

FEATURE

Dorothy Day film slated for limited Rochester run

By Lee Strong
Associate editor

In 1978, Father Ellwood Kieser, CSP, proposed an idea to Dorothy Day.

The Paulist priest had met Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, in 1965 at the Second Vatican Council, and had long been fascinated by her life story.

So 13-years after they first met, he asked her permission to make a film about her life.

"She told me, 'Wait until I'm dead,'" he recalled.

Day died in 1980 at age 83, but it was 16 years before Father Kieser finally released his film, "Entertaining Angels: The Dorothy Day Story."

The film has had limited release since its August 1996 premiere. It is scheduled only for four matinee showings in Rochester March 1 and 2 at the Little Theatre, 240 East Ave.

Dayna Papaleo, promotions director for the Little, said officials at the theater decided to show the movie because Rochester is home to one of the oldest continuous Catholic Worker Houses in the country, St. Joseph's House of Hospitality. She added that the run could be extended if the movie draws well.

Father Kieser, the producer of the movie, is not surprised that the film has had such limited release and, in most cases, limited numbers of showings.

He said he only made 35 prints of the film due to a limited budget.

"It's not like a blockbuster, with a thousand or two thousand" copies circulating, he said during a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier* from his Pacific Palisades, Calif., office.

Moreover, the focus of the film has made it difficult for some theaters and critics to look upon it favorably, he said.

"The picture is not politically correct," Father Kieser said. "Dorothy regrets her abortion. Dorothy becomes a Catholic. Those are not politically correct things to do."

But the priest is not worried about the financial success of the film.

"You never make money on the theatrical releases, except for blockbusters," observed the creator of the Emmy-award-winning series "Insight."

The priest is in a position to know. He



John P. Johnson
Moira Kelly (left), in the title role as Dorothy Day, and Heather Graham, as Maggie, participate in a suffragette march in "Entertaining Angels: The Dorothy Day Story," produced by Paulist Pictures.

was the executive producer of the 1988 film "Romeró," which won critical acclaim but did not turn a profit until released as a video. More than 70,000 copies of that video have been sold thus far. He expects to make back his money for the Day film the same way.

Not that he will have far to go. Despite the presence of such actors such as Moira Kelly (Oona in "Chaplain," and the voice of Nala in the "Lion King") and Martin Sheen, direction by Michael Rhodes (who holds five Emmy's and directed such television programs as "Christy" and "China Beach") and a script by John Wells (executive producer and a writer for "ER"), the movie cost just \$4.5 million to make.

"I've made a \$20 million picture for \$4-1/2 million," Father Kieser proclaimed.

He was able to do so because so many of the people involved in the project worked for scale, and a number of major studios donated or provided at cost costumes, sets



Moira Kelly as Dorothy Day, Martin Sheen as Peter Maurin, and Heather Camille as Tamar, Day's daughter.

and equipment.

Sheen, for example, contacted Father Kieser without prompting about being in the movie.

"He sent word through a mutual friend that he wanted to play Peter (Maurin)," the French peasant philosopher who helped Day launch the Catholic Worker movement, Father Kieser said.

Sheen had personal reasons for being involved, the priest observed.

"When he was a young actor (in New York), he used to go to the Catholic Worker soup kitchen for a meal," Father Kieser explained. "He both knew and loved Dorothy."

The person who captured both Sheen and Father Kieser's attention remains a controversial figure in the church, lauded by some people as a saint, criticized by others as a radical, Father Kieser acknowledged. But the priest believes Day's life has much to teach people today about faith.

"I'm essentially an evangelizer," he said. "I don't know any American whose story contains the high Gospel density that Dorothy's does in as much as she made a 180-degree change from being a bohemian, sleeping around, having an abortion, to being an American Mother Teresa."

The movie focuses on Day's transformation from that "bohemian" who wrote for communist publications, was active in the suffrage and labor movements and bore a child out of wedlock, to a devoted Catholic who discovered God, rejected

parts of her previous life and reached out to the poor during the Depression. Thus the film only deals with some 20 years of her life.

His decision to limit the film to that period in her life — and not deal in greater detail with her pacifist activities during World War II and the Vietnam War, her support of labor unions, her acts of civil disobedience — has not gone over well with all people, Father Kieser acknowledged.

But his goal was not to deal with her entire life.

"I'm most fascinated by the process of conversion," Father Kieser explained. "I think Dorothy's bohemian period is where most people are. These are the people I most want to reach."

That explanation does not resonate with Nazareth College sociology professor Harry Murray, however.

"I think it missed the importance of Dorothy Day for the church in America today," noted Murray, author of the 1990 book, *Do Not Neglect Hospitality: The Catholic Worker and the Homeless*. He saw the movie at its national premiere last August at the Pax Christi U.S.A. conference in Cleveland.

"It really underplays her political relevance," Murray explained. "There's almost no mention of her commitment to nonviolence and her challenge to the political and economic structures."

"I think it's unfortunate if this is the only exposure people have to her life," he said.

But, he added, "I think the good that could come from it might be that some folks might be inspired by it to learn a little more about Dorothy."

Father Kieser would welcome such interest.

"Dorothy is a classic figure," Father Kieser said. "I think people will be talking about her 400 years from now."

And, he added optimistically, "I think the video will still be watched 10, 15 years from now."

Worker house recruits volunteers to aid poor

The St. Joseph's House of Hospitality in Rochester is seeking help for its residential team.

The team is an ecumenical spiritual community dedicated to offering hospitality to the poor, according to a spokesman. The team works with 100 people a day, providing meals and other aid. It continues to follow the guidance of the Catholic Worker movement as it was founded by Dorothy Day.

Anyone interested may call the house at 716/232-3262, or write it at 402 South Ave., Rochester, NY 14620.

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