

Sonny's favorite movie

It was 'The Godfather,' and he thought he was the inspiration for Sonny

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Al Pacino, Marlon Brando, James Caan and John Cazale in Paramount Pictures' 1972 film "The Godfather." Photo credit: Paramount Pictures / Everett Coll

Like any film buff, Sonny Franzese has a favorite movie. His is "The Godfather."

"Terrific movie. I think it's one of the best movies ever made," Franzese said in an interview at his nursing home. The sequel, "Godfather Part II," was "fantastic."

His appraisal was based, in part, on the lead actors, several of whom he said he knows. Al Pacino, who played mob patriarch Vito Corleone's son Michael, was his favorite. "He's a nice guy, Al," Franzese said. "Hell of an actor, hell of an actor. I think he's about the best actor around today." Pacino, he said, can "play anything."

He also liked Robert De Niro, who portrayed a young Vito Corleone in "Godfather Part II." "De Niro is a good, uh, second," he opined.

Franzese's critical eye was informed by his unique expertise, as well, according to his son, John Jr. When they watched "Godfather Part II" together, the story of Vito Corleone's early life as a young Italian immigrant in Hell's Kitchen, Franzese had particularly acute insights.

That became evident during the scene of the funeral for Vito's wife, the mother of the movie's three dissimilar sons. There, Michael, the son now leading the family, and Fredo, the older brother who had betrayed him, embrace.

Up to that moment, John Jr. said, "Michael was never going to kill him." Then his father tracked the moment

when Michael's feelings changed. "He said if you notice when Michael hugged him, [Fredo] came with a gun," John recalled.

A close viewing of the scene shows no obvious gun, just a hand with a watch — Michael's hand — on Fredo's back. It pauses briefly, as if he felt a gun, although it is not clear. But to Franzese, that moment was crystal clear.

As John Jr. related, "The fact that you brought a gun to a funeral to meet your family meant that you didn't feel safe anymore when Michael said come back."

If he didn't trust them, they couldn't trust him. Fredo had to go.

In John's view it was the kind of insight into Mafia life that only someone who lived it could have, which is why Franzese refused to believe the movie was a work of pure fiction. Mario Puzo, who wrote the 1969 bestseller on which the movie is based and who died in 1999, always insisted it was.

"He had to get it from a mob guy," Franzese said. "Puzo couldn't get that information himself. He had to get it from somebody."

And Franzese believed Corleone's oldest son, the libidinous and hot-tempered Sonny, was named for him. He said the idea could have been planted with Puzo by mob boss Joe (Joe Bananas) Bonanno, who was unpopular within the Mafia because he constantly maneuvered against other bosses.

Bonanno, Franzese said, wanted to make him look bad because he was jealous of him.

Puzo, who wrote a memoir before he died, denied knowing any gangsters. He did, however, admit to heavy gambling, which, through bookmaking and loan-sharking, was the province of mobsters.

"Puzo knew me good," Franzese said, declining to elaborate.

Gianni Russo, the actor who played Carlo in the film, said he also knew Puzo. He said Puzo told him his characters were composites of mobsters he researched, adding that Franzese was "a legend."

Regardless of the work's genesis, the movie never would have been made without the help of the Colombo family.

After hearing of filming plans in New York in 1970, Joe Colombo, then head of the Colombo family, used his Italian-American Civil Rights League to protest what he said would be an ethnically biased film. Colombo publicly denied there was a Mafia, calling it an ethnic slur.

The pressure escalated when the movie's producers found themselves blocked from working at already approved locations and getting threatening phone calls, according to news accounts at the time.

They sat down with Colombo and reached an agreement: In exchange for hiring some Colombo associates as extras and striking the words "Cosa Nostra" from the film, their troubles would be over, according to a 1972 New York Times article and Russo. Among those who gained employment was Lenny Montana, a 300-pound Colombo enforcer who played the loyal hit man Luca Brasi and who happened to be the uncle of a Nassau detective who once arrested Franzese for a parole violation.

Such business dealings were Franzese's special area of expertise. Tony Napoli, the son of the late Genovese capo Jimmy Napoli, said Franzese was a "consultant" on the film.

"The word 'consultant' is not the word that they used," Napoli said in an interview. "They would come to a man like Sonny, different areas, OK them to do shooting there. Otherwise, your trailers would be missing, if you know what I mean."

Asked about that, Franzese denied it emphatically.

He was in prison at the time of the filming, though friends say he conducted business even behind bars.

Franzese also professed a close connection to actors in the movie, in particular James Caan, the actor who played Sonny. Franzese said he got to know him "through the picture."

That connection emerged in film credits later on when the crime drama, "This Thing of Ours," about the Mafia and starring Caan, was made in 2003. Franzese is listed as an associate producer, even though he was not impressed by the final product.

"That was a baloney movie," he said.

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