

# 'Jesus of Montreal' offers compelling plot

NEW YORK (CNS) — A challenging French Canadian drama, "Jesus of Montreal" (Orion Classics) is about a young actor whose decision to play Jesus in a Passion play changes his life.

Daniel (Lothaire Bluteau), a talented but little-known actor, is asked by Father Leclerc (Gilles Pelletier) to revise a Passion play written by the priest years before and performed annually at a shrine atop a mountain overlooking Montreal.

Intrigued with the opportunity, Daniel researches the role, consults a biblical scholar about contemporary interpretations of the Gospel text and selects his cast of four — two men and two women.

The result is a play that radically changes the priest's pious but dramatically dull original. Based on St. Mark's Gospel, Daniel's "revision" encompasses the life as well as death and resurrection of Christ. Performed outdoors with the lights of Montreal twinkling below, its striking tableaux are presented with a commentary on the historical background of the period.

Though the dramatization attracts both socialites and ordinary Montrealers, its unorthodox treatment — chiefly in questioning the virgin birth, use of colloquial language and inclusion of the "To be or not to be" soliloquy from "Hamlet" — causes shrine authorities to withdraw permission for future performances.

The play, however, has become so important to the now-close-knit troupe that they defy the ban to put on one last show. Police are called, a melee follows and the cross upon which Daniel hangs is knocked over, wounding him mortally.

Writer-director Denys Arcand has made a secular movie that treats the Gospel message compellingly and with surprising depth.

Daniel's dramatization of Christ's life is modern only in the sense that its form challenges the audience to think about the meaning of what they are watching. The play's coolly objective commentary makes the actors' fervor in re-creating the Gospel story all the more arresting.

The movie narrative goes beyond the controversial staging of the Passion play. There is a deeper level paralleling events in Christ's life with those experienced by the dedicated actor. For example, as Christ gathered the disciples, Daniel gathers his actors — taking them from such ordinary, even unlikely places as a parish soup kitchen, a studio dubbing porno films, and the world of TV commercials.

The biblical account of the moneychangers in the temple is reflected in a scene where Daniel erupts in anger at an



Orion Pictures Corp. The biblical account of Jesus chasing the money changers out of the temple is interpreted in this scene from 'Jesus of Montreal,' in which Daniel (Lothaire Bluteau) angrily disrupts an audition for a commercial because a model has been ordered to remove her sweater.

audition for a beer commercial after a model is ordered to take off her pullover despite her protests that she is not wearing a bra. Reacting to this contempt of human dignity, Daniel overturns a camera, destroys a monitor and uses a TV cable as a whip to chase clients and crew from the studio.

In another of many such parallels, Daniel resists the tempting offer to become rich by signing a media deal with a devilishly smooth-talking lawyer. Looking down on Montreal from the upper floor of a skyscraper, the lawyer says, "With your talent, this city is yours if you want."

Finally, after being taken from beneath

the toppled cross, Daniel descends into the underworld of a subway station where he collapses in what proves to be a terminal coma. His vital organs are removed and used as transplants to save the lives of others.

This transformation of Daniel into a Christ figure certainly adds another dimension to the movie's religious significance. Yet that is only part of Arcand's larger intentions. He also uses the film to critique the theater as art and business.

While Arcand pays suitable homage to the artist's aspirations and dedication, he is also amusingly critical of Montreal's theatrical flaks and phony socialite sup-

porters. The movie opens with a play declaring that God is dead and life not worth living. Praising it as profound is a clique of dizzy trend-setters who later turn up using much of the same gushy language in lauding Daniel's reworking of the Passion play.

Despite such playful potshots at theatrical groupies and media lightweights, Arcand is quite serious in his criticism of contemporary materialism and its spiritual emptiness. He is also serious in his criticism of the institutional church in the person of Father Leclerc, who admits that he is "not a very good priest."

His inability to be faithful to his vow of celibacy may be humanly understandable but his self-serving rationalizations for remaining a priest are devastating. Arcand contrasts Father Leclerc's spiritual sterility with Daniel's commitment to give life to his role as Jesus, thereby becoming indirectly an instrument of evangelization.

Bluteau's performance as Daniel is subdued, confident and self-contained, and he projects both a human warmth that attracts people and the interior determination of a man with a mission. Pelletier as the bad priest affects the weary demeanor of a man who has given up the struggle and is only going through the motions. His performance invites our understanding but not sympathy.

Produced in French Canada, the film is very Catholic in its sensibilities. Refreshingly, it is free of the kind of cynicism about the church found in movies from Europe's Catholic countries. Though critical, it is well aware of the difference between the church and the human nature of those who serve it.

Awarded the Ecumenical Prize at the 1989 Cannes Film Festival, "Jesus of Montreal" is a richly complex movie that makes demands on its viewers. Those who approach it as casual entertainment may be dismayed by its pathetic portrait of a failed priest, its intermingling of the historical Jesus with unseemly aspects of modern life as well as having a naked actor on the cross, no matter how discreetly photographed.

Others may gain some refreshing insights and new perspectives on Christianity's continuing relevance in our own times.

Because of its challenging treatment of religious matters as well as some rough language and a flash of nudity, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-IV — adults, with reservations. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted.

## Lots of clowning around, few laughs in Murray film

There's a lot of clowning around in "Quick Change" (Warner Bros.), but it doesn't add up to a fully satisfying comedy.

Bill Murray portrays Grimm, a jaded New York City urban planner who decides to desert the rat race by pulling off a million-dollar bank robbery. With his pregnant girlfriend Phyllis (Geena Davis) and harebrained buddy Loomis (Randy Quaid) as accomplices, Grimm engineers the bank job disguised as a clown, and the three escape undetected.

However, their getaway car gets towed, leaving them stranded and desperate to reach the airport before a frustrated police chief (Jason Robards) can nail them in their tracks.

The insane side of living in the Big Apple creates most of the maddening complications as the trio gets misdirected, robbed, taken for a ride by a volatile cabbie, held at gunpoint, and mistaken for members of the mob.

Murray's first directorial effort — he and Howard Franklin co-directed — is a sporadically funny attempt at screwball comedy.

The bank caper is rather ingenious in its execution, and the film's absence of any real violence is welcome. Davis' and Murray's understated performances serve as a foil to Quaid's broad, slapstick characterization of a spineless nerd going to pieces, which at times goes overboard.

A lame romantic element adds little to the comic mix, though Grimm's newfound flair for crime makes Phyllis question their sexual relationship. Her pregnancy, however, is treated rather cavalierly as the pursued couple joke about having a baby behind bars.

Due to some rough language, acceptance of an unmarried sexual relationship and crime treated as a lark, the U.S.C.C. classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted.



Warner Bros. In 'Quick Change,' bank guard Hugh Estes (Bob Elliott) is surprised by a gun-toting 'bozo' (Bill Murray), who soon learns that it's easier to rob a bank than to get out of New York City.