

A movie we couldn't refuse — or could we? 'The Godfather,' a half century later

By JOEL SAMBERG

Exactly 50 years ago, in the spring of 1972, my friend Bob and I put on black shirts and white ties (for some reason that's what we thought guys in the Mafia wore) and got on line to see "The Godfather" at the Mid-Island Mall in Plainview.

Because of the national buzz, there were hundreds of people standing toe to heel on a line that crossed over two other stores. Bob and I were the only ones dressed like that. We may also have been the only two refused entry because we were 15 and didn't have parental supervision.

But I went back that night, with my parents. In the intervening half-century, I've taken some time to reflect. Here's the biggest question my reflection raises: If I could go back in time — but with the ethics and morals of my older self — would I have hung up a poster of Sonny Corleone on my bedroom wall, as I did back then? Is it okay to glorify criminals, even fictional ones? I can't escape the fact that I was captivated by the character, as played by James Caan. Sure, he was a hoodlum, but a rugged, funny and passionate one. (In my defense, I also hung up posters of Humphrey Bogart from "Casablanca" and Kate Jackson from "Charlie's Angels.")

Here's what I've decided about that: Back then, I believed there was a thick line between fact and fiction — that most of the bad guys with whom I was familiar from movies and television were firmly make-believe, and that real-life bad guys were not nearly as engaging. Now, however, there are bad guys all over the place. Elected politicians, award-winning actors, business titans, even television and radio hosts. Today I would not wish to add to the unraveling of society by lionizing a miscreant, real or imagined, on my bedroom wall because that line now feels so damned thin.

I had always thought that "The Godfather" was a perfect movie. So did millions of other people. Everyone bought into it as if it were real. Including my father, next to whom I sat in the theater that night. In the middle of Connie and Carlo's wedding, outside the compound, when several men in business suits walk around and jot down license plate numbers, my father leaned over and with complete conviction said to me, "That's the FBI." He wasn't explaining the movie, but telling me what was really happening. As if it were news footage. Or something going down in front of our own house. It gave me an instant reverence for the art of film and the way movies can make us believe. I think it was that scene that made me long, more than anything else, to become involved one day with that kind of perfection. To grow up and make movies.

It was only much later, after watching it more than a dozen times, that I realized it was far from perfect. All devotees know at least one scene to which I'm referring — that infamous one when Sonny beats up Carlo and clearly misses his head. But there are more subtle instances, such as the actions of Robert Duvall's Tom Hagen. As written, the character isn't nearly as smart as a consigliere should be. What consigliere worth his weight in olive oil would warn a vicious adversary to stay clear of the one man who might try to kill him? But that's exactly what Tom does when he's temporarily kidnapped by Virgil Sollozzo. When Sollozzo tells Tom that the Don is dead, Tom says, "Even Sonny won't be able to call off Luca Brasi." I know that Luca was already dead by this point, but Tom didn't know that. It was dumb of Tom.

A minor criticism, perhaps, but on the 50th anniversary, it's comforting to know that things don't have to be perfect in order to be, well, just about perfect. It somehow gives me hope. Here's another source of comfort. Mario Puzo, author of the novel and co-writer of the screenplay, was 49 when "The Godfather" was published. It was his first real success after decades of trying. When I saw the film I was a teenage wannabe novelist and thrilled that if I didn't make it for another 34 years, it would be okay.

I'm 64 now, and still waiting. For what it's worth, I'm still waiting to make movies, too.

Which brings up one final point. In the famous wedding scene, Tom says to his wife, "No Sicilian can refuse a favor on his daughter's wedding day." It makes me wish I knew a Sicilian bride. I'd rush over to her father and ask him to pull a few strings to make it 1972 all over again.

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