



Marlon Brando as Don Vito Corleone.

## 'The Godfather': Bene!

By Gary Arnold

The television ads say simply, "The Godfather" is now a movie," but there's no longer much point in being so cagily modest about it. In this instance the modesty amounts to false modesty, because "The Godfather," which opens today at the Republic, Marlow, Langley and Cinema 7, happens to be eminently worth crowing about.

It's an extraordinary achievement: a new classic in a classic American film genre; a richly ironic example of how crude popular fiction may be transformed into great popular art; a fresh source of both legend and optimism, reviving the career of Marlon Brando and probably making the careers of young actor Al Pacino, young screenwriter-director Francis Ford Coppola, and several others. And, last but hardly least, it is a product of almost limitless commercial potential.

Newsweek's description of this picture as "the 'Gone With the Wind' of gangster movies" doesn't really overstate the case.

It will take some kind of movie to prevent "The Godfather" from dominating next year's Academy Awards. Quality aside, the film may be approaching, or even surpassing, a gross of \$100 million by the time the ballots go out next winter. I wouldn't be surprised to see it overhaul that earlier Paramount goldmine, "Love Story," in a relatively short time and then begin challenging the commercial heights occupied by "Gone With the Wind."

Artistically, "The Godfather" has nothing to prove, because it has few, if any, peers within its own genre. While respecting and drawing upon traditional, pulp material, Coppola has also transformed it with a modern style and sensibility. He brings a fresh approach, a fresh interpretation, to some familiar, haunting old themes. The result is not just a new gangster melodrama but a newly definitive gangster melodrama, the best gangster movie ever made.

Coppola collaborated on the screenplay with Mario Puzo, working from Puzo's

crudely written yet crudely compelling best-seller. The film sticks closely to the principal story line, covering about 10 violent, intrigue-ridden, transitional years in the life of an American Mafia family. The critical action begins late in 1945, with the attempted murder of Don Vito Corleone (played by Brando), a New York Mafia chieftain in his 60s, by a rival gang, in strategic reprisal for the Don's refusal to cooperate in the up-and-coming drug racket.

The publicity for the film, centering on Brando's "comeback," may obscure the fact that the protagonist is not the old Don but his youngest son, Michael (played by Pacino), who becomes the new Don. Originally intended, by both his father and himself, for a "legitimate" career, a life outside the family "business," Michael is drawn back into the criminal, conspiratorial heart of the family by the shooting of his father; eventually he emerges as the ruthless in-

See GODFATHER, B5, Col. 1

# 'The Godfather': 'Best Gangster Movie Made'

'GODFATHER, From B1

heritor and repossessor of his father's power.

The transformation of Michael Corleone from a decent, diffident young soldier into a coldblooded killer and power merchant has been powerfully and subtly realized. "The Godfather" is not the movie to see if you're in the mood for light entertainment; it's three hours of strong, ominously engrossing melodrama, and one leaves feeling somewhat scared and shaken, emotionally overwhelmed.

Despite Brando's presence and magnetism, "The Godfather" is Michael's story and Pacino's film. As conceived by Puzo and Coppola and played by Pacino, Michael becomes a horrifyingly quiet, impassive sort of monster. There's no raving or floating, no demonstrative psychotic behavior in the old-fashioned gangster style.

Michael accepts the burdens of family loyalty and leadership without obvious emotion, but Pacino manages to convey the essential, tragic moral change that his acceptance entails. His Michael becomes, by almost imperceptible graduations, a chillingly private and guarded personality, a man committed to living a double life, pursuing plans and continuing enmities that he had hoped to escape.

The emotional reverberations are deep. Michael's complete acceptance of a divided self, his consciously hypocritical submersion in the role and the unfinished business of his father, evoke genuine feelings of pity and terror. We're left sharing the apprehension of his wife Kay (Diane Keaton), because Michael's duplicity seems to encompass more of American society than the "criminal elements."

One of the film's great strengths is the precision with which it touches a contemporary nerve, using the private, fictional case to symbolize a more general, public apprehension about the state of The American Dream and How To Pursue It.

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The point of view of the filmmakers is understated but unequivocal: Michael is a Faustian protagonist who pays the price of his soul in the process of accumulating power and exacting revenge. We watch the process take place with fascination and compassion, but we're never encouraged to envy or emulate Michael's fate.

Curiously, both Coppola and Puzo seem to have approached "The Godfather" in a certain mercenary spirit, at least in the beginning. In a Hollywood Reporter interview Puzo acknowledged that his book was a sloppy piece of work, written quickly to make money needed to pay off gambling debts. At the same time, he's expressed some rather ill-defined dissatisfaction with the way the movie turned out—a dissatisfaction that, under the circumstances, he might be wise to forget.

Coppola, who will be 32 next month, was the first college-trained filmmaker to win a substantial foothold in the commercial industry—and with this picture he becomes the greatest advertisement university film schools have ever had.

After his years at UCLA, where it was generally conceded that he was the guy who would break through if anyone did, Coppola worked on several minor films and shared writing credits on several major projects, such as "Reflections in a Golden Eye," "This Property is Condemned," "Is Paris Burning?" and "Patton," which would eventually earn him a share of an Academy Award for screenwriting.

Movie people have anticipated a major breakthrough by Coppola ever since his first important feature, "You're a Big Boy Now." Supposedly, Coppola was

"THE GODFATHER." Produced by Albert S. Ruddy. Directed by Francis Ford Coppola. Screenplay by Mario Puzo and Coppola, from the novel by Puzo. Director of Photography, Gordon Willis, A.S.C. Production Design by Dean Tavoularis. Editing by William Reynolds and Peter Zinner. Costume Design by Anna Hill Johnstone. Music composed by Nino Rota and conducted by Carlo Savina. Released by Paramount, Technicolor. 178 minutes. MPA Rating: R.

#### THE CAST

Don Vito Corleone	Marlon Brando
Michael Corleone	Al Pacino
Sonny Corleone	James Caan
Clemlenza	Richard Castellano
Tom Hagen	Robert Duvall
McCluskey	Sterling Hayden
Jack Woltz	John Marley
Barzini	Richard Conte
Kay Adams	Diane Keaton
Sollozzo	Al Lettieri
Tessio	Abe Vigoda
Connie Rizzi	Talia Shire
Carlo Rizzi	Gianni Russo
Fredo Corleone	John Cazale
Cuneo	Rudy Bond
Johnny Fontane	Al Martino
Mama Corleone	Morgana King
Lucia Brasi	Lenny Montana
Paulie Gatto	John Martino
Bonasera	Salvatore Corsico
Neri	Richard Bright
Moe Green	Alex Rocco
Bruno Tataglia	Tony Giorgio
Apollonia	Simonetta Stefanelli
Don Tommasino	Corrado Gaipa
Frabrizio	Angelo Infanti
Calo	Franco Citti
Lucy Mancini	Jeanne Linero
Sandra Corleone	Julie Gregg

purchasing his independence in 1968 when he agreed to direct "Finian's Rainbow" for Warner Bros.-Seven Arts.

The reward was complete autonomy in the production of his original script. "The Rain People." But "Rain People" turned out to be a flop. It suggested that while Coppola might be an exceptional adapter and director, he left something to be desired as an original dramatist. "The Rain People" was all sensibility and no story, and at the time I wrote, "We keep looking at gorgeous compositions and listening to unusually sensitive sound effects, but the drama is inarticulate and shapeless."

Now he's put it all together. In addition to being an impeccable work of craftsmanship, "The Godfather" is shatteringly eloquent. The film is an interesting and instinctive piece

of collaboration, because Coppola and Puzo don't seem to have much in common.

Presumably, Coppola took the directing assignment on "The Godfather" in order to free himself again, but there's been a happy, miraculous accident: Coppola's exquisite sensibility refines the crudities out of Puzo's story, while that brutal, archetypal, melodramatic story concentrates and intensifies Coppola's abilities in a way the "original" but vague "Rain People" never did.

Obviously, there's a lot to be said for somehow bringing contradictory tastes and temperaments and complementary skills together. One is grateful beyond expression to Paramount chief Robert Evans for assembling this company—and sticking with it. According to Newsweek, Coppola was almost fired three times, and the film is so beautifully designed and executed that one can easily believe it. Entrusted to a hack, "The Godfather" would still have been a hit, but it would not have been a work of art.

Several recent films have excelled at period recreation and color design, but I think "The Godfather" is in a class by itself. Coppola, cinematographer Gordon Willis and production designer Dean Tavoularis give this film a totally unique look. The guiding concept is chiaroscuro and the lighting, particularly in the interiors, achieves moods and effects modeled on the paintings of Rembrandt and often equally intense.

Within the darkened settings there are islands of illuminated faces or silhouettes. The color has an unusually muted, granular texture, and the hues are frequently diminished or augmented for dramatic effect. Indoors the colors in the

brown - yellow - orange - red range seem to dominate—ferruginous shades, perhaps deliberately chosen to accentuate the archaic, elemental nature of this story of family honor and vengeance with elemental colors. Willis seems to get a curious sense of period through color diminution: one has the feeling, particularly in the great opening sequence of the wedding party and in the Hollywood sequences, of watching animated back numbers of Life magazine.

In many ways "The Godfather" is the kind of artistic breakthrough one dreams about. Coppola's control of both the visual design and the dramatic substance is almost flawless. It's a new-looking movie with an old-fashioned sort of wallop, and Coppola's exquisite taste doesn't prevent him from taking chances and letting out the stops in certain sequences, exhibits A and B being Brando's death scene and the climatic baptism-massacre juxtaposition, in which Michael becomes a godfather while his men murder the enemies of the family.

As the elder Don, Brando is one of many memorable

figures. His performance is typically daring, especially the voice, which seems disconcertingly rasping and puggish when one first hears it. But as so often happens, Brando gradually wins one over to his conceptions and becomes more affecting as the movie goes along. After Pacino's Michael suffers a broken jaw, one begins to comprehend the vocal conceit. The mushy diction is not an affectation but rather evidence of a battered, violent history. This jowly, courtly, seemingly gentle old man conceals a past full of murderous encounters and unhealed injuries.

There's scarcely room left to praise the work of James Caan as Sonny, Richard Castellano as Clemlenza, Diane Keaton as Kay, Robert Duvall as Tom Hagen, Talia Shire as Connie, etc., etc. A lot of congratulations are in order on this occasion. Suffice it to say that "The Godfather" is a great new American movie. Coppola begins his film in utter darkness with the line, "I believe in America . . ." What follows is a dark, troubled vision of America—not reassuring but certainly compelling and illuminating.