a glass of Courvoisier. And he waved to me. We watched The Wizard of Oz. When it was done, he got up and he said, Thanks, Rock. Gave me a hug. And I went home. He was lonely. All great artists are lonely.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: After Greased Lightning, Richard Pryor went to work on another movie with Michael Schultz – called Which Way is Up? Not only did Richard star in the movie – he wrote it, with screenwriter Carl Gottlieb.

CARL GOTTLIEB: I'd known Richard Pryor a long time. We go back in comedy to Greenwich Village days. Richard Pryor lived his life in cycles. He'd be healthy for a while, and then he'd fall off the wagon and start snorting and shooting and abusing himself. When I first met him, he was depressive and doing drugs. The next time I met him, he was with Pam and being healthy. I often wonder if she considered him like a rehabilitation project. Let me see if I can take this guy who's full of himself. And he's been like this, you know, self-destructive all-star for so long. Let me see if I can, you know, if I can get him to eat right and play sports and pay attention to his body and what he puts in it.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Writing 'Which Way Is Up?' wasn't easy. Richard was full of ideas, but often got distracted. Carl needed him to concentrate on the screenplay. They decided to leave the country to write in isolation.

CARL GOTTLIEB: Someone rented us a villa in Barbados, where my wife and I and Richard and Pam went to live. We're sitting like in the patio with long lawn furniture and this lush tropical vegetation and I think it was a catered bungalow. So I think there was staff, at least a housekeeper and possibly a housekeeper and a cook were taking care of us. I mean, it was kind of idyllic.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: One night in Barbados, the cook prepared a meal with shellfish in it. Pam is allergic to shellfish. She had a terrible reaction.

CARL GOTTLIEB: Her lips and her tongue swelled up and she had difficulty speaking and she had a rash over her body. And Richard panicked. I mean, he didn't know what to do. His only solution was like some folk remedy from his distant grandmother's past. He just, like, covered her in talcum powder, which didn't help.

PAM GRIER: He's thinking, I'm going to die. And I know I'm not going to die. And I feel vulnerable that he's never been around anyone sick. And that is alarming to me because he can't save me. I have to save myself. The man in my life doesn't know enough to save his child, his children or me.

CARL GOTTLIEB: Luckily my wife is one of those women who travels prepared for any eventuality. So she recognized that what Pam was going through was an allergic reaction. So my wife gave her some Benadryl. A simple antihistamine. And within an hour or two it cleared up. She was fine.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam made a full recovery. But she never forgot Richard's panicked response. His inability to act.

PAM GRIER: I realized I would have more responsibility in the relationship with him. I could be concerned if I ever went away to work, what could happen to the horses? Or his children or him?

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The rest of their time in Barbados was uneventful. Carl and Richard finished the screenplay. When they got back to Los Angeles, Richard asked Pam to move in with him. Pam said no.

PAM GRIER: He was on drinks, protein drinks, you know, just eating very healthy skin cleared up, use of acne, cleared up his hair, started going back, you know, and said, Hey, I'm strong. I can invite my friends, I think I said, Are you sure? They're pretty tough. What if they pull out coke and get you to drink? No, that's not going to happen. And when I came home and it was happening. He was drinking and there was a line of coke on the table.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam confronted Richard. She called him out. In front of those friends.

PAM GRIER: Are your friends going to take care of you? They don't bring food, they drink everything up. What are they going to do? And that's when the brothers said, You're going to let your woman talk to you like that? And Richard looked over and saw the knives on the sink. And he looked at them and then he looked at me. And he said, I've known them longer than I've known you.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Richard had fallen off the wagon. Hard. Around this time, Pam went to the gynecologist for a routine checkup. The doctor called her into his office, and closed the door.

PAM GRIER: And they said, Is someone who you're dating doing coke? Maybe did for a long time, maybe have stopped, I don't know.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam had cocaine in her system. But she never did drugs. The doctor told her it could have been sexually transmitted. Pam knew it came from Richard. He talked about it in one of his most famous routines.

RICHARD PRYOR: Somebody told me you put it on your dick you could fuck all night. Shouldn't have told me that! [snorting noises]

PAM GRIER: He had been putting cocaine on his genitals, on his penis and and it was entering my body and it could have been through his bloodstream as well.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam stopped sleeping with Richard. But she didn't leave him. She hoped his latest drug relapse was just a bump in the road. That she could still change him. She realized she was wrong when Richard got a horse. A TV producer gave Richard a miniature horse as a gift. Her name was Ginger. Pam adored her. She fed and cared for Ginger in a stable behind Richard's house.

But Richard also had dogs. Pam warned Richard to keep them away from Ginger. He did, for a while. Until one day, when the dogs got loose. They ran to the stable and pounced on Ginger.

PAM GRIER: They formed a pack and she was bleeding. Intestines were coming out.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: She was attacked by Richard's dogs?

PAM GRIER: All the dogs, too many dogs. They formed a pack and chased her. She was prey.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam was in Richard's house. She heard the attack and ran outside. She quickly turned a hose on the dogs until they ran off. Ginger lay on the ground, all torn up. She needed medical attention – fast. Richard was distraught. And completely unable to help. He didn't own a horse trailer. Pam took control.

PAM GRIER: OK. We are putting the horse in the back seat of my car. But it's a Jaguar! I know, that's what we're doing, we're going to take the horse to the vet. OK, we got to do it before she bleeds to

death. And he was like crying, the little boy failing, and I said, We're going to do it. We're going to save her life.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam and Richard crammed Ginger into the Jaguar. Pam got behind the wheel and peeled out of the driveway. The horse was bleeding on the seats.

PAM GRIER: Her head was out the one side and the tails at the other, and Richard's sitting in the front seat. And he's in his bathrobe and slippers, crying and sobbing.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: They hit the freeway. Pam floored it.

PAM GRIER: And the whole car is weaving because of the weight. And people are watching us driving there, it's just black people in a Jaguar with a horse in the back seat going down the 405 and they were following us. There must have been like 20, 30 people following us.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: They pulled up to the animal hospital. Pam had called ahead so the vets were expecting the horse. They worked on Ginger for five hours, stitching her up, treating her for shock. Pam stayed by Richard's side the whole time.

PAM GRIER: He sat there and he cried and they saved her life. I helped save the horse, but I couldn't save him.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The final blow to Pam and Richard's relationship took everyone by surprise. Rocco Urbisci found out at work. He was producing Richard Pryor's NBC variety show. He saw Richard almost every day.

ROCCO URBISCI: When Pam and Richard were dating, he came into my office and said, I'm not gonna, 'I'm going to be late for work tomorrow. I'm getting married.' I said fantastic man, great. Don't come in! No, no, I'll be in but I'll be late in the afternoon. I said, Great, fantastic. So I said, Everybody, Richard's getting married. So I had Gene, he was our prop master on Pryor. What a fucking great guy he was. So, Gene, make a big cake, man. Just make a fucking big cake. Cause Richard's going to show up and we're going to have cake.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Rocco told Gene to write "Congratulations Richard and Pam" on the cake. That's who he assumed Richard was marrying.

ROCCO URBISCI: So I'm getting dressed in the morning, and NBC News says Richard Pryor got married today and blah blah blah blah.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The news said that Richard's new wife is named Deboragh McGuire.

ROCCO URBISCI: So I get back to the studio and everybody's abuzz.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: One of the other producers ran up to Rocco. He had gotten a call. From Pam.

ROCCO URBISCI: So Pam Grier is coming over here to kill Richard. What? She's going to drive over. She's going to kill him. So we had to have security at the gate in case she showed up.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam didn't show up. But Richard did.

ROCCO URBISCI: So in walks Richard with this young girl. And I forget there's a big cake that says, Congratulations Richard and Pam. And Gene starts rolling it out. And next to the cake is, uh, a prop table with a lot of plastic flowers. I picked them up and I jammed them in the cake. I just jammed them where it said Richard and Pam. I just jammed the flowers in the middle of the cake. Gene laughed, we rolled the cake out, and that was it.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Richard's marriage lasted just a few months. His marriages tended to end quickly.

Richard would reach out to Pam once more, several years later. It was at his lowest point. But Pam wasn't having it. She was done with Richard Pryor.

THEME MUSIC

BEN MANKIEWICZ: After the break - Pam returns to the movies - by playing a murderer.

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

GREASED LIGHTNING CLIP: Drivers, in your cars!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Greased Lightning opened in July of 1977. It wasn't a hit. Part of the reason was timing. That summer was dominated by two other movies: Star Wars and Smokey & the Bandit.

Pam was 28 years old. Her acting career suddenly stalled.

MICHAEL SCHULTZ: A lot of black creative talent wasn't really given the kind of appreciation or due that they should have been given. There was nothing being written for actors of real talent, male and female, but especially female.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam was sometimes told to show up at auditions wearing a bikini. She refused. Movie roles weren't coming in, so Pam turned to TV. She appeared in the miniseries *Roots: The Next Generations*, and on an episode of *The Love Boat*.

One morning, in 1980, Pam went jogging in Santa Monica, where she was recognized by a fellow jogger. An agent.

PAM GRIER: And while I was running this agent said, You're Pam Grier. You know what? We've been looking for someone who's built like you, sharp like you, for a Paul Newman movie. Do you have an agent? I said, kind of. Not really. I haven't been working. I just don't want to work for a while.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The Paul Newman movie was *Fort Apache: The Bronx*, a police drama set in New York's toughest neighborhood. Paul Newman was famous for playing outlaws in movies like *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *The Sting* and *Cool Hand Luke*. Now he was playing a cop.

The role the producers couldn't cast - the role they wanted Pam for - was a villain. A violent sex worker addicted to heroin. Parts of the role were cliched. But Pam took it seriously. She didn't want to be just another stereotype.

PAM GRIER: Playing a junkie's seriously hard. You've got to observe junkies. You've got to observe that, that's not a role you just step into and put on like a hat. I said, if I can get the time to study this character. Two weeks. Okay. I'll do it. I'll do it. I prepare.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam lived by that credo - an actor is always prepared. She learned that early on, when Roger Corman recommended that book by Stanislavski.

She still needed to audition for *Fort Apache the Bronx*. The role wasn't hers yet. So she took her preparation to the next level.

PAM GRIER: I went to New York and they put me up.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam's first stop was a sex shop. There were plenty of them in New York. She bought a blonde wig, red stockings, a garter belt, and stilettos. Then she toured Manhattan – visiting the sketchiest parts of the city.

PAM GRIER: It's hard, it's scary. I did go to Avenue 10 near the trucks and hookers and 8, 9 in Hell's Kitchen and I went to, you know, junkie places, heroin houses and stuff and observed. It was fucking scary.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam went back to her hotel room – and locked the door. She stayed there for the next few days. She cut her skirt short. She kept herself up at night with caffeine and sugar. She didn't shower, she barely slept – and when she did, she slept on the floor.

The night before her audition, she ate a whole cherry pie. The next morning she felt like crap. But she looked the part. She stumbled out of the hotel, in full costume.

PAM GRIER: My red stockings were showing, my garter belt, my ass, my short skirt, my blond wig, my hello sailor dress and my fuck me pumps. The police pulled up and asked me out for a date.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The audition was at the Minskoff Theatre – one of the fanciest theaters on Broadway. Security stopped her at the door.

PAM GRIER: They weren't going to let me into the building because I look like I was a drunken heroin addicted killer. And they wouldn't let me. I said, No, would you please tell them Paul Newman, that Pam Grier is there? And the sister said, "Oh, you ain't no Pam Grier." I know, it's been a long day. "Who are you really?" Please. I'm here to see them for an audition. I laughed so hard I almost broke my character. Just her attitude, you know. Shit, I thought she was gonna go beat me up and kick me out the door for trying to be Pam Grier. "Oh no you ain't, bitch. I'll whoop you, you aint no Pam Grier, I know who Pam Grier is, I know what she looks like." I didn't want to get into that. She was a big sister.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam convinced them to call the producer, who said – yes, we're expecting Pam Grier. They let her through to the production office. The hallway was packed with actresses, all of them auditioning for the same part.

HEYWOOD GOULD: We had at least two days of people. So maybe that's ten people to it. Maybe 20, maybe 25.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's Heywood Gould. He wrote Fort Apache The Bronx. Pam calls him "Woody."

HEYWOOD GOULD: I remember I came in in the morning and looked on the audition list and I saw her name was on it, which was great. I was a big fan of hers from the 70s movies. I thought, This is great. But then when we started the auditions, I went outside, looked outside. She wasn't there. So I thought she blew off the audition, doesn't want to do it or whatever. And then the casting lady, Lois Polanco, said, okay, now I'm going to go out and get Pam. And she came in, I guess she'd been hiding, didn't want anybody to see her. She wanted to have a shock effect, which she did have.

PAM GRIER: I didn't knock on the door. I kicked the door.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: You kicked it open?

PAM GRIER: No, I just kicked on it three times, I didn't knock on it. A lady knocks. Knock knock knock. No, I'll kick the damn door. Woody Gould, the writer on Fort Apache, answers the door. And he goes, "Oh wow. Hey, Pam, how are you? How was your trip? How's your flight?" Oh, shut the fuck off. I aint flown anywhere.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Who's in the room?

PAM GRIER: Paul Newman, Dan Petrie, the director. And David Susskind.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: David Susskind was the producer.

HEYWOOD GOULD: And so she came in dressed as the part, as the character. It's all in character, wardrobe, makeup, the whole thing. Crazy, you know, junkie, you know, flipped out and really terrorized the whole room, including me. And I mean, her reading was unreal.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Everyone watched while Heywood did the audition with Pam. He read off the script. Pam had it memorized.

PAM GRIER: "So you're going to read with Woody." OK, hurry up. You know how to read, motherfucker? Shit, sit down.

HEYWOOD GOULD: She was frightening. She came right up to me and kind of, you know, waved the- - I mean, there was no knife on her, but she was waving her hand in front of me.

PAM GRIER: They said, "We're going to start here." I said, OK, we'll do the lines. And then the rest is off book. OK. Because I gonna shoot up in here.

HEYWOOD GOULD: She was completely intense. She was in the role. And we were gape-jawed and silent during this audition.

PAM GRIER: And I do the lines. I'm not finished now. The dialog is finished. And I sit I do a lap dance on Woody Gould's lap. And he drops the book. And everybody's laughing, and I'm saying, just put the book over your crotch, we don't want to see anything, you know. You're OK. I gave him a pure ass lap dance.

HEYWOOD GOULD: She was very, very close to me. And she did put her arms around my neck, me, at one point. You know, she's like a snake. She calls herself a snake in the scene.

FORT APACHE THE BRONX CLIP: Did you ever see a ssssnake?

PAM GRIER: And I shoot up, continue the scene, ad libbing, you know, and then I just lean up against the wall, I get high and I start nodding out and I slide down nice, to the floor and I pass out. And Paul Newman starts applauding.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: What did he say at the end of it?

PAM GRIER: He says, you got the part. And I said, Can I call my mom? I think, yes, you can call your mom because we want you here for rehearsal. The whole time we'll send you back home to get your stuff and send you back here and you'll be here for like 10 weeks.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: It's got to be validating. It's got to feel good.

PAM GRIER: More than that. More than that, because you make these choices of making an absolute fool of yourself. I just felt that I had breathed some energy into this character, some life.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam told her friends the good news, she had landed the role of Charlotte, the killer junkie. Their reaction was unanimous - don't take the part.

PAM GRIER: "If you're a movie star, you don't get killed. You don't die." You shouldn't die, you should be the icon, the movie star, they never die. Shut up. I'm gonna die for Paul Newman. OK?

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Production started right away on Fort Apache. Pam had rehearsals, costume fittings, hair and makeup tests. In her spare time, she watched Paul Newman work – how he studied every word, how he'd tweak his delivery on each take.

Pam had been a star. Her personal life was in magazines, she was recognized on the street. But working with Paul Newman – this was something else, this was no B movie. This was a chance to prove herself as an actress. A chance to earn some real respect.

HEYWOOD GOULD: She plays this menacing hooker. She goes through the movie just, you know, wiping people out. She starts the movie, you know, by killing the cops. And it's a really important moment because I think that the audience now knew what they were getting themselves into when, you know, when she plays this terrifying scene and she shoots these two cops. And so she actually sets the tone for what's to follow. And, you know, totally steals the picture.

FORT APACHE THE BRONX CLIP: You been partying baby? Shit, I been partying all the time. I'm a party girl!

HEYWOOD GOULD: She improved the line in the first scene, which is she's supposed to say to the cops, "That's not my job." That's the line I wrote. And she said...

FORT APACHE THE BRONX CLIP: Hey I'm on my j-o-b too.

HEYWOOD GOULD: And that became I guess, what you'd call a meme. Everybody went around the set, if you tell somebody to do something, they go, Oh, that's not my j-o-b. She changed that line. It's a simple change like that, that a good actor can do when that actor is in the character and when the actor is in a character as far as Pam was, they really can't say anything wrong.

FORT APACHE THE BRONX CLIP: Hello lover. You wanna go out?

HEYWOOD GOULD: We knew how great Newman was going to be. And he is great. And Pam had been in exploitation movies. She'd been in movies when she was great. But to go that deep into her

character as she did, I mean – I can't tell you how many people I've spoken to over the years who told me, boy, that's a frightening, wow.

FORT APACHE THE BRONX CLIP: Well, if I was selling it baby, you sure couldn't afford it. But I'm gonna give it up. 'Cause I likes you.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam had played killers before. But this character, Charlotte the junkie, wasn't just damaged. She was deranged. Getting into that mindset left a mark.

PAM GRIER: I had nightmares for a while. Charlotte, with the razor blades in her teeth, killing a man in the neck. And graphic scenes that I saw in my preparation, they haunt you.

HEYWOOD GOULD: You know, we shot on location. And there were a lot of things going on while we were shooting because the police precinct was still in operation. So there were a lot of you know, sirens blasting and cops rolling around and crimes being committed. A lot of kind of burglaries were committed on the set. We had people protesting the movie. Picketing the movie. Picketing me. I was threatened by a nun who said, we're going to we're going to chain you to a chair and make you rewrite the script. We were bombed one night from from an El track. They threw bottles down on the set from the top of the subway. And the cops ran up the stairs to try to get them and they ran away. So it was a unique kind of experience of making a movie.

NEWS REPORT: The committee against Fort Apache also protested today in front of several other New York theaters. One demonstrator says the film is not fair in its depiction of Blacks, Hispanics and women in that area of the Bronx.

PROTESTOR: The film is a racist film, it presents a very unrealistic picture of our community, it makes statements such as that our community is to blame for the poverty and the things that affect our community.

HEYWOOD GOULD: I got a good story about Pam. A crowd got rowdy at one point in front of her trailer. A bunch of kids got crazy. They were screaming and yelling and trying to disrupt the shooting. And she came out of her trailer and said, if you guys don't behave, I'm going to get my cousin Rosey after you. And her cousin was Roosevelt Grier. He's an all pro, a defensive tackle for the New York Giants. And they knew who he was, and then they went, Oh, and then she totally melted them. They just loved the river. Pam. Sorry, Pam, can you give us your autograph and this and that? And she handed out a bunch of 8x10s. Everybody was happy after that.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: By the way, Rosey Grier is not Pam's cousin. But she pretended he was when she needed to.

Fort Apache took three months to shoot. Pam lived inside her character the whole time. She didn't sleep much. She lost weight. In the movie, you can see dark circles under her eyes. That wasn't makeup.

PAM GRIER: I get a call on the set and it's from Jim Brown. They say, Pam, someone needs to speak with you, it's Jim Brown, about an accident?

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Jim Brown was a hall of famer in the NFL before a second career as a blaxploitation star. He was also a close friend of Richard Pryor.

PAM GRIER: It was Jim saying, Pam, Richard Pryor had an accident. He burned himself up.

NEWS REPORT: Richard Pryor was almost fatally burned in a freak accident.

NEWS REPORT: Comedian Richard Pryor, critically burned Monday night.

NEWS REPORT: I want you to understand you have a man with burns of a third-degree nature, who is very, very sick.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: It was all over the news. A fireball exploding in Richard's home. Pam guessed – correctly – that Richard caused the explosion by freebasing cocaine.

PAM GRIER: I said, freebasing with that tube thing? Yeah. And he wants to see you. They think he won't make it through the night. He's not going to live. And he wanted to see you before he died. So we're sending a private plane to pick you up. And I said, I'm working. This is my job, he's not going to mess it up. I said, I aint doing it. My love – I'm showing him love by not coming. And Jim says, "That sure was cold, that was cold Pam. That was cold." Pissed Richard off. Made him want to live to beat my ass, smack me around, call me bitch.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Richard Pryor did survive his burns. Pam never left the set of Fort Apache.

HEYWOOD GOULD: When we wrapped, she went around and she said, I'm going to give you guys a photo. So everybody expected, you know, like kind of a cheesecake-y photo of Pam Grier in one of

her roles, like Coffy, one of the roles that she played. And instead, she gave us snapshots that were taken when she was a five-year-old girl in Denver in a snowstorm. So it's a five year old girl with a snowsuit on. In front of an old car. And that's the picture that she gave us.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Heywood Gould still has the black and white photo. Pam is a little girl, bundled up, hood on, standing in the street next to a 1950s Pontiac. Behind her is a house, with a white picket fence, and a couple of bare trees.

HEYWOOD GOULD: The DP, John Alcott, said, I'm disappointed. I said to him, me too, we all are. So that was Pam's little joke on all of us, you know?

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Fort Apache The Bronx hit theaters in February 1981. It immediately hit number one at the box office and got good reviews, especially for Pam.

ROGER EBERT: Newman and his partner have a run in with a pimp and his prostitute, played by Pam Grier.

PAM GRIER: It was just that I achieved the goals I needed to meet in such a short time. It was really something for me that I learned, that I didn't think I had or could do.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Fort Apache helped Pam's career. But only in a limited way. The movie was over two hours long, but Pam was on screen for less than nine minutes. Compare that to Coffy, or Foxy Brown, or even Sheba Baby, where she's in almost every scene. Where she's the star.

As the 80s went on, Pam took on more supporting roles. But good parts – really good parts, like Charlotte – were still few and far between. Hollywood didn't know what to do with Pam Grier.

CARL GOTTLIEB: She was struggling. She was looking for things to do that were, were not genre exploitation titles, and it wasn't easy. She was still trapped in that sexploitation, blaxploitation, role of the strong aggressor woman. But it was, it was not who she was as a person. And it took someone like Tarantino to get past the clichés and find the real character.

THEME MUSIC

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Next week - on our season finale: The hottest director in Hollywood gives Pam the role of a lifetime.

QUENTIN TARANTINO: I want it to sound like a Pam Grier movie. I want it to have a Pam Grier opening credits sequence. I want the poster to reflect a Pam Grier poster.

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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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.