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A FAMILY YOU CAN'T REFUSE: *From left, James Caan, Marlon Brando, Al Pacino and John Cazale in "The Godfather."*

DVD

THE GODFATHER COLLECTION

A Paramount Homevideo release of the 1972, 1974 and 1990 Paramount films directed by Francis Ford Coppola. Screenplays, Mario Puzo, Coppola, based on the novel by Puzo.

With: Marlon Brando, Al Pacino, James Caan, Richard Castellano, Robert Duvall, Sterling Hayden, John Marley, Richard Conte, Diane Keaton, Robert De Niro, Talia Shire, Morgana King, John Cazale, Mariana Hill, Lee Strasberg, Andy Garcia, Eli Wallach, Joe Mantegna, Bridget Fonda, George Hamilton, Sofia Coppola.

Released: Oct. 9, 2001.

By TODD McCARTHY

Not too many films warrant, or can sustain, 725 minutes of rapt attention, but Francis Ford Coppola's three "Godfather" epics, combined on five discs with three hours of mostly worthwhile bonus material, certainly do. No matter how many times you've seen the first two entries in the trilogy, both of which won best picture Oscars, it remains all but impossible not to get hooked once you start watching them, and the director's commentary track for the oft-maligned third installment offers a precise analysis of why it didn't work with audiences even as he defends all his choices. In short, this collection is a must for fans who want to experience the Corleone family saga in mint condition, as well as for buffs and film students craving loads of behind-the-scenes info.

Granted, a fair number of the extras, including a behind-the-scenes documentary made during the production of Part III and a collection of 34 deleted scenes, have been seen before, and some are rather lame. All the same, it's great to have access to Robert De Niro's very good screen test to play Sonny in the original "Godfather"; James Caan's (as well as those of Martin Sheen and the eventually cast Al Pacino) for Michael; Coppola's audiocassette recording of his meeting in Rome with Nino Rota at which the great composer first played his various themes for the director on the piano (nicely matched here to appropriate scenes from the picture); production designer Dean Tavoularis' detailed illustration of how he trans-

formed a modern New York street into the Little Italy of the early 1900s; and Coppola showing off his enormous notebook filled with scribbled-over pages from Mario Puzo's novel, which gives an idea of the kind of concentrated work he did to prepare for directing the first picture.

"How would Hitchcock design this?" a margin notes demands on the page detailing Michael Corleone's killing of cop Sterling Hayden and rival gangster Al Léttieri, citing an influence never really invoked to describe Coppola's magnificent work on these films. Coppola's expansive and engrossing commentary under the 545 minutes of the three pics' total running time leaves one central question unanswered: Where did this stately, precise and confidently classical style come from? It certainly hadn't been apparent in any of the young director's previous work, and it particularly stood out at a time when the fashion ran toward showoff experimentation and New Hollywood trendiness.

The director's commentary for Part I has the most density and vibrant anecdotes, probably because Coppola felt terribly under the gun most of the time, struggling with a relatively low budget and constant complaints from his bosses that they didn't like what they were seeing. Not only was Coppola miserable throughout the shoot, he admits that "I had no indication that this nightmare was going to turn into a successful film, much less a film that was going to become a classic."

By contrast, on Part II he had it all his own way, the only real crisis coming in post-production when the cross-cutting between old and new stories wasn't working out; cinematographer Gordon Willis' comment upon seeing the first cut was, "It doesn't work and you'll never get it to work." Only at the last minute did Coppola and his editors solve the problem by reducing the number of occasions the narrative jumped in time.

Seen directly up against the first two, Part III indeed looks like the weak sister, but the problems are almost all conceptual rather than a matter of Sofia Coppola's inexperience or Al Pacino's hair. While sticking to his guns in explaining why he made the film he did, Coppola acknowledges that most of his key decisions were made for deeply personal reasons having to do with the man he was in 1990; Michael Corleone must ponder his reputation and place in the world,

Turn to page 30

Variety 10/29 - 11/4/01 P. 27; 30

THE GODFATHER COLLECTION

Continued from page 27

he must realize the greater importance of family and children over business, he must seek redemption for his sins and, finally, he must be punished. All of this countered the Michael audiences warily admired in the earlier pictures, who always took decisive action to do what needed to be done and to survive, whatever the cost.

A truly complete "Godfather" set would feature interviews or commentary from some of the many great actors who were part of this exceptional contribution to American films. Coppola himself keeps compli-

NOVEMBER 4, 2001

menting the thespians, including many of the little-known players who pop up with key contributions, some of whom he found in open casting calls. And even if Marlon Brando would never sit down, it would be great to get Pacino, De Niro, Duvall, Keaton, Caan and all the rest to help fill out the story of what it was like making these landmark pictures.

Most importantly, however, after having appeared muddy and washed out on video, the films look fantastic as presented here, the darkness that was the hallmark of Willis' shooting style looking as deep and rich as the colors of the Sicilian sequences are warm and resplendent.
