

FEATURE

Bloody 'Windtalkers' suffers from weak narrative

By Anne Navarro
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — Director John Woo, known in the United States for his finely choreographed action films, ventures into the realm of period epics with "Windtalkers" (MGM). However, he ends up with a monotonous, bloody World War II drama that fails to move the viewer despite the story's historical relevance.

Inspired by true events, the film tells the story of how several hundred Navajos were recruited to be Marines using a secret military code based on their native language which, it was hoped, would foil the Japanese. Up to that point, the Japanese had continually broken encrypted military transmissions. These Marines were referred to as "code talkers" and their code, which the Japanese never broke, is considered to have been key in winning the war.

Writers John Rice and Joe Batteer set the story during the 1943 Battle of Saipan. Marines Joe Enders (Nicolas Cage) and Ox Anderson (Christian Slater) are assigned to protect code talkers Ben Yahzee (Adam Beach) and Charlie Whitehorse (Roger Willie) but protect the code at all costs.

Enders and Anderson must be prepared to kill the Navajos if capture is imminent. The premise has great promise, but its potential is never tapped. Instead, ultrablooded battle scenes are punctuated by dry storytelling that doesn't flesh out the moral



MGM Pictures/CNS

Nicholas Cage and Adam Beach star in a scene from the movie "Windtalkers."

quandary faced by the protecting Marines nor the clash of cultures between the American Marines and their Navajo counterparts in a meaningful way.

The narrative unfolds the parallel stories of Enders, who loses everyone in his squad during a battle in the Solomon Islands, and that of Yahzee, who has left his wife and young son in Arizona.

Enders has retreated into his own world

with the faces and screams of his dying platoon members constantly running through his head. He is reluctant to form bonds after the losses he has suffered but determined to serve his country to the utmost of his ability. It is unclear whether it was the bloodshed in the Solomons or previous events that has made him renounce his faith. Yet in the end there is a change in his attitude, which some might consider late in

the game while others would consider it a saving grace. The problem is that Cage underplays the part so much that the result is a forced, teeth-clenched performance, instead of a subtle one with emotion bubbling just beneath the surface.

Yahzee is a happy-go-lucky kind of guy, pleased to be serving his country but a true tenderfoot in the realities of war. Slater and Willie's characters are minor in comparison to Cage and Beach's, as are the rest of the Marines that fight by their sides. The viewer isn't transported into the hearts of the Marines who are daily watching their comrades die horrific deaths at the hands of the Japanese. And the Japanese troops, who suffer great losses as well, remain a distant, faceless enemy.

"Windtalkers" does not do justice to the real life events. It is a constant tug between the battle scenes and the development of the slim narrative, which doesn't capture all that could have been included in a story such as this. Woo has been quoted as saying that, with this film, he wanted to send a message that war has to be stopped. The savage scenes are certainly repelling enough to convince audiences, but the story doesn't support the action.

Due to much graphic war violence with sporadic rough language and profanity, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops classification is A-IV — adults, with reservations. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted.

'Ya-Ya Sisterhood' offers fine cast, spiritual element

By Anne Navarro
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — In "Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood" (Warner Bros.), writer-director Callie Khouri adapts Rebecca Wells popular novel with mixed results.

"Ya-Ya" centers around an estranged Southern mother and playwright daughter and an eccentric circle of aging Southern belles who try to salvage the mother-daughter relationship.

In the way it presents women's relationships, particularly Southern women, the film sporadically connects with the audience. The talented cast and snappy dialogue soften the high melodrama.

"Ya-Ya" is encumbered by confusing flashbacks from two time periods and the use of three sets of cast members to play the women during different stages in their lives. Yet it is likely to strike a chord with

women as it showcases the considerable aptitude these grand dames have for portraying the colorful but shallow characters.

In a magazine interview, successful New York City playwright Sidda Lee Walker (Sandra Bullock) takes a few swipes at her Louisiana mother's parenting skills, unintentionally setting off a feud with her mother, Vivi (Ellen Burstyn).

To the rescue come Vivi's long-time pals, members of the secret childhood society, the Ya-Ya Sisterhood: widow Necie (Shirley Knight), who holds the group's moral compass; Caro (Maggie Smith), who throws back drinks as often as she reaches for her oxygen mask; and Teensy (Fionnula Flanagan), a wealthy Alcoholics Anonymous member who drives a canary-yellow convertible Rolls-Royce.

The trio trot off to the Big Apple and stage an "intervention," kidnapping Sidda back to Louisiana to show her all the things

she never knew about her mother and possibly to help Sidda understand the fear of commitment that has kept her from marrying her Celtic beau Connor (Angus MacFadyen) of seven years.

The women reveal their "divine secrets," their lives, loves and losses, in a series of flashbacks with Ashley Judd conveying the inner demons of the young Vivi. However, the film never probes Vivi's emotions and frustrations or how her actions impacted Sidda, the oldest of four children, who bore the brunt of Vivi's tantrums. By the time the film reveals the truth behind Vivi's erratic behavior and the reconciliation between mother and daughter, it is a letdown.

"Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood" does have a few gems to offer: the cast and, most surprising, its spiritual side. Pained by guilt over her sins, Vivi confesses to her priest regularly. Faith seems to have been a constant in her life regardless of the tur-

moil surrounding her. In her own extravagant way, Vivi prays to the Blessed Virgin asking her to intercede and take her prayer to God and Jesus. And although the spiritual aspects are somewhat downplayed, they do exist and are presented in a confident manner in keeping with the character.

Although screenwriter Khouri tried to cram in as much as possible, so much more is missing, particularly in the background and stories of the characters. But, for those who enjoy down-home, lively female flicks, this may be fine summer entertainment.

Due to a live-in relationship, a scene of child abuse, mature thematic elements and intermittent profanity and crass language, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

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