Five Films from 2002 – A Christian Critic's Review

2002 was a fantastic year for the cinema, so let's review a few notable features.

Lord of the Rings

J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy continues with the second installment, *The Two Towers*, directed by Peter Jackson. The trilogy as a whole follows the struggle for possession of the One Ring created by the Dark Lord Sauron, which, if returned, will enable him to enslave the entire world.

The first film ended with the apparent death of Gandalf who was assisting the hobbits in their quest to destroy the ring. Another key figure, Boromir, who was assisting the hobbits, also died, compromising the strength of the fellowship which then splintered into three groups. In *The Two Towers,* Frodo and Samwise are in possession of the ring and are on the way to Mordor, while Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas is attempting to save Merry and Pippen as the elves wrestle with the question of whether they should intervene on behalf of mankind or leave them to suffer whatever fate should befall them. An additional character, Gollum, a loathsome creature (created as a completely digital character) who made only a brief appearance in the first film, becomes the most prominent feature of the second as an antagonist who vacillates between his conviction to help the hobbits and his urge to kill them and take the ring to fulfill his own selfish desires.

The film as a whole is a masterpiece of technical genius and creativity. One should not, however, get lost in the digital effects and panoramic landscapes and forget that at the heart of the story is an epic struggle between good and evil. Tolkien, a devout Christian, believed in the power of epic

narrative to stir the soul to a greater understanding of life and man's place in the universe. The *Rings* trilogy is not a close allegory of the Christian narrative, but plays on the tension of the great cosmic battle taking place in all men which is being fought with high stakes and eternal consequences.

In one scene, Sam pleads with Frodo to continue their mission and destroy the ring in order to save man from a terrible fate. He says, "There is good in the world, and it is worth fighting for." This is a reminder to all, especially the devout followers of Tolkien, that we too are in the midst of a great battle and everyone must do his part or evil will triumph.

One of the great values of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy can best be understood in light of Tolkien's understanding of the fairy tale.

> *"The realm of the fairy-story is wide and deep and high and filled with so many things: all manner of beasts and birds are found there; shoreless seas and stars uncounted; beauty that is an enchantment, and ever present peril; both joy and sorrow as sharp as swords."*[{1}]

The *Rings* trilogy is not a "fairy-story" in this sense, however it does contain a fairy-story in the background (*The Hobbit*) that challenges the reader to suspend his or her disbelief and entertain ideas of magic, miracle, and unseen powers and forces. In doing this, one is indirectly prepared to entertain the gospels which are filled with accounts of beings who come down and intervene in the affairs of men (angels), a virgin birth, nature miracles, resurrections form the dead, and ascensions back to heavenly realms.

The Two Towers concludes with a cliffhanger that should be resolved in the third and final installment, *The Return of the King,* next year. In the meantime it is advisable to read the

Lord of the Rings trilogy in order to better understand the true grandeur of Tolkien's visionary masterpiece.

Far From Heaven

Todd Haynes' *Far From Heaven* portrays the lives of a typical, upper-class Caucasian family of the 1950s that by all outward appearances have a life made in heaven. Upon closer view we see that, in reality, their lives are far from paradise. This story is not intended as entertainment for the masses. Everything does not work out well and no one lives happily ever after. In modern American culture we often tend to idealize past times and places, remembering them the way we wish they had been, and forgetting the darker currents that made up that particular era. *Far from Heaven* is stylistically a tribute and homage to the Technicolor films of the fifties with a serious examination of post-war American life with all of its blemishes in which Haynes accurately creates a picture of a culture turning away from tradition, family, and church.

Cathy Whitaker (played by Julianne More) is a classic "June Cleaver" housewife and mother of two in the mid-fifties with a seemingly typical husband, Frank (played by Dennis Quaid), who may be compared with Thomas Wrath, the character played by Gregory Peck in *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*. Neither is quite comfortable in his job, home, or marriage to an idyllic fifties housewife. However, while Wrath returns in the end to family, tradition and home, Frank begins to exercise his latent homosexual tendencies and is caught by his wife in a passionate embrace with another man. Frank agrees to attend counseling, but continues to engage in this adulterous affair and in the end leaves his family. The film tragically concludes with a scene of Frank at peace with himself and his male lover in a hotel room.

When Cathy, who is a Caucasian American, cannot confide in her daiquiri-drinking, bridge-playing socialite friends about her homosexual husband, she seeks solace in her gardener Raymond

(played by Dennis Haysbert) who is African-American and a single parent. Soon Cathy and Raymond are seen walking together in public, and on one occasion dancing and drinking in an exclusively black bar in a town that will tolerate a discreet affair, but not inter-racial relationships or homosexual adultery. Meanwhile the children fade into the background, cast aside like so many unused lifestyle accessories that, while once cherished, now seem more of an inconvenience.

As the film concludes, the lights go down on a family and a community in the early postwar decades that would soon become more promiscuous and sinful. *Far From Heaven* should be viewed as a kind of history lesson, a reminder of the far-reaching consequences of the moral decline of the last half of the twentieth century.

A Walk To Remember

A welcomed surprise in our list of notable films for 2002 is *A Walk to Remember*, based on the novel by Nicholas Sparks and directed by Adam Shankman. The film begins with a painfully stock set of characters, but moves beyond the formulaic to create a story that is not only a pleasant surprise, but is truly inspirational. Landon Carter (played by Shane West) is the obligatory renegade cool guy at his school. When he participates with friends in a prank that results in the serious injury and near death of another student he is sentenced to tutor younger students at the school on Saturdays and act in the annual school play.

As Landon is no Laurence Olivier as an actor, he reluctantly but desperately enlists the help of Jamie Sullivan (played by pop singer Mandy Moore), a conservative and rather plain-looking girl who seems to be the antithesis of what he and his friends consider to be cool. She lives quietly with her widowed father, the town minister. Jamie, who wears plain clothes and the same drab sweater every day, is immune to the

taunts of her peers and rides the school bus with her Bible in her lap. Her confidence is drawn from a very mature faith in God, and from wisdom gained from facing some very adult situations early in life.

Despite Jamie's warning, Landon falls in love with both her simple charm and the strange confidence she possesses. His friends, who seem to be opposed to any form of spiritual pursuits, shun him for his association with someone who so fearlessly lives a Christian life. Reverend Sullivan, Jamie's father (Treat Williams), is not impressed with his would-be son-in-law. He sees the union between Jamie and Landon as impulsive and non-scriptural. Landon's mother (Daryl Hannah) is also doubtful about her son's relationship, but appears to lack the spiritual depth to understand or guide him. When Landon confronts his estranged father who has remarried the conflict grows to the point of crisis. This misguided young man can find no one to support or direct him.

Before wedding bells can ring, Jamie must reveal a secret that will change the course of everyone's lives. Even after Jamie's devastating revelation, Landon decides he cannot pass up a once in a lifetime opportunity to marry this remarkable Christian girl and discover a spiritual side to himself he did not know existed. In the end, her influence challenges and alters his life in a miraculous way as her source of strength becomes his. Landon finds healing for relationships and hope for a future that he had previously been unable to conceive.

A Walk to Remember offers a positive portrayal of Christians and well developed characters that struggle with very mature issues.

My Big Fat Greek Wedding

My Big Fat Greek Wedding, the low budget independent film directed by Joel Zwick that celebrates all things Greek, crossed over into the main-stream movie market and became a

favorite of both critics and audiences in America. Toula Portokalos (played by the film's writer Nia Vardalos) is the film's central character: a 30-year-old Greek woman who feels that she is at least ten years past the date for meeting her family's matrimonial expectations, and with no prospects on the horizon. The family will not let her forget that Greek women are on the earth for three things: to find a Greek husband, to have Greek children, and to feed everyone until the day they die. This light-hearted comedy tells the story of Toula's quest for a husband and her transformation from a rather drab old maid into a truly beautiful bride.

As the film opens, we meet Toula, a "seating hostess" (which she insists should not be confused with a mere waitress) at the family restaurant that is appropriately called *Dancing Zorbas*. One day Ian Miller (played by John Corbett), a kind of hipster vegetarian, sees Toula, and there is a natural mutual attraction that soon leads to full blown love and one very big fat Greek culture shock for Ian and his family. Before her family will bless the marriage, though, there is a last ditch effort to match Toula with a genuine Greek man that results in one of the most hilarious parade of fools ever assembled. Having done their best to preserve the purity of their Greek bloodline, the family gives in and begins to warm up to Ian.

Ian watches in amazement as his soon-to-be father-in-law, Gus (Michael Constantine), uses Windex to cure everything from minor cuts and burns to arthritis and sore ligaments. Another Greek custom that is extremely foreign is the practice of spitting on a bride for good luck, an act that disgusts the middle class parents of the groom. When Ian's parents bring a bundt cake to a family party, the Greeks cannot understand why someone would make a cake with a hole in the center. The cake reappears later with a potted plant in the center for presentation. Misunderstandings between two very different families are the driving force behind hilarious cultural awakenings. However, their desire to understanding one another

makes the characters both endearing and truly human. *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* is a great example of how the differences we have with one another can be overcome by true love and a recognition of the greater number of similarities we share as human beings.

Kandahar

Kandahar is a hybrid of documentary, historical, and biographical narrative, that is based on the real-life situation of Nelofer Pazira who plays Nafas, the lead character in the story. Mohsen Makhmalbaf (best known for *Gabbe* and *The Apple*), directs the film that was shot just prior to September 11 without professional actors and literally in the minefields of the Iran-Afghanistan border. Makhmalbaf has been directing films for almost twenty years, and *Kandahar* is his best work to date.

Nafas is a female Canadian journalist who is returning to Afghanistan because the sister she left there was maimed by a land mine and is threatening to commit suicide during the final solar eclipse of the twentieth century. The film simultaneously navigates through themes of the oppression of women, widespread poverty and hunger, and the ever-present realities of landmines in one of the most war-torn regions of the world.

It is not exactly clear on which of these themes Makhmalbaf would have the viewer concentrate, but this becomes a strength rather than a weakness. *Kandahar* is a kind of slow walk through the unseen side of Afghanistan before the West knew very much about it, and before it had been labeled an “evil empire” by those who only learned about it after September 11th. The Afghanistan we see in the film is the one where someone has died every five minutes in the past twenty-five years from land-mines, wars, famine or draught. It is a region in which young girls must be trained not to pick up the dolls that have been placed over the mines as bait for young

children.

Nafas's effort to return behind the Muslim Iron Curtain takes her through a land of refugee camps that are populated almost exclusively by amputees. In one of the many surreal scenes, hoards of one-legged men run a foot race across the desert to retrieve prosthetic legs that are parachuting from the sky. The limbs, referred to simply as "legs," are coveted items that had been ordered a year earlier; such items rarely find their way back to the originally intended patients. This scene and many others remind the viewer of what daily life in a war-torn third world country is like.

America is now winding down a war with a middle eastern people that few of us understand with great clarity, and many view with nothing but bewilderment. Many people believe that we will be rebuilding Iraq soon, and that there may also be opportunities to participate in a dialogue with them concerning spiritual values, worldviews, and religion. *Kandahar* is a film that offers us an opportunity to understand people who have vastly different worldviews. Before we can presume to minister to a people, or to criticize them, we should look at the world from their perspective and at least make some effort to understand their plight. Many countries throughout the world have welcomed the liberation and freedoms that followed American intervention and occupation. *Kandahar* allows us to see the plight of people who need someone to hear their cries and identify with their pain; a people desperately in need of help.

Nafas serves as a kind of poster-child for the millions of women who live in exile behind the veil of the burka—a symbol now used world wide to plead the case of oppressed women. *Kandahar* may serve as a valuable lesson for many who would like a different look at the problems of Afghanistan.

Notes

1. “On Fairy-Stories”, *The Tolkien Reader*, Ballantine, 1966.

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