

Will Fallen Angels in 'Noah' Turn Off Christian Audiences?

Rain lashes down from the heavens while hungry followers of Cain trample over each other for a spot on Noah's massive wooden ark. The end is inevitable and, of course, not pretty.

Director Darren Aronofsky, best known for dark and unrelenting dramas such as the Oscar-nominated *Black Swan*, would have it no other way in the biblical epic *Noah*, which stars Russell Crowe and is set to be released in U.S. and Canadian theaters, as well as several other countries, on Friday.

"There's something elemental about the water," Aronofsky said. "Water has an incredible power to destroy and it also gives rebirth. It's an amazing force. So, I've just always wondered why no one ever brought it to the big screen."

The film distributed by Viacom Inc's Paramount Pictures is the auteur director's first big test of whether he can guide a big-budget spectacle to box office success.

And the risk-taking Aronofsky, 45, is sure to unsettle some along the way as the film blends one of the best-known Old Testament tales with the trademark psychological torment to which he routinely submits protagonists.

"We all have the Noah story inside of us since we were very young," the director said, making the case for why his challenging film can have wide appeal. "It's so deep, a part of not just Western culture, but everyone on the planet has heard of the Noah story. Even if it's not part of your belief system, you have a flood story."

The film also stars Jennifer Connolly as Noah's wife, Naameh, Anthony Hopkins as Noah's grandfather, Methuselah, and Emma Watson as Ila, the wife of Noah's eldest son, Shem, who is

portrayed by Douglas Booth.

While faithful to the slim four chapters in the Bible, *Noah* also takes a detour into fantasy with the biblical Nephilim. Aronofsky explains the giant fallen angels made of rocks as a representation of a pre-flood Earth that was home to alternate possibilities of life.

'Wrestling With Darkness'

The decision to include the fallen angels, called the "Watchers" in the film, is one of the reasons why *Noah* will be challenging, even for religious audiences, said Rebecca Cusey, an editor of the religious website and film critic.

"This movie takes it more seriously than a lot of people who teach it in Sunday school. We have to admit that this story is really dark, and (it is) wrestling with the darkness and having different strains of theology."

Paramount said *Noah* had a \$125 million budget. The film is tracking to gross a respectable \$41 million in its opening weekend domestically, according to .

The film also represents a string of bets Hollywood has made on Bible stories.

Studio 20th Century Fox is set to release director Ridley Scott's epic *Exodus* in time for Christmas, with Christian Bale as Moses. The studio also released *Son of God* last month, an adaptation of 2013's successful *The Bible* TV miniseries.

For Anthony Hopkins, the revival of Biblical epics on the big screen speaks to the global economic and political upheaval since 2008 financial crisis.

"Maybe it's a resurgence of a desire for certainty in an uncertain world," the Oscar-winning actor wondered, adding that biblical epics tend to give audiences hope in chaotic times.

But Bible stories also dovetail with the action films that make significant money for Hollywood studios, said Craig Detweiler, a professor at Pepperdine University in Malibu, Calif.

After all, *Noah* serves up plenty of action, special effects, blood and violence.

“Perhaps Hollywood is reaching back to Old Testament stories because of the brawny nature of the conflicts,” said Detweiler, who has worked for studios as a consultant on religious topics.

“It is the ultimate way to get teenage boys who otherwise would have no interest in this subject into one of our culture’s largest shaping stories,” he added. “It’s like a graphic novelization of one of the most seminal texts in civilization.”

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