

World & Nation

Lines, protests greet 'Last Temptation'

By Cindy Wooden

Washington (NC) — The public premiere of "The Last Temptation of Christ" was greeted by long lines of ticket buyers in nine North American cities and by picketing groups of protesters ranging from four people in Montreal to almost 1,500 in New York City.

The movie, directed by Martin Scorsese, opened August 12 in Montreal, Toronto, New York, Washington, Chicago, Minneapolis, Seattle, San Francisco and Los Angeles. The opening had been moved ahead one month from the originally scheduled date so viewers could decide "on fact, not fallacy" what to think of the film, according to Universal Pictures, distributor of the film.

The rush into print forced the studio to release it slowly because not many prints could be produced immediately. Scorsese finished editing the film on August 3, according to Universal.

Police and extra security personnel were on hand at each of the nine theaters, all owned by Cineplex-Odeon, a financial backer of the film.

A spokesman for Universal in New York said August 15 that the film grossed about \$450,000 at the box office in its first three days.

By releasing the film despite months of protest led by fundamentalist Christians, Scorsese "is uniting Christians," said Dudie Gilheany, who came from Vienna, Va., to join the picket line at the Avalon Theater in Washington.

Gilheany, a Catholic, said most of the 50 Washington protesters were Baptists and Methodists.

"I am very offended by the movie," she said. "To mock God is wrong."

As 360 ticket buyers waited in line for a 1 p.m. showing at the Avalon, the protesters were led by a man pushing a life-sized mannequin dressed as Jesus. At his feet was a tape recorder playing contemporary Christian music.

Rita Gilmanis from Gaithersburg, Md., said she was picketing "because I love Jesus and I want people to see him for who he really is."

Gilmanis said she did take into consideration the possibility that the protests would help boost the film's box-office take, but said, "I cannot sit back and watch Jesus portrayed this way. It hurts."

Police at the Avalon arrested one protester for moving out of the designated demonstration area, and theater personnel searched the bags and briefcases of those entering the building.

Among the ticket buyers was Lani Makhholm of Annapolis, Md., who told reporters she admired the work of the late Nikos Kazantzakis, author of the book upon which the film is based. "We are all at different levels of understanding," said Makhholm, who described herself as a born-again Christian. "I think we



Jesus, portrayed by Willem Dafoe, is surrounded by children in a scene from "The Last Temptation of Christ." The movie was released a month ahead of schedule due to protests.

should all see it and make up our own minds." In New York, the protest was coordinated by the local chapter of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, with support from Greek and Russian Orthodox, Protestant fundamentalists, Jews and Moslems.

Dawud A. Assad, president of the 173-member U.S. Council of Masajid (mosques), said in an August 11 statement, "We as Muslims deeply respect and revere all prophets of God and, as such, Jesus is very dear to us. Depicting the prophet Jesus in any form other than that of a prophet of God is an abomination."

The New York protesters and a handful of people supporting the film were separated from

ticket buyers by police barricades. Among the protesters at the Ziegfeld Theater in midtown Manhattan was New York Auxiliary Bishop Francisco Garmendia, who spoke with reporters and later led some of the protesters in reciting the rosary.

"We are trying to save this society," the bishops said, calling the film an "atomic bomb" against social and family values.

But Father Edmund S. Nadolny, pastor of St. Vincent Ferrer Parish in Naugatuck, Conn., told reporters in New York that he had seen the film and thought it contained a valid and positive message about "modern man's struggle for commitment."

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Reviewer pans wooden, unconvincing dramatization

By Henry Herx

New York (NC) — Capitalizing on the controversy that has elevated a low-budget movie to a full-blown media event, "The Last Temptation of Christ" (Universal) has arrived in the movie marketplace more than a month early.

For the curious willing to pay to see what has occasioned outraged protests by segments of the religious community, the movie can only be a disappointment. It proves to be little more than a wooden, unconvincing robe-and-sandals dramatization.

This, of course, is not what movie director

Martin Scorsese had intended with his screen adaptation of the 1950s controversial novel by Greek author Nikos Kazantzakis. The novel was an attempt to probe the mystery of the human nature of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, by using the writer's imagination to conjure with the reality of the divine in human form.

How well the original novel dealt with this question is less important than how credibly Scorsese conveys it on the screen. Though his attempt is a failure, its faults are mainly those of artistic inadequacy rather than of anti-religious bias. Those who reject as blasphemous any attempt to portray the Lord other than as they interpret the Gospels deny the right of even an untalented artist to use the power of the imagination to grapple with the character of Christ, the central figure identified with Western culture.

Lest there be any misunderstanding about what he is intending Scorsese prefaces his movie with a quotation from Kazantzakis, explaining that this is not the Gospel account but the author's meditation. As long as the Christian faith is alive and well, storytellers will feel compelled to fill in the blank spaces left by the Gospel writers.

With this said, Scorsese has done a poor job in evoking a credible image of the human side of Christ. A principal handicap is the muddled script, shallow characterizations and flat dialogue contributed by screenwriter Paul Schrader.

The script begins with a confused, God-obsessed Jesus being berated by Judas, an anti-Roman zealot, for making crossbars for Romans to crucify Jews. After some time in the desert, Jesus returns confident that God is speaking through him.

The script retells in a somewhat jumbled, idiosyncratic manner the miracles worked by Jesus, the gathering of the apostles, the

triumphant entry into Jerusalem and the Last Supper. Here, Jesus persuades the reluctant Judas to betray him so the Scriptures can be fulfilled.

On the cross, Jesus yields to his final temptation by the devil in the form of an angel. In what may be taken as an hallucination, Jesus is shown leaving the cross unseen to spend his final years as contented husband and father. But as an old man he finally realizes the truth and asks his heavenly Father to allow him to complete his sacrifice for all people. His request is granted, the movie ends with his death on the cross, leaving viewers to wonder whether such a fallible figure can, indeed, be regarded as the Messiah.

After more than two hours, this final 15-minute sequence offers little in the form of dramatic resolution, nor any reconciliation of the narrative's contradictory strands. One leaves with a sense of frustration rather than of enlightenment or wonderment.

Partly because of the limitations of his low-budget production, partly because of the failure of his own artistic imagination, Scorsese has come up with a muddled, unconvincing and ultimately religious dramatization.

As such, the movie falls flat, troubled by a halting narrative that never manages to get beyond its surface level of trying to picture the world in which Jesus lived. These images prove to be an interesting mishmash of picturesque costuming, elaborate tattooing and exotic music of northern African desert tribes uneasily mixed in with more conventional Hollywood trappings of the New Testament era.

Essentially what is missing is a meaningful spiritual dimension, let alone any depth of characterization. On the human level, inconsistencies abound as the main characters of Judas (Harvey Keitel) and Mary Magdalene

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Barbara Hershey as Mary Magdalene.

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