

Malcolm McDowell in *Suing the Devil*

Homage to silence

Suing the Devil (PG, 2011)

Well this is a very interesting concept, and I liked the casting of Malcolm McDowell as Satan. This was a bit like having Morgan Freeman play God in *Bruce Almighty*. While probably aimed at the US Christian market, the film was filmed in Australia around Darlinghurst and parts of Sydney (and also some filming in LA), and clearly has significant Australian involvement, especially with Wesley Institute students.

The premise is simple. A down-on-his-luck law student decides to sue Satan for 8 trillion dollars because he argues Satan is the cause of all the world's problems. Satan appears at the trial in the nick of time to defend himself, and a courtroom drama unfolds. Satan is assisted by some of the world's best lawyers, all of whom could easily feature as characters in the usual jokes about lawyers. During times in the witness box many different ethical and philosophical questions are raised including the nature of evil and the problem of pain. Who is responsible for evil in the world? All good questions and the film may help some younger groups in particular to think about God's world.

There are cameos from Christian leaders and writers, including Christian singer Rebecca St James, and a Sydney-based well-known Pentecostal pastor. Malcolm McDowell has such a strong screen presence in nearly anything he appears in that he can easily dominate. It was certainly amusing seeing him take the oath and learning that Satan sees his role as "just the trash collector." There are a number of other Hollywood actors involved as well, including Corbin

Bernsen (see the review of *Rust* below) and Tom Sizemore, and perhaps it is the professional involvement that illustrates the difficulties with some of the other roles, especially the lead role.

The film-work often reminded me of a play, and illustrated the difference between directing a film and directing a play. Using a relatively unknown actor Brad Bronson in the lead role of Luke O'Brien has limitations. While we know God uses all people including the weak, there are times when Luke's portrayal is too understated. This is especially illustrated by his use of the voice-over, a notoriously difficult technique to use well. The approach comes across as text being read rather than speaking with passion. Overall, the theme is about finding out who you are in relation to God: What do you truly believe in, love and therefore follow?

The Grace Card (M, 2010)

Another Christian film developed with the assistance of a church in the USA, *The Grace Card* has been received well, and can be compared to *Courageous*, though it was released before-hand. There are similar themes related to the law enforcement characters and issues about fatherhood and relations within the family unit. The acting is usually well-done with a good role from Louis Gosset Jr (who received an Academy Award for his role in *An Officer and a Gentleman*).

The director of the film is David Evans, a graduate from Southwest Baptist University who established Graceworks Pictures. This is another example of a film developed within a

church community, being the Calvary Church in Cordova, Tennessee. David has a long history of directing the church's Passion Play. The screenplay was written by Howard Klausner who wrote *Space Cowboys* (2000). Ephesians 2:8 is the bible verse chosen to highlight the message of "the power of forgiveness": "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God".

The film has some good elements, but has a didactic preaching style that is occasionally repetitious and does not allow some issues to develop by themselves. This is a helpful film for its consideration of racial issues that are rarely raised in 'Christian films' and no doubt arising from the local church's emphasis on reconciliation. Watching this film, I was reminded of another aspect of grace: "Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone." (Colossians 4:6). Let grace abound.

Rust (PG, 2010)

This is definitely a Corbin Bernsen movie. He wrote the script, directed the film and also plays the main character James Moore. This is an understated and somewhat subtle film about doubt. The main character, a preacher (the denomination is deliberately left ambiguous) goes back to his hometown while suffering a crisis of faith. Rather than having his lowering expectations realised, he is renewed as his gifts and abilities come to the fore through a specific situation of tragedy and injustice that has arisen in the town.

The film was written for and thus set in the real town of Kipling in Saskatchewan Canada, and the town 'bankrolled' the movie—another interesting way of making a picture. While slow at times, this is deliberate as it parallels the preacher working through issues.

The film could enable some significant discussion, including Bernsen's involvement because he is not known for 'Christian films' and seems to like long philosophical discussions himself about religion and meaning. Bernsen is well-known for playing Arnie Becker in *L.A. Law*. From interviews Bernsen makes it clear he was more focussed initially on the human elements of the film and the wider appeal the story has in terms of helping people think about redemption and love.

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