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A picture of youth again

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Francis Ford Coppola rediscovers his creative juices in Romania, writes DES PARTRIDGE.

HE was 29 when he gave movie audiences the classic American gangster film *The Godfather*. Now, 40 years on, at an age when most are contemplating retirement, **Francis Ford Coppola** has bridged an eight-year gap between films with *Youth Without Youth*, the sort of personal movie the acclaimed director made early in his career.

Based on a novella by Romanian author Mircea Eliade, and filmed in Romania, it stars the versatile British-born Tim Roth as a linguistics professor, bent on suicide, who becomes young again after being struck by lightning before the start of World War II.

It's a film studded with potent visual symbols, including the lightning bolt that changes everything for the professor and sets the plot wheels in motion.

"The story touched my life," Coppola says.

"Like its leading character, Dominic, I was tortured and stumped by my inability to complete an important work. At 66, I was frustrated. I hadn't made a film in eight years. My businesses were thriving, but my creative life was unfulfilled."

Coppola was introduced to Eliade's novella by a friend he'd known from his high-school days, Wendy Doniger, now a professor of South-East Asian studies at the University of Chicago. Soon after beginning to read the story, he says he thought: "I can make this into a movie. I won't tell anyone. I'll just start doing it."

"I wanted to return to personal film-making," says Coppola, who first gained critical attention with *Rain People* (starring James Caan and Shirley Knight) in 1969, three years before *The Godfather* elevated him to another level among film directors.

His latest film was 1997's *The Rainmaker*, based on John Grisham's novel and starring Matt Damon, who makes an uncredited walk-on in the new film.

"Very much on the sly, I began negotiating to buy the rights to the novella," Coppola reveals in his film notes.

"I started thinking about how I would make the movie even though I didn't yet have a movie to make.

"I got a notebook and started to break down the novel. Suddenly, there was hope."

Coppola says the project made his spirits soar: "I felt better because I had a secret no one knew about - a movie brewing."

He travelled to Romania with his granddaughter, Gia, staying at the home of an American friend who owned an old pharmaceutical company he was making European Union-compatible.

This provided cover for his assignment.

"I was anxious not to get ensnared as a famous film director with a big budget," he says. "Gia and I travelled around Romania, going to all the real addresses in the story. It was fun and adventure. Little by little, I was cooking up a scheme to make a movie which I could finance myself."

"It was a relief not to go hat-in-hand to money men or studio bosses."

He says he kept everything simple, bringing over two trusted colleagues, Anahid Nazarian and Masa Tsuyuki, who have worked on all his previous films, and testing actors in a backroom of his host's company.

With more than 50 speaking parts in *Youth Without Youth*, he was determined to cast as many locals as he could.

His elaborate scheme to protect his film included testing each actor with a different photographer. Romanian Mihai Malaimare was given the job of shooting the film.

"The movie was about becoming young again, and I liked the fact that Mihai was young (58), had a gentle personality and was tremendously talented," Coppola says.

"When I told him the camera would remain stationary throughout (in the style of Japanese master film-maker Yasujiro Ozu), he told me 'That's great'."

Filming started in October, 2005, and lasted 85 days, with a predominantly Romanian crew and cast, including Romanian-born Alexandra Maria Lara who stars alongside Roth.

"You can enjoy the film like a Faust story - an old man gets young, has an opportunity to finish his great work and fall in love again, but can't finish the work because of love . . . that is his ultimate sacrifice," the director says. "But it can also be an educational opportunity to learn more about Eastern philosophy."

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