

# MARTIN SCORSESE

## Oustanding Achievement in Directing Award

**D**irector Martin Scorsese long ago proved that he is one of the greatest filmmakers of the latter half of the 20th century, if not all time, with such acclaimed films as "Mean Streets" (1973), "Taxi Driver" (1976), "Raging Bull" (1980), "GoodFellas" (1990) and "Casino" (1995). Many in his position would be content to rest on their laurels, but as the onetime seminary student prepares to enter his sixth decade of life, he maintains a passion for film that some would say borders on the fanatical. The Hollywood Outstanding Achievement in Directing Award honoree spoke recently with **Todd Longwell** for **The Hollywood Reporter** about life changes, script changes, improvisation, collaboration and his upcoming historical epic "Gangs of New York" (due Dec. 25), a dream project that has been simmering in his head for more than 30 years.

### dialogue

with Martin Scorsese

**The Hollywood Reporter:** You originally planned to make "Gangs" in the late 1970s. Do you think it would've been a significantly different film if you'd gotten the greenlight back then?

**Martin Scorsese:** It could've been. On the one hand, you're the same person, but as you get older, you change somewhat, and you never know how it's going to affect your work. When myself and (screenwriter) Paul Schrader were working on "Bringing Out the Dead" (1999), we were dealing with material similar to "Taxi Driver," only instead of an angel of death, it was an angel of life. My approach to "Gangs of New York" has changed over the last 25 years in different ways, where maybe you're depicting a violent society, but the actual playing out of the violence is not as important to me as all the cultural envy, the sort of primal family conflicts in the picture.

**THR:** Were you actually ready to shoot "Gangs" back in '79 or '80?

**Scorsese:** Not quite. By the time (screenwriter) Jay Cocks had made that first pass, that's when the industry sort of changed in a way. I was doing "Raging Bull," and by the time it came out, everything had changed in terms of the kind of big films that were being financed. More personal films, you could make them, but your budgets would be cut down. I think what happened there was just the budget would be too big to build these sets because nothing really exists here in New York of that period; you have to build it all. It isn't like England, where you have Edwardian houses and mansions from the 17th century that you can actually shoot in. And sometimes, it's just a matter of set dressing, costumes and hair. It's a big difference.

**THR:** On "Taxi Driver," you improvised in rehearsal to flesh out some parts of the script.

**Scorsese:** Yeah, because Schrader's script ... The beauty of his work there is the tightness of it and how concise and direct it is, but it allowed us to open it up in a few scenes.

One is the scene with (Robert) De Niro in front of the mirror, which I asked him to improvise dialogue for. There was no dialogue written, but I thought that if he's fantasizing, he should talk to himself.

**THR:** Is that your standard operating procedure?

**Scorsese:** That's the way I like to work best. If it's a modern-day story dealing with certain ethnic groups, I think I could open up certain scenes for improvisation, while staying within the structure of the script.

**THR:** Did you allow the actors to improvise on "Gangs"?

**Scorsese:** Constantly. We were not only doing that but also rewriting certain things as we were shooting the characters and heightening things that I decided ... how should I put it? Things that were going one way, I just said, "I like that direction. Let's see if we can do more of that sort of thing." Kenny Lonergan (who shares screenwriting credits with Jay Cocks and Steve Zaillian) was on the set working that way very often.

**THR:** Do you generally have the screenwriter on the set, constantly rewriting?

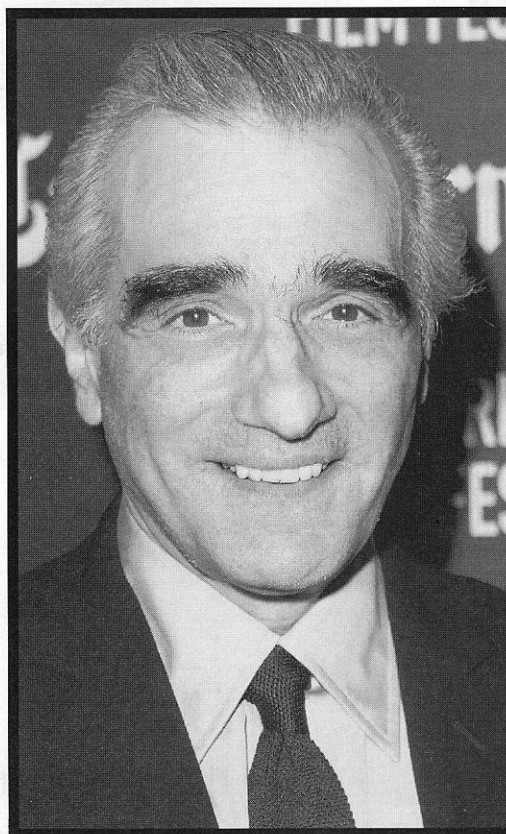
**Scorsese:** I did on "Cape Fear" (1991), where we literally rewrote every scene, and Wesley Strick was on the set every day. On "Casino," I was one of the writers, so basically, it was myself improvising with the actors around the structure, rewriting every day; that's what we had on "Gangs of New York." Ultimately, I was able to open it up. I didn't want it to be stiff. I wanted it to have some life.

**THR:** Is it true that Daniel Day-Lewis was living in his character of Bill the Butcher 24 hours a day during the making of "Gangs"?

**Scorsese:** Yes, he was. It was great. He was really Bill. If I had any questions about the character, I'd just go ask him.

**THR:** Does Leonardo DiCaprio work the same way?

**Scorsese:** It's pretty similar. I think one of the things about shooting (at Cinecitta Studios) in Rome and having the sets built



created a place; the more weather occurred, the more the place was lived in and had a feeling of life around it. So Leo just felt like he was part of the city streets, and within about two or three weeks, he was like one of these street kids. He was really inspired by everybody around him, particularly when you see all the supporting characters and the extras in these costumes and hair — you really feel like you're back in time.

**THR:** You've done quite a bit of acting yourself.

**Scorsese:** Every year or so, I try to do something; it keeps me refreshed as to what's going on in front of the lens, and I understand what the actor is going through. But my "acting" is of a contemporary style in a contemporary setting. If you were to say, "I'm going to do a film in the Medici (period)," I don't think I could act in it.

**THR:** Well, you were pretty convincing as that homicidal husband in "Taxi Driver."

**Scorsese:** That's me. What can I say? I have to live with me. I'm going to be 60, and I'm almost used to myself. I always say that I've been in a bad mood for maybe 35 years now. I try to lighten it up, but that's what comes out when you get me on camera. ■