

Christians Set Sights on Film Industry

Christian producers are courting Hollywood dollars and looking for a new hit at theaters

Now that the hottest-selling Christian book of all time is about to become a major motion picture, observers say Hollywood may be on the verge of producing a wave of Christian-themed movies. The trend may also surprise the naysayers who doubt Hollywood will ever spread more light than darkness.

Left Behind: The Movie, based on the first book in a series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, will hit theaters in February—its \$17.5 million budget ringing it in as the most expensive Christian movie produced in decades.

The book is based on the top-selling end-times thriller Left Behind, which has sold some 17 million copies. This has some insiders wondering if Left Behind: The Movie will draw more than last year's successful The Omega Code, which cost \$7.5 million, grossed more than \$13 million and has sold more than 500,000 video versions.

The producers behind the Left Behind movie are confident that a new day is dawning in Hollywood. They believe their anticipated success and the triumph of The Omega Code are sure landmarks along a road to greater Christian impact in Hollywood.

"Hollywood is a land filled with giants, but people of great

faith can take it," said Peter Lalonde, who along with brother Paul Lalonde run Cloud Ten Pictures, the company co-producing Left Behind.

"If we do, it will open up a whole new avenue for young Christian filmmakers. Then we'll see a whole new wave of evangelism taking place through movies," Peter Lalonde said. "The timing is right because Hollywood is so far removed from reality, and a group of Christian filmmakers are stepping up."

Matt Crouch, who wrote and produced The Omega Code, has new projects in production. Providence Entertainment, a one-year-old Southern California company that distributed The Omega Code, is busy handling films for a

group of young Christian filmmakers and is working to define and develop a market for Christian films.

Crouch used the TBN network owned by his father, Paul Crouch, as a vehicle to enlist church support, but the Lalondes plan to make churches financial partners. The Left Behind video is scheduled for release in November, followed by a scheduled release to theaters in February. To finance the \$3,000-\$6,000 in film printing and advertising needed to open the film on a single screen, Cloud Ten and its partner, Namesake Productions, will ask churches to pay the costs to open the film on screens in their neighborhoods.

Participating churches will then make the "opening" into a Christian event and provide discounted tickets to their congregations. Backers will recoup their expenses from the initial proceeds of the local showing and share in the potential profits. Peter Lalonde said this will make it possible for the movie to open on several thousand screens

nationwide, more than major Hollywood productions.

“It will be like sponsoring a Billy Graham event,” Peter Lalonde said. “If we are a success, it will create a model that will allow Christian films to compete with the biggest studios in America.”

Providence Entertainment marketing director Michael Harpster believes marketing can make Christian films an accepted “genre,” much like horror or African American films. At New Line Cinema he successfully sold the Nightmare on Elm Street series to teen-agers and House Party to black teens.

He said that although African Americans make up only about 12 percent of the total population, many \$30 million to \$40 million films marketed to black audiences were profitable.

“The Christian audience is obviously much larger,” he said. “We should be able to produce \$30 million to \$40 million movies with a strong Christian theme and never have to cross over to a mainstream audience.”

Founded by Christian millionaire Norm Miller of Dallas, Providence will distribute films for True Soul Armor and Signal Hill Pictures, two Southern California companies that have attracted national media attention in their quest for young Christian viewers.

True Soul Armor, a successful 7-year-old apparel manufacturer headed by Eric Hannah and Scott Brinson, produced Christian videos The Moment of Truth, versions I and II.

Extreamdays, scheduled for release this fall, is the first evangelistic extreme-sport film ever made. Signal Hill's Mercy Streets, an urban drama about two brothers separated by guilt and anger and reunited by faith and love, is also scheduled for release this fall.

"We're trying to create an army [of moviegoers] who are committed to changing the world one movie at a time," Harpster said. "It's a long process, but I am convinced the culture is up for grabs."

Matt Crouch will begin shooting Meggido, the sequel to The Omega Code, in September at a cost of close to \$15 million with theatrical release scheduled for next spring. The movie will again star Michael York but will not deal with Bible codes.

"I've met with a lot of people in Hollywood who don't need any more convincing [about the viability of Christian-themed movies]," Crouch said. "They're scratching their heads and saying, 'Where did these people come from?' I believe theaters will be the street corner churches of the 21st century."

Crouch is buying part of the Hanna-Barbera Studio, adjacent to Universal Studios in Studio City, and he and PAX TV executives have agreed to produce a series of one-hour documentaries in which modern technology intersects with ancient biblical prophecies. Shot in Rome and Israel, airing will begin in July 2001. Crouch also plans to adapt the theatrical drama of T.D. Jakes' book Woman, Thou Art Loosed! into a feature film titled Come to the Water.

Peter Lalonde said only a few of Hollywood's financial backers strongly oppose or support Christian films. "The rest only ask if we can make money and don't care what's on the screen," he said. "If we can create movies with strong Christian themes that are viable in the marketplace, we can create a change in the world's thinking."