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## Interview: **Francis Ford Coppola** on the film he couldn't refuse; Cursed by *The Godfather*, blighted by *Apocalypse Now*, **Francis Ford Coppola** hasn't directed a movie in 10 years. Now he's back.

**BYLINE:** Interview by James Mottram

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Receiving its world premiere at the Rome Film Festival, this movie marks Coppola's return to directing after a 10-year hiatus. More importantly, after years clawing his way out of debt as a director-for-hire on studio films like 1997's John Grisham adaptation *The Rainmaker*, it's a return to more personal film-making.

If this is a cause for celebration, Coppola seems too distracted by his party preparations to care. Dressed in a bright orange shirt and a pair of grey suit trousers straining at his sizeable girth, he's hunched over a laptop when I arrive, putting the final touches to his guest list.

"It's a family affair," he mutters to his PR, furthering those comparisons to Corleone, the Mafia patriarch at the heart of *The Godfather*, the film that turned Coppola's career upside down 35 years ago. But he's not kidding. The Coppola clan are in town: wife Eleanor, to whom he's been married for 44 years, and grown-up children Roman and Sofia, who have both followed their father into directing. Coppola has always laid considerable emphasis on family: "If I had to choose, I'd choose those I love over any idea of work or success," he says later.

The day we meet, a story has just broken that he has attacked two members of the extended Coppola family, Al Pacino and Robert De Niro, who both starred in *The Godfather: Part II*, in an article in *GQ*. With Jack Nicholson also in the firing line, Coppola is quoted as accusing them of lacking ambition. "It's not true," he protests, claiming quotes he gave were "obviously bent out of shape" by the magazine. "Why would I do that? They're my friends, all three of them. It's not logical. I think those three guys are among the greatest living actors we have. They've always been kind to me. In the case of De Niro and Al, I feel I didn't make them. They made me. And in the case of Jack Nicholson, he's one of a kind super-intelligent."

If loyalty is just as important to Coppola as it ever was, so is time a theme that can be constantly found in his work. Until now, it's at its most overt in his 1983 SE Hinton adaptation *Rumble Fish*, with its speeded-up cloud formations, shots of clocks without hands and Tom Waits's bartender opining: "When you're a kid, you've got nothing but time."

Coppola is now 68, so time is no longer on his side. When he recently presented Martin Scorsese with his Oscar, it only heightened the sense that Coppola was burnt out compared to his peer. But he has too much bravura to let on that this bothers him. "It is a little disappointing to see that your legs are not as strong," he says. "But I like the idea of growing old, and the thought of approaching death is not particularly daunting to me."

Over the past few years, he has handed the keys of his own company American Zoetrope, which he founded in 1969, to Roman and Sofia. "When you're 68, they tell you that you can't own anything any more and you have to begin to try and turn it over to the next generation," he says. With the company now publishing a quarterly fiction magazine, *Zoetrope All-Story* (although it's still active in film production, most recently backing De Niro's CIA drama *The Good Shepherd*), it's no longer the utopian vision Coppola intended it to be. Rather, like the brilliant, beguiling meditation on the Vietnam War that was *Apocalypse Now*, it remains a monument to the folly of Coppola's grand ambitions, a symbol of his Icarus-like fall.

Once intent on creating an artistic haven for directors, offering a "new version of the Hollywood studio system", he looks a little sheepish when the subject is raised. "Unfortunately I failed to do that because of the failure of *One From the Heart*," he says, bluntly. His highly stylised 1982 Las Vegas-set musical went millions over budget which all came out of his own pocket and forced the director to file for bankruptcy protection.

It was a bleak time. In 1986, Coppola V

C suffered the tragedy of losing his 22-year-old son Gio in a speedboat accident. He found no solace in work; flops such as the jazz-era gangster film *The Cotton Club* were followed by sell-outs, such as the limp *Godfather: Part III*. He was so broke that he filed no taxes for three years.

If this is the sort of position that would send most people towards their doom, it was a risk worth taking for Coppola, a man who has always admired those who reach for the skies. Think of his 1988 film *Tucker: The Man and His Dream*, with its quintessential Coppola protagonist Preston Tucker (Jeff Bridges), the real-life car manufacturer who dared to take on the automobile industry with his revolutionary designs. "It's the idea that counts, the dream," Tucker says, in a line that could almost be from Coppola's mouth.

Yet if he's *Tucker*, then he was also the template for Colonel Kurtz, the awol military commander awaiting Martin Sheen's captain at the end of *Apocalypse Now*. "I've been called everything," Coppola sighs. "When I did *Godfather*, I was a Machiavellian. And definitely on *Apocalypse I*



was the mad Kurtz, a megalomaniac. I don't think I'm a megalomaniac."

Yet it was *Apocalypse Now* where the rot truly set in for Coppola. The moment where he became drunk on power, he was "operating", as is said about Kurtz, "without any decent restraint". As documented by Eleanor Coppola in the eye-opening account *Hearts of Darkness*, everything from set-busting typhoons to a heart attack for leading man Martin Sheen sent the film way over budget and schedule, forcing the director to pump \$25m of his own money into the film by mortgaging the wine estate in Napa Valley that he'd bought in 1975. He called it his own "idiodysey".

"I like to put myself in the situation of making the film that parallels what the story is about," Coppola says now, shrugging. "*Apocalypse Now* is clearly a wild movie that almost got away from us in the same way that the Vietnamese war got away from the Americans."

When it finally emerged in 1979 (sharing the Palme d'Or at Cannes with Volker Schlöndorff's *The Tin Drum*), the use of The Doors' "The End" as the song that wraps around the film was eerily prophetic. Never again has Coppola come close to crafting such a grandiose masterpiece. The nearest he came was the film he never made, *Megalopolis*, a science-fiction epic he planned for years. "I put in it tasks that were probably beyond my capability," he says, noting that the New York setting made it impossible to finance after September 11. "I think it's good to be overly ambitious," he says. "I think it's better to be overly ambitious and fail than to be underambitious and succeed in a mundane way. I have been very fortunate. I failed upward in my life!"

While the 1990s saw the success of his wine business, hotel resorts in Belize and even a range of cigars push him towards financial solvency, Coppola was becoming more of an entrepreneur than a film-maker. The success of his 1992 film *Bram Stoker's Dracula* aside, the decade will be remembered as the moment Coppola reached his nadir, directing Robin Williams as a man-child in 1995's *Jack*.

Meanwhile other projects like his *Pinocchio* film fell by the wayside. "I did feel frustrated," he admits, "but it was a more personal artistic frustration. I just thought, 'What kind of career can I have at this point?' I didn't want to be a Hollywood director. I don't think anybody wanted me. I had done, for 10 years, to pay off the debt, one movie after another from age 40 to 50. I wanted to make personal films, but nobody particularly wanted to sponsor me to do that. I didn't know where my place was."

If retirement beckoned, in the end it was his daughter Sofia's burgeoning success that inspired him to return to film-making with *Youth Without Youth*. "When she made her first film [1999's *The Virgin Suicides*], I helped her not in making the film but in setting up the production," he explains. Teaching her how to work with few resources, it recalled his own early days, when he trained under Roger Corman, making his 1963 debut with the horror movie *Dementia 13*. "In a funny way, I taught Sofia how to make a low-budget film," he says. By the time she made her second film, *Lost in Translation*, Coppola cut himself loose from *Megalopolis* and decided to follow suit. "I did say, 'Well, Sofia went off to Japan to make *Lost in Translation* on a lower budget; certainly I can.'"

Based on the philosophical novel by Mircea Eliade, *Youth Without Youth* was also thematically born out of working on *Megalopolis*, a story Coppola says was "very free in trying to look at consciousness and time". During his research for *Megalopolis* he came across Eliade's novel, the story of Dominic Matei, a suicidal linguistics professor in his twilight years who is literally given a new lease of life when a lightning bolt strikes him on the eve of the Second World War. His youth returning, his memory surges back and he finds fresh impetus to return to his work.

"I knew it was an unorthodox story but I thought it was so full of craziness and energy... I felt it was like an adventure reading it, so I wanted to make a film that would be like that," Coppola says. "I tried to make it as a story that you could enjoy, like a *Twilight Zone*."

Casting Tim Roth as Dominic whom he'd wanted to play William Burroughs in an adaptation of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, another recent project that floundered there's no doubt that this is the strangest film of Coppola's career. A Faustian tale of Nazi scientists, doppelgängers and Sanskrit-speaking paramours, it's as intriguing as it is baffling.

"I didn't try to make a movie that would confound audiences," he says, a little dismayed. Yet Dominic is arguably a protagonist to whom Coppola bears significant comparison. A man struggling to finish his magnum opus, whose greatest achievements are long since behind him when he begins to defy the ageing process, it's not hard to imagine Coppola wishing the same. "I did think, 'How appropriate,'" the director admits. "Here's a story of an older man who gets to live his life and become young again."

Call it the Godfather effect. A sensation on its release in 1972, his adaptation of Mario Puzo's Mafia potboiler about the Corleone family won Coppola two Oscars and turned him into "one of the first young people to become rich overnight", as he once put it. "I never had any money before," he says. "So my life went another way."

While he got to make one of his best films, the thriller *The Conversation*, as a trade-off for directing the 1974 sequel, which won him another three Oscars, his career had mutated irreparably. "The Godfather changed my life, for better or worse," he reflects. "It definitely made me have an older man's film career when I was 29. So now I say, 'If I had my older career when I was young, as an older man, maybe I can have a young film-maker's career.'"

Like Dominic, Coppola has engineered a reversal in time, *Youth Without Youth* taking him back to his pre-Godfather days in particular to *The Rain People*, his affecting 1969 road movie about a runaway housewife (played by Shirley Knight) where the production was so small that the equipment was all carried in one van. Coppola wanted to do the same for *Youth Without Youth*. "We went back and built this truck again a more modern version, but still one truck," he says.

The film was shot in Romania and self-funded, and he admits he tried to make it with the sensibility of a student film-maker. "It wasn't dramatic," says Tim Roth of the shoot. "It wasn't like *Apocalypse Now*." For Coppola, it was all about emulating the foreign film-makers who influenced his youth. "Back then, we were seeing the films of Bergman, Kurosawa," he says, "and we thought this was wonderful."

Initially, it was his older brother August who fostered a love of film in the Detroit-born Coppola, taking him to the cinema where he would gorge on the work of Alexander Korda, in particular *Things To Come* (reputedly an influence on *Megalopolis*). Living with August and their



younger sister Talia, his upbringing was unsettled, in part because his father Carmine's work as a flautist frequently led the family a merry dance across the country. "I was a lonely kid," he admits. When he was eight, a bout of polio confined him to bed for a year. "My only talent I didn't have many was that I could understand science. I was terrible at maths, but I could grasp science, and I used to love to read about the lives of the scientists. I wanted to be a scientist or an inventor."

Life took him in another direction. He majored in theatre at Hofstra University in New York, and then in the early 1960s he moved to Los Angeles and enrolled in UCLA film school. From there, his entry into the business was swift and successful. After his apprenticeship to Corman, he won his first Oscar in 1970 for the screenplay for the military biopic Patton.

Yet, in some ways, Coppola always seemed a man out of his time. With his love of spectacle, he speaks fondly of the Hollywood of Jack Warner and Samuel Goldwyn. "They were entrepreneurs, but they were showmen so they were willing to take a risk because they wanted to have the big film of the year. Today, the entrepreneurs are way higher up. They own the companies that own the companies that own the film studios. Their idea of risk is to buy a telecom company or merge with a big press empire."

If Coppola is now a ringmaster without a circus, he seems at ease with it. He's already planning his next movie, Tetro, "a story of fathers and brothers", to be shot in Argentina, with Matt Dillon and Javier Bardem. "I can't say it's really autobiographical, as if I did the ghost of my father and the furies would come after me. It certainly was inspired by things I saw when I was a kid, things I felt. It's something I think I'd like to work out at this point."

The film is another relatively low-budget affair, as if the megalomaniac is finally and firmly under control. "I just want to make one movie after another while I can still walk," Coppola says. "It's a wonderful feeling. I feel like I'm doing what I wanted to do when I was 18." Maybe time is on his side after all.

*'Youth Without Youth' opens on 14 December*

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