

An amazing, grace-filled film

Apted's movie shows faith and art can work together

Review by Peter Bentley

Many readers would have already seen *Amazing Grace*, a film biography about the work of the evangelical antislavery pioneer William Wilberforce. The Australian cinema release was in late July, but if you missed it on the big screen, there will be the opportunity to see it later this year on DVD.

The film is directed by Michael Apted, who has no recognised Christian background, and is most well known for his ground breaking reality documentary series, *7 Up*, which in 2005 marked the seventh part with participants now aged 49 years. Apted also directed the James Bond film *The World is Not Enough* and will direct the third film in the Narnia Series. Apted brings a professionalism and standard



Actor Rufus Sewell as anti-slavery campaigner Thomas Clarkson in *Amazing Grace*



that is expected and is in the tradition of *Chariots of Fire*, another Hollywood-style film which treated people of faith with dignity and respect.

Ioan Gruffudd plays Wilberforce. You may recognise him as Hornblower in the TV series of the same name. William Wilberforce was elected to the House of Commons at the age of 21, and after his own spiritual awakening used his political career to help end the trade of slavery in England and, mainly with the help of others, eventually in the whole British empire. He also took up many other social causes, all inspired by his faithfulness to God and God's grace shown to him.

A focus of the film is the relationship between friends and mentors. Long standing actor Albert Finney plays John Newton, the former slave runner turned Christian pastor. Newton has a supporting role in this film, as the confidante of Wilberforce who helps him to dedicate his life to serving humankind. According to historical record, Newton told Wilberforce that it was "for such a time as this" that he had been placed in Parliament and needed to work toward the abolition of the slave trade. The movie emphasises that it was only as a politician that Wilberforce could best serve God.

In a way the other main supporting star of the film is not a person, it is the hymn itself. John Newton wrote the original words to one of the most sung hymns of all time while he was an evangelical Anglican priest in the Parish of Olney, and it was first sung at a New Years Day service in 1773 with his sermon entitled *Faith's Review and Expectation*, from a text of 1 Chronicles 17: 16-17. Newton continued to write many hymns and preached until the last year of his life, although he was blind by that time. There is a wonderful scene, captured in the film, where Newton says he now realises what it is like to be blind but also see.

Benedict Cumberbatch plays William Pitt the Younger, England's youngest ever Prime Minister at the age of 24, who encourages his friend Wilberforce to take up the fight to outlaw slavery, and supports him in his struggles in Parliament, except for a period during war with France, which is briefly related in the film. There is a lovely portrayal of Barbara Spooner by Romola Garai and Senegalese singer Youssou N'Dour plays the former slave Olaudah Equiano, who bought his freedom and made his home in London, where he wrote a best-selling account of his life and became a leading figure in the fight to end the slavery of his fellow countrymen.



John Newton died in London on December 21, 1807, and there are many celebrations planned for the 200th anniversary of his death this year, here and in other places, including Sierra Leone, which was the first country he visited on a slave ship, and where today a town is named after him.

William Wilberforce died in 1833 shortly before the final passing of the Slavery Abolition Act, 26 years after the initial Slave Trade Act. It is the anniversary of the 1807 Act that this film also commemorates.

Where does this leave us today? William Wilberforce's work is far from finished. There are an estimated 27 million slaves in the world today. Modern day slavery has many forms, but at the centre is the abuse of a person's creation in the image of God. In the movie we hear amazing words spoken by a former slave, who says that the slaves were marked (branded) so that they would know they "no longer



belong to God but to a man.” In conjunction with the release of the film *Amazing Grace*, the company behind the production, Bristol Bay Productions has launched a campaign to abolish modern day slavery. This is found on their website, www.theamazingchange.com

It may seem unusual for a company to promote education resources and campaigns, but this company and Walden Media are part of Anschutz Film Group which is owned by well-known billionaire conservative evangelical businessman Philip Anschutz. Educational liaison and educational campaigns have been a key feature of Walden Media, which produced the first Narnia film in conjunction with Disney. The next film for Bristol Bay Productions is another C.S. Lewis classic, *The Screwtape Letters*.



Pictures: top left, Romola Garai plays Barbara Spooner, who encouraged Wilberforce, and later married him. Left, Benedict Cumberbatch plays Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger. Top, William Wilberforce, played by Ioan Gruffudd muses about his future course of action in conversation with Richard, his butler (Jeremy Swift, right.) Above, Michael Gambon, of Harry Potter fame, plays Lord Fox, a wily British peer who is reluctant to fight the slave trade, but eventually signs on to join the struggle.

