

Returns

by David R. Slavitt

The Godfather Part III

Produced by Francis Ford Coppola

Written by Mario Puzo and
Mr. Coppola

Directed by Mr. Coppola

Released by Paramount Pictures

Awakenings

Produced by Walter F. Parkes and

Lawrence Lasker

Written by Steven Zaillian

Directed by Penny Marshall

Released by Columbia Pictures

Alice

Produced by Robert Greenhut

Written and directed by

Woody Allen

Released by Orion Pictures

The return of Francis Ford Coppola to the Godfather epic was clearly the movie event of 1990. The first two parts of the Godfather series had both won Oscars (Best Picture), and there was so much pressure—or skepticism—about the likelihood of a third film maintaining their extraordinarily high level that the critics wound up being kindly in their treatment. In a bizarre way, Coppola had become an underdog for whom it was impossible not to root. There was also the possibility that innocent movie-going was still alive and that some of these critics, remembering the earlier pictures and their easy zest, just wanted to have a good time.

Coppola seems to have understood

this and exploited it. *Godfather Part III* is frankly nostalgic, full of references and clips of the earlier movies, which are not mere embellishments but structural elements. He seems to be encouraging the audience to join Michael Corleone in a sentimental wallow. Al Pacino is not only respectable now but enfeebled, the ravages of eight years having taken a greater toll on him than on such other continuing players as Diane Keaton or Talia Shire. He seems less dangerous, devious perhaps but mostly benign. Menace is left to the likes of Joey Zasa (Joe Mantegna), an ambitious younger hoodlum, or to Michael Corleone's nephew—Sonny's illegitimate son—Vincent Mancini (Andy Garcia). The real plot of the film is the way in which Vincent becomes Michael's surrogate son and the heir to the enterprise, while its theme is Michael's frustration as he tries to become legitimate and respectable. "The higher you go, the crookeder it gets," he says.

It's an uneven film, shorter than the two earlier parts, but draggier and fuzzy in some of its details. The opening, in which Michael Corleone is awarded the Order of San Sebastian, is stately and handsome: Gordon Willis is still running the cameras and has become ever more painterly, which is not always a good thing, especially during some of the boring sections in the middle—we're not supposed to be so aware of how pretty these shots are. But the last half hour or so, corny, extravagant, and frankly operatic, is just fine, an elegant invocation of the real artistic and intellectual tradition in which Coppola is working—the grand gestures of opera stages serve mostly to make palatable a shallow if not absolutely stupid set of notions about life, love, death, and honor. Corleone has at last come home, not only to Sicily but to the opera house in Palermo, where his son, Anthony (Franc D'Ambrosio), is singing Turiddu in *Cavalleria Rusticana*. Concerts and operas have their decorum, as Hitchcock so elegantly demonstrated in several films, and the violence of an assassin lurking in the audience and training his sights upon his victim seems even more shocking than it would in almost any other setting. Coppola is invoking the baptism sequence of the first film and all but matching it—in a wonderfully

good-humored romp that is similarly spectacular (in the sense of eye-glasses).

Less good-humored was the news that on an opening day showing in Valley Stream, Long Island, there were arguments among the audience, one group of ruffians making noise and another making almost as much of a disturbance with their shushing. Guns were drawn, bullets fired, and four people were hit, all of them innocent bystanders. One fifteen-year-old boy was killed. There are a variety of possible readings of this debacle—mine being that the structure of the movie is perhaps too sophisticated for the mass audience for which it was intended, at least by the Paramount executives. Coppola's attitude toward these films has been ambivalent, and he is said to prefer his other, more "serious" and certainly less successful work. The Paramount people were clearly correct, however, to make him an offer he couldn't refuse (this line does not occur in *Godfather Part III*), for the first day's receipts of something more than six million dollars broke all previous one-day records. Nevertheless, some of the audiences are—obviously—restless. The violence in Valley Stream came after the sequence in which Joey Zasa's people massacre a whole slew of Mafiosi in a rooftop restaurant in Atlantic City—a lively if somewhat mannerist demonstration of carnage that woke up the thugs in the audience. But then, after a few minutes, when the delight of this bloodshed was not repeated—Arnold Schwarzenegger knows exactly how many seconds may be allowed to pass between sprayings of red stuff across the screen—they made up the perceived deficiency themselves. In such circumstances, for Michael Corleone to be sickened, tired, and even disgusted . . . seems quite correct.

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I had my own moments of impatience with the picture, but I am less violent than I used to be and even mellower. In a way, it was entertaining to see Coppola's own daughter, Sofia, playing the part of Michael's daughter, Mary, who is in love with her cousin Vincent. She is awkward enough to have attracted a lot of comment, which suggests that Coppola must have noticed her maladroitness and decided, for whatever reason, to leave her in the picture and go with whatever statement that gesture implied. I find myself wondering what it could mean—a contempt for Paramount's money and greed? A way of answering back and signing the picture, claiming it with some piece of sabotage? Or are we to take her in some larger emblematic way, reading in her face a cue to the Old Masters who would put themselves or their family members into altar pieces and other such public performances? The gesture in the direction of opera is clearly a conscious contrivance, to which this may be a complementary trope. She is never quite bad enough to ruin the film, but one notices sufficiently to keep the movie at a slight remove from the immediacy the Valley Stream louts might have preferred.

Of *Awakenings* I have relatively little to say. The picture is worth mentioning for the brilliant performances of Robert De Niro and Robin Williams. The story is of the brief revival of a group of catatonic patients on L-dopa and their relapse to near inertia. It is obviously tear-jerker stuff, a variant on a number of earlier films (*Charly*, for instance, with Cliff Robertson as the retard who is transiently smartened up, but basically *The Prince and the Pauper*). The message, which is trumpeted loudly enough to suggest that Penny Marshall's intended audience is on the lower slope of the bell curve, is that life is precious and we should all be grateful for the gift of each second that is afforded to us. Crankily, I am tempted to counter that if each second is so precious, fewer of them should be wasted on this kind of ersatz uplift . . . but De Niro was so good as to make me decide that I hadn't wasted the time after all. (On the other hand, Robertson got an Oscar for his performance in *Charly*.)

By the end, when De Niro is put

back to bed and we see him reduced to diapered helplessness, Robin Williams, the shy doctor, is finally emboldened to invite Julie Kavner, the noble nurse, to join him for a cup of coffee. Seize the gusto! Live each moment of your life as if it were important! Get the message? Well, we do, and it is difficult to keep from giggling. One feels at such a moment a kind of nostalgia for Sofia Coppola, whose badness was at least interesting enough to think about.

Woody Allen's new piece, *Alice*, is also a return to old themes and techniques. There are some very funny moments, and this is, in many ways, a laudable film. It seems almost churlish to complain that there used to be a bitter tang to some of Allen's humor, a hard edge of cutting anger, and while the sweetness that has replaced it in this good-humored piece is evidence that Allen's life and psyche are in good order, the level of achievement is less lofty than what it was.

This time around, we have Mia Farrow (sounding more and more like Allen as she reads his lines with the hesitations and hitches he once relied on in his own routines) as a victim of surfeit. Julie Kavner comes in to do a short turn as an interior decorator who presents Alice with an eel trap, an odd oblate construction out of wicker-work, and announces, "They're hard to come by," and says, "It's a steal at nine thousand." Alice seems unclear in her reaction, and Julie Kavner advises her to "live with it for a while."

But that's exactly what she is having trouble doing. Her sixteen-year-long marriage to Doug (William Hurt) has turned stale and perfunctory. Alice isn't doing anything but shopping and consuming. It is the predictable mid-life crisis, and, naturally, she meets Joe (Joe Mantegna), with whom she has the predictable affair. What Woody Allen has done to enliven this is to introduce a bizarre Chinese herbalist, Dr. Yang, brilliantly played by Keye Luke from the old Charlie Chan movies. Dr. Yang's packets of herbs and philtres transform not only Alice's life but the film too into a version of Latin-American Magical Realism. The fantasies and dream sequences are not new—Allen has always embellished his movies with these odd riffs, wonderful leftovers from his days as a stand-up comedian. But their impact

now is different, gentler, less driven by panic than by some vision of bliss. Thus, Alice and the ghost of one of her old lovers take flight and soar, Peter Pan-like, over the dreamland of nighttime New York, while lush strings play "Moonlight Becomes You," and there are rather self-conscious beauty shots of the surf of Long Island. It is not supposed to be funny. On the contrary, this is meant as uplifting, and true, and is virtually without irony.

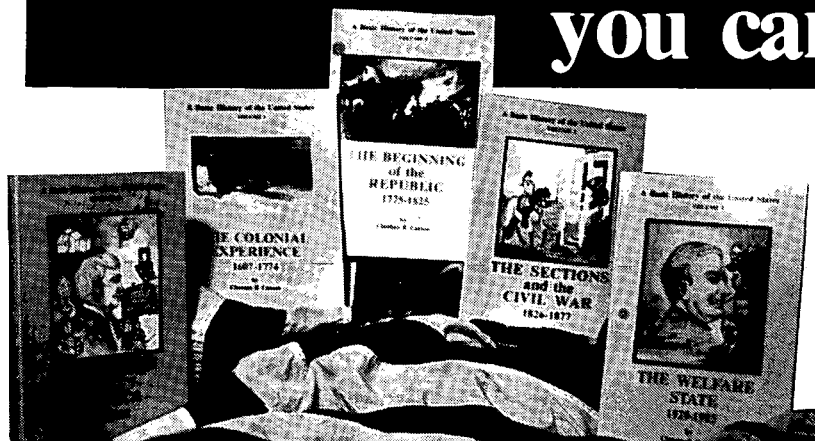
There are some funny bits, and some nostalgic gestures to old movie-movies. One of the preparations of the inscrutable Dr. Yang has the effect of making the patient briefly invisible, and Allen, Farrow, and Mantegna have great fun with this. At another juncture, upset and uncertain, Alice repairs to Dr. Yang's shabby offices for an emergency visit, and she finds that he lives there, and indeed that, at night, it's an old-fashioned opium den. To see Mia Farrow, in her Peter Pan collar and pearls, puffing away on the opium pipe and then curling up on the floor next to another virtually unconscious habitué, is quite mad and splendid. But that manic energy we expected from Allen is only evident in these quick flashes.

At the end, Alice goes off to the streets of Calcutta to join Mother Teresa in her good works (as if the purpose of the starving hordes of Calcutta were to provide spiritual opportunities for New York's matrons sated by Henry Bendel). The treatment of this curious resolution is deliberately straight, clearly un-ironic, for Alice then comes home to work with the Manhattan homeless, and she has "real values" and pours milk for her children!

This dopiness comes, however, after a brilliant piece of plotting that I resist revealing, a bit of business about a love potion Dr. Yang has supplied that is up there with the best of Allen's old work. But I worry about his happiness and mellowness. It's fine, personally, but it doesn't make for the zany, angry, hurt, and puzzled brilliance of such earlier pieces as *Stardust Memories*. The new, happier, more serious Allen seems to be trying to go beyond Fellini and he is nudging up against Frank Capra.

David R. Slavitt is a poet and novelist who lives in Philadelphia.

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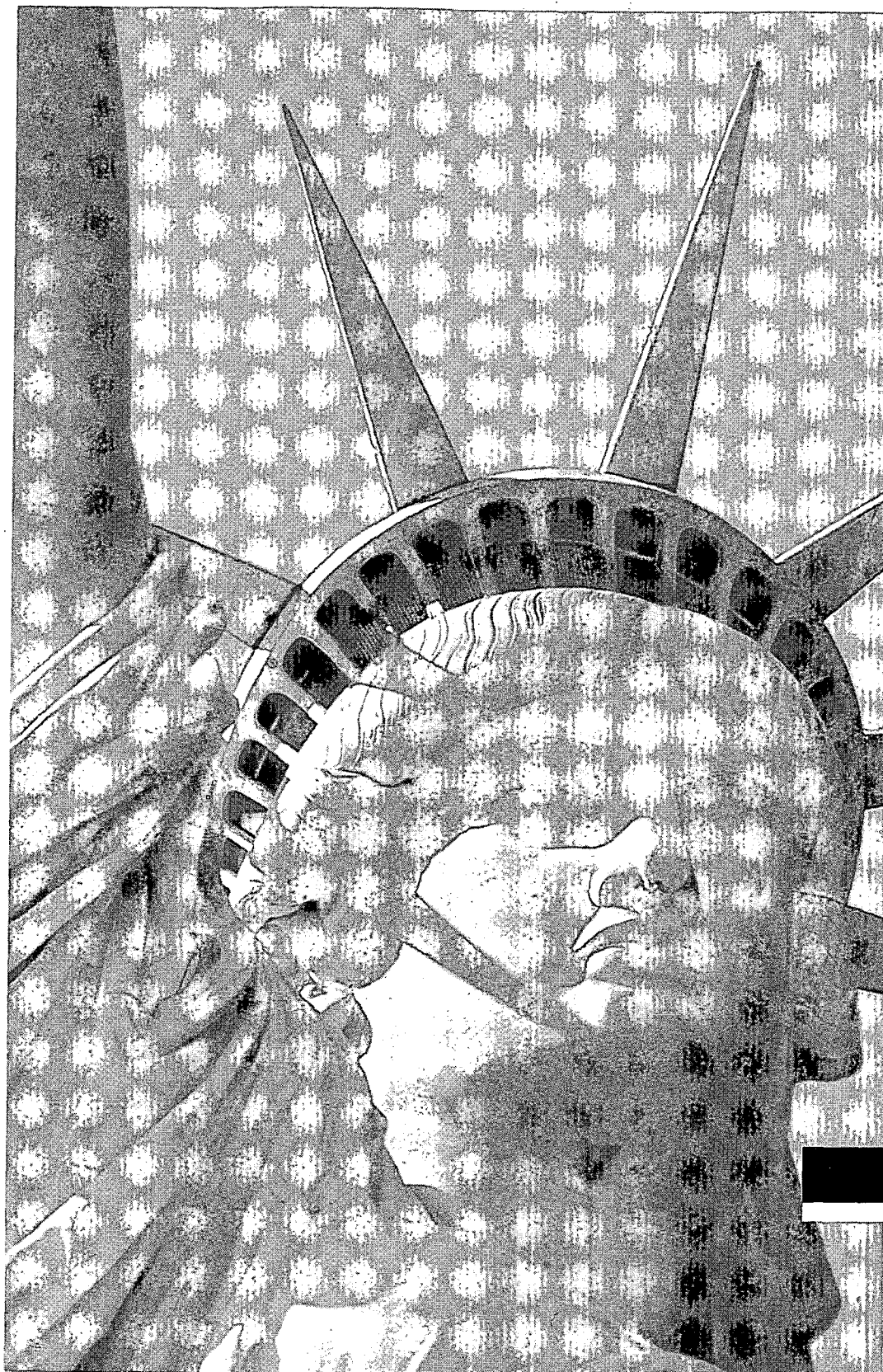
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