

'Son of God' draws rave reviews from religious leaders



Cardinal Donald Wuerl calls "Son of God," opening in theaters Feb. 28, "engaging and compelling." Bishop David Zubik, after watching an advance DVD five or six times, pronounces it very, very powerful.

"I have to say, of all the films I've seen about Jesus, this is the most moving. The manner in which they portray some of the significant scenes takes on a love and a tenderness and a merciful side of Jesus that maybe isn't always as beautifully portrayed," Bishop Zubik told the Post-Gazette.

"Son of God" is a 138-minute movie drawn from the History Channel's "The Bible." The 10-hour miniseries premiered in February 2013 and covered the Old and New Testaments. The film opens with a quick Old Testament montage but concentrates on the New Testament and incorporates footage not seen on television.

It's being billed as the "first major studio feature film on the complete life of Jesus Christ since 'The Greatest Story Ever Told' 50 years ago."

Produced by actress Roma Downey and husband Mark Burnett, "Son of God" stars Portuguese actor Diogo Morgado in the title role and tracks Jesus from his birth through his teachings, crucifixion and resurrection. It opens in select theaters with 10 p.m. Thursday showings and everywhere a week from today.

Variety recently reported that church leaders have bought out multiplexes in at least 10 cities for early screenings.

Rick Warren, author of "The Purpose Driven Life" and senior pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, Calif., booked eight theaters throughout Orange County, the trade publication said. "We're excited Jesus is back on the big screen, and we're going to fill the theaters. ... Whether you can buy out a whole theater, or just one screen, now is the time to show up."

Online promotional materials have a phone number for group sales and ways to become a "movie mobilizer" by encouraging similar sellouts, sending emails to contacts, using Facebook tools and posting comments to movie sites.

Included are endorsements from Cardinal Wuerl, archbishop of Washington, D.C., and Mr. Warren, along with Bishop T.D. Jakes of the megachurch Potter's House in Dallas, TV minister Joel Osteen and the Rev. Samuel Rodriguez from the Hispanic Evangelical Association.

Bishop Zubik, whose reflections about the movie are available at <http://vimeo.com//85569045>, was one of a half-dozen bishops invited to share their thoughts in such a manner.

"There are a number of scenes that really captured my heart," he said in a recent interview.

Among them: The reaction on the faces of Joseph and Mary as the Magi bow before the Christ child and they realize God's promises are coming to pass; Jesus' call to Peter, the first miraculous catch of fish and the melting of the disciple's resistance; and a scene where Jesus prays over Lazarus and kisses him on the top of the head and the dead man opens his eyes and comes back to life.

"The Stations of the Cross, that portion of the film is very graphic in terms of the violence," the bishop said, "but in the midst of it all, it's the tenderness of Jesus either to his mother or to the man who plays Simon of Cyrene or the way in which Jesus reaches out to the thieves that are [hanging] on either side of him or the way that he looks down on the soldiers that are executing him, it's just a very beautiful, beautiful portrayal of the best of Jesus as a human being as well as Jesus as the son of God."

Bishop Zubik, a movie fan whose endorsement was conveyed in a letter to parishes in the Diocese of Pittsburgh and a Feb. 14 story in the Pittsburgh Catholic newspaper, said the script is "very on target" when it comes to its source material.

"What it supplied was the element of emotion that sometimes people don't picture when they're reading about those various scenes. Obviously, the film is titled the 'Son of God' but it also emphasized, in a very beautiful way, the humanity of Christ and the manner in which he fulfilled his role as the son of God."

The movie will open five days before Lent and during a slow week when the other big release is the PG-13 action thriller "Non-Stop" starring Liam Neeson.

"Son of God" is one of several faith-based movies scheduled for this year with plans just announced for an animated "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat." Russell Crowe stars in "Noah," due March 28; "Heaven Is for Real," about a boy who claims to have visited heaven, April 16; and "Exodus," a retelling of the story of Moses with Christian Bale, Dec. 12.

Seeking a cross-over audience

No one expects "Son of God" to match the box-office success of "The Passion of the Christ," which was an anomaly, said Paul Dergarabedian, senior media analyst with Rentrak, a global media measurement company.

Mel Gibson's "Passion," fueled by devotion, controversy and curiosity, was an R-rated movie that nevertheless attracted families and ended up grossing \$370 million in North America.

Mr. Dergarabedian tracks the box office and says the name of the game today is about crossing over to mainstream audiences. "Ride Along" isn't seen as just an urban movie or "The Lego Movie" as strictly kiddie or family fare. Both steadily or speedily passed \$100 million in North America and are spawning sequels.

"The faith-based movies have a little bit of a tougher go. A lot of those movies are perceived as being so specific that you're only going to be preaching to the converted, so to speak," Mr. Dergarabedian said this week.

"I think what they're going to attempt to do with this movie is go beyond that, and try and bring all audiences into the mix because at the end of the day, if you have a really good movie and it's well marketed, all barriers are broken down in my opinion -- or they can be."

Every time a faith-based movie does well, it emboldens studios, producers and theater owners to get behind such releases, he added. Television has done just that, with NBC ordering 12 hours of "A.D.," Mr. Burnett's sequel to "The Bible" expected to air in 2015.

The fact that much of "Son of God" was on cable TV or "The Bible" was the top-selling miniseries of all time on DVD and Blu-ray means the movie was basically made -- although it needed to be re-edited and promoted once again.

Marketing to churches

Taking a page from "The Passion of the Christ," "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" and "The Da Vinci Code," the movie is being pitched directly to believers and churches, as well as the public at large.

"There's no more important reviewer in this case than a bishop," Mr. Dergarabedian said.

"There has to be some level of grass-roots marketing, no matter how big the faith-based movie. It's one thing to be dissatisfied with the types of movies in the marketplace but then if you are and you're a faith-based moviegoer, you have to go out and support these movies. ...

"It's an underserved part of the audience but you have to be a frequent moviegoer to get what you want. You have to vote early and often." If moviegoers turn out for "The Hunger Games" or Batman, Hollywood will make more, as sequels, spinoffs and reboots have proven.

A drama such as "Son of God" could bring infrequent moviegoers back to the theaters. It will not be hobbled, as "The Christmas Candle" and "Gimme Shelter" were, by limited distribution or, in the latter case, mixed or unfavorable reviews.

David Huffman, director of marketing for Cleveland Cinemas and Pittsburgh Cinemas, which operates the SouthSide Works Cinema, said he has fielded calls from churches but none had committed yet to blocks of tickets for any of his five theaters playing it.

"I think this is more family friendly than 'The Passion of the Christ,'" Mr. Huffman said. "Passion"

was rated R for sequences of graphic violence while "Son of God" is PG-13 for its intense and bloody depiction of the crucifixion and for some sequences of violence.

"We had a screening of it here in Cleveland at one of our theaters months and months and months ago -- I want to say it was maybe October -- for one of the church groups, to try and get feedback about it, as well as to get the word out that it was coming soon. That was way earlier than most movies would have been screened."

The film is being repackaged and expanded in another way with "The Bible: Son of God Tour," a two-hour live event promising immersive video and visual effects with live musical performances.

Scheduled to perform are musical artists Francesca Battistelli, Sidewalk Prophets, Natalie Grant, Chris August, Meredith Andrews and Jason Gray. See www.thebibletourexperience.com for more information.

It will make 16 stops from March 20 through April 13, including at Victory Family Church on Route 19 in Cranberry. Tickets are on sale and all 2,400 are expected to sell out before the April 10 event.

Movie editor Barbara Vancheri: bvancheri@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1632. Read her blog: www.post-gazette.com/madaboutmovies.

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