

Photos Courtesy of Tim Farley

uck, disasters, people who became household names and one of the most famous horse novels on the planet came together when “The Black Stallion” film debuted in theaters 40 years ago. For all the dramatic, heart-warming scenes of Walter Farley’s 1941 novel, this masterpiece of Hollywood magic clearly came about through a series of events that might double as fiction if published. From a typhoon in the Philippines, to the power and clout of a single person in reaching the silver screen, to the chance mention of a favorite childhood book from a girlfriend to a film producer, the story of the making the timeless film brings a backstage element hard to imagine by even horse-savvy viewers.

In a rare interview at his hilltop home in Northern California amongst a vineyard surrounded by 35,000 Bordeaux-blend grapes, director Carroll Ballard shared still vivid memories of the trials and tribulations of a movie that became as much of a journey to bring to the world as the story it told. Starring a two-time



More Than Hollywood Magic Made The Black Stallion

By Elizabeth Kaye McCall



American Horse Show Association Horse of the Year, a 1969 Arabian stallion named Cass Ole+ (Al-Marah Casanova++ x LaBahia++), the movie also included a host of doubles, including the black Arabian stallion Fae-Jur (Fadjur x La Fana) and grey geldings from the Carmague in France, dyed black for the role.

Ballard began with surprising words. "To me it was always kind of a mystery how the film became successful. When I was making it, I felt it was completely out of control, and I wasn't going to be able to fix it. But there was enough continuum that kept everything in balance while it was underway."

Ballard confesses, "I didn't like the book when it was first presented to me. I thought, 'Oh, come on, what is this?' I wanted to make War and Peace! I wondered for a long time how is it that this book became such a big hit because I was dwelling on the old trainer and the kid talking. Stuff I thought was totally predictable."

Ballard continued, "But there is this 'thing,' and I really didn't see it for a long time. There is a mythic element in the book. It is every child's

desire to have a powerful friend who can do things and who will make him

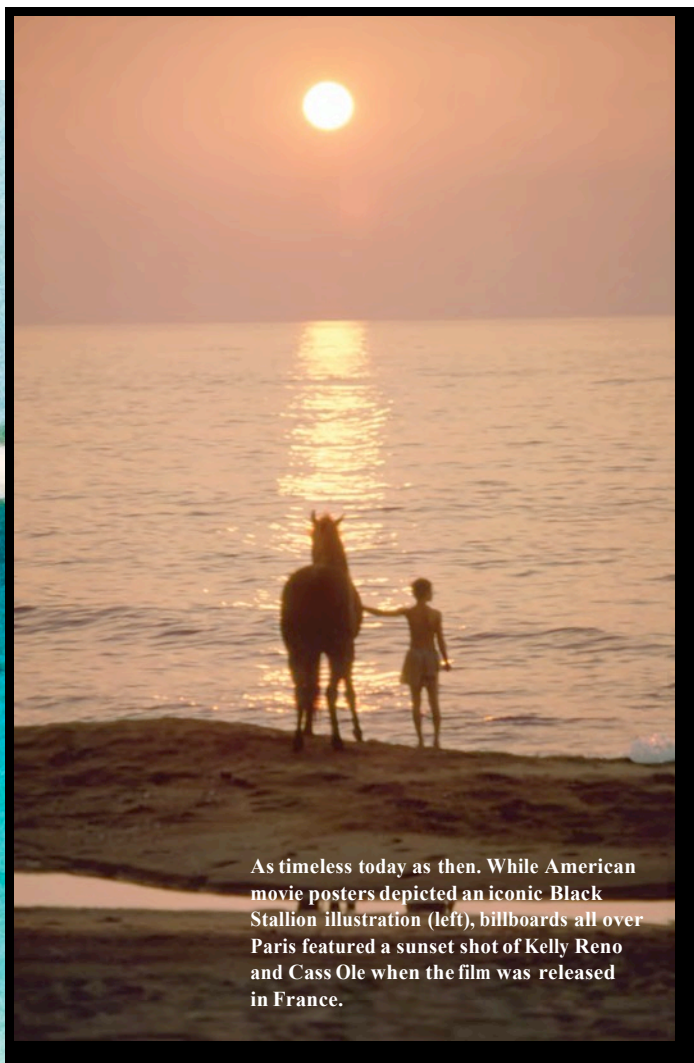
powerful, too. That's what's in this film, and it's mythic and in the form of a black horse. That's the element.

"By dwelling on that concept of the myth, Debbie Fine, who worked for Frances (Ford Coppola) found the story of Alexander the Great and Bucephalus, which isn't in the book.

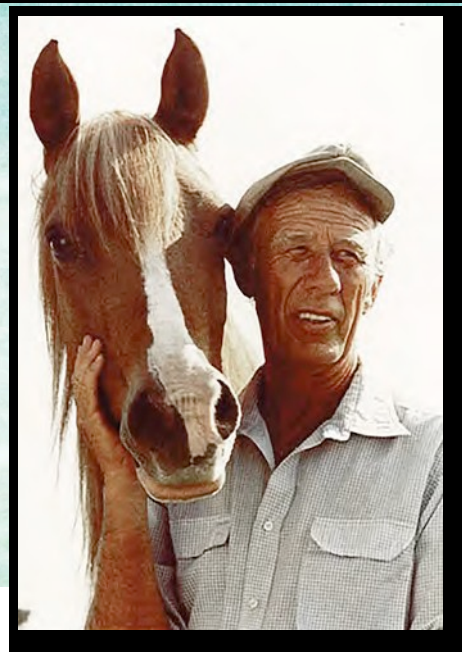
In the Beginning

How did this movie come to Ballard in the first place? "I went to school with Frances Ford Coppola, and I'd done a few other jobs for him," he remembered. "Frances called me one night. It's two in the morning, and it's Frances calling me from Sicily where he's filming 'Godfather 2.'

He thought he would give me a try to make this movie. It took us a long time. We tried to write the script for years. First we tried to combine the two books ('The Black Stallion' and 'The Black Stallion Returns'), but it turned out to be too big of a story so we narrowed it down to one book.



As timeless today as then. While American movie posters depicted an iconic Black Stallion illustration (left), billboards all over Paris featured a sunset shot of Kelly Reno and Cass Ole when the film was released in France.



Walter Farley with his mare Al-Marah Athena, whose namesake appears in the author's 1965 novel "The Horse That Swam Away."

RIGHT

Kelly Reno with director Carroll Ballard from the scene when Alec was dragged ashore by *The Black*.

BELOW

Director of Photography Caleb Deschanel (left) and director Carroll Ballard (center) on the water with Kelly Reno, who learned how to swim for his role as Alec Ramsey.



Frances was shooting ‘*Apocalypse Now*.’ It wiped out all their sets. It was a catastrophe. They had to cancel the whole production, and they all came back here. He didn’t have any money to finish the movie. A way out for him was to sell the script of ‘*The Black Stallion*’ to United Artists. So, he made a deal. Frances was a pretty powerful guy in the movie business. Nobody around had the clout that he did. So, he was the mover to move the project.

Walter (Murch) and I tried desperately to pull the script together, but nobody liked it. Then, there were other writers who were brought in



Finally, I just threw up my hands.

“I could never figure out how we were going to put the two parts of the story together; he (Alec Ramsey) and Henry (played by Mickey Rooney) the old trainer and his (Alec’s) time on the island with the horse. I think it was touch and go all the way through the movie whether we could pull the two halves of the story together.”

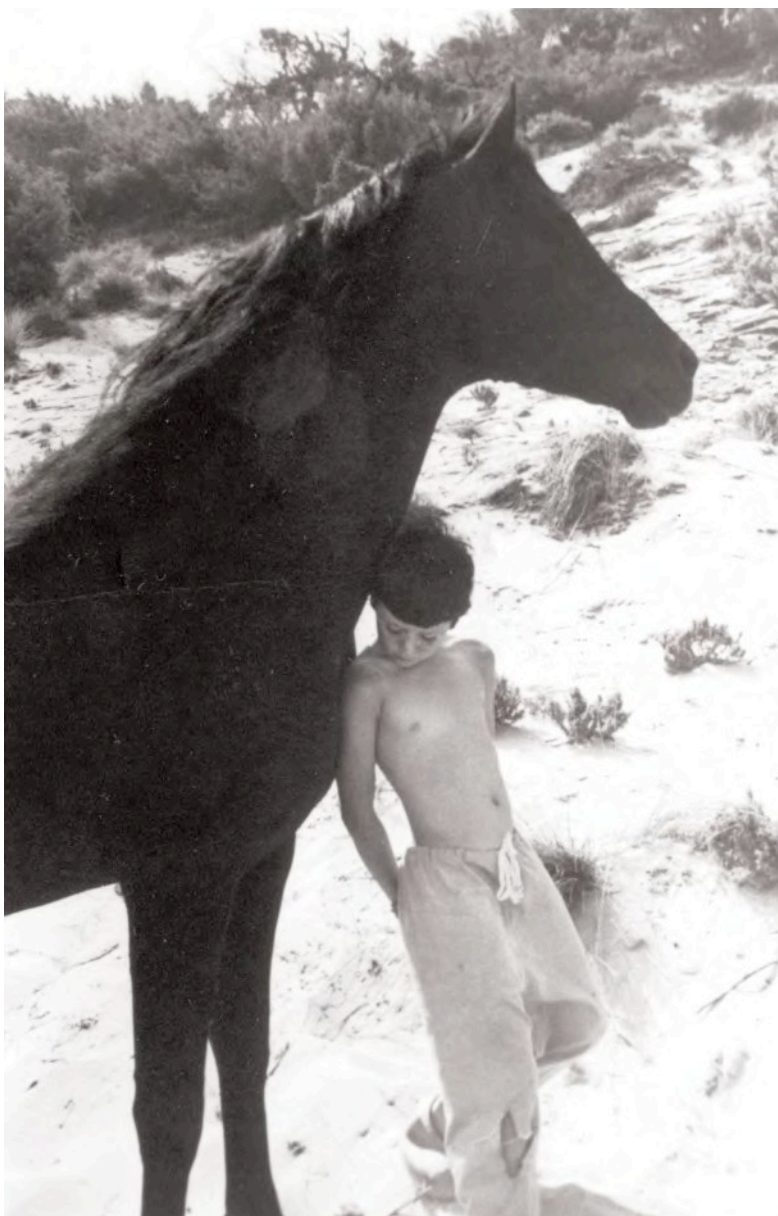
“We agreed to try to work the thing out. I essentially agreed to make a movie, but it was three years later when we finally got the go ahead,” Ballard said. “I don’t know that we would have if it hadn’t been for this huge typhoon in the Philippines while

ABOVE

A massive pane of glass, invisible to the camera, kept Kelly Reno safe for the scene with Alec and the snake.

RIGHT

“The training was good, but both horses were really good. Kelly figured out how to play with them. They hung out,” recalls director Carroll Ballard.



including Bill Whittliff from Texas. We were dead in the water when Frances made the deal with United Artists. He had so much power in the business. It would never have seen the light of day without him.

“United Artists green-lighted the movie. There we were with a script nobody was too interested in, and I did not know what this movie was going to be about. I had a few little ideas, and then we’re out there — 150 people and horses and stuff. What do we do now?” recalled Ballard.

In the end, they shot an eight hour movie. “That’s why it took us a year and a half to edit it,” he said. “There was so much stuff, and we tried to somehow make sense of it.”

Walter Farley on Set

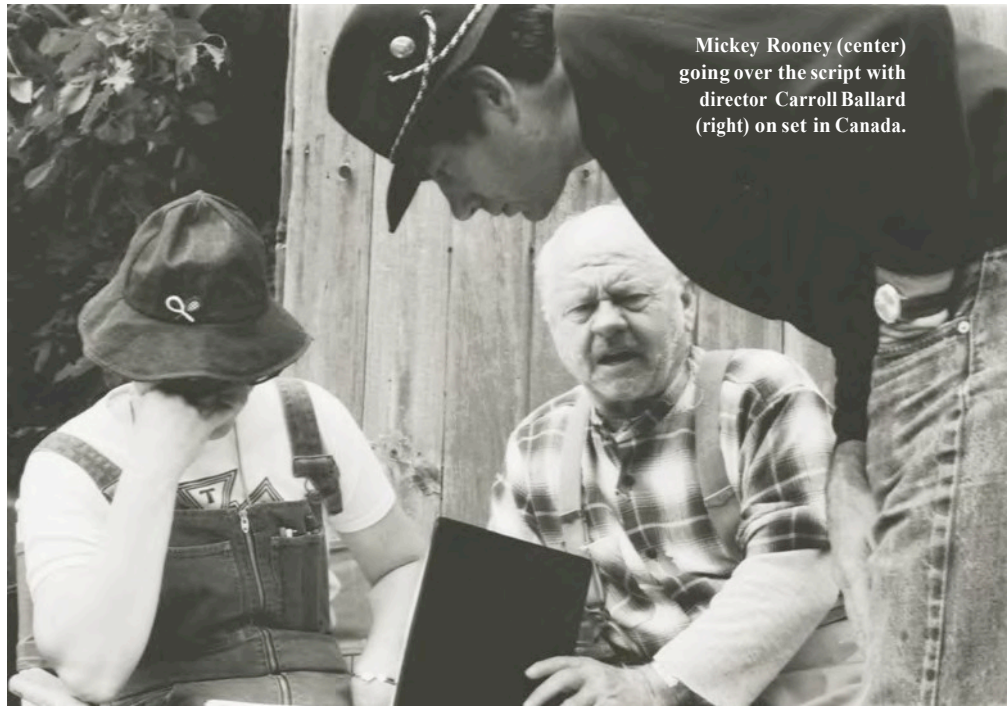
One of the most important people involved in the film was the original author, Walter Farley. About him, Ballard remarked, “He truly was a horse lover. He really was into horses, although he and I were not entirely on the same page. Fae-Jur was not his idea of what the Black Stallion should be. He was small and very feisty, but he was a fantastic mover, and I felt that was the magic horse. You could believe he was a spirit of some kind. Cass was a gorgeous horse and was big. He was very magisterial.”

“Both horses were really good,” he continued. “Kelly figured out how to play with them, and that’s what we filmed.”

Behind the Scenes

There are some wonderful, now famous scenes from the movie that had fascinating stories behind them. “To me, the hardest, most crucial scene in the whole movie was the scene with Alex’s mom where he tells her about the shipwreck and so forth. Kelly (actor Kelly Reno who was 11 at the time and had no prior acting experience) understood that was an important scene, and he had to express all the things to Teri (actress Teri Garr who played Alex’s mother). He pulled it off. He made it believable.”

Another infamous scene was



Mickey Rooney (center) going over the script with director Carroll Ballard (right) on set in Canada.

where Alex and The Black galloped along the beach. “We just wanted a shot of him riding the horse along the beach. It was Cass Ole,” explained Ballard about a pick-up shot filmed at Cannon Beach, Ore. “It was long after we did most the filming. We were just doing pickup shots. I was really worried about the hardness of the sand. I was so worried Kelly might fall. (Ballard shifted into a good rendition of horse trainer Corky Randall’s voice.) ‘Carroll, that little horse can’t outrun a flea.’ So we decided to do the run. We’re shooting along. It was going great, and all the sudden Cass took off. That horse took off down the beach and disappeared into the fog. It was terrifying. All Kelly had was that little wire bridle. It ended up being the footage we used.”

“Corky picked up that this wasn’t going to be the kind of movie where the horse is going to walk in here and do this and that. That’s how a lot of movies are shot. This wasn’t (done) that way. Often times, Caleb (Deschanel, cinematographer) and I would just see something and say, ‘Wouldn’t it be great if that happened?’ and we would do it right there on the spot. Corky picked up on that, and he was ready whenever some crazy idea would happen. He could improvise,”

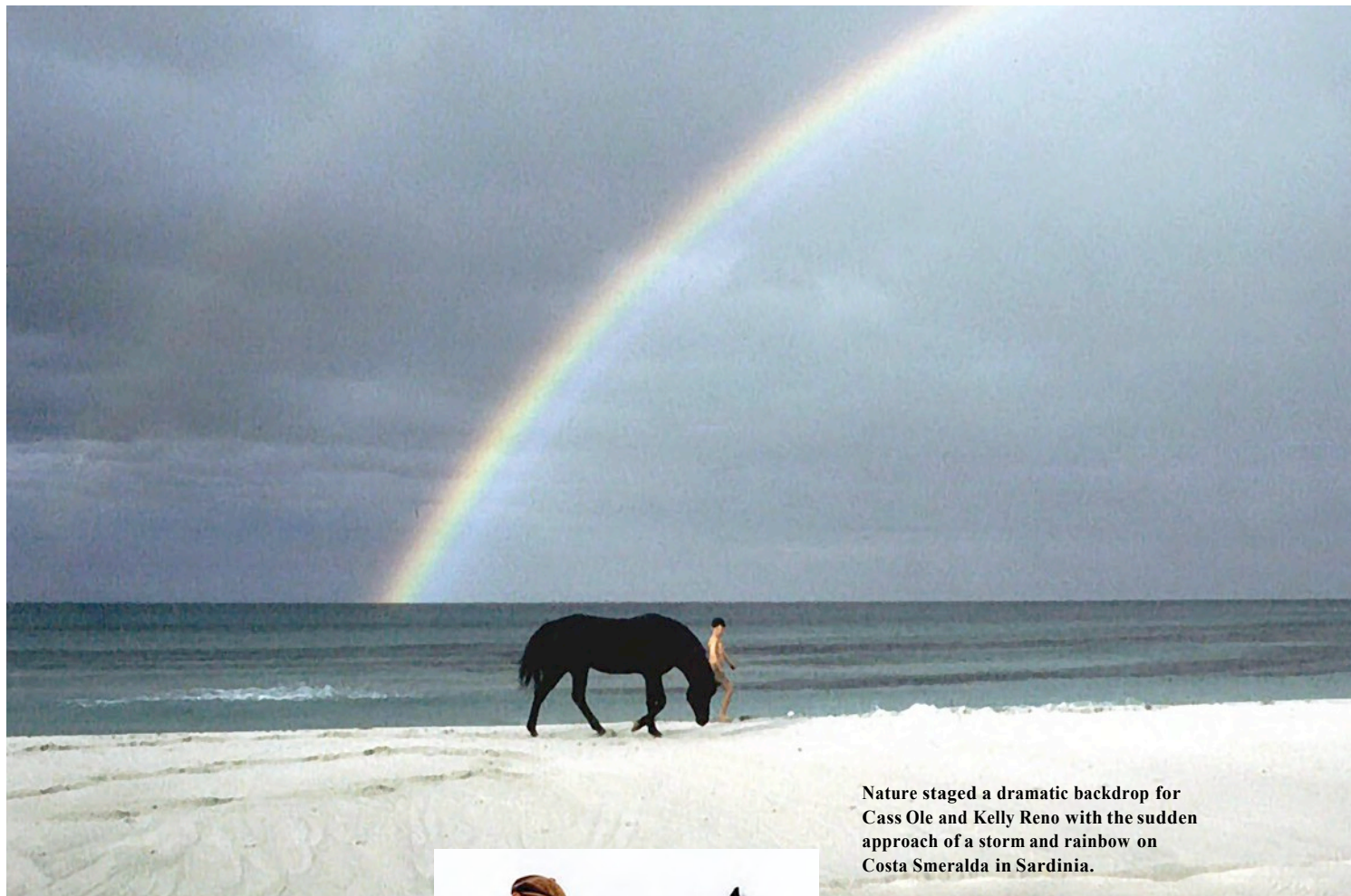
noted Ballard, citing a signature scene in the movie. It was the seaweed scene and dance of getting to know one another that Alec and The Black display.

“There’s a scene where Kelly’s going to give him the little piece of seaweed, and they kind of walk back and forth. Nobody said anything about that. We were just shooting on the beach and said, ‘Maybe we’d do something here with Kelly and the leaf and a close-up. Maybe we can get him going back and forth. Corky picked up on it and said, ‘OK, Carroll, where’s the frame line?’

“Corky’s there right out of frame when the horse is backing up and rearing and coming forward. The whole thing was done in one shot, and Corky did it all.”

One pick-up scene was where The Black comes to the boy’s rescue and stomps the cobra about to strike Alec. Ballard mentions the real-life scenario that vies with the fictional tale.

“We’re back in Sardinia, and we have to do some pick-ups with the snake scene because of the problems we had with the snake. We’d made a deal with a movie snake guy to supply the snakes. They promised me the snakes (real cobras) had been defanged.



Nature staged a dramatic backdrop for Cass Ole and Kelly Reno with the sudden approach of a storm and rainbow on Costa Smeralda in Sardinia.

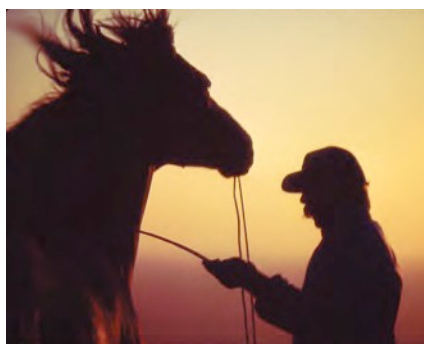
The day we were going to shoot, these two guys showed up in a little car, and in the back seat they had these two big baskets. They wanted to show me the snakes. I said, 'OK' and out of the basket came this snake. It was the scariest thing you've ever seen. I said, 'Gee, that's really scary. I'm glad they're defanged.' Well, the guy said, 'They're not defanged! We don't do it that way. The way we do it is this,' and he reached over and had this little refrigerator with a hypodermic needle. He said, 'If the boy gets bitten by the cobra, we just inject him with this.'"

Ballard knew there had to be a safer solution and recounted what followed as if it were yesterday. "A couple hours later, two grips come walking down the beach carrying this gigantic pane of glass. They put the glass on the sand and strapped it up. The cobra is on one side of the glass and the boy (Kelly Reno) is on the other. We filmed some, but we weren't able to get enough angles on the snakes."

Three months later, when Ballard returned to Sardinia to finish the



Kelly Reno aboard Cass Ole at Woodbine Racetrack in Toronto, Canada, where the scene of Alec riding The Black in a rainstorm was shot.



Corky Randall made his name as a Hollywood horse trainer on "The Black Stallion," (his dad, Glenn Randall, trained Roy Rogers' horses). Pictured here in a sunset training session on the set in Sardinia.

scene, the weather at the beach had changed. "The wind is blowing like crazy. It's so cold that the snakes can hardly move," Ballard recalled. "So, how are we going to shoot this scene? We've got to warm up the snakes. OK, how are we going to do that?" Ballard recounts the impromptu solution. "We've got to warm up the snakes.

Let's dig a hole in the sand and put some heaters down there so they heat up the sand, and we'll put boards on top and put sand on that. Meanwhile, the wind is blowing like crazy, the sheet of glass is moving around, and the sand keeps blowing against the glass and it's sticking. What we were trying to do was get a shot of the snake being scary, and we had this huge contraption and all the heaters going and the snake trying to warm up. This whole deal for trying to get one ridiculous shot of the snake. We finally got a few shots."

The Finished Product

Incredibly, when the film was edited and completed, Ballard worried



FAR LEFT, TOP TO BOTTOM
The Black's big race against two champions was shot at Santa Anita Park in Arcadia, Calif.

Unlike today's film options, getting race footage then was difficult! No drones for these logistics.

LEFT
Behind the scenes with the crew on set in Sardinia.

BELOW
Legendary Hollywood horse trainer Corky Randall (right) with wrangler Gene Walker.



LEFT
Author Walter Farley (left) and director Carroll Ballard in Sardinia brainstorming about a scene where Kelly Reno conveyed Alec's emotions and loneliness with no words, through visuals from the boy's perspective, as he seems to see faces in the rocks.

"The Black Stallion" took home the Special Achievement Award. At the Los Angeles Film Critics Association Awards. It won Best Cinematography for Caleb Deschanel, Best Music for Carmine Coppola (Frances Ford Coppola's father) and the New Generation Award for director Carroll Ballard. Now 40 years old, it is still a beautiful film that captures the hearts of horse lovers everywhere. 🐾

it was a failure. "The studio guys that came to see it thought it was not releasable. They said, 'What is this? Some kind of art movie for kids?'" United Artists shelved it. It took the full clout of Francis Ford Coppola to see that the film finally reached theaters.

Despite the studio's impressions, the movie did, in fact, become a time-

less hit. Why? According to Ballard the reason was that "it hit a common chord that a lot of people were feeling at that point." Named the best film of the year by the late Roger Ebert, the movie quickly became a box-office hit and earned two Oscar® nominations, including one for Mickey Rooney.

At the 1980 Academy Awards,

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