In 1967, Mario Puzo had written only part of his novel *The Godfather* when Paramount gave him a $12,000 advance with the promise of an additional $75,000 if a film was made. Published in 1969, the novel was an immense success, remaining on the New York Times best-seller list for 67 weeks, and prompting the studio to get a film made quickly. But mobster Joseph Columbo's Italian-American Civil Rights League raised objections, and threatened interference with filming—until the producer, Albert Ruddy, agreed to remove all references to “Mafia” and “Cosa Nostra.” Hiring a director was a challenge: at least ten men found it to be an offer they could refuse before Paramount approached Coppola. Born in 1939, UCLA Film School graduate Coppola was a sought-after scriptwriter (he had just written * Patton*, which would earn him an Oscar). His previous directorial efforts were not box-office successes, but he had exhibited skill with actors (most evident in *The Rain People*, 1969), and he was Italian-American. Coppola had reservations, saying that the novel “is a hunk of trash. I don’t want to do it. I want to direct art films,” but he took the job to pay off debts incurred by his American Zoetrope company. In Michael Corleone’s words, “it’s not personal, it’s business,” but Coppola ended up making it a profoundly, morally complex meditation on crime, violence, responsibility, loyalty, revenge, family, and, indeed, the connections/conflicts between business and the personal.

As legendary as the film are stories about its troubled production, told in countless articles and interviews, memoirs, and books—including * The Godfather Book* (Peter Cowie, 1997) and * Take The Gun, Leave the Cannoli* (Mark Seal, 2021), both meticulously detailed—and last year’s 10-episode (highly fictionalized) miniseries, *THE OFFER*. Coppola fought with Paramount’s executives, especially head of production Robert Evans, about almost everything. If it had been up to them, *THE GODFATHER* would have been a 90-minute, $2 million budget film, set in contemporary times, filmed on Hollywood backlots, or maybe in St. Louis, and with the Adirondacks standing in for Sicily. Vito would have been played by Ernest Borgnine or Anthony Quinn (definitely not Marlon Brando, considered “troublesome” and a “has-been”), and Michael by Robert Redford or Ryan O’Neal (definitely not Al Pacino, virtually unknown, and deemed “too short” and “too Italian”).

Despite the obstacles, Coppola managed to begin filming on March 23, 1971, eventually utilizing 120 locations in and around New York City, before moving on to Sicily, and after 77 days of shooting, wrapping on August 6, 1971—the budget rising to (a still modest) $7 million. The Coppola-Evans feud continued: Evans disliked Gordon Willis’s Rembrandt-evocative cinematography (“too dark”), Nina Rota’s exquisite music (“too highbrow”), the pace (“too slow”), and the running time (Evans ordered cuts, then ordered Coppola to restore the cuts).

Fortunately Coppola won the battles, and when *THE GODFATHER* premiered on March 14, 1972 it received almost universally enthusiastic reviews. Vincent Canby (* New York Times*): “Taking a best-selling novel of more drive than genius…Coppola has made one of the most brutal and moving chronicles of American life ever designed within the limits of popular entertainment.” Pauline Kael (* The New Yorker*): “If ever there was a great example of how the best popular movies come out of a merger of commerce and art, THE GODFATHER is it… (Coppola) has stayed very close to the book’s greased-lightning sensationalism and yet has made a movie with the spaciousness and strength that popular novels such as Dickens’ used to have…The abundance is from the book; the quality of feeling is Coppola’s.” The film broke box-office records, not only becoming the biggest hit of 1972, but also the first movie ever to gross $100 million (after only 18 weeks), eventually totaling about $300 million. Nominated for nine Academy Awards, it received only three, but they were significant: Actor (which Brando famously refused), Adapted Screenplay, and Picture. Coppola congratulated the Best Director winner, Bob Fosse (* Cabaret*), but was clearly disappointed. Adding insult to injury, when Producer Albert Ruddy accepted the Best Picture Oscar, he didn’t mention Coppola. In the meantime, however, Coppola was already at work on one of the most imaginative sequels of all time.

**DID YOU KNOW: THE GODFATHER IS FIRMLY ENSHRINED IN THE WORLD CINEMA PANTEON. IN THE BRITISH FILM INSTITUTE’S MOST RECENT (2022) DECENNIAL GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME POLL, WHICH AMASESS VOTES FROM ABOUT 1,600 CRITICS, ACADEMICS, AND ARCHIVISTS, THE FILM RANKED #12; ON THE 2022 BFI POLL OF 480 DIRECTORS, IT RANKED #3, AFTER 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY AND CITIZEN KANE.**

**NEXT UP:** COME BACK TOMORROW, SAME TIME, SAME PLACE, FOR THE UNMISSABLE SECOND PART OF PUZO AND COPPOLA’S SAGA, *THE GODFATHER PART II*, SCREENING FROM ANOTHER BRAND-NEW 35MM PRINT, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 10 AT 7 P.M.