INTRODUCTION
BY FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA

IT WAS A SUNDAY AFTERNOON in the spring of 1969, and I was living with my wife and two little boys in San Francisco. I was thumbing through *The New York Times*, and I saw a little ad in the bottom corner of a page. The ad showed a black book with a puppeteer's hand, and it said *The Godfather* by Mario Puzo. I was intrigued, because I thought Mario Puzo must have been an Italian intellectual and the book a treatise on power and Machiavelli, an avant-garde novel by a kind of Robbe-Grillet European writer, and I like that kind of literature. And I loved the logo on the book jacket, because it implied *power*; the story was going to be about power.

Oddly enough, but true: two other incidents occurred the same day. Two producers from Paramount who were shooting a film in San Francisco called *Little Fauss and Big Halsy* dropped in to say hello, having heard that I lived there. And during this purely social visit, the phone rang, and my wife told me it was Marlon Brando on the telephone. It was the first time I had ever spoken with him. He was calling me to turn down the role I had written for him in an original screenplay called *The Conversation*. So on that one Sunday afternoon, three elements that would change my life independently came together. The two producers were Al Ruddy and Gray Frederickson, who would shortly be assigned by Paramount to be *The Godfather*'s producers, and of course, Marlon Brando would play Vito Corleone.

A few weeks later, Peter Bart of Paramount Pictures contacted me and told me that there was a possibility the film would be offered to me to direct, and that the book was being sent for me to read. By then, I was so curious that I cruised the stacks of the Mill Valley Public Library looking for books about the American Mafia, and took out three or four titles. It was in those books that I learned about the wars and struggles out of which came powerful families and

the real-life godfathers who might or might not have been the inspiration for Don Vito Corleone. The four books I checked out of the Mill Valley library were great books; one was about Joseph Valachi and another was about Vito Genovese. Of course, at that time there was speculation as to whom *The Godfather* was really based on, and my own opinion was that the character was based partly on Joe Profaci and partly on Genovese, maybe more on Genovese.

Then, before I ever read Mario's novel, Paramount Pictures offered me the job to rewrite the screenplay and direct the film. One of the main reasons I got the job, in my opinion, was because of my film *The Rain People*. The film showed the studio that I could direct acting and have serious scenes. It was a dramatic movie; it looked good, and it was made inexpensively. I already had a career as a screenwriter; I had written *Patton*, so they figured I could give them a decent script rewrite. And of course, there was also the fact that I was Italian American, which might have deflected the protests or heat they could have gotten from depicting Italians as gangsters.

So when I received the Puzo novel, I read it eagerly but barely finished it. My very first reaction was surprise and dismay that it was nothing like what I had imagined. It was more of a potboiler, and much of it was dedicated to the odd story of Lucy Mancini and the surgeon who was hired to alter her private anatomy, and the subsequent relationship that evolved into a love story. I intended to turn the project down, feeling that the book was more salacious and commercial than was my own taste. But as they say, beggars can't be choosers; I was a young father of two children with a third on the way, and I was already in debt due to my dream of being an independent filmmaker of small art films. George Lucas, my young protégé and cofounder of our struggling company, American Zoetrope, emphatically told me: "You have to accept this job; we have no money, and the sheriff is coming to chain up the front door." And so I accepted the offer to direct *The Godfather*, which surprisingly had been turned down by the best directors of the time, including Elia Kazan—probably the best director of acting in the entire history of cinema.

When I realized I was actually going to make a movie out of *The Godfather*, I sat down and began to read the book again, very carefully, my pencil poised. Upon

that second reading, much of the book fell away in my mind, revealing a story that was a metaphor for American capitalism in the tale of a great king with three sons: the oldest was given his passion and aggressiveness, the second his sweet nature and childlike qualities, and the third his intelligence, cunning, and coldness. Suddenly I saw the story as one of succession of power, and began to note the main details that might be used to support that theme. With the background of those library books in my head, and with the technique I always use when first reading a novel that I might have to adapt into a screenplay, I took my pencil and marked down on the actual pages of the book my very first impressions and underlined portions that seemed important to me. Having gone through the book with these few notes and comments, I then decided to make a prompt book out of it.

When I was a theater arts student in college, one of the many things I learned (among lighting, sewing, rope knot tying, animal glue cooking, and cable coiling), was how to make a "prompt book." A prompt book was an old tradition in theater. It was the big loose-leaf notebook that you needed to assemble if you were to perform the duties of a theater stage manager. Basically, there were two approaches to constructing such a book: One was to obtain two copies of the text (the play) and glue each onto a larger sheet of 8½" x 11" three-hole, loose-leaf paper, and the other was to cut by razor the center of the blank 8½" x 11" page so that the play's text could show through when the cut paper was glued or taped on the page. The object of this was to give one the large area around the text for the many notes a stage manager would need to enter, such as lighting cues, scene shift cues, actors' entrances, special effects, music cues, and so forth. The prompt book was like the master control of the play; it was the "bible" of the show that had to be in a damage-proof format and would have everything that was essential clearly notated. Thus, the holes of the loose-leaf pages needed to be well reinforced, and colors needed to be chosen for the different types of cues. The building of the prompt book took hours, and the tedious activity of cutting, reinforcing, and organizing the pages provided many meditative hours during which one could use the other side of the brain to roam over the ideas and essential themes of the playwright's intention. This was very much the way I configured *The Godfather Notebook*; I based it on this idea.

As I sat there before the novel, I thought I would prepare such a master control, not so much for the performance of a play, but for everything that I would do in terms of trying to get the essence—the best stuff—out of the novel. And I'd have it annotated, so I could refer to it when I wrote the actual screenplay and during the shooting of the movie. So I took Mario's novel, broke it out of its binding, and set upon this task of cutting the pages with a razor blade and mounting them on cutouts of white paper so you could see both sides.

Even the time you take to cut out the pages, get the right binder, and get the hole reinforcements on both sides so the pages never come off during the wear and tear, all of that is sort of like a kind of stalling or being involved in a lengthy process that you know is going to be tedious and take a while. But you're really ruminating over what it is you're going to do. I spent many hours cutting, reinforcing, and gluing the pencil-notated novel pages, and built the loose-leaf notebook with care, so that it could last through the many months of production; it would be the repository of every idea I could think of about this future project. I called it *The Godfather Notebook*, and typed a big notice on the title page, "If found, return to this address for reward," because I recognized that it would have every opinion and idea that I had on the book.

I took my huge notebook, bought a big brown satchel I could lug it around in, got my Olivetti Lettera 32 typewriter and blank paper, went to the Caffe Trieste in North Beach in San Francisco, and set myself up in the afternoons to work on this project. I went there every day for many weeks; I sat at a corner table next to the phone booth, which was sort of private, and I would just sit there, looking at the people coming and going, and go through these pages. I loved it; I was living a dream. I was in a café where there was lots of noise and Italian being spoken, and cute girls walking through, and that was my dream; it was *La Bohème* for me.

I began the notebook by dividing the novel into five acts, and then subdividing those into fifty sections, or scenes, each separated in the binder by a numbered tab. These were divisions *I* elected to do; in other words, I wasn't necessarily following the chapters in Mario's novel. Sometimes my sections corresponded to the actual chapters in the book, but sometimes not. And of course, in the middle of it, all the stuff from the book about the doctor and the

gynecological operation with Lucy Mancini and her love story, I just cut out. I cut out the background on Johnny Fontane in Hollywood. I liked the story of young Vito Corleone in Sicily as an immigrant in America, but I knew I couldn't really delve into that, as I was already under fire from Paramount because I insisted on having the story take place in the 1940s and shooting it in New York. The original script, which I never saw, was set in the 1970s and had hippies and other contemporary elements, and they wanted to shoot it in St. Louis to save money. But I was convinced that New York was a real character in the story and that the film had to be shot in New York City and take place in the 1940s—both of which would make the film more expensive. This was not a popular idea, and they would have been all over me if I had even suggested shooting the young Vito story. So I cut that section out as well. (Later, I did make another, much smaller notebook for *The Godfather: Part II* that incorporated it.) So after thinning out the parts I didn't want, what remained were the sections of the book that I was able to look at and say, "That's what I'm going to try to do."

In front of each of these sections, I decided to type a cover sheet containing my thoughts on what I felt were the key criteria: (1) synopsis, (2) the times, (3) imagery and tone, (4) the core, and (5) pitfalls.

The first category, "synopsis," was literally whatever that part of the book covered, what the description would be: "Michael comes home and talks to his father about pasta, and they do such and such." I'd write a brief paragraph or two saying what was happening in that section. And also, I was being sneaky; I knew that when I was finished, if I just put the synopsis parts of each section together, I'd have the embryo of the script—which I did, and which it was. The script was based on the synopsis of each section.

Next, for "the times," I'd write a short paragraph explaining how the times (the period in the 1940s at the end of WWII) provided factors and context for that part of the story. I felt it was very important that the film be set in the '40s, after the war, because that was a very peculiar time in America; you'd go into a bus station, and maybe half the people would be soldiers. America in the '40s had a certain style. There were many aspects and details that could convey the era, so those would be other criteria.

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Another category I felt would be very useful as a visual realization for me as a director was "imagery and tone." This is, of course, images that seemed to stand out from reading the book or even from the tone of the story. What did I see out of the page of the novel that I could latch onto in terms of the visualization of it? What would it feel like? I would consider everything that happened in that sequence and put down the thoughts I had. Obviously, for a big opening sequence like the wedding, "imagery and tone" comprised pages and pages of ideas and snippets of things, also drawing from my own family and things I remembered as a kid going to Italian weddings. But that was a big section—not all the scenes would have that much imagery and tone.

"The core" was initially inspired by a wonderful chapter in Toby Cole's book *Directors on Directing*, which tells how Elia Kazan prepared his own thinking about *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Kazan believed that every scene in a play comes down to a "core idea," which could be put into a word or two. Every scene should have a core that is at the root of that scene, and the reason that scene is in the piece is only validated if you express that core, if you hit its essence and why the scene is there. It was appealing to me that if you nailed the clarity of that core in each scene, the audience would get that, and that would form the spin of the experience for them. I endeavored to distill the essence of each scene into a sentence, expressing in a few words what the point of the scene was. It was very important, in the course of looking over the novel, always to say clearly what the core of every scene was.

Finally, in "pitfalls," I'd try to guess what I might do wrong or errors I could fall into that would ruin that section. It was another way of saying, "How could I screw this up?" What were the dangers I very easily could find myself in or things I wanted to avoid? "Pitfalls" included all the things I could do wrong and later bitch about, all the things that when I saw the movie would make me say, "Oh, my God, no."

So those were my five criteria, and when I finished typing them up for a section, I'd put that sheet into the big prompt book, and proceed to the next section.

I had finished my scenes, I had broken them down into my five criteria, and

then I very carefully went through each page of the novel, detailing and expanding my original pencil notes with different-colored pens and a ruler, putting down the details of how I would dramatize or especially accentuate certain things. When I saw an opportunity for great effect or showing violence, I'd make notes such as "mists of blood" or "hit hard here." Those were just things that came from my imagination and instinct as I was reading the novel and trying to imagine it, and I put them down on those same pages, in color. But basically, my notes were in black with some red and a few other colors. I marked and noted everything that struck me—action, character, imagery, dialogue—and wrote my reactions next to them. Obviously, the more pens I used and the more ruler and squiggly lines that there were in a section sort of implied the excitement of the book was higher and higher, so that just the sheer amount of ink on a page would tell me later on, *This is one of the most important scenes*. The scene where Michael kills Sollozzo was marked up like that, and also with a big asterisk, which meant an extremely important scene. And indeed it was, not only for the movie but for Al Pacino, because it was in that scene that the executives of Paramount Pictures first caught a glimmer that maybe I had not been crazy in wanting to cast him.

And I didn't know this at the time, but a lot of Mario's wonderful dialogue that I noted, sage remarks like "Make him an offer he can't refuse," all came from his mother. Mario told me that the character of the godfather was based in part on his mother, who was apparently a very practical woman given to pithy remarks. Mario didn't grow up knowing a lot about the Mafia; he wrote the dialogue from research and reading *The Valachi Papers*, and he didn't really speak Italian. The name of the character Don Corleone just shows how naive Mario was; there would never be an Italian called Don Corleone—he would be Don Vito or Don Ciccio if his name were Francis—but there would never be Don Coppola. But he didn't know, so to the world, now it's Don Corleone, which is the power of Mario's great talent.

Some of the notes I made came from my own background, for the book sort of sparked my own memories of having lived in an Italian American family, arguably composed of the same kind of people as these characters. I knew the homemade anisette would have a piece of tape with the date affixed, and it wouldn't

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be clear, it would be cloudy. And when the men were all meeting late at night and sent out for Chinese food . . . who would think an Italian family would do that? But we did. Wherever I saw an opportunity to include the fact that Italian Americans behave a certain way, I made note of it.

The last thing I did was make a list of the characters, and put it at the front of the notebook. The character descriptions were from the novel, and at that time I had no ideas about the cast, other than knowing I wanted Marlon Brando to play the godfather. Later, after the notebook was completed, I wrote in the names of other actors I thought would be good for the various roles.

Several months later, I took the notebook with me to a meeting I had with cinematographer Gordon Willis, production designer Dean Tavoularis, and costume designer Anna Hill Johnstone to plan the visual style of the film. We went through every scene, discussing the visual elements and how the images would be tableaux—the camera rarely moving. I knew I wanted the film to be a very respectful, classic-style piece, full of authentic details evocative of the time, but not trapped by the period.

In truth, I think that I made the notebook out of profound fear. It's important to understand that at the root of it all, I was terrified. I must say I've never approached a project without fear—especially the writing aspect of it—and commitment to the writing. I always felt that I could know a bad performance from a good performance or fake a way to make something look good, but if I were wrong in the script, then that'd be as wrong as I could be. So I was very frightened. I thought that if I could first work out the story on a set of blueprints—a plan—I would then be able to sleep at night. I would feel that at least I would be taking a step forward, that doing it this way would help me get a handle on how to do the script. I was sort of blindly looking for a structure to organize myself in order to get the most out of the subject matter, and the notebook was the result of that.

After I completed the notebook, I wrote the screenplay. The screenplay went fast; it took only a few months, because it was based on the work I had done in the notebook. I would work on the script, write the pages in San Francisco, and then send them to Mario in New York; Mario would change them or just write on

them something like "Great." I had Clemenza saying, "Well, you wanna know how to make the sauce? You take the sausage and you brown the sausage, and then you put in the garlic . . ." And Mario wrote back, "Francis: Gangsters who cook never brown; they fry." He would also offer his perspective and new ideas; it was a nice collaboration.

When I went to shoot the movie, I had this notebook in my big brown bag; I would schlep it around from location to location, and it was always with me, throughout the shooting of the entire film. There was a script, obviously, which was used by the production team and actors, but I really directed the film using the notebook because it had the actual book rather than a screenplay, which had left so much out, so I was able to review not only Mario Puzo's original text, but all my first notations as to what was important to me or what I felt was really going on in the book. The notebook was a kind of multilayered road map for me to direct the film, and the script was really an unnecessary document for me. I didn't need a script because I could have made the movie just from this notebook.

During the filming there were a lot of downs and downs. I know you're supposed to say "ups and downs," but it was down and then another down. It was pretty rough. The notebook was my anchor throughout all of it. It's something I want to keep forever and for my family after me; I would never part with or sell it. But on the other hand, I think people will be interested to see what the actual process was; the notebook was the bridge from the book to the film. It's quite hilarious and amazing to me that the film turned out to be the classic that it did. I realize also that it was somewhat the luck of the draw; for whatever reason, it all came together at the same time: writers, actors, artists, designers, and musicians—talented people got together to do this. And I was very fortunate to have been a part of that. But it is never to be forgotten that *The Godfather* was the creation of Mario Puzo and his wonderful imagination and ability to write.

After the film came out, we found ourselves celebrities. Once, while a group of men who sounded much like the characters in the film were praising the film and me, someone with a gruff New Jersey accent said, regarding Mario Puzo, "Remember, you didn't make him; he made you!"

Thank you, Mario.