

Filmmaker Tells Story of 'Wounded Healer'

Richard Rossi says his biopic about evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson reflects his own brokenness

When filmmaker Richard Rossi stood before 500 members of the influential Screen Actors Guild in July after a showing of his film, Aimee Semple McPherson, he told them about the power of the Holy Spirit and God's ability to work through a "wounded healer."

Rossi says he was talking as much about himself as he was his film, a biopic about the famed healing evangelist who founded the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. "Sister Aimee's story is a story of faith that the Holy Spirit can anoint things, and that anointing makes a difference," said Rossi, whose film is to release this fall.

"I really identify with her because she prayed for healing for thousands, but could not seem to get healing for herself and her own personal relationships. When I was in the healing ministry, the more I was up on a pedestal the more isolated and depressed I became."

Rossi, 42, grew up in Pittsburgh. The son of a jazz guitarist and an artist, he was playing guitar on stage at age 7. At 14, after watching the Christian movie A Distant Thunder, he walked the church's aisle during the altar call. But two years later he nearly died from a drug overdose and in desperation called The 700 Club prayer line. They referred him to a Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship meeting, where he says he was baptized in the Holy Spirit.

He formed a Christian rock group and began playing at high schools. But wanting to preach, he enrolled in Liberty University and earned a master's degree in biblical studies. There, he met Sherrie Plauger, and they soon married. After graduation, they returned to Pittsburgh to plant churches, minister in song and preach.

Rossi, who had a flair for the theatrical, appeared on The 700 Club and produced a Christian album. A Pittsburgh newspaper called his congregation "a church where hippies are hailed and people are healed." The healing services grew from 200 to 2,000. He even filmed the healings and exorcisms and produced a Fox TV documentary. The Rossis' marriage and ministry seemed on fire. But the flames soon died.

Suffering from depression that Rossi said stemmed from childhood abuse, he preached on Sunday mornings, frequented bars in the afternoon, then preached and prayed for healing that evening.

Then on June 24, 1994, Rossi was arrested for assaulting Sherri. Pleading no contest, he spent 101 days in jail. The story of the fallen healer appeared on A Current Affair, Hard Copy and Inside Edition.

While in jail he enrolled in a 12-step program and later underwent restoration at Healing for the Nations ministry in Atlanta. Now, more than 10 years later, Rossi still attends a recovery group four days each week and speaks with his Alcoholics Anonymous mentor nearly every day.

"Our faith and family are stronger now than ever," said Sherrie Rossi. "Our marriage is proof that a born-again family

can overcome media scrutiny, incarceration and even friends telling me to give up on Richard when he was at the lowest point of suffering.”

In 2001 Rossi finished the documentary Saving Sister Aimee. Though some considered it a sensationalized depiction, it won the Motion Picture Council’s Angel Award for best documentary. Last year, with only a few months and \$50,000, he wrote, directed and produced Aimee Semple McPherson. In February, a rough cut attracted a record crowd to Hollywood’s Beverly Cinema.

“The film came out of my brokenness, and had I not been broken, I could not have made this movie,” he said. “Her story is a story of total grace, and so is mine. As I made this story about a wounded healer, I received healing for my own wounds. I was able to tell my story by telling Sister Aimee’s story.”

Ed Donnally in Hollywood