



By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

Even if you’ve never picked your feet in Poughkeepsie or any other town north of New York City, did you ever see “The French Connection”? Gene Hackman and Roy Scheider starred as New York narcotics detectives who are stretched to their limits trying to break up a huge heroin smuggling operation.

The film opened nationwide on Oct. 9, 1971 — 55 years ago Friday — and grossed \$51.7 million, despite being made for just \$1.8 million. It would win five Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director and Best Actor.

A FICTIONALIZED TALE BASED ON A TRUE STORY

“The French Connection” was based on a 1969 book by Robin Moore, who had written “The Green Berets” and, with Xaviera Hollander. “The Happy Hooker: My Own Story.”

“The French Connection: A True Account of Cops, Narcotics, and International Conspiracy” was, in fact, a fictionalized story of two real New York City narcotics detectives: Eddie Egan — who Moore turned into Jimmy “Popeye” Doyle — and Sonny Grosso, who Moore called Buddy

“Cloudy” Russo.

Much of the heroin traffic in the 1960s and early 1970s came to the U.S. through France. In April 1968, a team led by Egan and Grosso seized 246 lbs. of heroin concealed in a Citroën DS car and shipped via the ocean liner SS France. It was one of the largest drug busts in U.S. history.

National General Pictures was hoping to produce a movie based on the



William Friedkin

book but disliked the first try at a screenplay. That didn’t surprise director William Friedkin, who disliked the original book and later claimed he couldn’t finish reading it.

Producer Philip D’Antoni took a revised script to Richard Zanuck and David Brown of 20th Century-Fox, who agreed to make the film if they could hold the cost down to a low \$1.5 million.

Friedkin rode along with Egan and Grosso as they did their jobs to get a feel for how real narcotics detectives behaved. He also hired Egan and Grosso to serve as on-set consultants, which made it easy for Friedkin to cut more costs filming on location in New York without the required filming permits.

Friedkin — who, two years later, would direct “The Exorcist” — shot in a hand-held, documentary style to further cut costs.

THE ADVENTURES OF POPEYE AND CLOUDY

Friedkin couldn’t afford his first choice to play Popeye Doyle, Paul Newman. He also considered Jackie Gleason, Peter Boyle, Rod Taylor, James Caan, and newspaper columnist Jimmy Breslin. He offered the role to Steve McQueen, who said he didn’t want to do another police film after “Bullitt.” He eventually settled on Gene Hackman.



Egan and Grosso had learned long before that drug dealers could easily spot undercover cops, so they had come up with the idea of Egan dressing as Santa Claus and walking down the street singing carols. When he switched to “Jingle Bells,” it was a signal for his partners to move in and make an arrest. Hence, the Santa scene in the movie.



That whole “pick your feet in Poughkeepsie” routine was from Egan’s method of asking goofy questions during interrogations to keep a suspect rattled and, hopefully, to incriminate himself. Egan didn’t really want the “Poughkeepsie” bit to become known as his catchphrase, however. He suggested “Addicts in the cellar, sellers in the attic.”



Egan and Grosso were also used as onscreen extras — Egan played Doyle and Russo’s supervisor. Grosso played one of the two federal agents on the case. After production on the movie ended, Egan retired from the NYPD and moved to Hollywood. The city later accused Egan of errors in handling evidence, but the charges were later reversed.



The movie’s most notable sequence, the car chase scene, was pure fiction. There had been no car chase in the actual drug investigation. The scene was filmed without permits via a camera mounted on the front bumper of the car and at a slow speed, so the playback could be sped up. A stunt driver drove Doyle’s car for that scene.



While some of the near-misses in that chase were choreographed, several weren’t. Some of the near-misses were with actual New York City traffic that drove into the path of the chase — since not all the side streets had been blocked off. The woman with the baby carriage was a stunt actor and her near-miss was carefully rehearsed.



After the car chase, Doyle shoots a gunman in the back as he tries to run back up the stairs of an elevated train platform. Police officers strongly objected, saying that’s not self-defense, that’s murder. That sequence, too, was pure fiction. Friedkin stood by the scene, saying he was convinced that’s what Egan would have done.



The singers in the bar were a real musical trio, The Three Degrees. In 1974, their single, “When Will I See You Again?” would hit No. 2 on the Billboard Hot 100. That same year, they’d be featured on a disco track by MFSB, “TSOP (The Sound of Philadelphia),” better known as the theme for the TV dance show “Soul Train.” It spent two weeks at No. 1.

NOMINATED FOR 8 ACADEMY AWARDS

“The French Connection” won five Oscars and was responsible for boosting the careers of Hackman and Scheider into leading man status. Hackman returned for a sequel film, “French Connection II,” in 1975. In 2005, “The French Connection” was added to the Library of Congress’ National Film Registry.



Best Picture



Best Director
William Friedkin



Best Actor
Gene Hackman



Best Supporting Actor
Roy Scheider



Best Adapted Screenplay



Best Cinematography



Best Film Editing



Best Sound