

# SUNDAY EXPRESS *magazine*

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID APPELEY

Roland Joffé has achieved his Mission—by directing Robert de Niro (above) and Jeremy Irons in his acclaimed film. By Robert Temple

## A DIRECTOR'S MISSION

The extraordinary talents of Roland Joffé go on view next week when Robert de Niro and Jeremy Irons star under his direction in the most impressive British film for years.

*The Mission* is a passionate movie set in the jungles of South America, a story of personal, political and religious conflicts.

Producer David Puttnam (who also produced Joffé's last film, *The Killing Fields*) has described *The Mission* as "an intellectual theme treated with guts". And when it was shown at the Cannes Film Festival as just an unfinished "work in progress", it picked up ecstatic reviews and the prestigious Golden Palm award.

But very different talents are on

view the moment one steps into Roland Joffé's Victorian house in Chelsea. He has redesigned the interior, removed walls, inserted windows and built in a panelled and glazed partition from a French bakery of the last century. It's a stunning and daring interior reconstruction by a man who once wanted to be an architect.

And, sitting at his inlaid desk inside his Chelsea home, he has a simple explanation for directing two major films which deal with

**Jeremy Irons as Father Gabriel, an 18th-century Jesuit priest, leads the Guarani Indians out of the mission he establishes in the South American jungle**



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22 powerful moral issues. "I have a kid's passionate love of fairness," he says.

Roland Joffé was born in 1945, an only child of a part French, part Jewish family. "We used to tease my aunt," he says, "because she was the Catholic in the family." He went to the French Lycée in London, but then went to the Jewish Carmel College, despite not being a Jew himself, "because my family thought it would be a good idea". He was still a child when he went to see *The Bridge Over the River Kwai* with a group of adults and had his first inkling of the power of the cinema.

"What I learned from going to that film was not from watching the film," he explains, "but from watching the faces of the people I was with. Here were adult faces with liberated expressions. They were so engrossed in the film, they were so carried away by the emotions it aroused in them that they let this show on their faces.

"I had never seen such expressions on the faces of adults before. And these were people for whom I had some

feelings as well, so seeing this meant even more to me. And that did more than anything to convince me of the enormous power of the big screen."

After university, Joffé went into the theatre, planning the Young Vic with Frank Dunlop in London, and then becoming the youngest director at the National Theatre. Then, five years later, he switched to television and directed everything from four episodes of *Coronation Street* to *Play for Today*. It was only when TV actor Colin Welland praised Joffé's talents to producer David Puttnam that Roland got his break on to the big screen.

"Puttnam asked me to read a script and make a report on it for him," Joffé recalls with relish. "It was *The Killing Fields*.

"It was compulsive reading and I stayed up all night. But after I finished it, I realised I knew absolutely nothing about Cambodia, so I went out and bought a lot of books on the subject, simply be-



## THE MAKING OF THE MISSION

*The Mission* was filmed entirely on location in the jungles of Argentina and Colombia: a colossal undertaking in terms of both men and machines.

Along with the production team, 225 boxes of camera and sound equipment had to be flown out, while 12 further containers of construction, catering and electrical equipment were sent by sea. A mere 86 vehicles from buses to barges had to be used on location and, when access was only available by river, the

film crew were using 32 boats a day.

"It was extremely exciting, but difficult," says Chris Menges, Director of Photography. "Roland likes to get the camera into the best possible places—and they always seemed to be the most difficult.

"The bulk of the heavy equipment had to be moved in by helicopter, and miles of catwalk were constructed so we could get through the jungle ourselves.

"And there was an enormous amount of

construction work to build scaffolding towers on which to raise the cameras."

Three hundred and fifty Wuanana Indians were hired to play the Guarani in the film. "Through an interpreter, Roland carefully explained what the story was about," says Chris, "and the Indians just got on with it.

"Roland can just pick good faces and good actors out of everyday people, whether they're Indians or whatever."

In all, the crew were

on location for some 15 weeks. "We were terribly careful with the jungle, because it is a very precious habitat and we treasured it.

"But I don't believe we could have made the film in a studio. The real place and the real Indians made it all possible, and the location is part of the drama of the film itself.

"I'm left with the impression that Roland Joffé is a man who is always looking for the impossible—and seems to get it."

cause I wanted to learn more about it.

"I wrote a very strong report for Puttnam about the potential of the script for the screen, recommending it highly and making various suggestions and points which I thought were relevant. And I thought that was the end of that.

"There was about seven or eight months' silence from Puttnam after that and we didn't meet again until we bumped into each other at a film awards ceremony. David had just received an award for *Chariots of Fire* which, although I admired it, was not my sort of film. I told him I was writing a feature film script about Angolan mercenaries and that I would be working on that. And he said, 'Oh no you won't. You won't be writing any script. You're going to be a very busy man for the next year or two, or maybe even three, because you're going to direct that film about Cambodia for me.' And then he was gone.

"Well, I didn't know what on

earth to make of that. When I got home, I said to myself, 'I can't have heard him right. He can't have meant that he really wanted me to direct *The Killing Fields* because that would be a really big film with a huge budget. That would involve millions of dollars.' But he did mean it."

It was an extraordinary debut. In his first feature film, Joffé handled a \$15 million budget and directed a film which picked up three American and eight British Academy Awards. After that success, Joffé said, "I wanted to do something that was different in style from *The Killing Fields*, but also a subject that would make me think, or at least was about issues that interested me."

When Puttnam offered him the script of *The Mission*, written by Sir Robert Bolt, Joffé, it was reported, read the script on a plane to New York.

"My first reaction was that it was very theatrical, but I began to be fascinated by the subject. I telephoned David Puttnam and said I

was interested if he was. I hadn't done anything like it, but I could see in it something very visual, emotional and extremely thought provoking.

"I thought we could make something extraordinary out of the story, especially as it was about South America and the root of much of what is happening now."

So, the story goes, he met up with Bolt and explained that if the author had no objection to a director who was not a religious man, then he would like to go ahead with it.

"I could see immediately that he was seriously interested," Bolt said after that first meeting with Joffé. "He listens, is full of enthusiasm. He told me various things about my script he felt were wrong and I said I knew how to get them right. All in all, he made lots of little points and they were all very good ones."

Robert de Niro was cast in the central character of Mendoza, the slave trader who becomes a Jesuit priest. "Bob was the only person I could think of who I believed could change, who would un-

dergo a shift of consciousness and would suggest the depth of Mendoza," said Joffé.

"Bob is very shy and private, very likeable," he said of the reclusive superstar. "I think one has to earn a relationship with him.

"He was very challenging. I wanted to do my job well because of him. I wanted to release his talents as much as possible.

"I think the power relationship is one I am not used to," he admitted. "I wasn't used to having a man of that stature in a film. But Bob, in fact, worked as a very, very good companion. We all worked very closely together and he was very much one of the group."

Jeremy Irons, in the other starring role, already admired Joffé's work. "I knew of his work at the Young Vic," Irons said, "and I had seen *The Killing Fields* twice in the space of three days—something I've only done once before and that was with *Death in Venice*.

"Roland knows what you need and when. He is wonderfully ▶27

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25◀ generous about making you feel that the huge paraphernalia, the sets and the lights, is actually set up so you can do that little moment.

"He is very imaginative in the way he focuses things for you, the way he interests you and the way he makes it real for you."

Joffé's own directorial respect goes out to Ken Loach, the British director, and to Akira Kurosawa who he met in Japan. "I looked everywhere around me for something for him to autograph," he admits. "But, finally, I had to get him to sign my shirtcuff. And then, of course, I had to cut the cuff off the shirt later and frame it."

It's because of the producer's energy that he likes David Puttnam so much. "When I first met him, I liked him right away. I thought, 'Here is a man with a powerful, nervous intelligence'. I knew his was a questioning mind."

And of all the attributes Joffé values, those rank higher. "Energy and curiosity are two great gifts," he says. "It's worth sacrificing a lot of cats for curiosity."

Despite the fact that *The Mission* is already being hailed as the salvation both of Goldcrest and the British film industry, Joffé still finds the system in this country



**Joffé with producer David Puttnam: *The Killing Fields* was their first joint venture**

drives him to distraction. "We in Britain are not geared to realising dreams, but rather to keeping things as they are.

"The reason why the American film business has always been such a huge success is that American life

is predicted on the assumption that every man's dream can be realised—and making movies is a quick way of doing just that.

"The British mentality is the reason why the British financial institutions cannot and will not support a British film business."

But now Joffé has been launched into the international level of film production. "He'll be getting a

million dollars a picture now," says Jake Eberts, head of Goldcrest. His next film, about atomic scientists, will take him to Hollywood for the best part of the next two years.

Roland Joffé is going to be used to "really big films" and "huge budgets" from now on. However, he is equally determined that his films will have "really big ideas" to match. ■