

Fantasy Life

Childhood polio allowed imagination to take flight, and a star was born

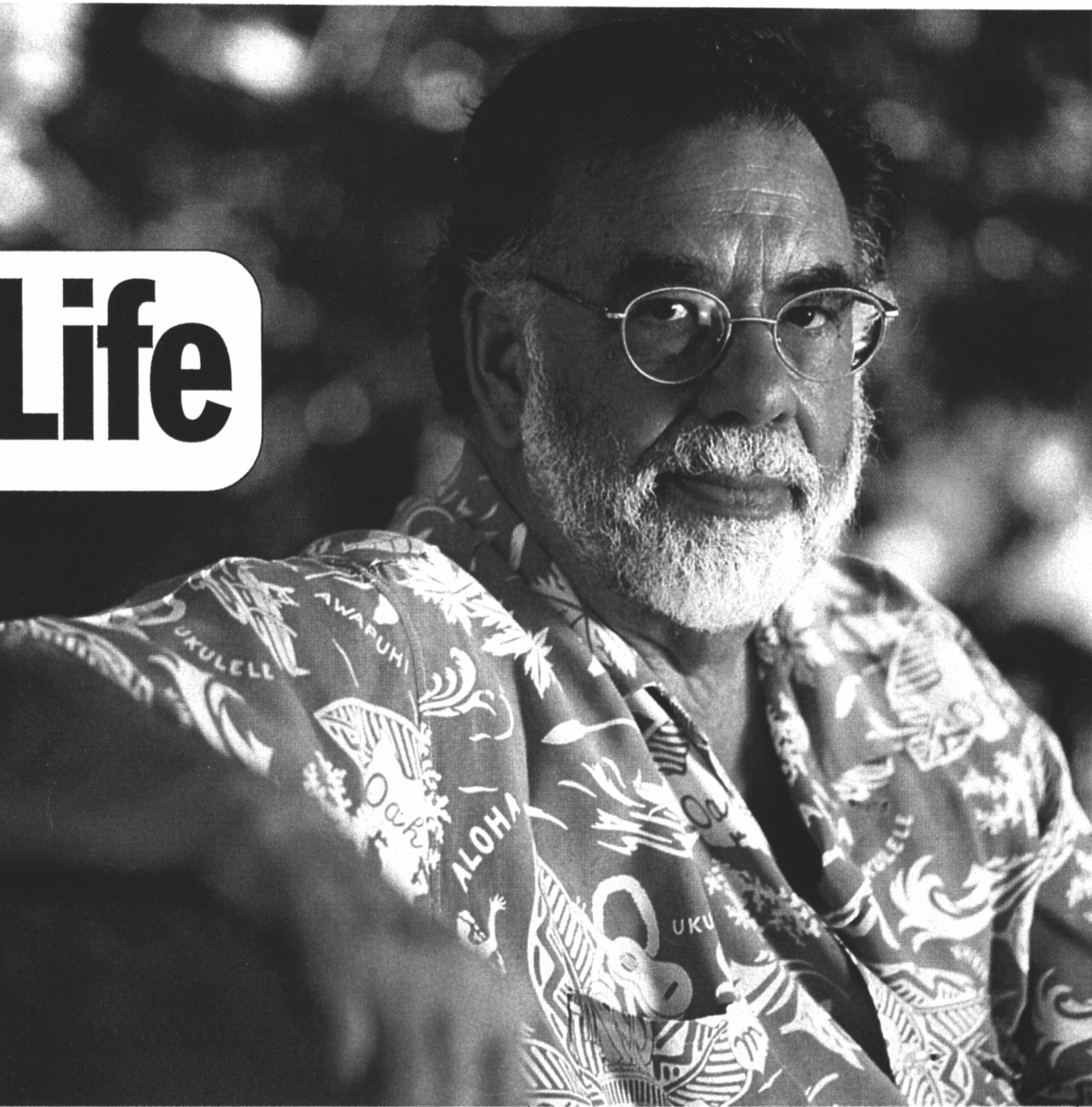
By FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA

"LOOK AT THIS!" I remember saying to my amazed parents when I slowly raised my left arm. Stricken with polio in 1949, I had lost all feeling in the arm and from the waist down. The doctors said I'd never walk again. I was 9.

I shocked everyone by recovering 18 months later. But my guess is that I never would have become a filmmaker and developed such a rich fantasy life necessary for my work had it not been for my battle with the disease.

Back when I got it, polio was an epidemic in New York City. Without warning, I went from being an active New York kid who loved baseball and being a cub scout to an invalid, confined to bed and isolated. The illness started with a high fever, which was painful and scary and lasted two days. After that, I was paralyzed. I wasn't frightened, though. But I was lonely. I had been quarantined from other kids, except for my older brother and younger sister.

To fill the empty hours, I entertained myself with the latest gadgets and my imagination. I was lucky because my wonderful father, a revered classical musician, was always bringing home the high-tech equipment of the day, such as a tape recorder and television set, long before most families owned them. And my beautiful, childlike mother had already instilled in me a belief in magic, feeding



my love of fairy tales and storytelling. I was an avid reader of Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm and comic books.

I would sit in bed and create my own little world. I'd do ventriloquism in a squeaky voice, using the simple language of a kid, and make my puppets dance across my lap. I also worked out



* THE DIRECTOR
Coppola, left, on the set of his 1962 film *Tonight for Sure*, and above at his Napa Valley winery

sound tracks for the silent cartoons I played on a 16-mm projector, with music from records and added lines I had written and tape-recorded.

Those were also the early days of live television, which I loved, especially *Horn and Hardart's Children's Hour*. I longed to be one of the show's talented kids who tap-danced and sang. Of course, that was so far from where I was then. Being paralyzed, I had to night-crawl on my bedroom floor just to change the channel; there was no such thing as remote control.

Because of my fascination with stories, I decided to become a playwright.

But I was so frustrated by my early efforts, I cried myself to sleep many nights while attending military school at age 16. So instead I decided to direct for stage and enrolled as a theater major at Hofstra University on Long Island. And then one afternoon in 1956, while a freshman, all my interests came together as I watched Sergei Eisenstein's 1927 silent masterpiece *October: Ten Days That Shook the World*, about the Russian revolution. I knew instantly I could combine storytelling with the innovation and technology of cinema.

My career took off a few years after film school at UCLA. By 1971 I had won my first Oscar, for co-screenwriting *Patton*, followed the next year by my success with *The Godfather*. Later I made a wide variety of films, such as *Apocalypse Now* and *One From the Heart*, a romantic musical shot entirely in a studio, just like the live television shows I had enjoyed as a 9-year-old.

Although being a sick kid was terrible in some ways, that period of solitary confinement, as I call it, formed me. I learned how to use my imagination working alone, so critical to film editing and writing, and how to bring my ideas together with the newest technology. But more than anything, that period planted the seed that the magic of storytelling was well within my reach.

—As told to Michelle Lodge