

“Conquering Hollywood” Tour

Industry veterans say equipping believers to work behind the scenes can bring change from the inside out

Churchgoers are expected to flock to theaters to see Mel Gibson’s film *The Passion of the Christ* when it opens this month. But Christians inside the entertainment industry hope believers will become as enthusiastic about making another kind of showing—behind the scenes in Hollywood.

Through his 14-city Conquering Hollywood tour that began in September, producer and director S. Bryan Hickox, winner of several Emmy Awards, including one in 1987 for *Blood Vows: The Story of a Mafia Wife* starring Melissa Gilbert, is seeking to train Christians to be marketable in Hollywood.

His two-day event, which costs roughly \$300, offers writing instruction from faculty at Act One, a Los Angeles-based ministry that teaches screenwriting to Christians, as well as workshops on acting and how to make a successful pitch. The tour has already made stops in Atlanta, Dallas and Phoenix, and is scheduled to hit San Francisco, Seattle, St. Louis, Chicago and Washington, D.C., in the coming months. The last stop will be Honolulu June 11-12.

Hickox believes a few hundred Christians working behind the scenes as set designers, makeup artists, casting directors and the like can influence the content coming out of Hollywood. Hickox said research shows that Christians and non-Christians want more films with a moral base, pointing to the success of *Finding Nemo*, *Bruce Almighty* and *The Matrix Reloaded* as proof.

A 40-year industry veteran who accepted Christ in 1974, Hickox

said in the early days of his career “less than 6 percent of the media gatekeepers had any church or synagogue affiliation. That is changing. In Hollywood, there is an awakening.”

But he doesn't foresee the entertainment industry being gutted of “objectionable content.” He sees room at the table for Christian perspectives, and he doesn't want believers to miss an opportunity.

“We have a chance to impact the world,” Hickox told Charisma during a break at the inaugural event, held in Jacksonville, Fla. “Other countries are growing weary of American morality. As Christians stand on truth, we can reclaim the entertainment industry.”

Casting director and acting coach Michael Stark said the tour is about helping Hollywood “clean up [its] act.” An actor who spent 26 years working in films and daytime dramas, Stark hopes the tour will encourage young artists to help reform the industry. “We old guys can talk to the young guys, but it's the young guys who will have to do it,” he said.

Richard Colla, a director, writer and producer whose career dates back to a stint as director for the TV series *Gunsmoke*, doesn't consider himself a Christian but wants to help students learn how to sell their stories. His track record is good—he has sold every script he's ever pitched. “I certainly am interested in the condition of man, and that certainly requires an examination of the character of man,” Colla said.

Participant Jeff Carr has loved film for years but realized only recently that he could be a Christian and pursue filmmaking as a career. “I was kind of thinking God had a

cruel sense of humor to give me these ideas, only to have to pitch it to a den of thieves,” said Carr, 27. “I never knew this [network of Christians] existed.”

The network has been mostly underground, stealthily working behind the scenes trying to find creative ways to keep the characters on That '70s Show from losing their virginity, for example, or convincing a studio executive to remove a scene in which church choir members are portrayed as hypocritical drug addicts.

“Most of the victories of the Christians in Hollywood are what you don’t see on the screen,” said Act One founder Barbara Nicolosi. “But we’ve got to get beyond playing defense. We’ve got to start making the movies we want to see.”

In 10 years she believes there will be “a profound change” in the entertainment industry as Act One students and other Christians develop a brand of morally based films that make viewers want to be better people.

Chatting during a break from an afternoon workshop session, 25-year-old Naji Hendrix said the conference has been a source of encouragement. The Iran native accepted Christ five years ago and believes God wants her to make a film about her testimony.

The tour has brought her dream “a little closer to reality,” she said, “like it’s not impossible to fulfill my vision.”

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