

Family-friendly 'Manna' is 'uplifting'

Gerri Pare/CNS

NEW YORK — Thirty years after a family and friends found a small fortune on their front lawn, one of them decides the time has come to pay it back in the enjoyable, Catholic-oriented comedy "Manna From Heaven" (Five Sisters).

The story behind the movie is as interesting as what's on the big screen. The filmmakers are the Burton family. Mom Gabrielle wrote the script, Dad worked on the production and their five daughters all collaborated on this, their third feature. Daughter Ursula stars as Sister Theresa and co-produced with her sisters, Jennifer and Charity, while Gabrielle C. and Maria co-directed the movie. Shot on a tiny budget, the independent film is getting a gradual roll-out across the country.

Billed as a comedic fable, it opens as Buffalo's Annunciata family and a few friends are gathered in the living room. Suddenly they notice \$20 bills floating onto the front lawn, seemingly out of the blue. After saintly 10-year-old Theresa (Hallee Hirsch) announces it's a gift from God, they divvy it up and go their separate ways.

Three decades later on Ash Wednesday, Theresa, now a nun, feels certain God meant the nearly \$20,000 as a loan, not a gift. She summons everyone who moved away back to Buffalo and announces that by Easter they must raise the cash since none of them ended up well off.

Despite their reservations, the eight go along and decide to sell chances on a car raffle and sponsor a ballroom dancing competition. Elderly Helen (Cloris Leachman) has her heart set on winning the prize car while Sister Theresa's brother and his wife (Harry Groener and Faye Grant) just hope they can keep their dancing school afloat. Cynical Inez (Wendie Malick), who became a Las Vegas casino card dealer, temporarily moves in with sweet Dottie (Jill Eikenberry), who opened a beauty parlor but, like Inez, never married.

Unbeknownst to the others, Floridians Bunny and Eddy (Shirley Jones and Frank Gorshin) have be-



Five Sisters Productions/CNS

Sisters, from left, Ursula, Jennifer, Gabrielle, Maria and Charity Burton, chat in Alexandria, Va., in October. Their movie production company, Five Sisters Productions, was promoting their third film, "Manna From Heaven," in the area.

come husband-and-wife con artists — and envision making off with the proceeds in the raffle car.

Meanwhile, bighearted Sister Theresa's been getting in trouble with Mother Superior (Louise Fletcher) for taking strangers off the street into their convalescent home.

Soon the community comes together to restore a crumbling theater for the dance competition. After almost being canceled, the big night finally arrives just as Bunny and Eddy have a falling-out over their past misdeeds.

The script also sketches other characters who play small but crucial parts in the plot. Romance is also swirled into the busy narrative — between the raffle car dealer (Seymour Cassel) and Dottie, the grown children of the two married couples, and an incognito admirer (Drew Pillsbury) who is drawn to Inez. Nor is the mystery of where the money actually came from, and where it will go, left up in the air.

There are contrived moments, but since the movie is genuinely funny and heartwarming they go down easily. The spirit of whimsy is alive and well throughout. It's a pleasure to see so many polished veteran actors

working together, three of them Academy Award winners, all of them able to provoke a smile or a laugh without overacting.

Movie Review

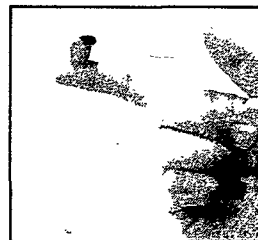
The comedy has its serious side, too, as the characters discover their earlier windfall didn't bring them fulfillment. In this re-evaluation of lives, Sister Theresa's loving generosity sets an example for the positive directions those around her take.

An uplifting film about lost dreams and renewed hope, "Manna From Heaven" is nourishing, family-friendly entertainment that deserves to find the kind of mass audience that embraced "My Big Fat Greek Wedding."

Because of a few crude expressions and fleeting sexual innuendo, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops classification is A-II — adults and adolescents. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG — parental guidance suggested.

Pare is the director of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Office for Film and Broadcasting.

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