

THE MISSION



British Film Year ended last May in a triumphant success at the Cannes Film Festival with the showing of **The Mission** and the fact that it was awarded the Golden Palm, the highest award at Cannes. It's a remarkable and unique film, based on a difficult chapter in history in which a group of Jesuits decide to close their missions in 18th century Portuguese South America. In fact, it took producer Fernando Ghia ten years to raise the money and put it into production. But the long wait has proved well worth while.

Robert Bolt's beautifully written screenplay takes the complexities of church and empire and weaves them into a fascinating drama of pathos, brutality and love of mankind. Robert de Niro plays a reformed mercenary who becomes a priest and Jeremy Irons is his wise and understanding mentor. When the heel of the Vatican comes down on the innocent natives, each man faces a personal dilemma — to fight or not to fight; and each man remains true to his own instincts. In the blackened aftermath, there are no heroes and no martyrs.

Roland Joffe, who made *The*

Killing Fields, directs this epic with a mastery approaching that of David Lean. He has captured on film the stunning magnitude and the majesty of nature around the impressive Iguazu waterfall in Colombia. Set against this is the misery of men, who must suffer the territorial conflicts between the Guarani Indians, protected by the Jesuit mission and the Portuguese invaders who have been ceded, in a treaty with Spain, the land on which they must finally perish.

"From *The Killing Fields* to **The Mission** was a logical step" said the soft-spoken director. "I wanted to make another film which involved as much of me as possible. I did not know the country at all, but I was immediately taken with the subject, and most of all, with the great beauty of the location.

"The film explores the role of the church and the relationship between morality and good government; in some ways it constitutes a complete historical incident on its own and in that sense it is closed. But the film also has reverberations and relevances to today. It is about the betrayal of a people and that betrayal continues today, not just in South America but elsewhere in the world.

"There are fundamental ques-

tions of what it is to be a human being in such a situation, how much individuals are capable of change and the role of love and violence in individual lives, questions of personal and public moralities.

"But I wouldn't want to be more specific than that," concluded Roland Joffe, "as to what it is actually 'about'. I think I leave that up to audiences and their own reactions. I actually love talking to people and making films is a way of doing that, but of course, by talking I don't mean an excess of dialogue. I use the camera to try and create understanding, and this is what **The Mission** is really about."

David Puttnam became involved as co-producer of **The Mission** in 1978 when he first met Fernando Ghia. "I was trying to drum up interest in *Chariots of Fire* and he showed me Robert Bolt's screenplay for **The Mission** which really moved me. He was always ready to make the film but was always being let down. When I worked with Roland Joffe on *The Killing Fields* I came to appreciate his skills and his ethical conviction. So I called Fernando, who liked Roland and we raised the money through Goldcrest.

"Filming in Colombia was extremely difficult. We had to create everything and to ship in

everything from England and Europe. And I was scared to death of the budget. Roland shared all the difficulties of filming of course and made himself ill over the compromises and pressures placed upon him.

"And the film crew put themselves through a life experience which none would want to repeat. Yet they did it with very little rancour. I wish everyone could experience just one day of what they went through. They're an extraordinary group of people and they have every right to be incredibly proud of this film."

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A note to moviegoers: The Mission begins and ends with the face of Cardinal Altamirano (Ray McAnally) the Pope's envoy to South America in 1750, staring out of the screen with a look of terrible accusation and remorse. Such is the power of this film framed by these two silent images that they convey all the guilt of every nation responsible for genocide and spoliation. But to see this final image, you must sit through the end credits. The effect of this face returning to look at you before the screen goes dark is haunting in the extreme.

— Gerald Pratley

