

# The First Omen

The First Omen is a 2024 American supernatural horror film directed by Arkasha Stevenson, who co-wrote the screenplay with Tim Smith and Keith Thomas from a story by Ben Jacoby. It is a prequel to *The Omen* (1976), and the sixth film in *The Omen* franchise. The film stars Nell Tiger Free, Tawfeek Barhom, Sônia Braga, Ralph Ineson, and Bill Nighy. The plot follows an American woman sent to work at a church in Rome who uncovers a sinister conspiracy to bring about the birth of the Antichrist.

*The First Omen* was theatrically released in the United States by 20th Century Studios on April 5, 2024. The film received positive reviews from critics and has grossed \$53.6 million worldwide.

## **Plot**

Father Brennan presses Father Harris about an occult conspiracy; the shaken Harris gives Brennan a photograph of a baby with the name "Scianna" inscribed. Harris is killed when a falling pipe splits his head open.

In Rome, 1971, amid <u>left-wing protests</u>, <u>American</u> novitiate Margaret Daino arrives at the Vizzardeli Orphanage. She meets with Cardinal Lawrence, Father Gabriel, and Abess Sister Silva, her roommate and fellow novitiate Luz, and nun Anjelica. Luz invites Margaret to a <u>disco</u>, where Margaret dances with a man named Paolo before blacking out; she awakens the next day with no memory of what happened.

Margaret bonds with the mistreated orphan Carlita, who is plagued by bad visions. Father Brennan warns her about Carlita, saying "evil things" will happen around her. Margaret spots Carlita showing Anjelica a drawing of a pregnant woman being restrained; moments later Anjelica self-immolates and hangs herself while repeating "It's all for you".

Brennan explains that radicals within the church, desperate to regain power against the rise of <u>secularism</u>, seek to bring about the <u>Antichrist</u> to create fear and drive people back to the church, with Carlita intended to be his mother. During a field trip, a riot breaks out and Margaret experiences demonic hallucinations. Sister Silva postpones Margaret's vows and orders her to distance herself from Carlita. She spots Paolo; horrified, he tells her to "look for the mark" before an oncoming truck fatally impales him.

### The First Omen



Theatrical release poster

Theathcal release poster	
Directed by	Arkasha Stevenson
Screenplay by	Tim Smith
	Arkasha
	Stevenson
	Keith Thomas
Story by	Ben Jacoby
Based on	Characters
	by <u>David</u>
	Seltzer
Produced by	David S. Goyer
Produced by	David S. Goyer Keith Levine
Produced by Starring	
	Keith Levine
	Keith Levine Nell Tiger Free
	Keith Levine  Nell Tiger Free  Tawfeek
	Keith Levine  Nell Tiger Free  Tawfeek Barhom
	Keith Levine  Nell Tiger Free  Tawfeek  Barhom  Sônia Braga
	Keith Levine  Nell Tiger Free Tawfeek Barhom Sônia Braga Ralph Ineson Bill Nighy

Margaret sneaks into Sister Silva's office. She uncovers a hidden, underground chamber and a series of subject files, all labeled "Scianna". Each file contains a photo of a disfigured baby with a birthmark in the shape of three sixes, with Carlita as seemingly the only survivor. She is intercepted and spots the mark on Carlita's palate before being imprisoned.

Father Gabriel frees Margaret; as they examine the files, they discover that another baby had survived through noting that the triple-six mark is on Carlita's palate and the baby in the photo has it on her scalp. Margaret then locates the mark on her own scalp and suddenly remembers that she was forcefully impregnated in a satanic ritual the night she blacked out at the disco. The Devil will need to mate with his own spawn in order to conceive the Antichrist, and Margaret had been brought to Rome as Carlita is too young. The group drives off to have the pregnancy aborted, but another car crashes into theirs on the way and Margaret's womb suddenly fills.

	Amy E. Duddleston
Music by	Mark Korven
Production company	Phantom Four
Distributed by	20th Century Studios
Release date	April 5, 2024
Running time	119 minutes $^{[1]}$
Country	United States
Language	English
Budget	\$30 million <sup>[2]</sup>
Box office	\$53.6 million <sup>[3][4]</sup>

She awakens strapped to a hospital bed and is greeted by Cardinal Lawrence, the head of the conspiracy. She gives birth to two children, a girl and a boy; the latter is hailed as the Antichrist. She stabs Lawrence but cannot bring herself to kill her son. Luz stabs Margaret as the conspirators flee with the boy and set the chamber ablaze to cover their tracks. Carlita saves Margaret and her daughter and Margaret sees her assaulter, a demonic <u>jackal</u> in the flames. The baby boy is given to American diplomat Robert Thorn to secretly replace the child his wife Katherine has supposedly miscarried. [a]

Years later, Margaret lives secluded in the mountains with Carlita and her daughter, now a happy family. Brennan appears and warns that the conspirators will be hunting her, and that her son has been named Damien.

### Cast

- Nell Tiger Free as Margaret, an American sent to Rome to work at an orphanage before taking the veil
- Ralph Ineson as Father Brennan, a priest who warns Margaret of a conspiracy within the church<sup>[b]</sup>
- Sônia Braga as Sister Silva, the Abbess of Vizzardeli Orphanage in Rome
- <u>Tawfeek Barhom</u> as Father Gabriel, a member of the Catholic clergy working at the orphanage
- Bill Nighy as Cardinal Lawrence, a senior member of the Catholic church
- Maria Caballero as Luz, Margaret's roommate at Vizzardeli
- Charles Dance as Father Harris, a priest<sup>[5]</sup>
- Nicole Sorace as Carlita Scianna, an older child at Vizzardeli
- Ishtar Currie-Wilson as Sister Anjelica, a disturbed nun at Vizzardeli
- Andrea Arcangeli as Paolo, a man who encounters Margaret
- <u>Rachel Hurd-Wood</u> as Katherine Thorn, the wife of American diplomat Robert Thorn and the adoptive mother of Damien<sup>[c]</sup>

## **Production**

In April 2016, a prequel to <u>The Omen</u> (1976) was announced to be in the works, with Ben Jacoby writing the script and <u>Antonio Campos</u> in talks to direct. By May 2022, <u>20th Century Studios</u> began developing it, with <u>Arkasha Stevenson</u> signing on in her feature <u>directorial debut</u>. <u>David S. Goyer</u> and Keith Levine produced under the Phantom Four Films label. Nell Tiger Free was cast in the lead role in late August 2022. On January 3, 2024, <u>Tawfeek Barhom</u>, <u>Sônia Braga</u>, <u>Ralph Ineson</u>, and <u>Bill Nighy</u> were announced to star in the film.

<u>Principal photography</u> took place on location in Rome and on soundstages at Lumina Studios from September 19 to November 22, 2022. <u>Buildings in Villa Parisi</u> and a farm in Procoio was used to portray the orphanage. Production designer <u>Eve Stewart</u> stated, "We wanted it to be a very unique and beautiful building, and since we couldn't find everything within one building, we put three buildings together and made sure that they all linked well with one another". The basement was created on the soundstage. <u>[10]</u>

Costume designer <u>Paco Delgado</u> wanted the costumes to have a gothic feeling. He designed light clothing that moves with the wind so it would match Stevenson's vision of "the figures sort of floating through the hallways". The girls at the orphanage were dressed in 1940s/1950s costumes, even though the film takes place in the 1970s; the crew wanted a "specific ambience". [10] For Margaret's look, Delgado was inspired with Yves Saint Laurent fashion of the 1970s. Adrien Morot served as prosthetic and creature designer. [10]

#### Music

The score was composed by <u>Mark Korven</u>, who wrote original music and referenced themes written by <u>Jerry Goldsmith</u> for the previous films, including "<u>Ave Satani</u>." The soundtrack album was released by Hollywood Records on April 5, 2024, the same day as the film. [11]

## Release

A specific shot in the birthing sequence resulted in the Motion Picture Association registering the film with an NC-17 rating classification. Producer Keith Levine said, "We had to go back and forth with the ratings board five times. Weirdly, avoiding the NC-17 made it more intense". David S. Goyer commented that, "The movie, by its nature, deals with female body horror, and I do think there's a double standard. That was really interesting when we were negotiating with the ratings board. I think there is more permissiveness when dealing with male protagonists, particularly in body horror". 12

The First Omen was greenlit in development for an intended streaming release on <u>Hulu</u>, but was given a theatrical wide release after <u>Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures</u> determined it needed to expand the studio's theatrical release slate after shortages caused by the <u>2023 Hollywood labor disputes</u>. The film was theatrically released by <u>20th Century Studios</u> on April 5, <u>2024</u>.

### Home media

*The First Omen* is set to be released on digital platforms on May 28, 2024. A streaming release on <u>Hulu</u> is scheduled for May 30, followed by a Blu-ray and DVD release on July 30, 2024. [15]

## Reception

### **Box office**

As of May 19, 2024, *The First Omen* has grossed \$20.1 million in the United States and Canada and \$33.5 million in other territories, for a worldwide total of \$53.6 million. [4][3]

In the United States and Canada, *The First Omen* was released alongside <u>Monkey Man</u>, and was initially projected to gross \$14–15 million from 3,375 theaters in its opening weekend. After making \$3.2 million on its first day (including \$725,000 from Thursday night previews), estimates were lowered to \$8 million. It went on to debut \$8.4 million, finishing fourth at the box office. In its second weekend the film made \$3.8 million, finishing in seventh.

## Critical response

On the <u>review aggregator</u> website <u>Rotten Tomatoes</u>, 81% of 169 critics' reviews are positive, with an average rating of 6.9/10. The website's consensus reads: "Frequently frightening even as it plays within the confines of a nearly 50-year-old film series, this prequel is *The First Omen* of a bright future for the franchise in quite some time." Metacritic, which uses a weighted average, assigned the film a score of 65 out of 100, based on 33 critics, indicating "generally favorable" reviews. Audiences polled by CinemaScore gave the film an average grade of "C" on an A+ to F scale.

Kyle Turner of <u>Slant Magazine</u> gave it 3/4 stars, writing, "Throughout the film, Stevenson slides easily between earthly delights and disgusts, wedding them together through viscera and audacious aesthetics. In *The First Omen*, Stevenson atomizes all the darkness and the light within ourselves." <u>The Guardian</u>'s Benjamin Lee gave it 3/5 stars, calling it "far more artful and striking than it has any right to be, thanks in overwhelmingly large part to the TV director Arkasha Stevenson, whose bravado works incredibly well until it really doesn't, when she's forced to play by franchise rules rather than her own." Writing for <u>The Times</u>, Ed Potton gave it 3/5 stars. He said, "Stevenson leans too heavily on the old horror staple of female hysteria and the explanation behind the plot to spawn a tiny Antichrist is the kind of thing you'd expect from a conspiracy nutjob on <u>YouTube</u>. Tiger Free makes a compellingly unstable heroine, though, and Bill Nighy and Charles Dance pop up as senior priests and wear their cassocks well... This is <u>Call the Midwife</u> directed by Satan."

<u>The Wall Street Journal</u>'s <u>Kyle Smith</u> wrote, "*The First Omen* may have a noble predecessor in one of the scariest films of the 1970s, but it has little to distinguish it from the last 665 mediocre horror features I've seen." Tim Robey of <u>The Daily Telegraph</u> gave it 2/5 stars, writing, "Stevenson has configured her tale as female body-horror fit for a dissertation, without giving it much of a spine: while slick, the set pieces are few, far between, and over too fast." Frank Scheck of <u>The Hollywood Reporter</u> wrote, "Ultimately, it all feels very familiar, and not just because this is the second movie in as many months to revolve around nuns and the birth of an Antichrist."

## Comparisons to Immaculate

Due to sharing similar premises and a common Italian setting and released at about the same time, *The First Omen* and *Immaculate* have been dubbed as twin movies. Both films explore the issue of female bodily autonomy, depicting the "systemic control of women's bodies reduced to vessels". Bilge Ebiri of *Vulture* wondered about "why should anyone be surprised that suddenly, in the wake of the Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, as state after state attempts to enact religious laws depriving women of bodily agency, America is getting horror movies about people forced into monstrous births by religious institutions worried about their growing irrelevance". [29]

### **Notes**

- a. As depicted in The Omen (1976).
- b. The character also appears in the 1976 film, where he is portrayed by Patrick Troughton.
- c. The character also appears in the 1976 film, where she is portrayed by Lee Remick.

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