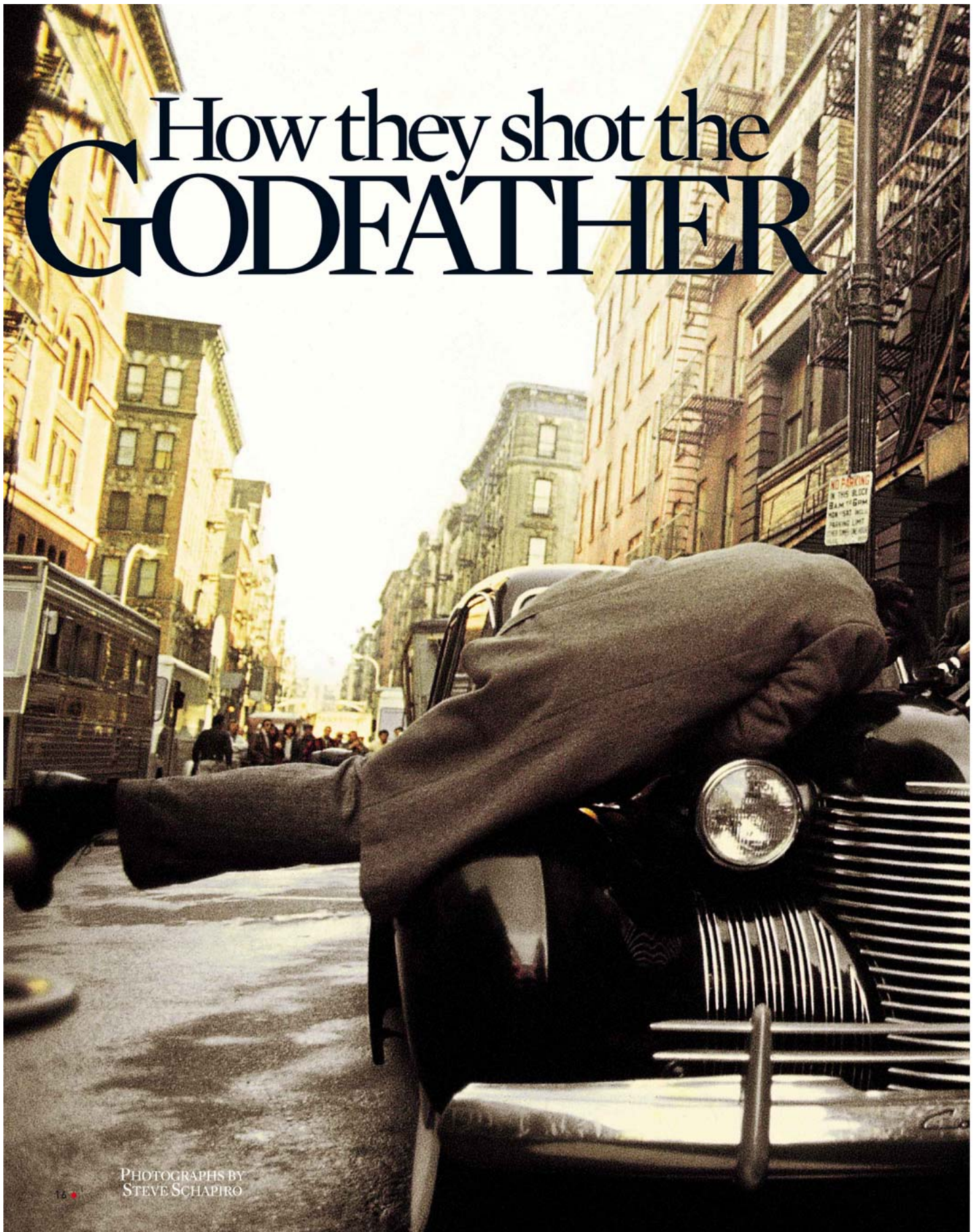


How they shot the GODFATHER



PHOTOGRAPHS BY
STEVE SCHAPIRO

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How's this for an offer you can't refuse: *The Godfather Family Album* – previously unseen candid pictures revealing how the finest gangster movies of them all were made... and a running commentary from author Mario Puzo on how he came to write *The Godfather* in the first place (he needed the money)



REPORTAGE



THE HIT

Left: the scene in the first film of the *Godfather* trilogy when Mafia family leader Vito Corleone – Marlon Brando – is shot by rival gang assassins while his weak middle son Fredo looks on, helpless. Right, from top: director Francis Ford Coppola choreographs Brando's slide down the front of the car; an aerial view of the action; Coppola and Brando discuss the scene, little knowing that just around the corner, real Mafia godfather Carlo Gambino is having coffee while his henchmen watch the filming (they were critical of the way Brando wore his hat). Coppola had fought to cast Brando, who had a reputation as a difficult actor. In return, the actor put up a \$1 million bond, swearing that he wouldn't cause trouble. He didn't



The reason I wrote *The Godfather* was to make money. My first novel, *The Dark Arena* (1955), received very good reviews and netted me \$3,500, so I thought I was going to be rich and famous. But when my second novel, *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, came out ten years later and netted me just \$3,000, I was going downhill fast.

While the book received some extraordinarily fine reviews, my publisher was not impressed. I asked them for an advance to start on my next book (which would be a big classic), and the editors were cool. They were courteous. They were kind. They showed me the door.

One editor had wistfully remarked that if *The Fortunate Pilgrim* had only had a little more of that Mafia stuff in it, maybe the book would have made money. (One of the minor characters was a Mob chief.) I was 45 years old and tired of being an artist. Besides, I owed \$20,000 to relatives, finance companies, banks, and assorted bookmakers and shylocks. It was time to grow up and sell out, as Lenny Bruce once advised.

So I told my editors, OK, I'll write a book about the Mafia, just give me some money to get started. They said no money until we see 100 pages. I wrote a ten-page outline. They showed me the door again.

I knew I'd never be able to write another book if the next one wasn't a success. The psychological and economic pressure would be too much. I had never doubted I could write a best-selling commercial novel whenever I chose to do so. My writing friends, my family, my children and my creditors all assured me now was the time to put up or shut up.

I was willing; I had a ten-page outline – but nobody would take me. Months went by. I was working on a string of adventure magazines, editing, writing freelance stories. One day I told a writer friend some funny Mafia stories and about my ten-page outline and he arranged a meeting for me with the editors of GP Putnam's Sons. The editors sat around for an hour listening to my Mafia tales and said go ahead. They also gave me a \$5,000 advance.

Naturally, as soon as I got my hands on their money, I didn't work on the book. (Luckily part of the advance was payable on the handing in of the complete manuscript or I would never have finished it.) The thing is, I didn't really want to write *The Godfather*. It took me three years to finish.

I'm ashamed to admit that I wrote it entirely from research. I never met a real, honest-to-God gangster. I knew the gambling world pretty well, but that's all. After the book became 'famous', I was introduced to a few gentlemen related to the material. They were flattering. They refused to believe that I had never been in the rackets. They refused to believe that I had never had the confidence of a don.

But all of them loved the book. And in different parts of the country I heard a nice story: that the Mafia had

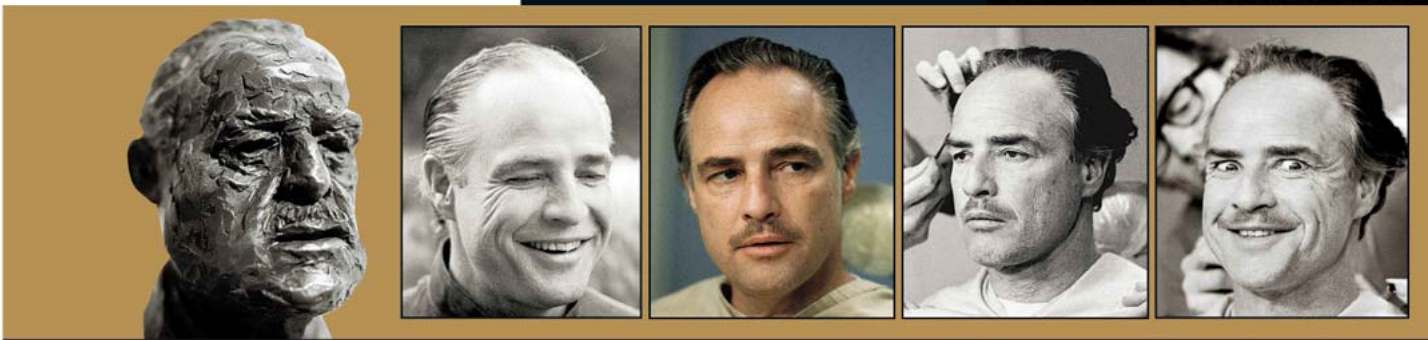


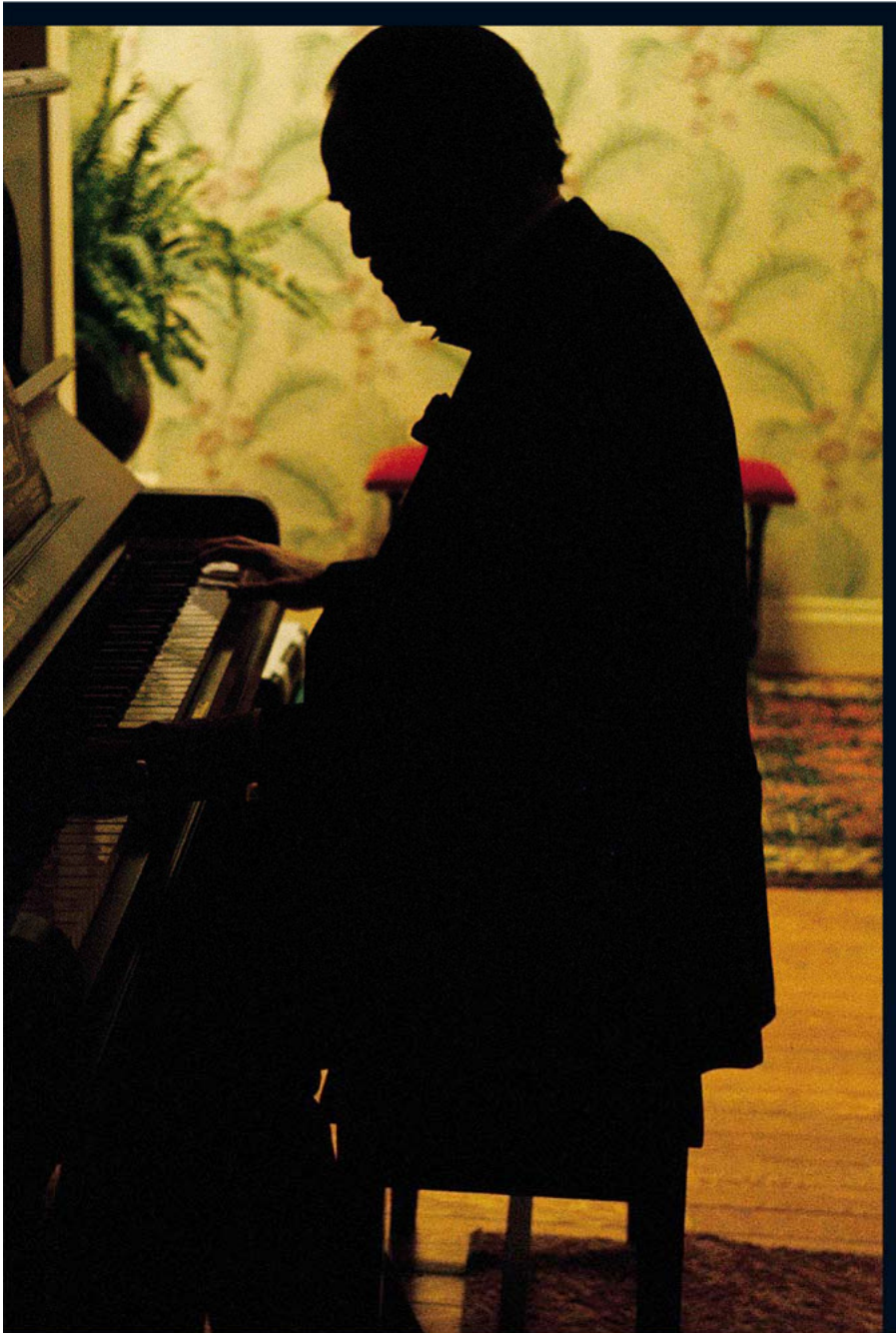
Above: Coppola – with sons Gio (at his feet) and Roman (who had a role in the film) – and Robert De Niro take a break to study *Variety* on the set of *The Godfather: Part II*. De Niro, at the age of just 29, was still a relative unknown – he had starred in Scorsese's *Mean Streets* the year before – but with the part of the young Vito his ascendancy began



DOWNTIME BETWEEN TAKES

Brando, an accomplished musician – he said if he hadn't been an actor he'd have been a drummer – takes a moment out from filming to play a piano he found on the set. Left: The cat is a stray Coppola picked up on the Paramount lot. The director believed in props as a stimulus – handed a prop, a good actor would make something out of it. So well did Brando get on with the cat that it was 'written' into the film – he was held in Vito's lap in the opening scene





paid me \$1 million to write *The Godfather* as a public-relations con.

I finally had to finish *The Godfather* in July 1968 because I needed the final \$1,200 advance payment to take my wife and kids to Europe. My wife had not seen her family for 20 years, and I had promised her that this was the year, so I handed in the rough manuscript. Before leaving for Europe, I told my publisher not to show the book to anybody; it had to be polished.

When we finally got home, I owed \$8,000 on credit cards. I wasn't worried. If the worst came to the worst, we could always sell our house. Or I could go to jail. Hell, better writers had gone to jail. No sweat.

I went into New York to see my agent, Candida Donadio. I was hoping she'd pull a slick magazine assignment out of her sleeve and bail me out as she'd often done in the past. She informed me that my publisher had just turned down \$375,000 for the paperback rights to *The Godfather*. I had given strict orders that it wasn't to be shown to even a paperback house, but this was no time to complain.

I called my editor at Putnam's, Bill Targ, and he said they were holding out for \$410,000 because \$400,000 was some sort of record. Did I wish to speak to their reprint-rights man, who was handling the negotiations? I said no; I had absolute confidence in any man who could turn down \$375,000. I hung around New York, had a very late lunch with Targ, and over our coffee he got a call. The paperback rights sold for \$410,000.

I called my brother to tell him the good news. This brother had ten per cent of *The Godfather* because he'd supported me all my life and gave me a final chunk of money to complete the book. So now I wanted him to know that since my half of the paperback rights came to \$205,000, he was in for a little over 20 grand.

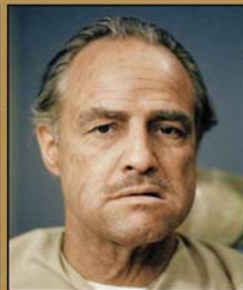
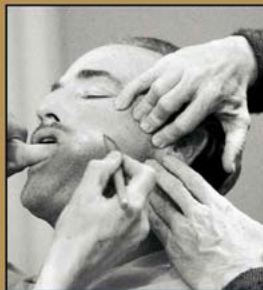
He is the kind of guy who is always home when I call to borrow money. Now that I had money to give back, he was naturally out. I got my mother on the phone. She speaks broken English but understands the language perfectly. I explained it to her.

She asked, '\$40,000?'

I said no, it was \$410,000. I told her three times before she finally answered, 'Don't tell nobody.'

Traffic was jammed, and it took me over two hours to get home. When I walked in the door, my wife was dozing and I went over, kissed her on the cheek, and said, 'Honey, we don't have to worry about money any more. I just sold my book for \$410,000.' She smiled at me and kept dozing.

I started getting annoyed. Nobody seemed to think this was a big deal. My whole life was going to change; I didn't have to worry about money. It was almost like not having to worry about dying. Then my sister said, 'You got \$40,000 for the book. Mama called.' I was exasperated with my mother. After all those explanations she had gotten it wrong. Her 80 years were no excuse. 'No, it was \$410,000.' Now I got the reaction I wanted... ▶



A MADE-UP MAN

Opposite page, from far left: the wax bust of Vito Corleone sculpted by make-up artist Dick Smith, which was used as a template for Vito Corleone; Brando, aged 47 when he took on the part, smiles and plays up for the camera as he prepares to undergo his transformation into a Mafia boss. This page, from left: Al Pacino and Coppola watch as the make-up is applied; a dental 'plumper' brace was used to pad out Brando's cheeks (cotton wool was used only in the screen test)

► I soon made what turned out to be my big mistake. When I had the first 100 pages of *The Godfather* done, the William Morris Agency approved a contract with Paramount for the book for a \$12,500 option payment, with 'escalators' if they exercised the option. I had already switched agents, but William Morris had signed the initial book contract and so represented me in the movie deal. They advised me against taking it. They advised me to wait. That was like advising a guy underwater to take a deep breath. I needed the cash and the \$12,500 looked like Fort Knox. Let me say now that the fault was mine. But I never held it against Paramount that they got *The Godfather* so cheap.

The Godfather became the number one bestseller in the USA; 69 weeks on the *New York Times* list; also number one in England, France, Germany and other countries. It's been translated into 17 or 20 languages; I stopped keeping track. They tell me it's the fastest and best-selling fiction paperback of all time.

I had read the literature about Hollywood, how they 'did in' novelists in general. I had already had one enlightening experience with movie producers. Earlier that year, my agent had called to ask that I come to meet John Foreman, who produced most of the Paul Newman movies. John Foreman was dynamic. For three hours he talked about my book - how he loved it, how he was determined to do it as a movie. He quoted all the best parts. He liked all the right things. The movie was definitely on. He said he would call my agent the next day and arrange the financial details of the contract. Nobody ever heard from him again.

One day I picked up the paper and it said that Danny

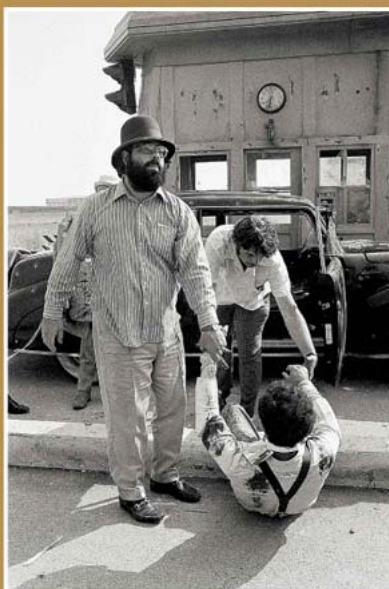
**'I WARNED HIM
THAT EVERYONE
HATED THE
IDEA OF BRANDO'**

Thomas [a comic actor] wanted to play the role of the Godfather. That threw me into a panic. I had always thought that Marlon Brando would be great.

So through a mutual friend I contacted Brando, wrote him a letter and he was nice enough to call me. He had not read the book, but he told me that the studio would never hire him unless a strong director insisted on it. He was nice over the phone but didn't sound too interested. And that was that.

What I didn't know at this time was that Paramount had decided not to make the movie. The reason for this was that they had made *The Brotherhood* - also about the Mafia - and it was a critical and financial disaster and made the studio brass feel there was no money in Mafia movies. It was only when *The Godfather* became a super-bestseller that they had to make the film.

Finally, Al Ruddy, the producer, said he wanted me to do the script but it would be a low budget so they couldn't pay much. I turned it down. They found more money and a percentage. The deal for the script was agreeable: \$500 a week expense money, nice money, up front (sure money), plus two-and-a-half per cent of net profit. But the deal was not as good as it sounded. For one thing, a suite at the Beverly Hills Hotel was \$500 a week, so that wiped out the expense money right there. Plus the fact that my two-and-a-half per cent was worth zero unless the picture became a big blockbuster.



BLOOD BATH

Vito Corleone's son Sonny (James Caan) is gunned to death at a tollbooth. Here, Caan's face and body are wired with 147 tiny explosive 'squibs', which explode when pulled. Caan was worried about the number - a record at the time - but went along with it rather than lose face with the women on the set. Left: the scene was so expensive - it cost \$100,000 - and the make-up so complicated that Coppola had just one opportunity to film it. Below: Caan jokes by 'rising from the dead' with, from left, Brando, actor Salvatore Corsitto and Coppola



The way it works is that the studio usually legally snatches all profits from anybody working on a percentage of net profit. They do this with book-keeping. If the picture costs \$4 million, they add another million for studio overheads. They charge advertising costs to pictures that make money. Their accountants can make profits disappear like Houdini.

The first conference was a pep talk intended for me. This was going to be the big movie for Paramount. This picture would save Paramount. I love that kind of stuff – it makes me feel important and I work twice as hard.

We talked casting. I suggested Marlon Brando for the role of the Godfather. They were kind to me but I got the impression my stock had dropped 50 points. Al Ruddy suggested Robert Redford for the role of Michael, and I didn't care how nice a guy he was, his stock dropped 50 points.

They had no director. I had to write the script before they got one. 'You just do what you want,' Ruddy said. 'But do me a favour. Start off with a love scene between Michael and Kay.' He still wanted Redford.

'Al,' I said as I drank his whisky and smoked his cigars, 'you can't start *The Godfather* with a love scene. It ain't fitting.' He recognised the tagline and he laughed. 'Listen,' he said, 'just try it. We can always cut it out later.'

'OK,' I said. I went back upstairs and read the contract and, sure enough, it said the producer can tell the writer how to write the script. I had to start off the movie with a youthful love scene. So I wrote it and it was lousy. I showed it to Al and he loved it.

By August 1970 they had the script and everybody liked it. Meanwhile, in the following months, while they looked for a director, I had a few adventures. The most interesting was with Frank Sinatra, a guy who had been my idol. In *The Godfather*, the singer named Johnny Fontane has been assumed by many people to be based on Sinatra. Before the book came out, my publisher got a letter from Sinatra's lawyers demanding to see the manuscript. In polite language we refused. However, the movie was another story. In the initial conferences with Paramount's legal staff they showed concern about this until I reassured them the part was very minor in the film.

Now the thing was, in my book, I had written the

Fontane character with complete sympathy for the man and his lifestyle and his hang-ups. I thought I had caught the innocence of great showbiz people, their despair at the corruption their kind of life forces on them and the people around them. I thought I had caught the inner innocence of the character. But I could also see that if Sinatra thought the character was himself, he might not like it – the book – or me.

But of course, some people wanted to bring us together. At Elaine's in New York one night, Sinatra was at the bar and I was at a table. Elaine asked if I'd object to meeting Sinatra. I said it was OK with me if it was OK with him. It was not OK with Sinatra. And that was perfectly OK with me. I didn't give it another thought.

A year later I was invited to a friend's birthday party given by a famous millionaire. The millionaire turned out to be one of those elderly men always trying to be youthful. He wore red slacks and a miniature Stetson and had that five-martini affability I dread more than anything else in the world. As we were having a drink at the bar, he said Sinatra was having dinner at another table and would I like to meet him. I said no. The millionaire had a right-hand man who tried to insist. I said no again.

During the dinner there was a tableau of John Wayne and Frank Sinatra meeting in the space equidistant between their two tables to salute each other. They both looked absolutely great, 20 years younger than they really were. And both beautifully dressed, Sinatra especially. It was really great to see. But on the way out the millionaire started leading me toward a table. His right-hand man took me by the other hand.

'SINATRA KEPT UP THE ABUSE, BUT HE NEVER LOOKED UP'

'You gotta meet Frank,' the millionaire said. 'He's a good friend of mine.'

We were almost at the table. I still could have wrenched loose and walked away, but it would have been an obvious snub. It was easier, physically and psychologically, to be led the few remaining steps. The millionaire made the introduction. Sinatra never looked up from his plate.

'I'd like you to meet my good friend, Mario Puzo,' said the millionaire.

'I don't think so,' Sinatra said. Which sent me on my way. I was trying to get past the right-hand man and get the hell out of there. So I heard the millionaire stuttering his apologies, not to me, but to Sinatra. The millionaire was actually in tears. 'Frank, I'm sorry, God, Frank, I didn't know, Frank, I'm sorry...'

But Sinatra cut him short and his voice was now the voice I had heard while making love as a kid – soft and velvety. He was consoling the shattered millionaire. 'It's not your fault,' Sinatra said.

I always run away from an argument and I have rarely in my life been disgusted by anything human beings do, but after that I said to Sinatra, 'Listen, it wasn't my idea.' And then the most astounding thing happened. He completely misunderstood. He thought I was apologising for the character of Johnny Fontane in my book. He said, and his voice was almost kind, 'Who told you to put that in the book, your publisher?'

I was completely dumbfounded. I don't let publishers put commas in my books. That's the only thing I have character about. Finally I said, 'I mean about being introduced to you.'

Time has mercifully dimmed the humiliation of what followed. Sinatra started to shout abuse. I remember that, contrary to his reputation, he did not use foul language at all. The worst thing he called me was a pimp. I do remember him saying that if it wasn't that I was so much older than he, he would beat the hell out of me. What hurt was that here he was, a northern Italian, threatening me, a southern Italian, with physical violence. This was roughly equivalent to Einstein pulling a knife on Al Capone. It just wasn't done.

Sinatra kept up his abuse and I kept staring at him. He kept staring down at his plate. Yelling. He never ▶



FATHERLY ADVICE

Coppola with the 14-year-old actor Oreste Baldini, who plays Vito as a boy in *Godfather II*, in this scene undergoing a medical at Ellis Island, New York, on his arrival from Sicily. Right: a rare publicity shot of father and son Corleone together – in fact, Al Pacino and De Niro never actually share screen time together in the second film



► looked up. Finally, I walked away and out of the restaurant. My humiliation must have showed because he yelled after me, 'Choke. Go ahead and choke.'

A few weeks later, when Francis Ford Coppola was named as director, he too had an incident with Sinatra. They ran into each other in an LA club one night, and Sinatra put his arms around Coppola's shoulders and said, 'Francis, I'd play the Godfather for you. I wouldn't do it for those guys at Paramount, but I'd do it for you.'

Some very famous directors turned *The Godfather* down because it offended their social consciences, because 'it glorified the Mafia and criminals'. My cynical mind makes me wonder if they picked Coppola because he was a kid in his early thirties and had just directed two financial failures, and so could be controlled. At the time they were hoping to do *The Godfather* for between \$1 million and \$2 million. (The picture finally cost over \$6 million.)

The fun was over. Now everybody got into the act. Stars, agents, studio heads and vice-presidents, the producer, the associate producer, songwriters and assorted hustlers. The big question: who was to play the Godfather? I warned Coppola that everybody hated the idea of Brando – some were afraid that he would make trouble, that he was weak at the box office, and a million other reasons. Anyway he fought and got Brando. And, incidentally, Brando never gave any trouble. So much for his reputation.

Coppola started shooting screen tests. Now the big problem was to find someone to play Michael, really the most important part in the film. At one time Jimmy Caan seemed to have the role. He tested well. But he tested well for Sonny, the other Godfather son, and he tested well for Hagen. Hell, he could have played all three of them. Suddenly it looked like he wouldn't get any of them. Robert Duvall tested for Hagen and he was perfect. Another actor was perfect for Sonny. That left Jimmy Caan for Michael, but nobody was quite satisfied. Finally the name of Al Pacino came up. He was a success in a New York play but nobody had seen him on film. Coppola got hold of a screen test Pacino had done for some Italian movie and showed it. I loved him. I gave Francis a letter saying that above all Pacino had to be in the film.

But there were objections. Pacino was too short, too Italian-looking. He was supposed to be the American in the family. He had to look a little class, a little Ivy League. Coppola kept saying a good actor is a good actor. Pacino tested. He didn't know his lines. He threw in his own words. He didn't understand the character at all. He was terrible. Jimmy Caan had done it ten times better. After the scene was over I went up to Coppola and I said: 'Give me my letter back.'

He shook his head. 'Wait a while.' Then he said, 'The self-destructive bastard. He didn't even know his lines.'

They tested Pacino all day. They coached him, they rehearsed him, they turned him inside out. After a month of testing they had everybody on film.

I had been amazed at how well the scenes played live, but they were not so effective on camera. There were tests of the girls who had tried for the part of Kay, the young girl role. There was one girl who wasn't right for the part but jumped off the screen at you. Everybody commented on her and studio boss Robert Evans said, 'We should do something with her – but I guess we never will.' The poor girl never knew how close she came to fame and fortune. Nobody had the



BRANDO THE PRANKSTER

Top: James Caan (left) and Robert Duvall (centre) were the jokers on the set, and their high jinks included mooning out of car windows. Brando (right) wasn't averse to joining in and mooned at the wedding reception scene. Above: Brando grins – as a joke he put weights under his body to make the stretcher almost impossible to carry. Right: Brando is given a set of bongos as a leaving present at the party to celebrate his last day of shooting



time for her just then. Hell, I did, but I wasn't a mogul.

On screen Pacino still didn't strike anybody – except Coppola – as right for the part of Michael. Coppola kept arguing. More tests were made of other people. No Michael. There was even talk of postponing the film. Coppola insisted Pacino was the right man (he never gave me back my letter). But it seemed to be a dead issue. Paramount boss Stanley Jaffe got so p****d off watching the tests of unknowns that when asked his opinion, he jumped up and said, 'You guys really wanna know? I think you've got the worst bunch of lampshades I've ever seen.'

I had to go away for a week. When I came back, Al Pacino had the part of Michael, Jimmy Caan had the part of Sonny. The guy who had the part of Sonny was out. John Ryan, who tested better than anybody for the

important role of Carlo Rizzi, was out. Even though he supposedly had been told he had the role. Ryan was so stunning in his tests that I did something I had never done: I sought him out to tell him how great he played the part. He was replaced by a guy named Gianni Russo, who had some sort of radio showbiz background in Las Vegas. I never found out what happened. I would guess Coppola and the Paramount brass horse-traded. I never got in on the horse-trading. For some reason I had never thought of that solution.

Now the Italian-American League began to make noises. The producer, Al Ruddy, promised them to take out all references to the Mafia in the script and to preserve the Italian honour. The league pledged its cooperation in the making of the film. The *New York Times* put the story on page one and the next day even had an indignant editorial on it. I must say Ruddy proved himself a shrewd bargainer because the word Mafia was never in the script in the first place. ■

'The Godfather Family Album' collector's edition is published by Taschen, priced at £400 each for a signed and numbered edition of 1,000. An exhibition of Steve Schapiro's images from the book will be on view at Hamiltons Gallery, London, from February 25 to March 28. Visit hamiltonsgallery.com. Words taken from 'The Godfather Papers And Other Confessions'

**'PACINO DIDN'T
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