ON THE MARK

LEE DANIELS, TUCKER TOOLEY AND PAMELA OAS WILLIAMS SHARE THE GORY DETAILS OF THEIR EXPERIENCE MAKING *THE DELIVERANCE*, WHICH EARNED THEM THE PRODUCERS MARK CERTIFICATION.

WRITTEN BY KATIE GRANT

The Deliverance is a horror/psychological thriller based on the true story of Latoya Ammons, her mother and her three children, who experienced bizarre behavior after moving into a seemingly haunted house in Gary, Indiana. Ammons' two sons and daughter behaved as if possessed, becoming violent, levitating above their beds, and growling like demons without remembering ever doing so.

These stressful trials took such a toll on Ammons and her mother that, after seeking medical help with zero findings, the family reluctantly called upon a spiritualist as a last resort to perform a "deliverance" of the demon they felt was causing such disturbances. A deliverance is a Christian practice that involves casting out evil spirits and breaking the connection between a person and a discarnate entity. It is about spiritual oppression as opposed to an exorcism, which addresses demonic possession.

Academy and PGA Award-nominated director and producer Lee Daniels did not want to make this movie. Neither did his longtime producing partner, Pamela Oas Williams, who said, "I don't do demons." But Tucker Tooley, their partner in the producing triumvirate, saw the movie as the "money-grab" indie thriller it could be. This got Daniels and Williams on board to make it as a streaming project for Netflix, the team's first time going straight to streaming.

Lee Daniels (left) on the set of *The Deliverance*.

Just as things seemed beyond control for the Ammons family, so too did the production of the film go way beyond what they expected.

Here, Daniels, Tooley and Williams talk about how they protected their story from beginning to end, starting with an on-set spiritualist who led willing cast and crew through prayer before each day's shooting began.

IF THERE WERE A "MAKING OF" DOCUMENTARY OF *THE DELIVERANCE*, WHAT WOULD THE FIRST SHOT BE?

Tooley: My vote would be an establishing shot of our production offices, which looked like a bombed-out place somewhere in Eastern Europe.

Williams: Yeah, it looked like Chernobyl. The offices that we looked out to were totally gutted for asbestos. So the film started out as scary from the production offices on.

Daniels: I think it would be a shot of me in my apartment where I look confused.

WHY WERE YOU CONFUSED?

Daniels: I didn't want to do the movie. Tucker and I had just been on the phone. I remember distinctly where I was when I said, "I cannot do this movie." Tucker brought the project to me, and said, "You've got to do this." It was his idea to make it "Black horror." There hadn't been anything done like that before. It had been in a spoofy way, or in a Jordan Peele, provocative, intellectual way. But never a true story like this. Tucker planted the seed of horror in my head. I do horror. *Precious* was horror in its own sort of way. Precious is in her own kind of hell.

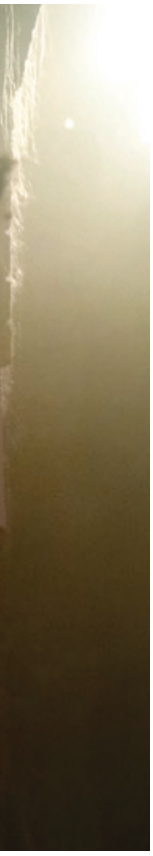
SO WHAT MADE YOU GO, "OK, I'M GOING TO MAKE IT AFTER ALL"?

Daniels: I was clear about the vision I wanted. The writers, whom I respect, kept trying to jump-scare us (in the script). I understand, because it's easy to fall into that trope as opposed to, you know...

MORE PSYCHOLOGICAL SCARES?

Williams: Yes. I have to say I ate my words when I read Lee's last version of the script. I wasn't on the project. Tucker and he were moving ahead. I don't do demons, because much like Lee, I believe in demons. I believe in God. I believe in the devil. I believe that these do exist. So I just don't need to play with demons, right? That was my attitude.

Daniels: So we kept doing one pass after another after another on the script.



Pamela Oas Williams and Lee Daniels on the set of *The Deliverance*.

LEFT: PHOTO BY AARON RICKETTS; RIGHT: PHOTO BY CONNOR WILLIAMS

Pam said, "I don't do spooky." I knew in my head what I was going to do with it, and I started caring for the characters with each pass. I think we went through a hundred passes.

Williams: Right. And Lee kept saying, "But God wins in the end." I said, "I know that, but I don't need to engage." Then he gave me his version of the script. I was like, "Shit, this is so good." It was about the characters, and I cared so very much about them. So I turned around and said to Tucker, "Well, I'll do demons if you'll have me on this."

YOU EARNED THE PRODUCERS MARK BEFORE AS A TEAM FOR *THE UNITED STATES VS. BILLIE HOLIDAY*. HOW WAS THIS COLLABORATION DIFFERENT FROM THAT PROJECT?

Williams: In comparing this movie to *Billie Holiday*, it was very similar in terms of it being a team sport. The biggest difference was that Tucker had to deal with Netflix, who had the money and the creative execs, versus dealing with our single investor on *Billie Holiday*. We all breathed a little bit easier on this one because we had the support of Netflix. On *Billie Holiday*, we were on a much more limited budget and scraping by. In terms of the team sport, Tucker and I are here to see Lee's vision through. So we're good at tag-teaming.

WHO'S GOOD AT WHAT? IS THERE A ROLE THAT YOU NORMALLY PLAY?

Tooley: Pam is a godsend. She's the most organized. Very detail-oriented. She makes sure the trains run on time and makes sure things happen in the way they should happen. That's not my strong suit at all. She's unbelievable at it, like the best of the best.

Williams: While I love the weeds, Tucker always has the big picture in mind. You can get lost in the weeds. I think we complement each other with him having the bigger view, as the lead on deals and with the Netflix creative executives. We are collaborative. Hopefully, as Tucker says, we try to serve Lee as best we can.

Daniels: What's interesting is that there was a third party, Netflix, involved this time, adding to myself as director and Pam and Tucker as producers. Even though I had final cut, you want to make sure that they feel good, and they're supported. I'm not insisting on the final cut like I'm God. I wanted to take in what they had to say, but a lot of them, the suits, didn't understand the world we were creating. So Tucker or Pam would say, "Did you get this note right here? Because they want this." It was hard in that I've never had anybody give me notes before. I was thinking, "Am I taking that note? Am I veering away from the story that I'm trying to tell by embracing people who don't understand what this is?"

On the set of *The Deliverance*.

PHOTO BY MYRIAM SANTOS

BEING YOUR FIRST TIME PRODUCING FOR A STREAMER, WAS IT SIGNIFICANTLY DIFFERENT TO GO TO WORK THAT WAY?

Tooley: Yes. This is the first time Lee has made a movie in conjunction with a streamer or studio. Everything else has been made and then sold or made and then distributed. They (Netflix) were super supportive the whole way. There were tussles here and there creatively, as there always are, and I think that makes a movie better. But they were supportive of us, and when the marketing and publicity teams saw the film, they were amazing. It was the best experience I've had in a long time.

Daniels: I didn't enjoy them not understanding the world, but who could get into my head to understand abuse, my idea of abuse? But once Netflix felt safe, I couldn't have had a better support team.

Williams: All of Lee's movies up to this point have been independently financed. I've made two independently financed movies with him and now this one with a studio. As a producer, it was great to have the support of Netflix versus having to count where every penny went because you had to save it from one area to spend it on another. With that all-consuming nature of finances, it's great to have Netflix support behind you.

Daniels: This is the great part about Netflix. I don't know how many times we reshot the character of the Devil. My first intent with what the Devil looked like was this naked, beautiful white

Lee Daniels with costars Andra Day and Anthony B. Jenkins on the set of *The Deliverance*.

PHOTO BY AARON RICKETTS

man trying to seduce you. We shot that and then I thought, "This is stupid." So I kept reshooting until we got the idea that the Devil is not an external entity. The Devil was in ourselves, in us, in the characters. That was something that I found. And that was a place where some money went.

IS THERE A STORY FROM THE SHOOT THAT MAKES YOU LAUGH OR CRINGE?

Tooley: There's a lot of funny stories. I would say everybody on the movie was hypersensitive to the story we were telling—and thus everything kind of spooked us. Like, "The light went out! What was *that* about?"

Daniels: You are literally walking into hell every day when you're making a movie. Filmmaking is not for kids. It's going to war. Every day I look at it as going to war.

EVEN ON ALL YOUR OTHER PROJECTS?

Daniels: Yeah, because you have to get it. You have to get the shot, your vision. Everybody lies to me and says, "You don't have enough time," which makes me think that I've got to get it now. It's a psychological tactic. It doesn't matter even if I know they're lying. But then it does, because what if they're not?

Williams: I wouldn't call it lying. I would call it a way of helping to strategize what time you have left.

Tooley: That's a good way to put it. But Lee's so aware that's happening that the minute Pam or I walk anywhere near him, he just looks at us and goes, "What?"

WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST TAKEAWAYS FOR EACH OF YOU AFTER PRODUCING *THE DELIVERANCE*?

Daniels: It's a journey. Not only a creative journey but a financial journey. You never know how it's going to end up. You start out thinking you're making one movie, and it's never that for me.

Tooley: The marketplace today demands that something is in a certain box. This movie could never be in a box. It was not that kind of movie. Even though the subject is a horror thriller or psychological thriller, it could never be in a box like that. The ability to have something that's not in a box, but has a lot to offer, is rare. I think we accomplished what we set out to accomplish and it'll continue to have a life for a long time.

The cast and crew of *The Deliverance*.

PHOTO BY AARON RICKETTS

Williams: I talk a lot about this being a team sport, and it is, from your department heads coming together and bringing their very best. We were also fortunate to have an amazing line producer, Jackie Shenoo, who is my favorite line producer I've worked with. So a shout-out to all the producers on this coming together and creative problem-solving. Not creating fires so they can put them out, but genuinely always eye on the ball for what we had to accomplish.

Daniels: This was a hard film for me to execute. I never want to do it again because how do you balance making this very grounded story as authentic as it can be? I knew how to get that authentic world going, but how do we segue into a space of authentic horror? How do you do that with the visuals and everything? And then also, what is God? Religion? It's different for everyone. It's a hard thing to do. I feel the people that believe in the Lord believe I accomplished it, and I think that's all that matters. If you don't believe, then you're not buying into the world at all.

Tooley: Lee certainly went above and beyond with having a faith-based aspect to this movie. I always try in our projects to do something where some people get it, and some people don't. Fortunately, Netflix totally got it. We delivered an honest version of the movie, they marketed an honest version of the movie, and the audience responded. I think we accomplished our mission. ■

Certification via the Producers Mark (represented by p.g.a.) indicates that a producer performed a major portion of the producing functions in a decision-making capacity on a specific project. Criteria, its definition, the process for earning the mark and other particulars can be viewed at producersguildawards.com.