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'Heart' for art's sake

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For some fans, Coppola's conflict with Paramount took on the dimensions of a cause

FRANCIS LEVY

"I'VE been around 20 years," Francis Ford Coppola was saying to the crowd of reporters at Radio City last Friday to see the "final preview" of his \$23 million Las Vegas musical. "I made a lot of films. You know them. I've been involved from the beginning. Everytime I want to make a film I have to go hat in hand to studio executives who don't have my experience. I'm frustrated."

Coppola acted on his frustration after a recent screening of *One from the Heart* with friends in Rome. He was enthusiastic about what he saw and excited about the unique video/film process — he calls it "electronic cinema" — that had been part of making the movie. Paramount had come to the aid of his troubled Zoetrope Studio with a \$500,000 loan last year and was to release *One from the Heart* in 700 theaters on February 10, yet Coppola was dissatisfied with the studio. He was particularly annoyed when Paramount showed an unfinished print of the film to exhibitors without his knowledge.

In response, Coppola had taken out an ad in the Sunday *New York Times* for two preview shows. "It looked like I was doing something against Paramount," Coppola explained apologetically. "I wasn't. I was very concerned. My film was being prejudged. I just wanted a chance to show it clean to audiences."

Friday night, having flown into New York for the preview after working right up to the last minute on the sound, Coppola seemed haggard and slightly dazed by the event he had created. Dressed in a purple tie and jacket and tattersall shirt, his face hidden as always by his full beard and tinted glasses, he looked like a harried college professor. He was obviously feeling the tension created by a screening where film personalities, studio executives, and exhibitors would be casting their judgments amidst the Art Deco splendor that calls to mind all great films of the past, where a year ago Coppola himself had presented a reconstituted version of Abel Gance's masterpiece *Napoleon*. He fidgeted as the questions came, tightening his knuckles, then hiding them while his young daugh-

ter, costumed in a black top hat and tails, lingered in the background along with a Zoetrope camera crew that was filming it all.

It's not that Coppola wasn't getting any support. The 5882 seats, selling at \$5 and \$10 for the 7:30 and 10 p.m. shows, had been sold out and by 6 the line stretched all the way around the south side of Radio City. "Francis Ford Coppola is a great artist and he takes his films seriously," said Bill O'Brien, a writer who was first on line, having waited since 4 in the mushy snow to guarantee himself a good seat. "It's not just a moneymaking venture. It's an art project. I've been standing longer than the movie is. But it's worth it."

For others the director's conflict with a major studio took on the dimensions of a cause. "He hasn't made a failure yet," commented Joe Albanese, a photographer waiting in line. "He is one of the few people you can say that about. I think it's a shame that producers can't buck the studio system. As soon as you make a movie the studio will screw you on distribution."

Coppola showed his gratitude by providing split-pea soup to the faithful. "He likes fires and soup," explained Bernard Gersten, executive producer of *One from the Heart* and former Joe Papp associate, as he mingled with the shivering crowds and TV crews. "I think it's too much of a Depression image. We talked him out of the fires. He talked us into the soup."

But the support of the loyal following alone was obviously not enough. Coppola was gambling. He had gambled on his \$32 million *Apocalypse Now* and won. He had gambled again in the making of *One from the Heart*, going as far as letting a bank put a lien on his Napa Valley house. But the gamble is part of the drama of Coppola's films — and an element that has sometimes been criticized as distracting from the filmmaking itself. It derives in part from Coppola's uncompromising vision of how a movie should be made and presented. He likes to do things his own way no matter what the cost; he likes to orchestrate. From the soup lines outside the theater to the square screen on which he could most effectively show a film done in the vintage 1:33 ratio (as *One from the Heart*

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was), to the organist who appeared magically out of an opening at stageside, he was intent upon letting his film be seen in a certain way.

This time, however, Coppola had indulged his desire to gamble to a greater extent than ever before. It was not just a matter of a few million dollars here or there. He was playing a kind of Russian roulette with the release of the film. Even though he admits that *One from the Heart* will have to make as much as *Apocalypse Now* to keep his financially endangered Zoetrope Studio afloat, he was willing to risk its not being released at all. (If audience response turned out to be negative, neither Paramount nor anyone else would be likely to take on the burden of distribution.) The day before the preview the risk seemed to be mitigated somewhat by the fact that Coppola and Paramount were reputedly trying to resolve differences, but nothing had changed by the time of the preview. By Friday it appeared that Coppola

was willing to take his chances (rather than somehow catalyzing a commitment from Paramount before audiences saw the film), regardless of the fact that no preview cards or reaction sheets were being passed out. "Have you ever sat in a room with 6000 people who don't like something?" Coppola had told the *New York Times*. "Believe me, you know."

One from the Heart is based on a simple story. Two lovers, Hank (Frederic Forrest) and Frannie (Teri Garr), argue, then break apart, as a score by Tom Waits (sung by Waits and Crystal Gale) plays as a backup. From the start it was apparent Coppola was less interested in originality of character or story than he was in the shots. It seemed that he stereotyped his romantic leads so that he could concentrate on giving the visuals an almost mythic significance. He has, in fact, termed his film "a fable with music." When, for example, Teri Garr leaves her lover, walking down a rain-soaked street to a perspective of tawdry neon lights, it is the condensation of every parting shot that has ever appeared in a romantic film.

Coppola uses the simple parallelism of the plot (two lovers and their reactions to each other) to create smashing imagery. Superimpositions and other deviations from naturalistic format also help to make shots emblematic. When the lovers are separated, they are constantly imagining each other in each other's environment. If she's in the foreground of a shot, he will be in the background, even though they're not in the same place (Garr will wake up alone in a room and pan to Forrest sitting at a bar). In many ways *One from the Heart* showed the same kind of self-conscious '30s-style movie theatricality that directors like Herbert Ross and Martin Scorsese have demonstrated in films like *Pennies from Heaven* and *New York, New York*, and the Las Vegas Coppola built for the movie seems to look intentionally like a stage set.

"The point of the film is that we are used to naturalistic films," says Coppola. "We know that look. There is a whole other world of cinema where you struggle with theatrical elements. I know there is more to films than what we are seeing." And the concentration

on visual elements was enough to make the film a total success for some. "I loved it," one woman was heard to exclaim as the credits finished. "I found it really creative. I can't believe they did it all in the studio, all those lights and colors. I thought it was really special."

Many of the audience were divided in their sentiments. "I thought it surreal and cold," said Joanne Roberts, a television producer who attended the preview. "But at the same time it made me cry." Others were even more ambivalent. "I thought it was two-dimensional," remarked another audience member as the crowds filed out. "I thought it was a piece of artwork. But I thought there was no substance to the story."

Although Coppola indicated that he was happy with the response of audience members, there were a wide range of reactions that will make it unlikely that the preview alone can seal the fate of his movie, his studio, or his relation to Paramount, and as the *Soho News* went to press there was still no word from the studio about whether it would distribute the film or not. ●