

Document Citation

Title	Coppola remarried to the Mob
Author(s)	Peter Cowie
Source	<i>Variety</i>
Date	1990 Jan 03
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	1, 10-11
No. of Pages	3
Subjects	Coppola, Francis Ford (1939), Detroit, Michigan, United States
Film Subjects	The Godfather: part III, Coppola, Francis Ford, 1990

HE MOB

After 15 years,
'Godfather III' kicks off
its cement shoes
as Coppola helms
\$44-mil production

By PETER COWIE

Rome After battling his customary pangs of ambivalence, Francis Coppola is back doing what he does best — directing “Godfather” movies.

The \$44-million production of “Godfather III,” the movie he said he’d never make, is now lumbering through its seventh week of principal photography here at Cinecittà, and Coppola grandly predicts it will be “the cathedral of Godfather movies.” Looking fitter and more relaxed than he has in years, Coppola seems to have effortlessly re-inserted himself into the ongoing saga of the Corleone family, which he began chronicling exactly 20 years ago.

And with good reason. The seven hours and 30 minutes of celluloid comprising “Godfathers” I and II has become an industry unto itself. The films have grossed more than \$700-million worldwide and have earned an additional \$100-million in tv and video.

‘The last great movie’

Together, the two represent a milestone in contemporary filmmaking — artistic triumphs that translated into boxoffice triumphs. Steven Spielberg recently called “The Godfather” “the last great movie” of the present generation of filmmakers. And “The Godfather, Part II” is widely heralded as the greatest sequel of all time.

Despite this acclaim, the process of tooling up “Godfather III” has consumed 15 years and several million dollars in development funds. More than any film in recent history, “Godfather III” became a corporate obsession. So intense was the passion to get it afloat that both Charles Bluhdorn, founder of Gulf & Western (now Paramount), and

Variety 1/3/90 Turn to page 10

'Godfather III': offer Coppola couldn't refuse

Continued from page 1

Michael Eisner, onetime Paramount production chief and now head of Disney, each took a stab at writing a story for the film, along with literally dozens of professional writers who also contributed scripts and treatments along the way.

Sylvester Stallone was signed to star and direct at one point but the deal blew apart at the 11th hour. Eddie Murphy even called Puzo and Coppola to tell them he'd like a role in the project, if they'd just give him a script.

"Godfather III" has remained a great beached whale — a symbol of corporate frustration.

What happened to change all that? In an exclusive VARIETY interview last week, Francis Coppola recalled a phone call he received from Frank Mancuso last year in which the Paramount president tried one final time to get the project moving.

Make it 'his way'

This time Mancuso promised that the studio was prepared to make the film "his way." Previous screenplays over the years had focused on assassinations of Latin American dictators, hits by CIA operatives and random vendettas among rival families. Coppola wanted to concentrate instead on the character of Michael, "because that's where the tragedy lies." Michael's story had gotten lost in most of Paramount's discarded scripts, Coppola observed.

"I told Paramount that for \$40,000 my people and I would prepare a feasibility study," Coppola recalls. "At the end of a couple of months Paramount would get an outline, a proposed budget, a schedule and a list of who would appear in the movie."

Coppola and Marlo Puzo began work on the script for "Godfather III" last April. By the Nov. 27 start of shooting, the script had un-

dergone 12 drafts. The greenlight from the studio to make the film was finally flashed in August, when a deal had been finalized for Al Pacino to return as Michael.

There has been widespread speculation as to why Coppola finally opted to do a second sequel. Throughout his career he has regularly denounced sequels, stressing his need to keep striking out on new artistic adventures — a determination that led him into such heretical undertakings as "Apocalypse Now" and "One From The Heart."

Some friends suggest that, after the disappointing returns from "Tucker," "Gardens Of Stone" and "The Cotton Club," Coppola felt a need to restore his standing as a director with commercial clout.

Others saw it as a question of creative inspiration. "Francis suddenly got a fix on the story," one longtime associate explains. "He woke up one morning and saw it."

Perhaps, but economic incentives are likely to have also played a role. Paramount agreed to pay Coppola some \$6-million to write and direct the film, sources declare, plus a handsome share of the gross. Coppola has been staring at the prospect of coming up with a \$12-million bond to forestall court seizure of his assets, including his treasured vineyards in the Napa Valley.

This looming debt harkens back to his opulently budgeted Las Vegas romance, "One From The Heart," which Coppola, desperate for funds, pledged to the Chase Manhattan Bank. He then borrowed an additional \$3-million from the wealthy Singer family of Canada to keep his studio afloat. To secure this second loan, Coppola had to put up his personal note plus the Zoetrope studio in Hollywood (now called Hollywood Center).

The latter loan has resulted in a flurry of litigation, with the Singers claiming that Coppola has refused to pay his debts. The litigation has dragged through the courts for almost eight years and the loan, with interest, has now spiraled to \$8-million. The California State Court of Appeals once ruled in favor of the Singers, but Coppola's attorneys have now re-appealed.

If the courts decline to allow a second appeal, Coppola will have to come up with the \$12-million bond unless Paramount decides to bail him out. The Singers, meanwhile, have bought Coppola's old studio and have built it into a thriving rental facility.

If Coppola now finds himself under pressure, that is hardly a new condition for him. "Francis does his best work under crisis," observes one longtime aide who survived the rigors of "Apocalypse Now" in the Philippines. "When no crisis exists, he invents one."

Indeed, when anointed to direct

the first "Godfather" a generation ago, Coppola, then barely 30 years of age, already was over \$500,000 in debt and in danger of losing his small studio in San Francisco (also called Zoetrope). Skeptical about taking on a gangster film (he had just finished the doggedly downbeat "Rain People"), Coppola was urged by his friend George Lucas: "Take the job for God's sake, Francis. You need the money."

Reassembled original team

Upon receiving his green light to start "Godfather III," Coppola decided to assemble as many members of the original "Godfather" cast and crew as possible. He signed Gordon Willis to reprise as cinematographer and Dean Tavoularis as production designer. Coppola's father, Carmine, would be in charge of music once again, as he was on "Godfather II" (Nino Rota created the memorable music

GREAT BARGAIN

"Godfather I" turned out to be one of the great bargains in filmmaking history. The studio acquired film rights for a mere \$10,000 (Mario Puzo, author of the novel, also had received a paltry \$5,000 advance from Putnam's, his publisher). Francis Coppola received \$200,000 to direct. The key members of the young cast, Pacino, Caan, Keaton, Duvall, each received a mere \$35,000 and Marlon Brando was paid only \$50,000 plus 10% of the net (he later sold back his points to the studio).

for the original "Godfather"). The presence of these "old pros," Coppola said, strengthen the sense of continuity.

When it came to casting, Coppola once again reached out for his old favorites — Pacino, Diane Keaton, Talia Shire (his sister) and Al Martino, among others.

Coppola also wanted some new faces on his set. He explored the possibility of teaming Madonna and Robert De Niro to play two newly created characters (De Niro would play the illegitimate son of Sonny Corleone.) Madonna tested for her part and, according to Coppola, her performance was exemplary, but then the director had second thoughts. The De Niro character should be cast younger, he decided, and that meant Andy Garcia would take the place of De Niro. It also meant no Madonna.

But Coppola was pleased when Frank Sinatra consented to play a character named Altobello, an aged friend of the Corleone family. This represented quite a change of heart for Sinatra. He had been so enraged by the depiction of Johnny Fontane, an Italian crooner, in the original novel that he had screamed epithets at a startled Mario Puzo when the two met by

accident at Chasen's restaurant in Beverly Hills.

But Sinatra, too, later dropped out. His character would require a 2-month shooting schedule, and this was too long for the singer.

Coppola had better luck with Winona Ryder and Bridget Fonda, two hot young actresses who were signed to play newly introduced characters. George Hamilton also signed on to play a shifty investment banker. The cast was taking shape. And, most important, it was Coppola's cast — the people he wanted for the roles.

"This would be my 'Godfather III' with my cast," Coppola exulted. "This wasn't going to be like the first time . . ."

A commanding presence on the set, there is no doubt that Francis Coppola is on top of his small army of technicians, aides and extras gathered in Rome. His top technicians, having braved many shoots and many locations together, mesh like clockwork. Often they seem a step ahead of their leader's moods and instructions.

Theirs is an undertaking of massive proportions. The budget, Coppola explains, totals \$44-million, of which \$20-million is above the line — that is, salaries of stars, director and producers plus some accumulated costs of old, still-born "Godfathers." "We're struggling every week to be cost-conscious," Coppola observes. "A big film is like a huge ship. You're always struggling to keep it on course. One dumb mistake can cost you \$100,000."

Coppola grows circumspect only when dealing with the script.

During preproduction tight security surrounded the screenplay. Key technicians were instructed to read their scripts within the confines of the Cinecittà offices, turning in their copies upon completion. Earlier drafts were shredded after each revision. Even now, the contents of the final 12 pages of the shooting script are known only to Coppola, Tavoularis and perhaps one or two others.

"Godfather III" will trace the uncertain relationship between the Corleone family and the Vatican. "I have always been fascinated by the effect of pure wealth, pure power," Coppola explains. "The Corleones want to be legitimate. The Vatican is legitimate. The Vatican is also a separate state that can move money around the world."

In "Godfather III," Michael Corleone, applying all his negotiating skills, seeks to legitimize the Corleone fortune by acquiring a stake in a European multinational real estate concern, with the Vatican as intermediary. But he is betrayed by old friends, outmaneuvered by shrewd bankers, and provoked by the rash instincts of his illegitimate nephew Vincent (played by Andy Garcia).

As the Pope lies dying, which

COPPOLA ALMOST CUT

Francis Coppola's initial weeks as director of "The Godfather" proved traumatic. His first choices for the cast, including Brando and Pacino, were flatly rejected by the studio and, only seven weeks in advance of principal photography, he was instructed to test about 30 new actors. After seeing the new tests, Paramount reversed itself and okayed his original choices.

The tests, however, had disrupted his preparation and two weeks into the shooting schedule the studio decreed that it was Coppola who now needed replacement. Several directors were interviewed and the business affairs staff was alerted that Coppola was about to be fired, and would be replaced by Elia Kazan.

Faced with imminent dismissal, Coppola took emergency steps to whip the film into shape. Cue cards were held up on the set for Marlon Brando, who had been blowing his lines with regularity. Younger cast members, who had not received proper rehearsal time because of the screen tests, suddenly sharpened their performances. By the fourth week the crisis had passed. Kazan, it was decided, would not be needed.

threatens to upset the deal between Rome and the Corleones, Michael's enemies launch their attack on him in Sicily . . . His consolation is that he achieves some kind of reconciliation with his former wife, Kay (Diane Keaton), and his estranged son Tony, who has sought fame as an opera singer instead of the legal career demanded by Michael.

Though the film will delve into the Corleone past, Coppola feels it also will be very timely in terms of ongoing political developments. "Michael in effect will look toward Europe for his salvation, finding himself confronted with the audacious new identity of that continent and its challenge to America," Coppola declares.

As in his previous films, Coppola is fascinated not only by themes but also by technologies. In his office at Cinecittà, Coppola watches on a monitor as the hand-drawn layouts for each shot are sifted and arranged before him.

'Integrated' production

Thanks to the technology that Zoetrope has experimented with over the past eight or nine years, the company can now transform preproduction, production and postproduction from separate entities into "one integrated, powerful phase," according to Coppola.

"At the end of each day I sit with Al Pacino and we look at the scene we have shot, all edited, and we discuss it," he says. He already knows that the picture will run to 14 reels, or two hours 20 minutes. "When you are dealing

THE DUBIOUS DOZEN

Though "The Godfather" was a runaway bestseller, the first 12 directors to whom the project was submitted in 1970 turned it down. Some, like the late Franklin Schaffner, felt the novel "glamorized" the Mafia. Costa-Gavras felt the story was an intriguing indictment of capitalism, but finally backed out because at that time, he did not feel qualified to undertake a film that was "so American." Fred Zinnemann didn't care for the book because it made the mob seem like "nice people."

When approached to take on the film, Francis Coppola argued the whole issue of glamorizing the Mafia was irrelevant. What "The Godfather" was, he argued, was a family chronicle, not a gangster movie. He got the job.

January 3, 1990

on this scale of moviemaking," he points out, "you cannot afford to produce a 3-hour movie and then cut out 40 minutes. You have to cut the 40 minutes out now."

There will be another three months of shooting in Italy, Sicily and New York City. Then will come the preview in Seattle

in summer with an opening at Thanksgiving 1990. Speaking as though the hard work were already behind him, Coppola says he has enjoyed making this particular "Godfather." "It's not just something I'm doing because I want to make a lot of money on it. I really think it could be beautiful . . ."