

Moviemakers Discuss Spiritually Inspiring Films

Making spiritually uplifting, religious, faith-based movies and television programs with inspiring content and messages can be a professionally and personally rewarding job.

That's the conclusion of a panel discussion, "Making, Distributing and Promoting Spiritually Uplifting Family Movies and Television Programs," held Friday at the InkTip Pitch & Networking Summit in Burbank, Calif.

Moderated by Radio and Website Manager Jeff Holder of Movieguide, which sponsored the event, the panelists gave a standing room only group of aspiring scriptwriters and producers a unique opportunity to hear from a panel of accomplished screenwriters and producers about what it takes to make spiritually uplifting, redemptive, faith-based movies and TV programs.

Among the panelists were writer/producer Jim Britts (*To Save a Life*), writers/producers James Bruner (*Ice Dreams* and *Missing in Action*) and Elizabeth Stevens (*Ice Dreams*), and producer Larry Thompson (*Amish Grace*, *Lucy & Desi: Before the Laughter* and *Little Girl Lost*).

Amish Grace won the \$100,000 Epiphany Prize for Most Inspiring TV program of 2010. *Ice Dreams* was a nominee for that award. *To Save a Life* was a nominee for the \$100,000 Epiphany Prize for the Most Inspiring Movie of 2010.

The two \$100,000 Epiphany Prizes are given each year to the best movie and television program that "greatly increases people's love or understanding of God."

All four panelists advised the attendees to make their spiritually uplifting, redemptive and faith-based content a

part of the story and characters, and not to just tack it onto their story.

“Make it part of the story and part of the character’s journey, someone who overcomes obstacles through spiritual growth,” Bruner said. “You have to care about the main character. If you don’t care, the audience doesn’t care.”

“We always like to flesh out our character’s background,” Stevens added. “A lot of times, the situations will come out of that.”

The panelists discussed their roots, what attracted them to the entertainment industry and how they ended up working in that industry.

“I’ve never had a job. I’ve never had a career. I’ve had a calling,” said Larry Thompson, who has negotiated the breakup of the Beatles, managed the careers of more than 200 stars and produced 19 movies for television, including *Amish Grace*.

When Britts found himself writing and producing *To Save a Life*, the movie grew out of his work as a youth pastor.

“We’re working with the most hurting generation ever,” he said. “We set out to make a movie to inspire teenagers.”

Thompson advised the beginning and veteran writers and producers attending the panel to consider the commercial aspects of their story, because someone has to sell the idea to a TV network or a movie studio, then to the public.

“Try to write scripts that encourage people to ask questions,” Britts suggested. “Does it make people walk out and ask questions?”

“There are no good writers and bad writers,” Thompson added. “There are only good scripts and bad scripts. The good news is that it’s now a level playing field.”

Moderator Jeff Holder agreed, saying that the faith-based market for spiritually uplifting movies and television programs with religious content has a “kaleidoscope” of people involved in it. “Niche marketing is a very big thing,” he added.

Tom Snyder, editor of Movieguide, pointed out that Movieguide encourages filmmakers to put spiritually uplifting, redemptive, faith-based content, some of it very overt, in all their projects, from big productions like the *Spider-Man* movies and *Lord of the Rings* to small movies like *Fireproof* and *Amazing Grace*, and medium-sized movies like the ones Tyler Perry is doing.

Movieguide’s Annual Report to the Entertainment Industry, now in its 20th year, shows that spiritually uplifting, redemptive, faith-based movies promoting strong Christian, biblical or monotheistic values make the most money on average, year in and year out.

The Epiphany Prizes are supported by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation, which serves as a philanthropic catalyst for research relating to what scientists and philosophers call the “Big Questions.” It supports work at the world’s top universities in such fields as theoretical physics, cosmology, evolutionary biology, cognitive science and social science relating to love, forgiveness, creativity, purpose and the nature and origin of religious belief. It also seeks to stimulate new thinking about wealth creation in the developing world, character education in schools and universities, and programs for cultivating the talents of gifted children.

Ted Baehr is chairman of the Christian Film & Television Commission (CFTVC) ministry and its family guide to movies and entertainment, Movieguide (). CFTVC and Movieguide are an international non-profit ministry dedicated to “redeeming the values of the entertainment industry by influencing industry executives and by informing and equipping the public about the

influence of the entertainment media."