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Sneaking Up on 'Apocalypse' *Now*

BY CHARLES SCHREGER
Times Staff Writer

"This is insanity. It's pandemonium."

—Larry Gleason, vice president of Mann Theaters, inside the Bruin Theater Friday night before the screening of "Apocalypse Now."

Pandemonium, insanity—that was overstating it. A bit. Friday night's preview of Francis Ford Coppola's \$30-million Vietnam epic, "Apocalypse Now," the first film by one of the undisputed masters of the medium since "Godfather Part II," was, however, a full-scale Hollywood event, complete with tumult, excitement and confusion.

Actually, the preview began Thursday with the newspaper ads announcing—proclaiming—that the next day at the Westwood Bruin Coppola would be screening "a work in progress," which was a fancy way of saying there would be a sneak preview.

The people who count, the people who it is assumed count, would not miss it.

According to lists circulating among Coppola's aides, Gene Hackman had a dozen tickets; James Caan, six; Coppola, five; Coppola's father, Carmine Coppola, who wrote the film's music score, four; Dustin Hoffman, four; Steven Spielberg, two; Richard Gere, two.

Besides the local press, the film critic from the Chicago Tribune had flown in for the showing; so had the reviewer for New York magazine.

A United Artists (UA) spokesman said that UA,

which is distributing "Apocalypse Now," had reserved 50 tickets. Executives from every studio in town seemed to be in the audience, among them people who rarely venture outside private screening rooms in Bel-Air and Beverly Hills to watch movies.

Officially, the event was to happen at 8 p.m. Tickets were scheduled to go on sale two hours before for \$7.50 each. All proceeds were donated to the Pacific Film Archive.

But by 9:30 a.m., nearly 11 hours before showtime, Rick Sandford was on line reserving a spot for himself and five friends—Christopher Isherwood, Don Bacardy, Joshua Becker, Jeff Capp and Sheldon Lettich.

"Why did I get here so early?" asked Sandford. "To see the work of a genius."

By 11 a.m. a dozen others stood, or sat, behind Sandford, including Cyrus Nowrastek, a USC film student who had reread on the way over to the theater a bootleg copy of the "Apocalypse Now" screenplay by Coppola and John Milius.

"It's bigger than Vietnam," declared Nowrastek about the picture, or at least about the script.

Tracy Stern, a clerk with the legal department at Warner Bros., didn't go to work; she called in sick and arrived in Westwood at 1 p.m. The line then stretched to the corner, more than 150 persons deep. Periodically, Stern was relieved by friends and she spent some time putting coins into a parking meter, bought eyeglasses and also a new pair of suede shoes.

Those in line were young, almost without exception. The favorite pre-screening activities were eating (lots of pizzas) and reading—Variety, the Hollywood Reporter, Film Comment, scripts and movie call sheets.

When the tickets finally went on sale at 6, the line meandered for two blocks. "It's nice to know L.A. has lines for other things besides gas," one patient fan remarked.

Four security guards hired especially for the screening arrived at 4 p.m. to assure that the mostly cheerful crowd remained orderly.

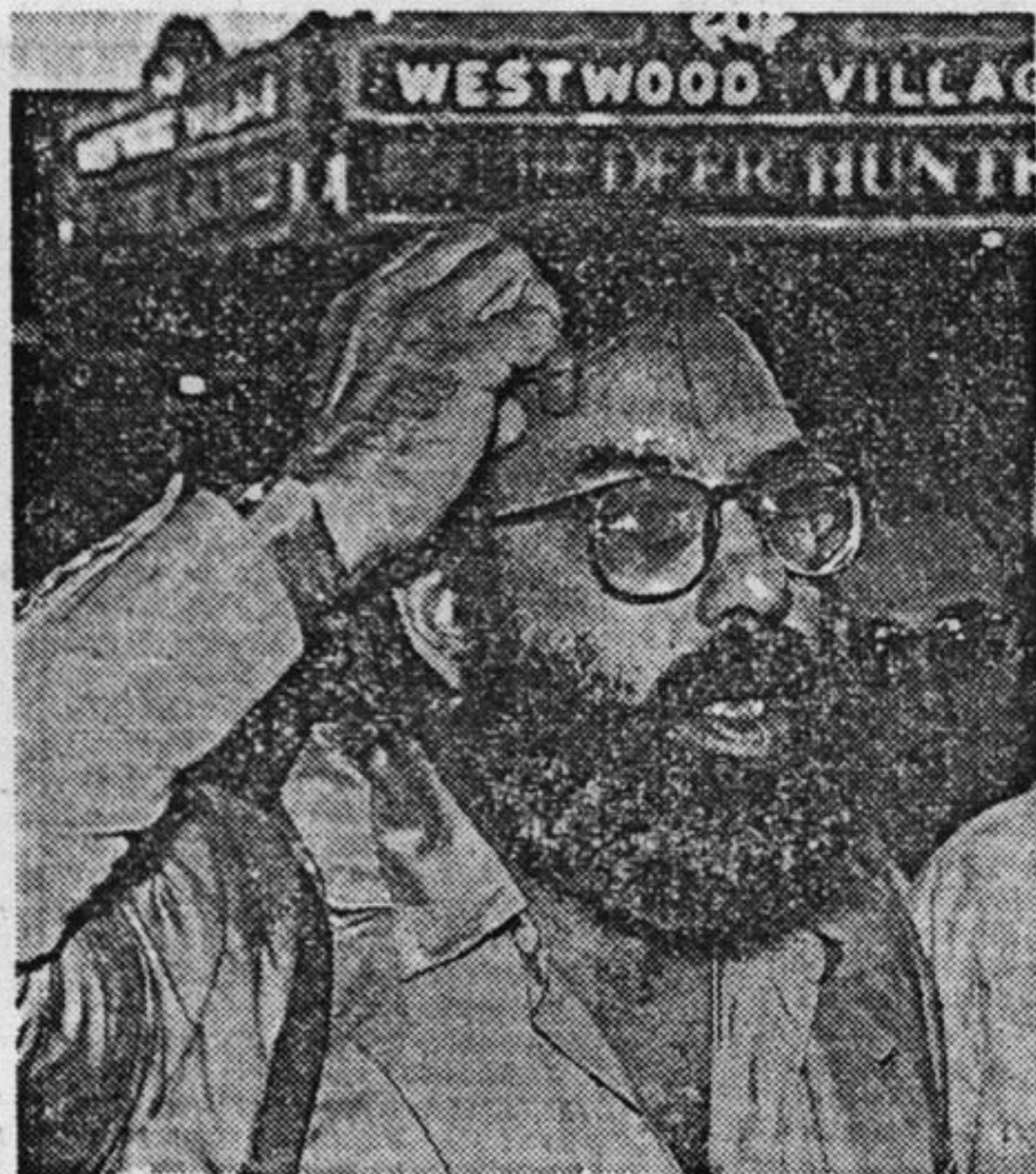
Eight members of the staff of San Francisco

based concert promoter Bill Graham, a friend of Coppola, were there to assure that the crowd remained cheerful. Dressed in T-shirts ("Francis Coppola Presenta Un' Anteprema Sneak") and equipped with walkie-talkies, they handed out sherbet, ticket stubs formally signifying that those in line were in line and kind words. Everyone would see the film, they said.

Which was true, assuming that they were willing to wait. And wait. Two screenings were added—one at 11:30 a.m. and another at 2:30. Dustin Hoffman was seen shuffling up to the box office at 2:15 in the morning.

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Inside the Bruin lobby about an hour before the picture



DIRECTOR CONFRONTED—Francis Coppola talks with Vietnam veterans who wanted to see the director's film, "Apocalypse Now."

Times photos by George Rose



SNEAK—The sign outside the Bruin Theater in Westwood Friday night said "A Work in Pro-

gress," but film was Francis Coppola's "Apocalypse Now," a \$30-million Vietnam epic.

was to begin, a sound check was going on; the projection facilities were being checked. Questionnaires to be distributed—and, it was hoped by Coppola, filled out by the audience—were being stacked.

Graham, the frantic and successful rock-concert promoter, was pacing, advising and directing. And arguing with Mann's Larry Gleason.

"Anyone who was invited was told we'll hold till 7:30, then it's a grab bag," Graham insisted.

"Then you should have had a bigger theater, like we told you," answered Gleason.

Meanwhile, lights were shining on the two. Their argument was being recorded on film by documentary film makers putting together a movie on the making of "Apocalypse Now."

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"I was and probably still am a theater director. For me this means I need the opportunity to show my work as close to its final form as I intend it so I can judge how it affects my audience."

—Francis Ford Coppola in his letter to the audience explaining why he was previewing "Apocalypse Now"

"Coppola, Francis Ford (1939-). American writer-director who graduated from nudie movies."

—Leslie Halliwell in "The Filmgoer's Companion"

About the film itself: It began five minutes late, and ran for approximately two hours and 20 minutes. It opens in August, so there's time for changes, refinements, additions and deletions. The critics will make their judgments then. So will the audiences, which must turn "Apocalypse Now" into one of the most commercially successful films in the history of the movies for it to break even.

Coppola claims that "Apocalypse Now" cost just over \$30 million. As is said in the film business, the money is on the screen; the picture looks expensive.

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As it played Friday, there were no credits—no actors, titles or technical people were noted on the screen. The movie opened with sound—jungle noises—rather than pictures. The first word of dialogue: Martin Sheen beginning his narration—"Saigon."

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"It wasn't a planned or organized thing. I just sort of faked it."

—Francis Ford Coppola on the making of "Apocalypse Now" outside the Bruin Theater, May 11, 1979.

Coppola arrived at the Bruin a little after 7:30 p.m. After addressing the crowd, assuring it there would be other shows, he entered the theater and watched his film, the result of four years of work, from the back row.

It was not the first screening ever of "Apocalypse Now," although it was the first showing of this version. A few days earlier, it had been screened for President Carter at the White House. About a month ago, it was shown in a somewhat different version in Atlanta and Minneapolis. More than a year ago, in far different form, theater owners in New York and San Francisco took a look.

Dozens of rumors have trailed this film. The newest one to circulate was talk about alternative endings. Coppola insisted a second ending was shot, not by him but by associates working with him, and that the ending he showed at the 8 p.m. screening was the ending the film would have.

The audience at the 8 p.m. screening reacted with polite applause. On the street, well-wishers related to Coppola praise of one sort or another.

"I don't know if it's worth \$4.50, but it's entertaining," said one.

"Conrad would have been proud of it," remarked someone else, tying the picture to one of its sources, Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness."

"Brilliant, it was worth the wait," said Sandford, who arrived at 9:30 in the morning to see "Apocalypse Now."

"A stately, sensual...opulent, passionate drama"

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