

Veggies retell story of Jonah, whale

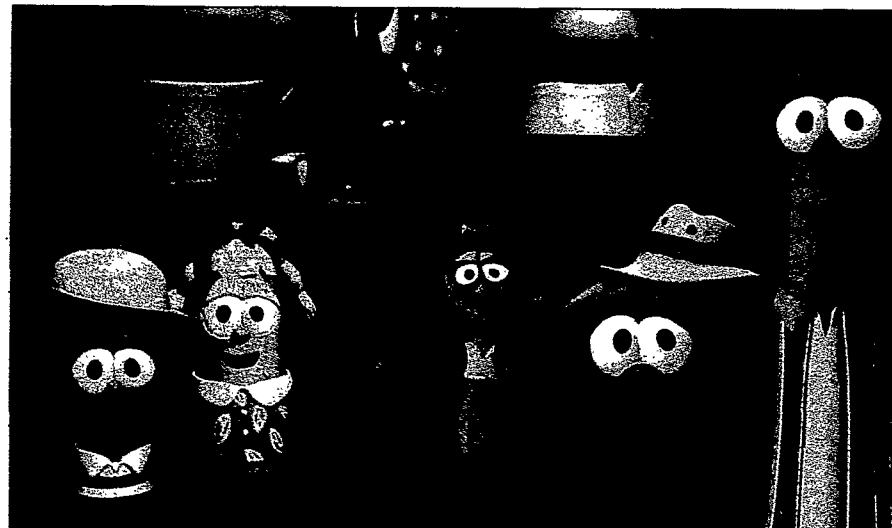
David DiCerto/CNS

NEW YORK — "Jonah: A Veggie Tales Movie" (Artisan) is a whimsical, computer-animated retelling of the biblical story of Jonah and the whale, based on the popular direct-to-video "Veggie Tales" series.

Written and directed by Mike Nawrocki and Phil Vischer, it features a salad bar of Christian vegetables who sing and dance their way through this parable of God's unconditional love. While the computer-generated animation is a few notches below recent Disney-Pixar offerings, parents and fans of the series will find this an appealing alternative to the glut of merchandise-driven flicks geared to the younger audience.

The tale opens with Bob Tomato and his mates en route to see Twipo, an Elvis-like asparagus, in concert. Sidetracked by a van mishap, the intrepid band encounters a bungling trio of pirates, eager to recount to the landlubbers a yarn about a recent call in a foreign port.

From here, the film picks up the familiar Old Testament story of Jonah, a prophet of ancient Israel, currently incarnated as an asparagus stalk, sporting a monocle and proper British accent. Jonah is instructed by the Lord to bring his message to the citizens of Nineveh, a godless Assyrian



Artisan Entertainment/CNS

The Veggies — Junior Asparagus, Laura Carrot, Percy, Annie, Bob the Tomato and Archibald Asparagus — star in the animated feature "Jonah — A Veggie Tales Movie."

city and Israel's hated rival.

Jonah refuses and tries to flee, setting sail for distant Tarshish aboard a ship crewed by the loony troika of pirates. A storm overtakes the vessel and Jonah is tossed overboard, along with Khalil, a fast-talking, scene-stealing caterpillar. The unlikely duo soon becomes whale hors d'oeuvres, and the recipients of a gastrointestinal visitation by a gospel choir of angelic vegetables.

Their rousing "Second Chances" prompts a change of heart for Jonah. His resolve strengthened, escapee Jonah pro-

ceeds to Nineveh, whose inhabitants have a nasty habit of slapping foreigners across the face with fish. God's message of boundless love wins the day. Nineveh repents. Jonah leaves, perplexed over how God's love could extend to even such an unworthy people.

The film closes with Bob Tomato and his merry legumes having learned an important lesson about God's limitless mercy and compassion.

Much of the picture's shortcomings hinge on the inevitable comparisons to bigger-budgeted, ani-

ated features. In addition to taking a back seat technically to what Disney or DreamWorks release, "Jonah" unfortunately offers less than memorable musical numbers. The celery, asparagus and assorted crudites, while cute, are at times difficult to distinguish from each other and lack the endearing personality of a Buzz Lightyear or cowboy Woody.

Several scenes are overly pedantic, with dialogue bordering on preachy. This moralizing may work better in an episodic series, but seems contrived in a movie.

Highlighting the positive, the filmmakers deserve kudos, showing courage in tackling a story as sublime as Jonah — especially taking into account the juggernaut-like merchandising engines fueling most children's entertainment. "Jonah" breaks complex moral concepts into child-sized bites that are more easily grasped in a lighthearted guise.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops classification is A-I — general patronage. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is G — general audiences.

DiCerto is a guest reviewer for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Office for Film and Broadcasting while staff critic Anne Navarro is on maternity leave.

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