

Repudiated upon its 1961 release by the tough-talking clergyman who inspired it, *The Hoodlum Priest* remains as obscure and intriguing as ever

By Dennis Brown Thursday, Mar 10 2011

On a sweltering afternoon in August 1960, movie star [Don Murray](#) stood on a Produce Row loading dock in despair. An hour earlier, during the filming of a robbery at the wholesale vegetable hub on North Market Street, his costar [Keir Dullea](#) had sliced an artery in his arm while attempting to break through a door. Production on *The Hoodlum Priest*, Murray's maiden effort as a producer, ceased while the profusely bleeding actor was rushed to a hospital.

The Hoodlum Priest could ill afford yet another untimely delay. Although principal photography was far from completed, already the film's unrealistic eighteen-day shooting schedule had nearly doubled. The movie's equally improbable \$350,000 budget had been exhausted weeks earlier—and Murray and his co-producer were personally responsible for covering the excess. Now he stood alone on the loading dock and asked himself unmerciful questions: What business did he have producing even a low-budget movie? What was he doing in St. Louis, anyway?

Fifty years later, Murray recalls that sun-baked afternoon as vividly as if it were yesterday. "I was so depressed," he says. "I didn't yet know how seriously Keir was injured, so his well-being was a great concern. I also didn't know if we were getting anything worthwhile on film. I thought to myself: If only we can complete this movie, so [United Artists](#) won't think we stole their money. As an escape, I conjured in my imagination that the movie would get finished. The first review would come out, and it would be a rave in *Time* magazine. Then I began to laugh at myself, because I knew this fantasy was so unreal."



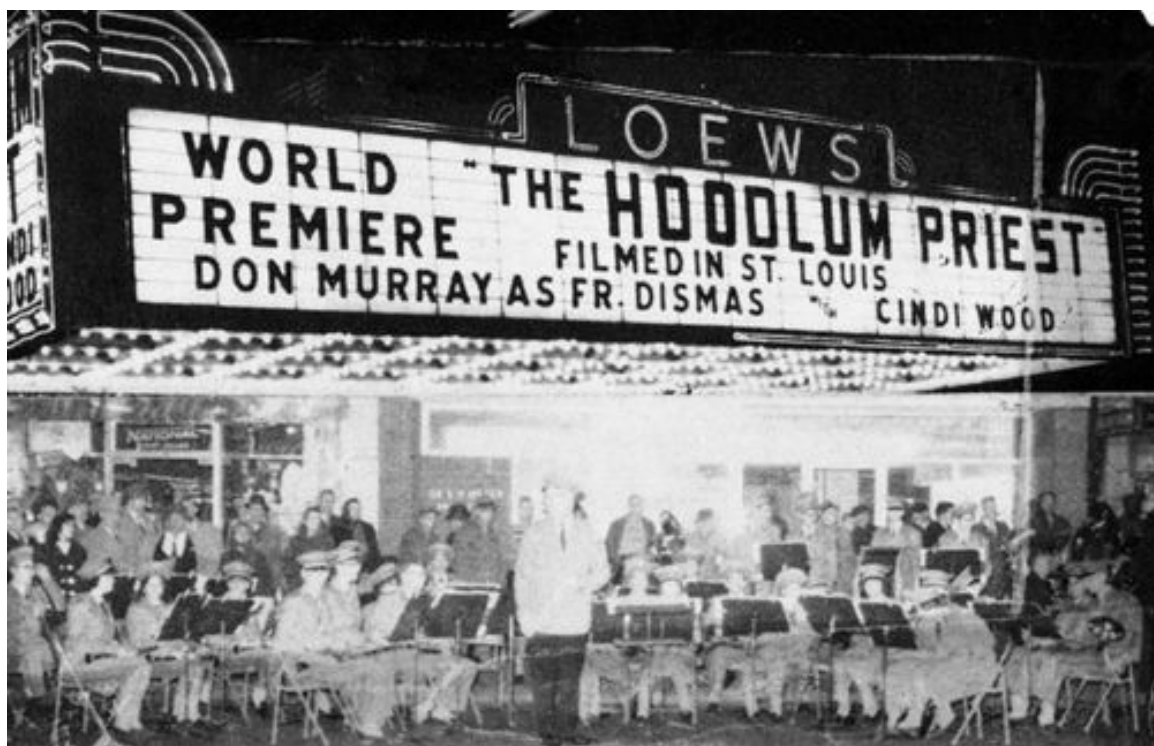
Don Murray wrote, produced and starred in *The Hoodlum Priest*, based on the life of Father Charles Dismas Clark, founder of Dismas House. The movie also starred Keir Dullea (center), who went on to greater fame in *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Unreality, though, had informed the entire project — beginning with its unlikely origins fourteen months before. When the film star flew into St. Louis in June 1959 to promote his current movie, *Shake Hands with the Devil*, a rousing melodrama about the 1921 Irish Rebellion in which he costarred with [James Cagney](#), Murray had not yet seen the film. He eagerly attended a press showing at a private screening room. Minutes after the movie began, a stranger slipped into the seat next to him and promptly began to speak.

"Now listen, kid," the man said in a reedy, agitated voice, "I ain't no square priest, you see."

Out of the corner of his eye, Murray was taken aback to realize that the Runyonesque interloper beside him was wearing a priest's collar.

"I was instantly intrigued by the dichotomy," Murray says. "He was dressed like a priest, but he spoke like a character out of *Guys and Dolls*. One sentence out of his mouth, and he had me fascinated."



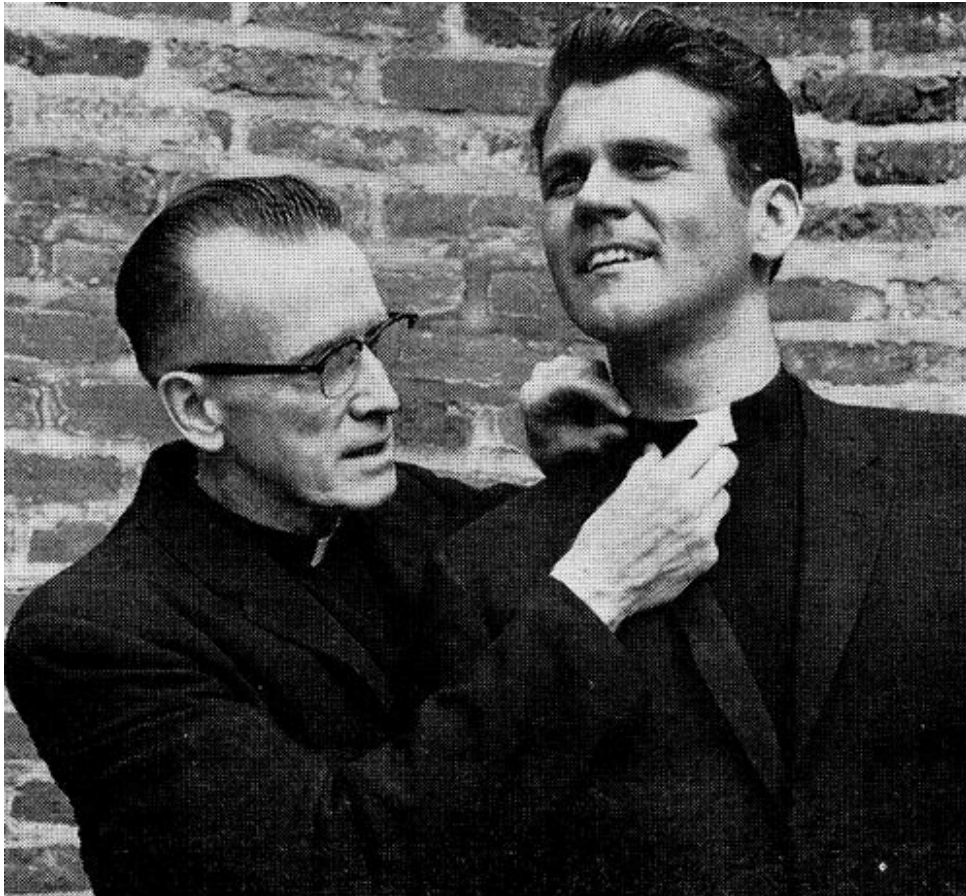
Filed in and around St. Louis, *The Hoodlum Priest* had its world premiere at the Loew's State Theatre downtown,

"Well, Father, listen," the actor replied. "I'm really interested in talking to you, but I haven't seen this film before, so do you mind? Let's meet in my hotel."

The next day [Father Charles Dismas Clark](#) visited Murray in his suite at the Park Plaza. They were an unlikely pair. Whereas Father Clark's furtive eyes were always on the lookout for trouble, Murray had a guileless air about him; only a month earlier, he'd been cast in a live CBS television special as [Herman Melville's](#) eternal innocent, [Billy Budd](#). The two men came from disparate backgrounds, as well. Clark, one of fifteen children of an itinerant coal miner, was born in Pennsylvania and raised in rural Illinois. Murray was born in Hollywood, where his father was a dance director at 20th Century-Fox, his mother a former Ziegfeld girl.

As a young man, Clark came under the care of a priest who so influenced him that in 1932 (when Murray was three years old) he was ordained a Jesuit priest. In the mid-1930s, when Clark was teaching math at [Saint Louis University High School](#), Murray's family moved east. His father was the stage director for Broadway's celebrated *Hellzapoppin* revues. While Murray was running track at his [Long Island](#) high school, Clark found himself increasingly tending to the needs of St. Louis' dispossessed — so much so that he gave himself the nickname Dismas, after the thief who was

crucified alongside Jesus. By 1957, the same year Murray received an [Academy Award](#) nomination for his first movie role, opposite [Marilyn Monroe](#) in *Bus Stop*, Clark was so well known as a champion of ex-cons that a *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* reporter had nicknamed him "the hoodlum priest."



Don Murray wrote, produced and starred in *The Hoodlum Priest*, based on the life and work of Father Charles Dismas Clark (at left), founder of Dismas House.

At the Park Plaza that June day in 1960, Father Clark spoke for three impassioned hours about his devotion to the disenfranchised. He described how a former [St. Louis Circuit Court](#) attorney had tried to have him arrested for tampering with a witness and how his work with ex-cons had led to an effort to have him defrocked. Murray sat mesmerized by the priest's compelling presence. "He was a spellbinder, and tremendously single-minded," the actor recalls. "When Father Clark was around, you couldn't discuss any subject other than the plight of ex-cons."

Clark explained that two weeks earlier, with the aid of a long-time friend and benefactor, prominent St. Louis criminal defense lawyer Morris Shenker, he had created the Fr. Dismas Clark Foundation, which qualified

them to bid at auction on a former city grade school at 905 Cole Street. Clark intended to convert the building into the nation's first "halfway house," a shelter where 40 homeless ex-convicts per month would receive food, clothes and lodging. Dismas House would have its own barber and a fully stocked men's shop complete with a tailor. It would open the world's first employment agency solely devoted to finding jobs for former convicts, and an office set aside for state parole officials. Although this unorthodox approach defied the conventional thinking that ex-cons should be kept separated, Father Clark was convinced of the rightness of his approach.

"Have you ever seen a man's eyes empty of hope?" he asked.



Keir Dullea's character in *The Hoodlum Priest* was a fictional construct, but Don Murray's Father Clark was based on just one larger-than-life St. Louisan.

In fact, Murray had. As a conscientious objector during the Korean War, he'd spent nearly three years in Europe, first in Germany with the Brethren Volunteer Service, then with the Congregational Christian Service in Italy, where he was involved with a refugee settlement program. "Those refugees in barbed-wire camps were very similar to convicts in a walled prison," he says.

So what did Father Clark want from Murray? A financial contribution? No, he was after more than that. "I want you to make a television story about my work," Clark proposed. "Because I need money to build my halfway house." Why television? Maybe he'd seen *Billy Budd*. Or perhaps because two years earlier Murray had written and starred in *For I Have Loved Strangers*, an acclaimed drama on CBS-TV's *Playhouse 90* series that dealt with his refugee experiences.

Father Clark was never afraid to dream big, but even he was not prepared for the actor's enthusiastic reply. Caught up in the thrall of the priest's charisma, Murray said, "I think your story is too good for a television show. I'd like to try to make a motion picture out of it."

As he spoke those naively ambitious words, Murray had no way of knowing that he was about to embark on the supreme adventure of his life.

Unbeknownst to Father Clark, for the past year Don Murray had been planning to follow in the footsteps of other film stars—[Henry Fonda](#), [Burt Lancaster](#)—who, in the mid-1950s, began to produce independent movies. Murray and his producing partner, former New York advertising executive [Walter Wood](#), were on the lookout for a story that was both substantive and sellable. To Murray's ear, Father Clark's idealistic activism sounded like the right mix. He wrote a thirteen-page story outline and sent it to United Artists executive vice president Max Youngstein, who was intrigued enough to provide seed money for a screenplay; if Youngstein liked the script, UA would bankroll the film.

Youngstein had no interest in the troubles of ex-convicts in St. Louis, or anywhere else; he was simply drawn to the phrase "hoodlum priest," which he could envision adorning the lower half of a theater marquee as the title of a cheap B-movie.

[**Editor's note:** A correction ran concerning this paragraph; please see end of article.] Murray and Wood hired screenwriter [Joseph Landon](#) (*The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond*). They dispatched him to St. Louis to spend a week getting to know Father Clark, who in November 1959 had succeeded in opening Dismas House. Landon returned to California after only two days. "He assured us he had the story," Murray recounts. "I was skeptical. Then when I read his script, I was appalled. He had written a sentimental *Going My Way* kind of story about a do-gooder priest. It didn't capture any of Father Clark's gumption and grit."

Landon was shown the door. Wood suggested they return to UA and ask for money to hire a new writer. Murray disagreed. "We have no track

record," he countered. "If they know that our first decision was bad, they'll throw us out on our ears." From sheer necessity, Murray proposed that he write the screenplay himself.

Murray crafted a story that dramatizes both success and failure. In the first half of the film, Father Clark overcomes criticism of his unorthodox manner as he prepares to open Dismas House. Murray consolidated several of Father Clark's unhappier dealings with ex-cons into one composite character, the doomed [Billy Lee Jackson](#). The film opens with Billy's release from prison and climaxes with his execution. In a rush of writing, Murray penned the first 75 pages in three days. After Wood read and approved the work, the novice screenwriter completed the first draft in another three-day burst. Youngstein green-lit the project with a budget of \$350,000.

"It was a silly budget — ridiculously low," Murray says. "In 1956 I made the [Paddy Chayefsky](#) film *The Bachelor Party* for United Artists. That movie had nowhere near the complexity of *The Hoodlum Priest*, and it cost a million dollars." Yet despite the minuscule budget, Murray was not about to cut corners by making his movie on a Hollywood soundstage. "Thinking back on it after all these years," he says, "there was hardly any decision at all. It was simply a given: *The Hoodlum Priest* had to be filmed on location in St. Louis."

Because Murray and Wood wanted their film to rely on visual imagery more than dialogue, they hired their cinematographer before choosing a director. In the decades to come, [Haskell Wexler](#) would rise to the top of his field, winning Academy Awards for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *Bound for Glory*. But in 1960 he was still looking to jump-start his career. Once Wexler was onboard, he in turn approved the selection of the equally inexperienced [Irvin Kershner](#), still nineteen years away from helming *The Empire Strikes Back*, to direct.

Murray would portray the title role. Veteran actor [Larry Gates](#) was cast in the part modeled after Morris Shenker, and Wood's wife, former model [Cindi Wood](#), was to play the female lead. But Billy Lee Jackson remained uncast. "I was considering [Robert Blake](#) and [Peter Falk](#)," Murray says. "They were both terrific actors, but they were also my age. I wanted someone younger." A persistent agent doggedly kept pushing for Keir Dullea, an unknown New York stage actor with no feature film experience. Finally it was agreed that if Dullea would fly to Los Angeles at his own expense, he could read for the part.

"I read the script," recalls Keir Dullea, speaking from his Connecticut home. "It was a really fabulous script. But because I was a nobody, the odds of me getting a lead role in a motion picture seemed ridiculously small and hardly worth the expense of a cross-country flight. But I had just auditioned for a Broadway play, and I had this gut feeling I wasn't going to get it. So to take my mind off that rejection, I flew out to LA."

After two days of intense improvisations with Murray and Kershner, Dullea won the part, thus launching a film career that would include the leading role in [Stanley Kubrick's](#) iconic *2001: A Space Odyssey*. "We were blown away," Murray marvels. "We really owe a great deal to that agent, because Keir was tremendous."

"They flew me to St. Louis, and I went right to work," Dullea recalls. "They moved me into Dismas House. Nobody but Father Clark and his first assistant, who was an ex-con, knew who I was. They had me mopping floors and sleeping in the dorm to get the feel of the place. I thought I had died and gone to Heaven."

Prior to the start of principal photography, the actors spent a week rehearsing the script in a [Chase Hotel](#) ballroom. "I was determined that we would rehearse," Murray says, "because that's what we did on *Bachelor Party* and *A Hatful of Rain*. I didn't know how Kershner—who had little theater background—would respond to rehearsing, but to my surprise, that's where he was at his best. He used that time to build all the actors' performances, including my own."

In an interview on the eve of shooting, producer Wood told *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* film critic [Myles Standish](#) that the movie "was not a commercial deal, but rather the desire of two men to fulfill their ideals."

But on the set, idealism soon gave way to harsh reality. *The Hoodlum Priest* was over budget before the first day of shooting. "We came to town with a completely union crew," Murray explains. "But the local union insisted that we hire several people we didn't need. We had to hire a cinematographer whose only contribution was to give Walter a haircut! Those unnecessary salaries made it impossible for us to meet the budget." That was only the beginning.

"We filmed extensively in the St. Louis city jail and in the state prison in [Jefferson City](#)," Murray continues. "Never having done jail scenes in a real prison, we didn't anticipate what happens. Every time you want to bring a light in — or even a light filter, anything — you have to unlock the door,

bring it in, then lock the door behind you. All that locking and unlocking and waiting for the proper person to authorize what you want to do took forever."



When Dismas House opened in November 1960 on Cole Street just north of where the Edward Jones Dome now stands, it was the nation's first halfway house.

Other delays were the result of the director's indecisiveness. "Kershner, who had been magnificent during rehearsal, did not have a sense of security about his camera angles," Murray says. "He would change his mind constantly. We were filming a scene in the chapel at Dismas House. He set the camera in the doorway, and they lit for that. Then he looked through the lens. 'No, this is not gonna work. Put it over there inside.' And he changed it three times, which meant we had to light three times. After the third time, he said, 'Don, it doesn't work. We can't do the scene.' I finally blew up. I said, 'Bullshit! Just put the damn camera here and shoot it!' That's what we finally did."

On two occasions Wood (whom Murray calls "the film's unsung hero") had to fly to New York to beg for more money. He was not received cordially. One United Artists executive admonished, "It's not unusual for a movie to go over budget. We've had movies go \$2 million over budget. But never, in the history of the company, has a movie gone 70 percent over budget!" UA

reluctantly advanced another \$250,000, but the two producers had to sign promissory notes that obligated them to repay the loan if the movie tanked. "That would be like a million dollars today," Murray computes. "Had the film flopped, I never could have paid it back. So even as we were trying against countless obstacles to complete this movie, I could see my life crumbling before my eyes."

When Dullea returned from the hospital, stitched up but not seriously hurt, filming proceeded at its snail-like pace. After more than a month in St. Louis, the production moved on to Jefferson City. "The state penitentiary was a fascinating location," Dullea says. "I remember filming the first shot in the movie, where I walk across the prison yard. Some of the prisoners were watching me. As I returned to my starting position for another take, one of the black inmates chided me. 'Hey man, you don't have that penitentiary shuffle.' I said, 'Well, you see, this isn't just any day. This is the day my character is getting out of prison.' And the inmate said, 'Then man, you *run*.'"

In St. Louis the filmmakers could not work on the second floor of a Mill Creek tenement owing to the weight of the camera equipment. Nor were they allowed into the gas chamber at the penitentiary. Those two scenes were filmed in Los Angeles, where a United Artists executive visited the [Samuel Goldwyn Studio](#) to offer encouragement to Murray and Wood. "I'm telling you this as a friend," he said. "You two will never produce another movie in this town. You're through."

Not yet they weren't. *The Hoodlum Priest* still had to be assembled. "We had hired [Maurice Wright](#), a veteran studio cutter whose credits extended back to 1930s [Frank Capra](#) films, to edit the movie," Murray says. "Kershner insisted that we hire a friend of his who had a more 'modern'—that was his term—point of view. But when we saw their first cut, everybody walked out of the screening room depressed. Haskell Wexler said, 'I know we've got a better picture in there somewhere.' So Walter called Kershner and thanked him for his work. Then he said we were going to exercise our prerogative as producers and do the final cut ourselves. We brought [Maury Wright](#) back, and I supervised the final edit at his side."

For his screenwriting credit, Murray used his high school track nickname, Don Deer. "I worried that critics might think it was too egotistical of me to produce, write and star," he says. "Better to use a pseudonym. It turned out to be one of the real dumb decisions of my life. It would have been a good thing for people in the industry to know I could write."

United Artists refused to discuss a release schedule until after company executives saw the finished film. On February 3, 1961, Murray and Wood showed the final print in New York. "We were trembling as we waited in the hallway outside the executive screening room," Murray recalls. "Our lives were on the line. The film ended. The door opened, and out they came. First was a big, tough, gruff guy named [Bill Heineman](#), who was head of sales. He had his handkerchief out and was crying. Walter and I looked at each other in disbelief. Then came Max Youngstein. First he hugged us. Then he dragged us into his office and toasted us with brandy. On the spot he offered us a ten-picture deal, five years, two pictures a year."



The shattering, mostly-silent gas chamber sequence in *The Hoodlum Priest* took the film out of the realm of the biopic and made it into an impassioned critique of the death penalty.

What were these hardened honchos responding to? First, *The Hoodlum Priest* builds to a harrowing gas chamber scene. But in addition to the film's stark content, its form was distinctive. "Walter and I wanted to get out of the rut into which we felt American filmmaking had fallen," Murray explains. "We wanted to return to the ideas of silent-era filmmakers like [D.W. Griffith](#) and [Sergei] Eisenstein, where it was the image that spoke, not just the character."

Dullea, for instance, speaks only three lines in the eight-minute gas chamber sequence. Murray does not utter one word in the film's final six-minute scene back at Dismas House.

Sold at last on *Priest's* potential, UA cranked up its promotional machinery. The world premiere was slated for February 28, 1961, in St.

Louis, where [Cardinal Joseph Ritter](#) issued a special dispensation to Catholics, lest they worry about attending such a gala event during Lent. In addition to stars Murray, Dullea and Cindi Wood, attendees included [Mayor Raymond Tucker](#), [County Supervisor James H.J. McNary](#), [Missouri Attorney General Thomas Eagleton](#) and infamous Teamsters president [James Hoffa](#), whose union had long been helpful in finding jobs for Father Clark's ex-cons. Hoffa and Morris Shenker were tight; by 1966 Shenker would be the union leader's chief counsel. ("I didn't even know Hoffa was coming to the premiere, and I don't remember meeting him," Murray says. "He had no connection whatever to our movie.") The sold-out benefit netted \$75,000 for the Fr. Dismas Clark Foundation.

As Murray stood in the Chase Hotel lobby waiting to be driven to Loew's State Theatre downtown on Washington Avenue, he spotted *Time* magazine on the newsstand. "I buy a copy," he says, savoring the memory. "I wonder if there's anything about us in it. Sure enough, here is our first review. The headline reads, 'God in a Gas Chamber.' The last sentence says, 'The experience is extraordinary—nothing less than an illusion of immortality.'

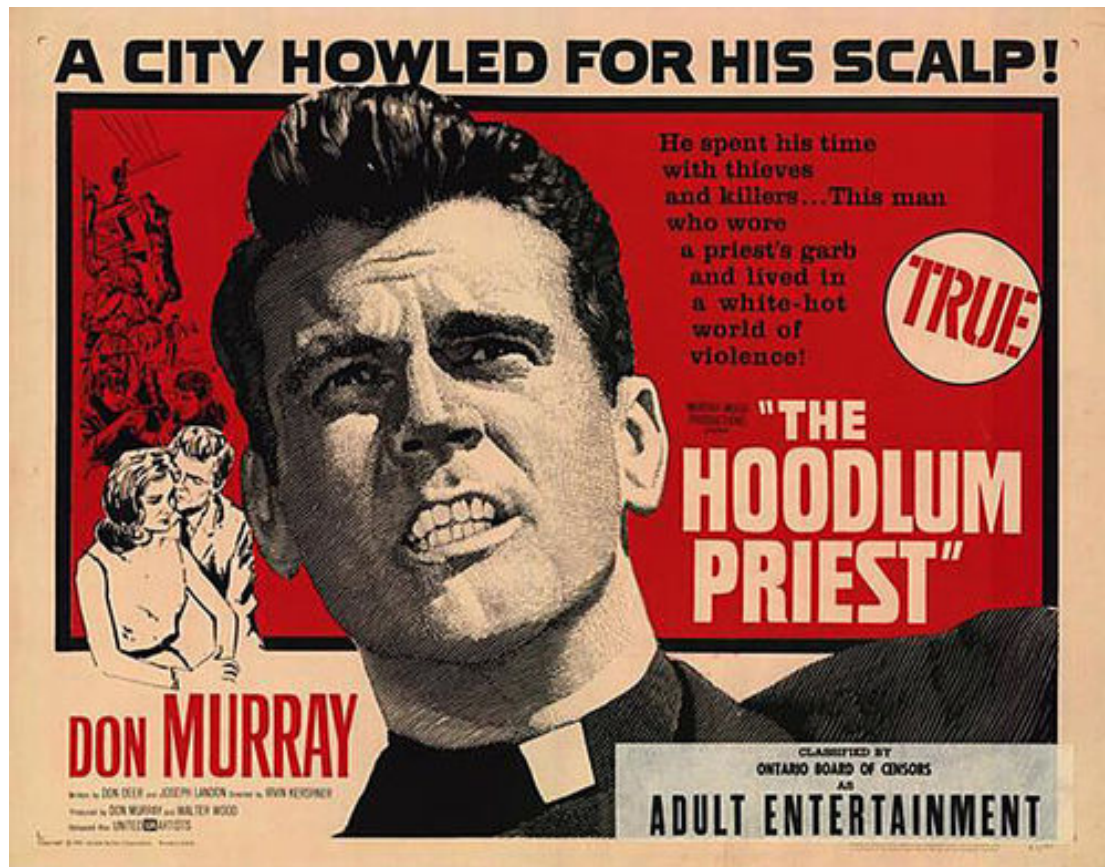
"I couldn't believe what I was reading. That review was so much more glowing than anything I could have fantasized."

The next day the local pundits echoed *Time's* praise. "The film has a raw and savage power," wrote *Post-Dispatch* critic Myles Standish. Both Standish and the *Globe-Democrat's* [Bob Goddard](#) predicted the film would be "the 'sleeper' of the year"—a forecast that came true when *The Hoodlum Priest* opened nationally in April.

Among scores of positive reviews, the demanding [Stanley Kauffmann](#) wrote in the *New Republic*, "*The Hoodlum Priest* is a modest film with a virtue often lacking in American pictures; it is an utterance of conviction... [T]his little film puts a hand on your shoulder and makes you turn and look." Wrote [Philip T. Hartung](#) in the lay Catholic magazine *Commonweal*: "The makers of multi-million, multi-color, multi-star religious spectacles might learn a thing or two from [this] unpretentious little film... In any one reel it catches more of the true spirit of man's relationship to God and to his fellow men than most of the elaborate Biblical blockbusters do in their entire running time."

The trade newspaper *Variety* reported that in its first week of wide release, the low-budget *Hoodlum Priest* was the nation's fourth highest-grossing movie, behind [Otto Preminger's](#) much-hyped epic *Exodus*, [Disney's](#) *One*

Hundred and One Dalmatians and the Marlon Brando-directed Western *One-Eyed Jacks*.



The advertising tagline "A city howled for his scalp!" likely got under the skin of *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* city editor George Killenberg, who wrote a "Letter to the Editor" of his own paper excoriating filmmaker Murray and *The Hoodlum Priest*.

"It was a smash hit right from the beginning," says Murray. "The film made several million dollars and went into profit in two years. As an actor I took a very small salary—just \$25,000, which was one-fourth of what I got for my next film [Otto Preminger's political drama *Advise & Consent*]. But as a producer with a percentage of the profits, through the years my earnings have totaled almost \$200,000."

In May the picture was cheered at the [Cannes Film Festival](#). At year's end *Newsweek* chose *The Hoodlum Priest* as one of the ten best films of 1961, alongside Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*, Visconti's *Rocco and His Brothers*, Michaelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura*, Elia Kazan's *Splendor in the Grass* and the musical *West Side Story*.

And yet, unlike the cinematic company it kept in 1961, *The Hoodlum Priest* has been almost completely forgotten.

What happened?

"Several things tempered the overall aftereffect," Murray suggests. "For starters, Irvin Kershner mounted a campaign against us. Despite all the acclaim, he went around telling anyone who would listen, 'If you think this version is good, you should have seen my cut before Don Murray ruined it,' and among some magazine columnists there was a backlash against the film. Kershner was especially harmful in Europe, where he did a tour before we opened the film saying what an egotist I was.

"Then too, our relationship with United Artists did not continue. They sent me some 'B' scripts, and I saw no way to make them as 'A' movies. I proposed starring [Sidney Poitier](#) in an adaptation of an off-Broadway play titled *Call Me By My Rightful Name*. But Sidney's current film, *A Raisin in the Sun*, was not a commercial success, so UA turned him down. Then the next year *Lilies of the Field* came out, and he was the hottest star in Hollywood."

When the ten-picture deal fell apart, so did UA's enthusiasm for *The Hoodlum Priest*. The studio didn't spend a dime promoting the picture for Academy Awards. And in March 1962, while the film was still playing in the hinterlands, UA sold the television rights to [ABC](#). *The Hoodlum Priest* had what might be the briefest turnaround between movie screen and TV screen of any feature film to date.

But perhaps even more damaging to the film than Kershner's vendetta were the destructive machinations of its title character.

Father Clark had become a nuisance. "He would call me late at night and say, 'I just tried to shake down United Artists for more money,'" Murray recalls. "Father Clark was appreciative when we were making the film. But after the *Globe-Democrat* condemned it, he became a problem." Indeed, despite a rave review on its movie page, the *Globe* blasted *Priest* on its editorial page.

[George Killenberg](#), the paper's city editor, was upset because the film's villain was not the ex-con-turned-murderer. Instead the script's most unsavory character was a slimy newspaper reporter who wrote for a fictional St. Louis daily.

"Father Clark had told us that one newspaperman had made his life hell," Murray explains. "We drew our character on that." Though the film's

reporter wasn't based on anyone from the *Globe*, nor, unfortunately, was he written — or portrayed by actor [Logan Ramsey](#) — with much nuance. In fact, [George Hale](#)'s one-dimensionality is sealed with his very first line. He enters a courtroom and with a leer inquires of the bailiff, "Any good rapes for the evening edition?" UA's publicity department fanned the flames of Killenberg's ire, headlining some ads for the film with "A CITY HOWLED FOR HIS SCALP!"—a misrepresentation of the film and an overstatement of the facts.

Killenberg also was enraged at the adulation accorded to [Jimmy Hoffa](#) at the premiere. Later that same week, Killenberg published in his own paper an irate letter, addressed "To the Editor," asserting that the filmmakers had "exploited" Father Clark and the *Globe*. "St. Louis deserves a fairer shake than given by the Hollywood scriptwriters who, if justice prevails, should certainly be welcomed on the Hoffa staff of press agents," Killenberg's diatribe concluded.

An accompanying unsigned editorial condemned Morris Shenker, "whose concern in the past has been more directed at keeping people out of jail than in aiding those released from prison." The editorial likewise slammed the Hollywood film industry, which with *The Hoodlum Priest* struck "another blow in behalf of tepid justice and criminality running rampant." "George's letter was extraordinary," says [Martin Duggan](#), the recently retired host of KETC-TV (Channel 9)'s long-running news roundup series *Donnybrook*, who in 1961 was the *Globe*'s general-news editor (and thus out of the decision-making loop regarding letters and editorials). "I would even describe the letter as very extraordinary. Had I been involved, I would have printed George's remarks not as a letter, but rather as a signed commentary." (Killenberg, who would rise through the ranks to become the *Globe*'s editor-in-chief, died in 2008 at age 91.)

At the premiere, an emotionally overcome Father Clark told the audience, "I can't speak tonight." But after the *Globe* fired its twin editorial salvos, the priest was characteristically pragmatic. The moviemakers had moved on. Dismas House relied upon local support for its very existence. Clark wrote a conciliatory letter to the *Globe*, assuring readers that Killenberg was "a very good friend of mine"—and not expressing a single syllable of support for the motion picture that was about to elevate "the hoodlum priest" to national prominence.

"We were totally taken aback," Murray says. "When Father Clark began to distance himself from the movie, it was very hurtful. Walter and I were sued by a publicist who claimed that the film was his idea. He said he'd

introduced us to Father Clark—which was absurd. Father Clark introduced himself. The guy lost his case, of course, but our defense required months of preparation, and I had to return to St. Louis for a two-week trial."



Father Clark (pictured here with one of the ex-cons he worked so hard to Help, turned against the project he'd initiated. repudiating the movie that praised him.

That trial marked the last time Murray saw Father Clark.

"He approached me in the courthouse lobby before he went in to testify," the filmmaker recounts. "Although he was friendly, he was talking very strangely. During our conversation he would suddenly begin to quote dialogue from the screenplay. The same thing happened during his testimony on the stand. He started to recite lines from the movie that were totally inappropriate to the questions he was being asked. I suspected that he was experiencing an early phase of dementia."

On August 15, 1963, Father Charles Dismas Clark died of a heart ailment. He was 61. At the time of his death, more than 2,000 former convicts had passed through Dismas House. Fewer than 5 percent had returned to prison. Halfway houses were being planned throughout the U.S. and Canada.

A lengthy obituary in the *Post-Dispatch* briefly alluded to the fact that Father Clark's "career was the subject of a motion picture," without so much as mentioning the film's title.

In the 1970s federal and state agencies began to recognize the value of Father Clark's approach to rehabilitation. Today Dismas House, which has relocated to Cote Brillante Avenue, just west of Kingshighway, is no longer a private organization. It is one of 250 federally operated halfway houses that house more than 11,000 offenders who have been released from prison prior to parole.

How many motion pictures can lay claim to such a legacy?

Correction published 3/10/11: In the original version of this story, we erroneously stated that Dismas House was opened in 1960. It was opened in 1959. The above version reflects this correction