

INSIDE THE ACTORS STUDIO (PUBLISHED IN THE COURIER-MAIL)

Friday, April 21, Ovation, 8.30pm

Even though the idea of a pay TV channel devoted to the arts promised much, the Ovation channel has been largely disappointing. While opera buffs have been catered for, there's been a dearth in, for example, dramatic theatre.

It's not all bad news though, with one must-see program in our household being Inside the Actors Studio, filmed at New York's home of the so-called "method" of acting. The audience consists of Masters students of acting, writing and directing, while the host is the wonderfully fawning school Dean, James Lipton.

Then there's the evening's guest, with the names being impressive by anyone's standards. Robert De Niro, Sissy Spacek, Al Pacino, Nicole Kidman or Harrison Ford might pop in to talk with the unashamedly reverential Lipton about their journeys through life and acting, and a treat is seeing these stars getting into the nitty-gritty of their craft. The Q and A time at the end allows the students to delve even deeper, like finding out what strategies the actors use if they're having problems getting into character.

Tonight, Lipton introduces influential film director, Martin Scorsese. Mean Streets, Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore, Taxi Driver, Raging Bull, The Last Temptation of Christ, Goodfellas - the little fella's done OK for himself.

Scorsese reveals that as a child he was a nerdy asthma-sufferer who took solace in watching movies. As a four year-old, he was affected by the technicolour and eroticism he saw in Duel in the Sun and then went on to love European films, such as The Bicycle Thief.

We see snippets from Scorsese's early short films from the 1960s, with Who's That Knocking At My Door? - his student film at university - the first of many starring Harvey Keitel. Scorsese tells that Keitel, a court stenographer at the time, had to get his hair cut, thus totally ruining continuity. In one scene a long-haired Keitel opens the door, and when he shuts it the hair is suddenly short.

Then of course there's the seminal Taxi Driver from 1976, for which Scorsese and Robert De Niro took minimal salaries so it could be made. The legendary "Are you talkin' to me?" scene was signalled in the screenplay with just one direction: "Travis looks in the mirror." Improvisation resulted in one of cinema's most famous and oft-quoted scenes.

If you've ever had any interest in the movies, this is the show to watch. The inside stories and revelations from the actors and directors who've given audiences so much pleasure over the decades

helps you feel just a little bit closer to the magic.

Vicki Englund