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QUALITY CHRISTIAN FILMMAKING -- AN OXYMORON OR JUST MORONIC?

Understanding why movies with a Christian message just aren't making it

By David White

Special to ASSIST News Service

LOS ANGELES, CA (ANS) -- Even after Mel Gibson gifted moviegoers with the unforgettable Biblical epic, *The Passion of The Christ*, one of the questions most often fielded by Hollywood's most successful Christian artists is, "When are Christians going to make BIG Hollywood movies?" By BIG, they mean big budget—an option not available to anyone who calls themselves a "Christian-film maker," unless, of course, like Mel, you are fortunate enough to be able to afford to bankroll your own vision. (Pictured: [David White](#)).

The truth is, Christian actors and producers will make BIG Hollywood movies when moviegoers support their efforts by purchasing tickets. The trouble is, there are plenty of self-inflicted roadblocks in the way that are preventing this from happening.

At the risk of offending an entire group of well-meaning, hard-working artists, it seems the "Christian movie" genre carries a carefully earned stigma of mediocrity marked by a steadily growing collection of low budget, poorly produced films. To mainstream moviegoers, the result of the negative association of following the word "Christian" with the words "actor," "producer" or "film" is that the collective contributions of these artists are automatically defined as less creative and inferior to their secular,

mainstream counterparts.

For more than 15 years, I have been fortunate to find success in Hollywood as both an actor and a producer—and yes, I am a devout Christian. My one-man show, Holyman Undercover, that I perform in various live venues—both secular and Christian — is a success as well. I find, however, that being defined only as a “Christian actor” or “Christian producer” doesn’t sit well with me.

Why?

Perhaps it is because so many of the movies produced and marketed with the “Christian” pitch rarely realize their full potential, reach their desired audiences or, more importantly, impact the lives of those viewing in a way that is memorable and life affirming. Where is the passion? Where is the commitment to quality? Where is the sold-out devotion to great storytelling?

In fact, so compromised is the response of mainstream moviegoers to most films labeled as having a “Christian message” that they are rendered almost useless as the evangelistic tool most Christian filmmakers pray their works will be.

A highly publicized study commissioned by the Dove Foundation and conducted by Paul Kagan and Associates proved that while some people line up to buy tickets to sex- and violence-laced R-rated movies, G-rated films are more than eight times more profitable. In the wake of that eye-opening study, makers of “Christian” movies are stumped by the figures. They are asking themselves why “Christian” movies aren’t seeing the success their less family-oriented counterparts enjoy. In a climate where family movies are the proven moneymakers, how did this happen? Why are Christian filmmakers—and Christians who are working to produce films with a Christian message—missing the mark?

Those who are fans of these kinds of movies are loyal and want to do what they can to support these kinds of productions. So, why is it so hard to grow

the Christian-film market and expand the number of those who are avid fans of this type of family-friendly fare?

The easy answer—and the truth—is because movies with Christian themes are about Jesus and Christians and how their faith affects their daily lives. The general public thinks using the word “Jesus” is the dividing line they don’t want to cross.

The more complicated—and more totally accurate—answer has to do with everything from the quality of the story and who is involved with a project to the complexity and cleverness of a film’s marketing plan. Had any filmmaker other than Mel Gibson attempted a project like *The Passion of The Christ*, it is unlikely the film would have garnered such an onslaught of media coverage and wide-spread praise—and angst—or enjoyed such amazing box office success. Why? Because Mel Gibson is Mel Gibson after all. He is a great filmmaker, and, most of all, he had a genius marketing plan.

Was it successful because it had a big budget?

Doubtful.

Without a good story, budget will mean little.

A film’s lack of success has less to do with the availability of a BIG budget than it does with a lack of creativity and a sold-out commitment to quality in writing, acting and production. It also has much to do with the agenda-based approach to storytelling that has come to plague the Christian filmmaking industry.

A friend came to see me a few weeks ago, and in the natural course of our lengthy, very pleasant conversation, our talk shifted from one subject to the next until we found ourselves talking about, of all things, vacuum cleaners. He immediately set off into a wildly descriptive monologue extolling the virtues of the most amazing vacuum cleaner of which I had ever heard. By the time he was finished telling me about all the really great things it could

do, I could hardly wait to buy one for myself. I was really grateful he had shared with me information that I might not have been able to get from someone else who hadn't experienced what that machine could really do and how it could change my life.

Then I got a kick in the stomach I wasn't expecting.

He offered to sell me one of those amazing vacuum cleaners at a one-time-only, today-only, low, low price of \$69.95.

At the end of our conversation, I realized, sadly, that maybe he really wasn't my friend at all. Everything that led up to his final sales pitch had simply been a manipulation designed to prepare me for a successful conclusion to his carefully constructed presentation.

Filmmakers producing movies with a Christian message have fallen prey to this same kind of hidden-agenda storytelling, and viewers are rejecting the sales pitch—and the movies. Many times, the Christian filmmaking industry is so intent with what they want to happen after a film is viewed—namely the viewer falling to their knees to accept the Lord Jesus as their personal Savior as the credits slowly roll—that the story they use to present the message becomes secondary. To them, the message of the story, not the story itself, has become the most important element. Now, in itself, a story slanted to a particular viewpoint isn't altogether uncommon. However, to be successful, it must be told with a no-holes-barred commitment to honesty in its presentation, or the audience can simply feel used and manipulated.

Quality writing, acting and production have taken a back seat to an all-out, get-them-in-the-end sales pitch. Unfortunately, the result is that audiences who feel manipulated and pressured are likely to reject the message altogether.

Something has to be done—and quickly—before our ability to use this format to further the Kingdom of God is lost forever.

It is time to issue a call-to-arms for all filmmakers who aspire to produce quality films that advance the cause of Christ by drawing lost souls home to the One who created them. We need films that encourage and edify believers everywhere and yet still have the ability to impact the lives of non-believers in a positive way.

How can we turn the tide? By turning our backs on mediocrity in Christian-genre filmmaking. It isn't about BIG budgets. The hearts of searchers aren't looking for a BIG story. They are searching for a story their hearts know is real.

Great filmmaking is a complicated, multi-faceted endeavor that can't be oversimplified. While great marketing is as important an aspect of successful Christian films as who is involved in the production, it isn't necessarily about how much money filmmakers spend on their productions that is the key to success. It is about telling stories about real people in real-life struggles in a way that enables viewers to discern for themselves that the real answers to life's most difficult questions and situations can only be found in a life lived for Christ.

The Lord has a great sense of humor and the Holy Spirit certainly can—and does—use even the most poorly written, acted and produced Christian films for His purpose. But God's message of redemption deserves our very best efforts and commitment to quality.

We serve the God of ALL creation and He lives within us. Because of this, mediocrity can never be part of our agenda. It is time makers of movies with a Christian message take that to heart and live it every day.

When are Christians going to make BIG Hollywood movies? When moviegoers support them. And that is only going to happen when Christian filmmakers properly market films based on a strong, creative and superior-quality story.

To contact David White about the views found in this article, or to find more

information about his Holyman Undercover Show, visit his website www.thedavidwhiteshow.com.

David White has been a working actor and producer in Los Angeles for over ten years. He was raised in a small farming town outside of Dodge City, Kansas. He went to school in Chicago, then moved to Los Angeles to pursue his dream in the film industry. At 19, David jumped right into the business. Just six months after moving, David landed a recurring role on Evening Shade with Burt Reynolds for four years. David then went on to guest appearances on such shows as: Coach, Saved by the Bell, Sisters, Melrose Place, Martial Law and many others. (Pictured: Burt Reynolds and David White).

In 2000, he produced and starred in Mercy Streets opposite Eric Roberts, Stacy Keach and Cynthia Watros. In 2003, he produced and starred in SIX...the Mark Unleashed opposite Stephen Baldwin and Eric Roberts. In 2004, David produced and starred in the thriller Ghost Soldiers opposite Viscellous Shannon (The Hurricane). This film is still in Post Production. David's Company currently is in post production on the Frank Peretti film, The Visitation. It stars Edward Furlong, Kelly Lynch and Martin Donovan. "This film is set to be released June, 2005."

Currently David is in Pre Production on the Vietnam film "To the Wall" and also starring in his own One Man Show, The David White Show: Holy Man Undercover! It is a cross between the HBO comedy specials (Robin Williams, Chris Rock etc...) meets a multi-media Vegas routine.

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