

Waterproof Breaks New Ground for Christian Films

Waterproof, starring Burt Reynolds, bucks the tired trend of 'end-times' plots and signals a new maturity in Christian films

In a sharp departure from its end-times fare, Cloud Ten Pictures released its first general-interest film in October. A story about forgiveness and redemption set in a small Louisiana town, *Waterproof* portrays a rural black family grappling with racism, bitterness and tragedy, yet drawing strength from its faith.

For Cloud Ten and Christian moviemaking, *Waterproof* is a landmark—a place to measure in time when Christian movies finally began to offer the quality too often lacking when believers get behind the camera.

Written and directed by Barry Berman and starring Burt Reynolds and April Grace (*Finding Forrester*), *Waterproof* tells the story of single mom Tyree Battle (Grace), who is fighting to protect her 10-year-old son, Thaniel (Cordereau Dye), from the tough streets of Washington, D.C. When her son shoots Jewish storeowner Eli Zeal (Reynolds) in a botched robbery attempt, Tyree goes home to *Waterproof*, Louisiana, with a wounded Zeal in tow, to shield her son from the law. At home Tyree must face the past and allow the love of God to heal old wounds.

Filling a void both for Christian entertainment and positive African American films, *Waterproof*, written by a Jewish screenwriter, gives an authentic glimpse inside black family life. The film is complete with characters many Southerners

can relate to: Tyree's charmingly wise Grandpa Sugar (played by the late Whitman Mayo of Sanford and Son), her hard-drinking brother Big (the late Anthony Lee of Liar Liar) and her simple-minded younger brother Natty (Orlando Jones of Evolution).

Though the film has a predominantly African American cast and will be shown at the Pan African Film Festival, actress Ja'net Dubois, who plays Tyree's devout mother, says Waterproof should not be stigmatized as a "black" movie.

"It's a movie with one intention: to show how God can change a person's mind, how He can turn anything around," says Dubois, who starred as Willona on the 1970s sitcom Good Times and has been a Christian for 40 years. "This is a helping movie. Without something bigger than you to believe in, you lose."

Spreading that message of hope is partly what motivated Cloud Ten to produce a film like Waterproof—the company's first departure from end-times movies such as Left Behind, Tribulation and Revelation.

"Make no mistake, Cloud Ten will continue making prophecy movies," said Cloud Ten CEO Paul Lalonde. "But there's a whole lot more to faith-based filmmaking than just Bible prophecy, and some of our recent projects, like Waterproof and Miracle of the Cards, are examples of exactly that. They're movies that Christians can sit down and enjoy with the whole family, movies that they can share with friends who may or may not be believers themselves."

Since Sept. 11, Christians in Hollywood say there is a greater openness to films that highlight faith and values. "I think

people are afraid and are looking for a message of hope," says actor Kirk Cameron, who stars in *The Miracle of the Cards*, a true story about a boy's miraculous healing from cancer. Distributed by Cloud Ten, the movie aired on PAX-TV in November.

Cameron, who is working to produce TV scripts that portray faith in God in both subtle and overt ways, expects to see more opportunities for Christian writers and filmmakers. "I definitely think there's a big shift in what's being offered. That's one of the good things that has come out of this [terrorist attack]—people are looking for some answers."

While some have criticized the quality of Christian films, Dubois encourages viewers to withhold judgment. "It takes one person to start something," Dubois says. "All Christian films aren't what you want them to be, [but] we shouldn't put anything down."

Reynolds adds that *Waterproof* is a film he's proud of—something he hasn't always been able to say. "I've been doing this for almost 45 years, and I can't say that about maybe a dozen films," Reynolds says. "I'm proud of this. I think it's good work."

For April Grace, *Waterproof* helped solidify her personal commitment to Christ. The film's moving baptismal scene also served as her real-life baptism.

"Everyone was bearing witness, but no one knew until afterward that I decided to make this real—but me and God and my mom," Grace says. "It was an amazing experience, and that's what amazing experiences are for; they are to share."

If Christian filmmakers get their way, they will be sharing dozens more authentic though amazing experiences in the future.

-Adrienne S. Gaines