

## Interview: Patrick Fabian Conducts ‘The Last Exorcism’

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CHICAGO – His face is inviting, but his intentions are ambiguous and perhaps somewhat devious. That’s precisely the type of character that Patrick Fabian has mastered. He’s lent disarming charisma to a variety of characters, from the self-righteously scheming man of faith in “Big Love” to the flamboyantly sleazy car company executive in “Pushing Daisies.”

Though he’s been delivering memorable work in film and television since 1992, Daniel Stamm’s documentary-style horror flick “The Last Exorcism” marks Fabian’s first major film role. As Cotton Marcus, a redemption-seeking minister taping his own faux-exorcisms, Fabian goes toe-to-toe with Ashley Bell, who’s eerily convincing as the seemingly possessed farm girl, Nell Sweetzer. In light of the film’s Jan. 4 release on Blu-Ray and DVD, Fabian spoke with Hollywood Chicago about the spooky side of religion, experimenting on camera and his opinion about the film’s much-debated ending.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What attracts you to playing so many shifty characters?

**Patrick Fabian:** The irony is that I think of myself as a loosey-goosey, hippie rock ‘n’ roller dude. I’m like “casual boy,” and the reality is that you’re right. I have a career full of snakes in suits. I’m the CEO who seems like he’s nice but is actually taking money from children. I don’t think of myself as being that guy inherently, but I think that’s what sells it. I have a [look] that says, “I’m the boy next door who will do the right thing,” so when I don’t do the right thing, it becomes a little more jarring.

With Cotton Marcus, I knew going in that if people weren’t on my side, it wasn’t going to work. I think he’s actually doing a good thing. He’s making a grand confessional, trying to make amends and make up for the fact that he has been bad. I think the step in the other direction would be for him to become a Jim Bakker-type, someone who really amps it up in terms of being false, and this is his chance to turn it around and fix it. I think American audiences love the idea of redemption and self-awareness. We’re all about therapy and figuring out who we are and how to correct our mistakes, and he is trying to do that here. So I think that really puts the audience on my side.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Do you note any similarities between Cotton Marcus and Ted Price, your character on “Big Love”?

**Fabian:** People ask me if I like religious roles, and I never really think about that. I’m more [interested in] the character’s point of view. Ted Price comes from a worldview of Mormonism, or at least his particular brand of Mormonism, where it’s money first and Jesus second, and I don’t think that there’s anything wrong about his view. He looks at the world through a biblical sense where if you don’t see things his way, he pities you and discounts your opinion. It’s black and white for him and he’s very comfortable with that. With Cotton Marcus, if his father had been a plumber, he would’ve been a plumber. He just went into the family business. He knows all the wrenches, all the tools, all the bible things, and all the ways to preach, but he’s lost the passion and the reason behind what he’s doing. He has no value behind the words he says anymore.



Patrick Fabian and Ashley Bell star in Daniel Stamm's *The Last Exorcism*.

*Photo credit: Lionsgate Entertainment*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** How would you go about defining Cotton's brand of religion?

**Fabian:** It's an amalgamation of a whole bunch of things. We decided we weren't going to go expressly Catholic or expressly Evangelistic. It was sort of a hodge podge because [Cotton] is covering a lot of ground in the South, so you've got to be able to adjust. If you need snake biting, we'll do snake biting. If you need the blood of Jesus, we'll get the blood of Jesus. We had a guy onset who was an actual preacher and exorcist. I watched some of the megachurch preachers of our day like Tim Baker and Ted Haggard and Jimmy Swaggart to get a feel for it. But in the end, we just took whatever we could from the Catholic religion, the Evangelists, the Born Agains, [etc]. Religions like Catholicism have a strict regiment for what must be done and in what order. We threw that out the window and decided that we'd cherry pick because, like I said, Cotton's a cherry picker.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** How much freedom did the director give you, in terms of experimenting on camera?

**Fabian:** Daniel had a very specific idea of the tone and what he wanted out of a scene. He was not married too much to the way the scene actually blocked itself out. He was very much about letting [cinematographer] Zoltan Honti, Iris Bahr and myself wander through the house, and discover angles that would suddenly work, either with the vibe of what we were saying or the way in which Zoltan was shooting it. Once we discovered an angle, we'd lay into that for a while. In terms of improvisation, the script was pretty much a map on the highway and Daniel would encourage us to take off ramps. Some ramps were really good, and others were worthless.

I don't want to give the impression that we stumbled upon a movie because Daniel definitely knew what he was looking for. But he allowed us a sense of exploration that helped free up the actors and made us much more loose and natural. The difference between "The Last Exorcism" and a lot of the other handheld stuff is that there's a discipline with the cameraman in this one. Zoltan had a way of coming into a scene and laying into it so the viewer could catch their breath and relax and watch what was going on as opposed to being aware that the camera is there. I think that's the trick. You're not really aware of the camera until later on when everything gets a little jerky.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** The scene that really got to me was the one in which Cotton and his crew discover Nell on her perch in the bedroom.

**Fabian:** Filming that [scene] felt interminably long, but upon viewing it, you realize that it's just long enough. We go into it waiting to see her, and the more you don't see her, the more you explore all the options that make sense. Just around the time you start wondering what's going on, we zoom up there, and boy, it's a really iconic shot. I can't say enough about Zoltan. He was fantastic.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** The first big laugh in the film is the moment in which you incorporate a recipe for banana bread into a sermon. Was that an improvisation?

**Fabian:** That's a great example of Daniel knowing what he wanted and then being loose enough to say, "Let's play." There's one shot that was filmed when we were outside the church. Zoltan was shooting some B footage and Daniel was giving me direction. I'm nodding because I'm literally in my mind going, "Uh huh, uh huh, get on with it." It's totally an actor being impatient with the director, but in the film, it looks like I'm preparing for my sermon and getting all revved up. When I saw the shot, I thought, 'There's the magic of film.'

We were preaching for about two and a half days in this church, and it was totally fun. I almost lost my voice. At one point, Daniel said, "I'd



like it if Cotton got the congregation so revved up that he could say anything...even a recipe." And that's immediately what we shot. There's a life to that moment that captures exactly what Daniel wanted. When I first saw the film with an audience, the knowing laughter that occurred when I look into the camera really surprised and pleased me because I knew that at that moment, they were onboard. They weren't hating me for it, they were actually okay with it.



Patrick Fabian, Louis Herthum, Caleb Landry Jones and Ashley Bell star in Daniel Stamm's *The Last Exorcism*.

*Photo credit: Lionsgate Entertainment*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Stamm told HC that it was his intention to have actors reach their breaking point by putting them through countless takes.

**Fabian:** Oh yeah, Daniel and his German heritage [laughs]. I'm dying for a cookie, I'm dying for him to give me a, 'Hey good job, you're a good actor,' and of course, he was not about that whatsoever. He would just keep going, 'Okay that was good. Let's do that again.' And I'd be like, "What? That's it?" It'd be like take 20, and you start getting a little frustrated, but you also start getting out of your head at the same time. The final product speaks for itself. He captured realistic performances, partly because he would continue to go back and re-mine stuff that I thought we had already covered.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What was the experience like of working with Ashley Bell during the "possession" sequences?

**Fabian:** The great thing about Ashley is that she's such a consummate professional. She came loaded with her homework and loaded with ideas and things to do. We got to shoot fairly in sequence, which is a real luxury. In the first part of the film, her off-kilter innocence is so off-putting and yet you immediately want to try and take care of her because you feel like she's wounded and lost and too innocent. So when we did those interview scenes, I felt parental toward her. When things suddenly change, her commitment on that level was equally 100 percent. Particularly during the final exorcism, she came to play physically and emotionally. I could be as good as I want to be in the film, but if you don't believe the possessed girl in an exorcism film, you don't have a film. You believe her, and because of that, my reactions were genuine. The barn scene was a day or a day and half of work, and that was very intense. She never let up, and that allowed me to never let up as well.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** The film seems to have been born out of the current paranoia about religious extremism.

**Fabian:** The isolation of the Sweetzer farm seems like a throwback in our multicultural, hyper-connected world. It seems like these people are rubes, and all they have is their religion. I think there's a spooky primal sort of voodooism that goes along with that idea. One of the most interesting parts of the film is when we're in the hospital, and the preacher is trying to convince the farmer that he needs to go to a psychologist, while the farmer is convincing the preacher to believe in god. The film shows that in the modern day, preachers are leaning toward scientific explanations and have lost their path. It also shows that giving your faith over to one point of view, wholeheartedly, without any examination of the other side leads you to dark places.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What are your thoughts about the film's controversial ending?

**Fabian:** The ending has been debated a bunch. I think Daniel said that once he decided to go in that direction, he decided to embrace it fully. It does feel like a different film in some respects. I thought the ending was going to go in a different direction at one point, because the film sets itself up as being something else. I thought it was going to be more about what happens with Cotton and what happens with Nell as people as opposed to this sort of wrap up. [Stamm] creates such a viable, realistic world that to be taken out of that realism and be reminded that you're



seeing a movie is a weird violation. And I think that's what people went through. They recognize the sort of ending they were being given, and that takes them out of the truly original experience of the first ninety minutes. And that's not to say that the ending is unoriginal, but it's certainly an area we are familiar with.



The Last Exorcism was released on Blu-Ray and DVD on Jan. 4, 2011.

Photo credit: Lionsgate Entertainment

**HollywoodChicago.com:** The ending seems as self-consciously artificial as the staged exorcisms Cotton performs early in the film.

**Fabian:** Someone came up to me and was like, "I totally get it. I fully expect to see a sequel where it turns out that this was all his footage and the entire thing was staged. Just call it 'The Rebranding of Cotton Marcus.' He's created this whole thing to rev up the second half of his career." And I was like, "Dude, spot on!"

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Has this role made you more eager to pursue films?

**Fabian:** I think anybody wants to do films if they get the chance. It just so happens that I look midway through my career and see that television has been my bread and butter basically. Movies are a tough nut to crack, they always have been. I was just saying to someone the other day that you always ask yourself, "Hey, how come I'm not Tom Cruise?" And the fact is, there's one Tom Cruise and he's doing just fine thank you very much. I'd love to do more features and the fact I was able to anchor this film will hopefully bode well for the next part of my career.

Meanwhile, I just finished wrapping 12 episodes of a sitcom, "Working Class." It's going to be on Country Music Television on January 28, and my [role] is 180 degrees different from playing an exorcist. But it's absolutely fun. I got to play with Melissa Peterman, the funniest girl on television, and Ed Asner, who's a TV legend. It was a great experience, and I'm looking forward to seeing how that rides. There are a couple of films for the springtime that I'm mulling over, and it remains to be seen which one I'm going to go with. But I'm looking forward to continuing working in films as much as I can.

*'The Last Exorcism' stars Patrick Fabian, Ashley Bell, Iris Bahr, Louis Herthum, Caleb Landry Jones and Tony Bentley. It was written by Huck Botko and Andrew Gurland and directed by Daniel Stamm. It was released on Blu-Ray and DVD on Jan. 4th, 2011. It is rated PG-13.*



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