

## LOCAL FOCUS

Australian screenwriter MICHAEL PETRONI continues his successful Hollywood career with his chilling, literate script for the new thriller *THE RITE*. BY ALICIA MALONE

# RISES OF PASSAGE



“The script was very, very good,” says a figure no less daunting than Sir Anthony Hopkins. “It’s always the genesis of doing movies: you read the script and then gradually it all comes together.” The praise is being applied

to Australian-born Michael Petroni, who has carved out an impressive niche for himself in Hollywood, where he has penned the likes of *The Dangerous Lives Of Altar Boys* (starring Jodie Foster), *Possession* (starring Sarah Michelle Gellar), and Australian-shot Hollywood flicks *Queen Of The Damned* and *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage Of The Dawn Treader*. He also directed 2002’s graceful, poetic drama *Till Human Voices Wake Us*, starring Guy Pearce and Helena Bonham Carter.

The script that Sir Anthony Hopkins is praising, however, is Petroni’s latest Hollywood assignment, *The Rite*, which follows Michael Kovak (newcomer Colin O’Donoghue), a sceptical priest-in-training, as he travels to Rome to learn the art of exorcism from the unorthodox Father Lucas (Sir Anthony Hopkins). *The Rite* opened at No. 1 on the US box office. Its source material was a ten-page book proposal by journalist Matt Baglio, who was investigating an exorcism school at the Vatican. His proposal found its way to various producers, including Beau Flynn, who had worked with Petroni on his directorial debut, the aforementioned *Till Human Voices Wake Us*. Petroni was brought on board to write the screenplay for *The Rite* even before Baglio had finished his book.

The screenwriter was immediately drawn to the concept. “The Michael character’s preconceptions as a priest of what an exorcist is and then what he ends up finding out exorcists really do, really fascinated me,” Petroni says. “I was put in contact with Matt, and he showed me his notes. It was very interesting; it would be 2:00am, and he would be in Rome and I’d be in LA or in Australia, and we’d be working back and forth. He would be telling me about this crazy exorcism that he had just witnessed. It was sometimes disconcerting to be on the phone at 2:00am and feeling slightly freaked out by these stories.”

Director Mikael Hafstrom (*1408*, *Derailed*) was

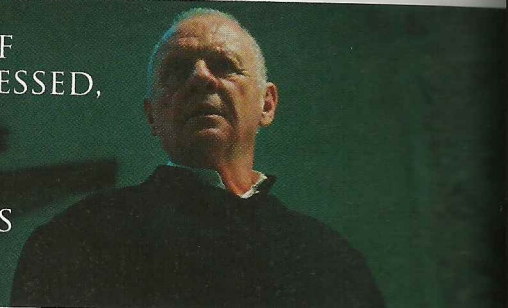
impressed with Petroni’s adaptation of the treatment. “It was quite a difficult script to write because it’s based on a journalistic piece,” the director says. “Michael really did a great job of achieving that. He’s my Australian friend now, and I’m very happy about that.”

Petroni did extensive research on exorcisms, and needed the cooperation of the Catholic Church, who, to his surprise, were extremely helpful. “I’ve done research for other projects, and I’ve always come up against a fair

was like a rat, but we never found the rat. It was only for the time that I wrote this script. As soon as I finished writing the script, the noise went away. It was awful.”

When asked how he felt hearing his words performed by the great – and highly complementary – Sir Anthony Hopkins, Petroni laughs. “It was very, very pleasing,” he admits. “He did a great job in humanising the character. In a way, Father Lucas is a very extreme character. He not only did a great job in humanising him, but he also brought

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amount of resistance. I didn’t get that with this though, which was very surprising considering the subject matter. The church was very open about it, and very welcoming of my curiosity. What helped in that is that Matt Baglio had made a lot of inroads into the Catholic realm in his research. I was often being introduced to people through Matt, so they knew Matt and they knew about his fixation on recounting the facts rather than turning it into some other story. In that sense, it was like a big welcome actually.”

But though their cooperation made writing the script easier, Petroni admits that spending long hours writing about demons wasn’t always fun. “My wife [Australian actress Jenni Baird] was pregnant at the time,” he explains. “I was almost reticent at that point to be writing this up, and to be dealing with this subject matter when she was pregnant. I had this scratching in the roof of my office. It

a lot of humour to the role, which was great.”

Hopkins’ natural delivery certainly adds to the realism of the film, which also uses few special effects in its effort to preserve the legitimacy of the script. Petroni notes that this sets *The Rite* apart from other exorcism movies. “It concerns itself with the authenticity of the subject matter,” he offers. “It is the portrayal of someone who is possessed, and the portrayal of priests who exorcise. It humanises priests more than most films in this sub-genre. My impression of most other films is that priests become symbols rather than people in those kinds of movies.”

*The Rite* is released on March 10 and will be reviewed at [www.filmink.com.au](http://www.filmink.com.au)