

Nearly 450 turn out to protest 'Hail Mary'

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Joseph Brown, a protester who was five times the age of Price, said that this was his first protest, and that he knew of no better reason to air his opinion.

"What I'm doing is for the Blessed Mother, and I'd do anything for her," said Brown, who will be 81 on his next birthday. "It's a sad thing; there's no movie they can make that should show her at all. She's the sweetest, purest, most honest woman that ever lived and that ever will live. I'd lay down my life for her."

Father Albert Shamon, who led the crowd in praying the Rosary on the university quadrangle, said that all Christians should take the "insult to the Blessed Mother personally." He called the makers of the movie "modern-day vandals."

"These people are like modern vandals smashing senselessly something that is very close to our hearts. Any red-blooded Christian would be angered and would resent this insult to the Blessed Mother," Father Shamon said.

Brother Joseph Noonan, OFM, peacefully refuted critics' opinions that the movie was just an "artsy smartsy" effort on behalf of Godard to use imagery in depicting his own religious beliefs.

"There's no misunderstanding the movie's

message. It's very clear what is trying to be done," said Brother Joseph, who resides at the Franciscan friary on Mt. Read Boulevard. "Although the movie may not always be a clear one, it is an attack and a mockery of the Blessed Mother and of the Catholic religion."

That sentiment, however, was not shared by all demonstrators or movie-goers.

"I'm here because I came to see how this is handled," said Rev. Kenneth Dean, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Rochester. "I may protest the movie after, but not until I see it," Dean said on his way into the theater.

The Rev. Dean, who called the protest "unwarranted," said attention to the movie was enhanced by all the coverage it received in the Rochester media. Dean, a former president of an NBC affiliate in Jackson, Miss., also said the protestors' view of the "free-standing university" was "out of focus."

"A lot of letters in the papers I've been reading lately spoke of the university as being anti-Catholic," Dean said. "That view I believe is out of focus, and I'm wondering if people here protesting tonight are out of focus on the film."

After seeing the film, Dean said he could see the movie would "conflict with people's taste," but that it was "totally within the bounds of

orthodoxy.

"The movie is not made for a Sunday school class. It's made for an art community audience in a university setting."

Calling the movie too serious to be entertaining, Dean said it illustrated Mary's struggle to choose between her lighter and darker sides.

The film's premise, according to Dean, is related to the theories of Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung, who believed everything had a positive and a negative side. "This movie simply showed Mary struggling between these two sides," said Dean, who added that it would be beneficial for those who protested the film to view it in the way scientists look at science fiction.

"Science fiction does not threaten true science, and this movie shouldn't threaten pure faith," Dean said.

Students walking around campus the evening of the screening, which took place during freshman orientation week, were mostly in favor of the school's presenting the film.

"I feel it is right for the people to protest as long as they keep it personal," said Larry Blumenfeld, 17. "But I also support the freedom of the school to show the film."



Jeff Spalding/Courier-Journal
Pat Marcello of Our Lady of Victory Parish in downtown Rochester, holds a banner of the Madonna during the prayer/protest rally outside the University of Rochester's Strong Auditorium. Inside, more than 600 people viewed the controversial film.

'Hail Mary' fails to shock viewers

By Teresa A. Parsons

"Hail Mary" disappointed plenty of viewers last Thursday night, but few were shocked.

More than 600 people turned out to see the controversial movie — a modern-day depiction of the Annunciation and Incarnation of Christ — shown in Strong Auditorium as part of the University of Rochester's Summer Film Series.

A steady stream of viewers left the theatre while the movie was in progress, but the majority stayed for all 107 inscrutable minutes, waiting for a shock that didn't come.

"It was terrible," admitted Lynda Howland of Rochester as she left the auditorium. "I didn't understand it."

But she and her companion, Joyce Owens of Rochester, agreed that the film was not blasphemous, pornographic, or even in bad taste. "It was unintelligible, but it was not offensive. Otherwise I would not have come," Howland said.

"Boring" was the verdict of James Chavin, of Rochester. "I expected more from the fact that the pope bothered to make a statement on it," he said. Although he believed the story had potential, Chavin termed the outcome "disappointing."

"It was a bit long," he added.

Attendance was almost double the average turnout for the summer film series' showings, according to George Morrison, the university's assistant director of student activities.

Every viewer interviewed said he or she had come in reaction to the protests and controversy the film generated. "No one I know would have come if they didn't hear and read so much about it," said Chavin.

Owens and Howland both said they came out of anger. "I can understand them (Catholics) being disturbed by it. But I have real problems with anybody trying to shut down what we can see or can't see," Howland said. "It frightens me to see that done in the name of religion."

Chris Taub, a Cornell University student and Rochester resident, called demonstrators' refusal to see the movie and their attempt to prevent others from seeing it "ridiculous."

"The whole thing is absurd," he said.

After the movie ended, the university sponsored a panel discussion for viewers. Less than 20 people stayed to hear analysis from: Nathan Kollar, a religious studies professor at St. John Fisher College; Beverly Roberts Gaventa, an associate professor of the New Testament from Colgate/Rochester Divinity School; Sid Rosensweig, a local filmmaker and critic; and Ralf Meerbote, a professor of philosophy at the University of Rochester.

Panelists agreed that the movie was neither blasphemous nor pornographic. "I liked it, and I agree with those critics who thought it was fairly reverent," Rosensweig said. "I don't think that word (blasphemy) has any meaning in a pluralistic society because we don't have a state religion. What is blasphemy to me isn't to somebody else."

"The possibility of being insulted, offended or hurt by any piece of work is the price we pay for freedom," he added.

Despite scenes in which the movie's main character, "Marie," was shown nude, Rosen-

Ambiguous film deals with spiritual conflicts

By Karen M. Franz

"Hail Mary," Jean-Luc Godard's pseudo-biblical drama, is an extremely complicated and slow-moving film laden with ambiguity and the sort of unintelligible symbolism one might imagine occurs in alcohol-induced nightmares.

After a single, confused viewing of the film, one can hardly understand it well enough to be certain of what Godard was trying to convey. One can say that despite its shocking elements — the unlikely contemporary setting and characterizations, crude language, nudity and sexual overtones — the film does not deviate from the biblical account of the events from the Annunciation through the youth of Christ. Nor does it ridicule Mary, the Virgin Birth or any other tenet of Christianity.

That, however, does not mean that the film portrays Mary as a lady pleasing to Catholics. Godard's Mary works in her father's self-service garage, plays basketball, uses crude language, indulges in sexual temptation and, at one point, becomes resentful and cynical. Her father, a taxi driver, is depicted as an unloving, unfeeling, chaste and somewhat distant. Overall, she appears to be an alien, strange young woman.

Joseph is portrayed as a boorish taxi driver who can't relate to his love for Mary. He refuses to accept the unusual circumstances of her pregnancy until Gabriel — a crude thug in the army of God — knocks some sense into him — literally.

These characterizations — rather than the mostly straight-forward and naturalistic nude scenes — are perhaps the film's most shocking aspects. For many, it would be uncomfortable to consider Mary, in particular, as a normal teen-ager who could not say "Thy will be done" without setting herself up for a lot of pain.

In two key scenes, for example, Marie is shown washing her bed, as she attempts to come to terms with what is happening to her. This scene begins with wonderful progression to a sense of resentment of God — peppered by crude language and such self-

sweig thought director Jean Luc Godard's intent was to avoid being pornographic. "The use of nudity disturbed a lot of people," he said. "But almost every time Marie was naked on screen, there was a voice-over commenting on the struggle between body and spirit."

Although Marie works in a gas station, plays basketball and uses four-letter words on occasion, she is not "sleazy," Rosensweig said. "She's a good kid!"

But panelists raised more questions than they answered in regard to the symbolism and intent of the film's director, Jean Luc Godard.

In the final scene, for instance, Marie is shown lighting a cigarette and applying lipstick. The movie closes with a close-up of her parted, blood-red lips.

Kollar wondered whether the scene represented Marie's search for the spirit inside her. Several other panelists interpreted the movie's end as a sign that she had rejected her chaste holiness for a more ordinary existence.

In Review

... pitying thoughts as, "God is a vampire... profiting from my pain" — through cynical resignation and, finally, a joyful acceptance of her bittersweet role in the birth of Jesus.

The Mary-Joseph plot alone would have been plenty for the audience to digest. But adding to the confusion is a secondary and more obtuse plot concerning an unnamed professor and a student who alternately calls herself Eve and Eva.

Between what we are led to perceive as unsuccessful sexual interludes with Eve/Eva, the professor wanders onto shifting metaphysical ground for a discussion of the origin of man. According to the professor, human life was brought to earth by extraterrestrial. As evidence for this theory, he points to a depression on a graph of electrical fields. "Undeniably a signature," he says of the depression. "In my opinion, this establishes the strong presumption that life came to earth. Moreover, he explains, a study of comets has led him to believe that man was created by a loving, superior being.

The two plots bump into each other for a short period — when the professor and Eve/Eva ride in Joseph's cab — but the plot lines otherwise appear to be unrelated. Godard jumps back and forth between the stories through the use of two ineffective transitional devices: a momentary flash of blacks bearing the words "At the time" ("En ce temps la") and footage of unrealistic scenery — yellow suns in bright pink skies, full and crescent moons, the moon and earth in extreme proximity, raindrops on pink-tinted water and waves crashing on the beach.

Godard may believe the professor plot adds to the philosophical underpinnings of the main story, but for the average viewer, it only adds to the confusion. At least 60 times in the 107-minute film, he asks the audience to

Rosensweig believed the question was left unresolved. "It's as if she is saying 'I've been touched by holiness. Now I'm not sure I want to let it go,'" he said.

"The overall picture is clear, but the details are intricate," Meerbote explained. For instance, when a doctor, and later Joseph, examine Marie to determine her virginity, she asks each "Does the spirit have a body?"

"That's one of the basic theological questions. You start asking yourself about the means by which God is made flesh," Meerbote said.

In fact, Gaventa noted, only two of the gospel accounts of Christ's birth even mention the Blessed Mother's virginity. "It could have been that the role of Mary's virginity was simply to draw attention to this as a special birth," she said. "Here, that piece of the story was taken very literally and used as a focus for the struggle between body and soul."

On the other hand, Kollar questioned whether the film was ultimately religious in na-

... abruptly shift gears. The "at that time" device succeeds only in making time a meaningless concept. And the constant movement — rather than providing a sense of dynamic action — only creates monotony, adding to the tedium of this ponderous film. Even the characters seem bored.

Whether the film is blasphemy is difficult to say. It may have redeeming qualities — its focus on the conflict between the body and the spirit, between temptation and conscience — but Godard never makes his points clear.

It seems possible, for example, that he didn't really intend the film to be about the Holy Family. Perhaps he intended only to use the highly familiar story of the virgin birth as a metaphor for the film's central question — how a spirit is embodied in a human person. Mary asks both Joseph and her doctor if the soul has a body; both correct her, saying the body has a soul. Mary sees the soul as uplifting the body from corruption. "I think the spirit acts on the body... for what is flesh alone?"

In a leaden fashion, Godard drags this question out, moving ultimately to a scene that casts doubts on the earlier thinking. Ten minutes before the film's end, Marie seems to have worked out her conflicts. Leaving resentment and cynical resignation behind, she says, "I am joy," and asks, "How can one be resigned to God's will, to being loved?"

Yet in the final moments, Mary lights a cigarette and paints her lips a brilliant red. This macabre sequence — with Mary's again-cynical commentary — nearly implies that the body is hopelessly depraved and can only be elevated by the spirit for a short time.

Nearly — but not quite — Godard not only leaves the audience looking for the meaning of faith, but also for any clue as to his meaning. Fortunately, by this time, no one but die-hard art-film buffs and dutiful reviewers has the energy or interest to care about Godard's message.

All in all, "Hail Mary" is a bizarre, convoluted and boring film. Critics can argue that it is "art," but it's certainly neither enlightening nor entertaining.

ture. "I don't know what there was of religion there," he said.

Among other things, Meerbote termed the movie "a straightforward love story" in which the central characters reacted to an impossible situation — that Marie conceived a child while still a virgin. "One of the most moving aspects of the movie is that they do manage to deal with that," he said.

The panelists also disagreed as to the film's overall merit. "Speaking personally, I'd say this is not great Godard," Meerbote said.

But Rosensweig thought it was too soon to tell whether it was "major Godard."

"I don't find it boring," he explained. "That's the stock response when you don't want to work at a film."

Although Morrison, the panel organizer, forgot to invite viewers to the discussion before the movie started, he was not expecting a large crowd to stay in any case. "My experience has been that people don't stay. It's been a long night," he said.