

Dr. Strange (2016)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour 55 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 5; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 1.

Our star rating (1-5): 4

*To do righteousness and justice
is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.
Haughty eyes and a proud heart—
the lamp of the wicked—are sin.*

Proverbs 3:4-5

*Those who try to make their life secure will lose it,
but those who lose their life will keep it.*

Luke 17:33

*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility
regard others as better than yourselves.*

*Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the
interests of others.*

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

*who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,*

Philippians 2:3-7a

Although I was not looking forward to still another Marvel Studio super hero tale, I found myself completely drawn in to

director/co-writer Scott Derrickson's origin story *Doctor Strange*. A combination of good script and direction, strong cast, the best special effects currently on display, and some nuggets of wisdom shared by Eastern and Western religious thinkers—all these add up to a film that will make you for two hours forget everything but what is rushing before your eyes on the big screen. Maybe even your popcorn.

Dr. Stephen Strange (Benedict Cumberbatch) is right up there with Tony Stark in the arrogance department. A brilliant surgeon able to perform delicate operations that seem almost miraculous, Strange knows it and makes certain that everyone else does also. He enjoys publicly humiliating a talented fellow surgeon, much to the dismay of fellow doctor Christine Palmer (Rachel McAdams), who despite his haughty spirit, is attracted to Strange. And so, the fate predicted by the writer of the familiar words of Proverbs 16:18 (one of many warnings about pride and haughtiness in the Hebrew/Christian Scriptures) descends upon our heelro when his reckless driving of his fancy sports car leads to a horrendous crash on a mountain road. Pulled from the wreckage barely alive, Strange awakens in the hospital to find both his hands studded with wires and posts. Virtually every bone, nerve, and muscle have been severely injured. Despite physical therapy Strange knows that his days as master surgeon are over. Unable to accept this, he lashes out cruelly at those trying to help him, including Christine who can take only so much before walking out on him.

Then he learns of a man named Pangborn (Benjamin Bratt), whose spine had been miraculously healed by nonsurgical means. Extremely rational, Strange is skeptical until he finds the man playing basketball in one of those pick-up games to be found all over Manhattan. Through him he learns that there exists in Nepal a center for spiritual healing. Landing in Kathmandu, Strange searches vainly at first through the crowded streets, but eventually is successful at coming upon

the unpretentious center where he is greeted by Karl Mordo (Chiwetel Ejiofor), who looks like one of the Jedi's from the *Star Wars* series. Mordo explains that the head of their center is called The Ancient One. Like Luke Skywalker in *The Empire Strikes Back*, Strange does not recognize the Ancient One when they come upon two similarly garbed personages. He mistakes a venerable Asian man with a goatee to be the person he seeks, rather than the youngish looking woman devoid of all hair.

Telling him that he must forget everything he has ever learned, The Ancient One (Tilda Swinton) begins his training. He proves to be, like Luke during his training with Yoda, a hard case to convince. During the first sessions, The Ancient One tells him that he is like a man peering through a key hole and has tried to widen it. Strange says that he cannot see how all the exercises can heal his hands, and she tells him that is not the purpose of the training. He is in for something much greater than physical healing. Strange refuses to believe in anything beyond what he can see, but the marvelous things she can do, such as create fiery figures in front of her, slowly bring him around to accept that there are some things which cannot be explained.

The toughest obstacle to his break-through is himself. "Who are you in this vast universe?" she asks him. This was probably a question he had never thought of because it is obvious that he had believed himself to be the center of that universe. "Silence your ego," she says. This is not a command he wants to hear as he continually borrows books from the library under the watchful eye of the no-nonsense Wong (Benedict Wong), perhaps the strictest and brawniest librarian ever depicted in a film. He even steals one of the forbidden books that is beyond his level of spiritual competence, but he wants to learn its secrets anyway.

Strange does progress in his reading and practice, able to conjure up fire in the air, especially when given a device that looks like a brass knuckle. He learns that there are many

parallel worlds and dimensions, including a dark world. Along the way, doubts arise in Mordo's mind about the Ancient One possibly making use of the dark world to retain her youthfulness and power. A former pupil named Kaecilius (Mads Mikkelsen) had succumbed to the darkness and is now abroad trying to bring on catastrophe as part of a plan to dominate everything. He himself operates under the command of Dormammu (also played by Cumberbatch), whom we see in just a few scenes, but who no doubt will figure in more in the inevitable sequel.

The rest of the film deals with the conflict with Kaecilius and Strange's reconciliation with Christine, the latter who treats him when he lands in the hospital again. Through fiery portals Strange and company are able to dash back to New York to do battle with Kaecilius. With each side engaging their powers, the buildings and streets are distorted into scenes that look like paintings by M.C. Escher or Salvador Dali, the streets at times turning side-wise to others, and even upside down, the buildings twisting and bending over. Even more than the above artists, you might be reminded of Christopher Nolan's 2010 film *Inception*, a fantasy in which the city turns also topsyturvy and enfolds upon itself. These are scenes, I suspect, that will bring audiences back for a second look, so spectacular are they! Especially memorable is the scene in which time is stopped and...well, go see this for yourself.

The film is fantasy, but it serves to expand the mind with such concepts as parallel dimensions, time travel, and mysticism. Much of the latter is New Age stuff, but still, it teaches, in company with all religions, that the universe, including ourselves, is more than matter; that there is a spiritual dimension that can be as powerful as any physical power. Best of all, is the depiction of the spiritual journey of Steven Strange from that of a bullying braggart centered on himself to repentant hero concerned as much for others as himself. At the end of the film I was reminded of another

movie with a similar plot, though light years away from being a fantasy super hero one. In the 1991 *The Doctor*, William Hurt played an arrogant heart surgeon who treated his patients like objects and not persons—until he became ill and found himself treated the same way by other doctors, and thus emerged a far better, humbler, person. If you enjoy *Doctor Strange*, then I urge you to take a look at this reality-grounded film—the fantasy might make you enjoy the older film even more. Steven Strange has learned something that the apostle Paul taught that even most Christians find difficult to practice, the ability to empty oneself on behalf of others.

This review with a set of questions will be in the Nov. 2016 issue of VP.