

DIRECTOR'S CUT

By James Morrow

“Director’s Cut” is section from that novel. James writes, Echoes of ‘Director’s Cut survive here and there in the [novel] manuscript, but the narrative structure could not accommodate a complete, autonomous one-cut play. And so, rather poetically, this play about ‘missing scenes’ is itself a missing scene.” We are lucky to have it in our pages.

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THE CURTAIN RISES ON THE prophet MOSES, caught in the glow of a spotlight and sitting atop a mound of Dead Sea sand. The famous Tablets of the Law stick out of the dune like ears on a Mickey Mouse cap. A large rear-projection video screen is suspended over Moses’s head. An off-stage INTERVIEWER addresses the patriarch.

INTERVIEWER. I’ll never forget. Who could forget? There I am, only nine years old, and Morn and Dad take me to see Cecil B. DeMille’s The Ten Commandments . . .

MOSES. A terrific picture, Marty, don’t you think?

INTERVIEWER. It sure impressed me as a kid. Today . . . well, it seems a bit hokey.

MOSES. Hokey? Hokey? That DeMille was a genius, Marty, a certifiable genius.

INTERVIEWER. Is it true his original cut ran over seven hours?

MOSES. Yep. Of course, no theater chain was willing to book the thing. You’d have had to serve dinner in the middle, like on a flight from London to Tel Aviv.

INTERVIEWER. It’s rumored some of the original rushes are in your possession.

MOSES. No way, Marty. You pull papyrus out by the roots and -- bang --it disintegrates in a few days.

INTERVIEWER. I meant movie rushes.

MOSES. (laughs and slaps his knee) I know you did -- gotcha! (holds up fistful of motion picture film) Over the past forty years, I’ve managed to collect bits and pieces from nearly every missing scene.

INTERVIEWER. For example?

MOSES. The Plagues of Egypt. The release prints included blood, darkness, and hail . . .

An excerpt from The Ten Commandments appears on the video screen: fiery hail clattering across the balcony of Pharaoh's palace.

MOSES. But they were lacking some of the really interesting ones. You should've seen what DeMilie did with frogs.

The screen displays two elderly, working-class Egyptian women, BAKETAMON and NELLIFER, potters by trade, sitting on the banks of the Nile River. As they speak, BAKETAMON fashions a canopic jar, NELLIFER a soup tureen.

BAKETAMON. (addressing interviewer) The frogs? How could I ever forget the frogs?

NELLIFER. You'd open your unmentionables drawer and--pop--one of them little suckers would jump in your face.

BAKETAMON. Don't let anyone tell you God hasn't got a sense of humor.

INTERVIEWER. Which plague was the worst?

BAKETAMON. The boils, I think. My skin looked like the back of the moon.

NELLIFER. The boils, are you kidding? The locusts were far worse than the boils.

BAKETAMON. The mosquitoes were pretty nasty too.

NELLIFER. And the flies,

BAKETAMON. And the cattle getting murrain,

NELLIFER. And the death of the firstborn. A lot of people hated that one.

BAKETAMON. Of course, it didn't touch Nelli and me.

NELLIFER. We were lucky, Our firstborns were already dead.

BAKETAMON. Mine died in the hail.

INTERVIEWER. Froze?

BAKETAMON. Beaned.

NELLIFER. Mine had been suffering from chronic diarrhea since he was a month old, so when the waters became blood -- zap, kid got dehydrated.

BAKETAMON. Nelli, your mind's going. It was your second born who died when the waters became blood. Your firstborn died in the darkness, when he accidentally drank that turpentine.

NELLIFER. No, my secondborn died much later, drowned when the Red Sea rolled back into its bed. My thirdborn drank the turpentine. A mother remembers these things.

INTERVIEWER. I was certain you'd be more bitter about your ordeals.

NELLIFER. Initially we thought the plagues were unjust. We even wrote a book about it.

BAKETAMON. When Bad Things Happen to Good Pagans.

NELLIFER. Then we came to understand our innate depravity and intrinsic wickedness.

BAKETAMON. There's only one good Person in the whole universe, and that's the Lord God Jehovah.

NELLIFER. Next to Him, we're a couple of slime molds.

INTERVIEWER. Sounds like you've converted to monotheism.

BAKETAMON. (nodding) We love the Lord our God with all our heart.

NELLIFER. And all our soul.

BAKETAMON. And all our might.

NELLIFER. Besides, there's no telling what He might do to us next.

BAKETAMON. Fire ants, possibly.

NELLIFER. Killer bees.

BAKETAMON. Scarlet fever.

NELLIFER. I got two sons left.

BAKETAMON. I'm still up a daughter.

NELLIFER. The Lord giveth.

BAKETAMON. And the Lord taketh away.

NELLIFER. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

The screen goes blank.

INTERVIEWER. When you went up on Mount Sinai, Jehovah offered you a lot more than the Decalogue.

MOSES. (displays excised footage) DeMilie shot everything, all six hundred and twelve laws. First to go were the prescriptions concerning slavery -- the protocols for selling your daughter and so on. Unfortunately, those cuts reduced the running time a mere eight minutes.

An excerpt from The Ten Commandments appears on the screen: God's animated forefinger etching the Decalogue onto the face of Sinai, while Charlton Heston watches with a mixture of awe, fascination, and incredulity. As the last rule is carved-- THOU SHALT NOT COVET-- the frame suddenly freezes.

GOD. (voice-over) Now for the details. (beat) When you go to war against your enemies and the Lord your God delivers them into your power, if you see a beautiful woman among the prisoners and find her desirable, you may make her your wife.

INTERVIEWER. I have to admire DeMilie for using something like that. Deuteronomy 21: 10, right?

MOSES. He was a much gutsier filmmaker than his detractors imagine.

GOD. (voice-over) When two men are fighting together, if the wife of one intervenes to protect her husband by putting out her hand and seizing the other by the private parts, you shall cut off her hand and show no pity.

INTERVIEWER. Private parts? DeMilie used that?

MOSES. Deuteronomy 25:11.

GOD. (voice-over) If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son, his father and mother shall bring him out to the elders of the town, and all his fellow citizens shall

stone the son to death.

MOSES. Deuteronomy 21:18-21.

INTERVIEWER. And here I'd always thought DeMilie was afraid of controversy.

MOSES. One ballsy mogul, Marty.

The screen goes blank.

INTERVIEWER. After the giving of the Law, The Ten Commandments jumps rather abruptly to the Children of Israel entering the Promised Land.

MOSES. Forty years of wandering in the wilderness, and poor DeMilie had to edit out thirty-nine of them. The entire Book of Numbers ended up on the cutting room floor.

INTERVIEWER. He actually filmed those episodes?

MOSES. (nodding) The Lord giving my sister leprosy, causing the earth to swallow up Dathan, striking down the Israelites who disparaged Canaan, firebombing the ones who complained at Hormah, sending serpents against those who grumbled on the road from Mount Hot, visiting a plague on everybody who backslid at Peor . . .

INTERVIEWER. Damn theater chains. They think they own the world.

MOSES. I especially hated to lose that stirring speech I made to my generals following the subjugation of the Midianires.

INTERVIEWER. Would you like to deliver it now, for the record?

MOSES. Sure would, Marty. Ready? Here goes. Numbers 31:15-18. (clears throat) "Why have you spared the life of all the women? These were the very ones who perverted the sons of Israel! Kill all the male children! Kill also all the women who have slept with a man! Spare the lives only of the young gifts who have not slept with a man, and take them for yourselves!"

INTERVIEWER. Do you suppose we'll ever see the version of The Ten Commandments that Mr. DeMilie intended?

MOSES. Only yesterday I was talking to some nice folks down at the National Endowment for the Arts. They're willing to kick in three million for a restoration.

INTERVIEWER. A worthy cause.

MOSES. The worthiest, Marty. Believe me, there's justice in this old world. You simply have to wait for it.

Curtain.

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James Morrow's most recent novel, *Only Begotten Daughter*, won the World Fantasy Award for best novel. He has also won two Nebulas for his short fiction, most recently in 1993 for his novella, *City of Truth*. HBJ will publish his next novel, *Towing Jehovah* sometime this spring..