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Karen Allen Nancy Gates
Richard Cox Stuart Richards
Don Scardino Ted Bailey
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Jay Acovone Skip Lee
Randy Jurgensen Detective Lefransky
Barton Heyman Doctor Rifkin
Gene Davis DaVinci
Arnaldo Santana Loren Lukas
Larry Atlas Eric Rossman
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Michael Aronin Detective Davis
James Remar Gregory
William Russ Paul Gaines
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Steve Inwood Martino
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Written and Directed by **William Friedkin**
Produced by **Jerry Weintraub**
Associate Producer **Burt Harris**
Based on the Novel by **Gerald Walker**
Editor **Bud S. Smith**
Director of Photography **James A. Contner**
Composer **Jack Nitzsche**
Art Director **Edward Pisoni**
Production Manager **Burt Harris**
Costume Designer **Robert De Mora**

EXORCIZE PREJUDICE WILLIAM FRIEDKIN'S *CRUISING*

by F.X. Feeney

William Friedkin brings forth something to disturb everybody in *Cruising* (1980), but that is this picture's aim and the moral core of its crazy bravery.

Or so I concluded the day it opened, February 15, 1980. A pal from film school and I were on hand, bright and early, eager to see the latest Friedkin as a noontime line stretched around the block on Hollywood Boulevard. It was impossible to ignore the nationwide controversy in advance of its release. Protests that it was anti-gay filled the news. A typical headline: *Cruisin' for a Bruisin'*. A spokesman for the National Gay Task Force was widely quoted: "Why is this film objectionable? ... It perpetuates the myth that we are violence-prone and obsessed with sex."

Despite a few chants those first mobs were jubilant. My friend Don D and I — heteros in our 20s — were wide-eyed voyeurs, like Al Pacino in the poster, and fell heir to many sporty, smoldering looks from leather-clad passersby. Conscious of sufficient self-torments from my altar-boy upbringing, I felt an affinity for what Friedkin said in reply to the controversies and reiterated in his memoir, *The Friedkin Connection* (2013): "I've had every kind of sexual fantasy myself, but never the curiosity nor the desire to act them out."

His best work asserts that to be truly alive one must explore, exorcize prejudice and take the world on, come what may. *Cruising* centers on Steve Burns (Al Pacino), an ambitious cop determined to make detective by infiltrating the leather-bars of lower Manhattan. His goal is to trap a sadistic killer who preys upon gay men. The opening sequence sets a scarifying stage — James Contner's camerawork, Bud Smith's cutting and Jack Nietzsche's music fuse under Friedkin's direction; within an instant, we are witnesses to a seduction and a murder. This demi-world is fierce, hyper-virile. Even the most "female" specimens boast Iron Man bodies under their Marilyn-like cascades of long blonde locks. The cops who patrol these depths may persecute their denizens but become no less caught up in their erotic





force, crossing boundaries inside themselves. This is what Friedkin and Pacino make visible in Steve. He dives so deep undercover that almost immediately, he has to ask himself, which way is up? Captain Edelson (Paul Sorvino) offers him this assignment with, in retrospect, a prophetic question: "How would you like to disappear?"

This means no gun, no badge. No connection to the police, apart from his Captain. Steve must live in a gay neighborhood under an assumed name. He can't even confide the nature of his assignment to Nancy (Karen Allen), the woman in his life. In moral and psychological terms he is set up for self-doubt: Where to set the boundaries? His new next-door neighbor Ted (Don Scardino) is a shy, gay, sweet-spirited playwright, flirty and appealing, especially when he admits: "I'm scared to death of cruising, myself." Ted represents the upbeat sociable norm of gay life, of people who simply live, work, and hope for love.

Steve – operating like a lens set at infinity inside his masquerade – lets himself be attracted to Ted, if only to become, in his own mind, "authentic." At night, on the prowl, in clubs called "Ramrod" and "The Mineshaft" he navigates a wilderness of wild spectacles. A naked man, chained and suspended, being fist-fucked is one of the more memorable. A man in leather and policeman's gear fellating his nightstick is another. These and the countless, deep, come-hither stares that confront Steve every which-way he turns – any one of which could be from the serial killer – not only challenge but corrode his every notion of "masculinity," his own or anybody else's.

A mute, brutal intensity has begun, demon-like, to possess him. It takes charge of him without words, in action, when he sneaks home to make love to Nancy. She can feel it; is troubled; asks him what's happening. He is forbidden to tell her about his assignment, so says nothing. He is also tortured by inhibition. After an extra rough police interrogation he suffers while undercover – one involving the seemingly surreal but procedurally accurate inclusion of an immense, muscular black detective in a cowboy hat and a jockstrap – Steve confesses to Edelson: "I don't think I can deal with it." "*I need you,*" the Captain replies. Sorvino says these words with all the heat of a romantic declaration. "*You're my partner, and you can't let me down.*" Friedkin renders this in close-up. It's an oddly funny

moment, one that fetches an off-guard laugh, even today – but *not* because we're invited to mock such wounded intimacy. Friedkin means us to understand that such is the true price of effective police work.

Philip D'Antoni, producer of *The French Connection* (1971), approached Friedkin about a 1970 novel called *Cruising*, by New York Times reporter Gerald Walker. The book – which made no reference to the S&M world – felt dated. Friedkin passed. By 1978 producer Jerry Weintraub approached him and found him more open. Randy Jurgensen, a detective from *The French Connection* days, had been regaling Friedkin with tales of haunting S&M clubs undercover to entrap a killer. A series of articles by Arthur Bell in *The Village Voice* told of *more* men who were being murdered in the S&M clubs, by still another killer, or killers: "Body parts were found floating in plastic bags in the Hudson River," Friedkin recalls. "The unexplained deaths and brutal murders aroused my curiosity. The devil was at work."

That ticklish hint of *The Exorcist* (1973) is both a conscious jest and a manifesto of this director's trust in the unseen, and the uncanny. In an eerie coincidence, a bit-player from *The Exorcist*, Paul Bateson, turned up under arrest, as a killer of gay men. Friedkin went to visit him. Bateson recalled the first murder – of theater critic Addison Verrill – and even admitted dismembering the body. About killing the others he was teasingly vague: "I *might* have," he said – and explained: "If I confess to eight or nine more murders, they'll reduce my sentence." Friedkin, astonished, asked why. "So they can clear the books," said Bateson. "Grab some headlines. 'Trash Bag Murders Solved.'" After serving 20 years, Bateson was released in 2004. This nightmarish, wonderland logic went straight into the film. The killer Steve traps is offered the same deal.

"I could have made a documentary about Iraq with what I shot for the opening sequence of *The Exorcist*," Friedkin once remarked. This is easy to believe. The power of that sequence is the eye for detail in the mobbed streets and the dusty archaeological site at its northern city of Mosul, where the Jesuit priest played by Max Von Sydow faces off, like a gunslinger in a western, with the demonic statue he uncovers in those ancient sands. Although there is no direct connection between this hypnotic overture and the plight of the young girl played by Linda



Blair in faraway Washington, D.C., when she is suddenly possessed by Satan, we are ready to buy an otherwise far-fetched supernatural battle because Friedkin grounds it in an everyday world, however exotic, of digging and study.

So it is with the underworld of sex clubs, city morgues, interrogation rooms, tugboats and body parts afloat in *Cruising*. Friedkin was diligent about collecting first-hand impressions of the S&M club scene, with the blessing of a mob-connected patron in the company of a retired homicide detective called Uncle Mort, recalling: “We had to strip down to our jockstraps, shoes and socks.” Word had been spread so that “No one bothered me or Mort – either that or we were the ugliest guys in the room.” The graphic sights that fill every corner of *Cruising* were harvested on this tour. “Every conceivable male-on-male fantasy was being fulfilled, and though they involved degradation, they were consensual, not exploitive. [...] I wrote my script to reflect what went on in these clubs, avoiding all reference to the Mafia or the ex-cops who were the nominal owners. [...] The timing was bad for a film about hard-core gay life, but I wanted to tell the story as I saw it, risking censorship and reproach. From my contacts in the police department and the gay community, I became painfully aware of the homophobia, exploitation, and humiliation inflicted on gays, and I wanted the film to reflect this.”

Merv Adelson of The Lorimar Company – best known for that wholesome family TV hit, *The Waltons* (1971-1981) – offered to back *Cruising*. His only condition was that it secure an “R,” not “X” rating. Friedkin agreed. “I cut at least half an hour from the club scenes and murder scenes. I had purposely let these scenes of pornography and violence run long, knowing they’d be cut and I’d be left with the story I wanted to tell.”

One comical long-range consequence is that what Friedkin deleted – and Lorimar routinely destroyed, in those days before home video – has taken on its own life in pop-culture mythology. James Franco and Travis Mathews even tried to recreate those mythical scenes in a 60-minute feature of their own: *Interior. Leather Bar* (2013).

Friedkin is amused at such devotion but proudly stands by *Cruising*, as-is. He secured permission to use the actual morgue and photograph actual disembodied limbs – routinely labeled “CUPPI,” an acronym for *Circumstances Unknown Pending Police Investigation*. Such detail sets the stage for the eerier, almost mystical layers to the story. The killer’s voice has a ghostly, even demonic rasp when we overhear it in the film’s opening scenes and thereafter. This voice of actor James Sutorius is lip-synched, not only to Richard Cox – who over time emerges as the prime suspect – but Leland Starnes, who plays his father, and other actors Friedkin deputized for various murder scenes.

Copies of the screenplay got leaked to protesters. The hardships of filming in New York City – an ordeal in the best circumstances – got particularly trying as organized mobs “shouted insults to the cast and crew,” recalls Friedkin. “Behind police barricades, hundreds of protesters were screaming, ‘Pacino, you fucking asshole, you little faggot.’ Piles of garbage were strewn on all our locations.”

Al Pacino – a passionate partisan from the moment he read Friedkin’s script – was dismayed to be so ferociously heckled. “It’s the first time in my life I’ve ever been in this position,” he told Lawrence Grobel, during the thick of production for their interview in *Playboy* magazine. “It makes me feel bad. When I read the screenplay, the thought of being antigay never even came to me. It never dawned on me that it would provoke those kinds of feelings. I’m coming from a straight point of view, and maybe I’m not sensitive enough in that area. But they *are* sensitive to the situation, and I can’t argue with that.”

He and Friedkin began as allies. “I hope Billy’s energy comes off on the screen,” he told Grobel. “It’s extraordinary to be around him. It’s like a temple he’s creating, and it lifts you. He’s a lot like Coppola in that way.”

Tensions nevertheless arose. The director was under the gun financially. The actor tried a haircut that proved so atrocious it set back the start of principal photography by six weeks. When Pacino chose not to memorize lines in the interest of “spontaneity,” Friedkin watched the clock and counted as dollar signs ticked past in the tens of thousands. “My uncertainty over [Al’s] performance affected my attitude,” he later wrote. “Everyone on a film set has anxiety over his



or her work, but when the director does, it can rock the foundations.” The team soldiered on, says Friedkin, “filming in a war zone. Al and I grew distant.”

And yet: With the advantage of the intervening decades, Friedkin has come to appreciate that Pacino “somehow managed in a hostile environment to achieve a focused performance.” What’s more, he detects a perfect pitch in the star’s most *non-verbal* choices, the spontaneity he was seeking: “I can see that in many ways he struck just the right note of innocence.”

Friedkin’s philosophy with actors is to invite them, not “to play,” but to *inhabit* their roles. Karen Allen, Joe Spinell, Don Scardino, Jay Acovone, Arnaldo Santana and countless others do so splendidly. The most dimensional performances are those of Pacino, which seethe with nuance. Sorvino (“I asked him to find the note of deep sadness in this character,” says Friedkin, “a man who has seen and experienced great tragedy”) and – to a blazing degree, Richard Cox as “Stuart Richards,” the story’s killer of record.

Cox’s particular artistry is the great discovery of this film. His lean hungry intensity conjures a realm of impulse-without-inhibition inside this man. His compulsion to kill expresses *not* a specifically homosexual passion, but a more complex rage in *every* individual nature, in relation to shame. Friedkin’s vision happens to map a time and place when society most brutally imposes shame on gay men. Cox and Pacino also resemble each other in one vivid particular – deliberate on Friedkin’s part – a vulnerable immensity in their eyes. This feeds the magnificent choreography of their final showdown in the park. At first, with Steve leading the dance, they rhyme one another’s postures on their side-by-side park benches. Their dueling gazes are more pointed than their knives, because for the first time – ever – this predator has someone in his sights that refuses to be a victim, and that is in itself a newfound excitement.

“In the cutting room it occurred to me,” writes Friedkin, “there might be multiple killers. All the CUPPI murders had not been solved, though Bateson confessed to many of them. It would be interesting to suggest there was a killer still at large at the end of the picture and that it might be Burns (Pacino). In one of the last scenes... The Richard Cox character denies he killed anyone, but his denial is in

the voice of his dead father, who he believes urged him to kill gay men. None of this was in my original script.”

In a later interview, he added: “I wanted to portray the idea that the murders were unsolved, really. There were many possibilities of who the murderers could be. It just seemed the metaphor for so much that happens in our lives – the mystery of *fate*.”

That our hero Steve may – just may – be a killer, too, was heatedly rejected by Pacino when he saw the finished film: “I would have played it differently if I’d known,” he shouted. Friedkin replied: “I honestly didn’t discover it until I got into the cutting room.” Yet, he admits, “I could see his point. As a serious actor, he didn’t want information kept from him by his director. Had I discovered this twist during production, I *would* have told him. For me it was a late discovery; for him, a betrayal.”

The showdown between Steve and Stuart, so similarly named, and – it would seem – *fated*, is the key to why *Cruising* abides. The savagery that Steve takes on, not just in this stranger before him, but in his own depths, haunts long after the film is over.

Even now, decades after it has been battle-tested, you may reject *Cruising* – as too violent; too uncanny; too twisted – and yet?

Consider that it has touched you with something real, and taken you somewhere new. Any movie that can do this is doing what movies must, if they are to have lasting value.

F.X. Feeney is a filmmaker and critic based in Los Angeles. His screen credits include The Big Brass Ring and Z Channel: A Magnificent Obsession. He has previously published two book-length essays for Taschen: Roman Polanski and Michael Mann.



ABOUT THE RESTORATION

Cruising has been exclusively restored by Arrow Films and is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with 5.1 sound. This new restoration was fully supervised and approved by director William Friedkin.

The original 35mm camera negative was scanned in 4K resolution at Warner Brothers/MPI.

Picture grading and image processing was supervised by William Friedkin and performed by Bryan McMahan at Roundabout Entertainment.

The 5.1 mix was supervised by William Friedkin and remastered by Aaron Levy at Smart Post Sound.

Picture restoration was completed at Silver Salt Restoration, London.

Warner Brothers/MPI: George Feltenstein, Ned Price, Hali Abdullah, Kristen Andrews, Bob Bailey, Jason Keller

Roundabout Entertainment: Bryan McMahan, Vincent Pirozzi

Smart Post Sound: Aaron Levy, Wayne Gordon

Silver Salt Restoration: Anthony Badger, Steve Bearman, Mark Bonnici, Lisa Copson, Simon Edwards, Tom Wiltshire

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Ewan Cant**

Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**

Technical Producer **James White**

QC **Nora Mehenni, Alan Simmons**

Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**

Blu-ray Mastering **David Mackenzie**

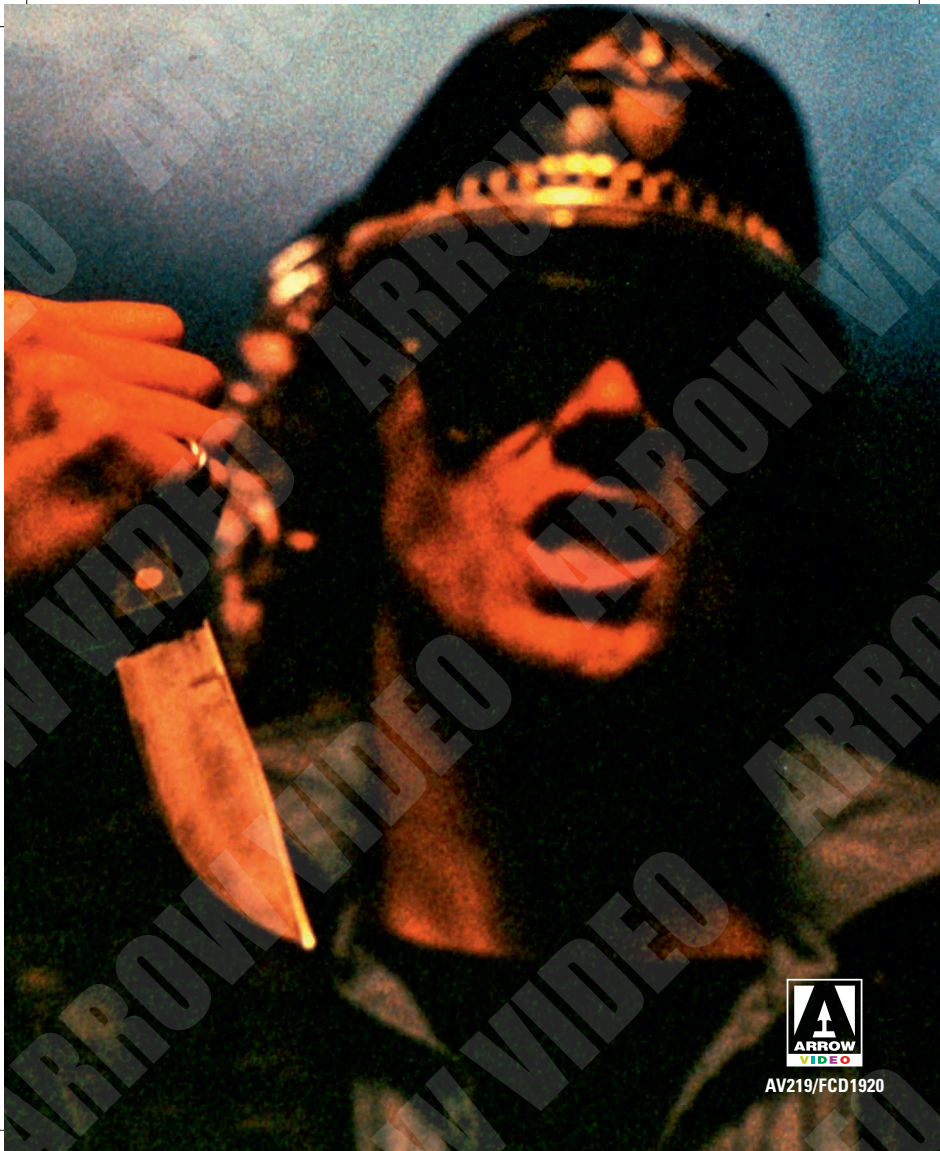
Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**

Artwork/Design by **Obviously Creative**

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Hali Abdullah, Alex Agran, Steven Anastasi, Kristen Andrews, Anthony Badger, Bob Bailey, Steve Bearman, Kevin Bergeron, Mark Bonnici, Lisa Copson, Simon Edwards, F.X. Feeney, George Feltenstein, Kurt Galvao, Wayne Gordon, Jason Keller, Aaron Levy, Bryan McMahan, Vincent Pirozzi, Ned Price, Albert Shin, Tom Wiltshire

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