

The Nativity Story: supporting this film is a ministry in itself

Billed as the ultimate timeless story, the commercial film *The Nativity Story* had a short life at the cinema, but is now available on DVD, and has more going for it than you may think. The film has received significant support from mainstream Christian denominations and interdenominational groups, and was actually the first film to premiere at the Vatican.

It is directed by Catherine Hardwicke, a former production designer who has had extensive experience working with youth in 'coming of age' drama – *Thirteen* and also in *Lords of Dogtown*. Her commitment to period settings and naturalistic drama is very strong. In *The Nativity Story*, the actors were taught to make cheese in traditional ways, press olives and grapes and milk goats. The cinematography in this film is also startlingly clear, and the use of natural light excellent. Written by Mike Rich (best known for *The Rookie*), the film is a sensitive and faithful story. The writer was also the Executive Producer and had a strong personal interest in bringing the film to the attention of the church community, as well as the wider cinema audience.

Rich brings a script founded in the bible, with a whimsical approach to non-biblical and speculative parts, for example, Mary's parents. It is worth reading one of Rich's comments about his reason for following through on what he termed his call to write this script and to bring this message to the screen.

"In the past few years, in a sense, the dialogue over Christmas has diminished slightly. And by that, I mean individuals talking with their families and friends about the focus of the holiday. I think that's been lost a little bit in the hectic nature of the holiday where we impose these deadlines upon ourselves that we have to get this done, and we have to get the shopping done, and we've got the office party to go to and this and that. We get to December 25, and we exhale and we go, 'Whew, we made it through that.' When I started seeing the early cuts of the film, I thought to myself, this is one of these stories that [when] presented in this fashion will give families that opportunity to spend a couple of hours together during the holiday season. But more importantly, what I would love to see happen is that it [would] refresh that dialogue where parents talk to their children about the amazing courage and the amazing faith that was displayed by Mary and Joseph."

The lead actors are also excellent, with Keisha Castle-Hughes making a lovely, caring, vulnerable and yet strong young Mary. Keen Star Wars fans will know Keisha Castle-Hughes better as Apailana, the Princess of Theed, or more likely as the new Queen of Naboo in *Star Wars III – Revenge of the Sith*. Castle-Hughes has not been in many films, but became widely known in film circles for her Oscar Nominated Best Actress performance as Paikea in the New Zealand film, *The Whale Rider* (2002). She was only 13 at the time of the nomination, the youngest person ever to be nominated. Now only 17, she has recently given birth to her first child.

Oscar Isaac is certainly not that well-known an actor, but is an excellent choice for Joseph. His delivery of lines and looks at certain times convey a depth that encourages the viewer to focus on the character rather than on a celebrity actor. DOVE, a US based Christian and family movie group, recommends the film as suitable for ages 12 and above due to some violence, and interestingly the comment that "very young children might find the movie a bit slow moving". Still they give it 5 Doves - their highest rating. Yes, it is actually quite slow moving in parts, but some scenes are 'rich' with poignant moments and surely at Christmas, as the script writer has mentioned, we can make time for quiet reflection and a slower pace. (I know I need to). Most commentators note the film's adherence to the biblical text, and also its liberty with those areas where we of course do not know what was spoken. It is not silly or gratuitous in any dialogue scenes or in the script overall, though perhaps it is a little too sanitised in terms of the actual birth of Jesus.

There are some issues, however, which pop up in nearly all nativity dramas; for example, the Magi. In this film they appear at the stables along with the shepherds. Overall, one could even use this point to discuss the context and what may have really happened, and Mike Rich has his own explanation, referring to the concept of the blended narrative.

I want to conclude by raising a more controversial point as to why Christians should support these ventures and others in the pipeline. Secular companies will not put vast amounts of money into films unless there is some guarantee of reasonable return, or at least not too great a loss, which can be made up partly via DVD sales. The company behind *The Nativity Story*, New Line Cinema, is reported to have lost nearly \$20 million dollars to date. Of course, other films such as *The Passion of the Christ* and the first Chronicles of Narnia film, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, have been commercial successes, particularly bolstered by Christian audiences. But my point remains: without this support, a wider and mainly non-Christian audience will not have the opportunity to view these films. More people can be reached in this way than by any other possible church based outreach event. While these films are essentially 'pre-evangelistic,' seeds can be sown, and Church groups can make use of these opportunities.

I believe that a Christian film ministry, firmly founded in serious biblical discussion will help to enable people to consider the claims of the Christian story in our visually dominated world. May this be so at Christmas time.

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Note: first published in ACCatalyst: Volume 1, December 2007