

JESUS OF MONTREAL (1989)

Rated R. Running time: 1 hour 59 min.

Our content ratings (0-10): Violence 2; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 5.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.

Matthew 23:28-29

Daniel, angry at the way the TV beer commercial producer treats his friend, upsets the tables in the studio.

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Director Denys Arcand's film, despite being a French-Canadian film with subtitles, has attracted a devoted following. For two years it was the hit of our Dayton Lenten Film Series, drawing our largest audiences well over 200.

The story is a simple one. A priest in charge of a Montreal shrine wants to improve the tired script of the Passion Play so that the crowds will return again. He hires Daniel (Lothaire Bluteau), an earnest young actor/director, who agrees that the insipid, sentimental play needs all the help it can get. Throwing himself into reading all the scholarly studies of the historical Jesus that he can find, Daniel throws out the old script and writes a new one.

He also starts out on a search for other actors to play opposite his Jesus. His quest takes him into some strange

places, such as a studio where some friends are dubbing the soundtrack of a porno film and a TV studio where talent is being wasted on an ad extolling the virtues of a cosmetic. Once the cast is assembled they enter into their characters – and find their lives affected in surprising ways.

The new Passion Play is a hit with its first audience, Jesus being portrayed in a way that most had never seen before. But the priest is dismayed at the portrayal of Jesus as an iconoclastic figure, far too down to earth. The conflict between him and Daniel leads to tragic results, and yet out of tragedy comes an unusual form of life giving resurrection. “Jesus of Montreal” is more than a retelling of the ancient story; it is a reinterpretation of the old Gospel story for those who are satisfied neither with the traditional church nor with the shallow values of contemporary society.

For Thought/Discussion:

1. What scene stands out in your memory? What contributed to its effectiveness: the acting; the camera work; the editing; the lighting; the music or sound effects?
2. What do you think of the original version of the Passion Play? Have you encountered anything like it in the “bathrobe dramas” of the church? What too often happens to the story that originally was such a powerful attraction to its hearers?
3. How does Daniel’s research affect him? Have you had such an experience, perhaps when you took a New Testament course in college? How can the critical studies of the Gospels refresh our view of Jesus? Or, as some claim, do they undermine or erode our faith? Note that cover stories about this were run in TIME and US NEWS & WORLD REPORT.
4. Were you disturbed or amused at the places and circumstances of Daniel’s search for fellow actors? How is this in keeping with the Gospels’ accounts of the origins of Jesus’ followers?

5. What other attempts have been made to update the story of Jesus? How has the reaction, of both audiences and actors, been similar to this account?

6. Were you surprised by the priest's reaction to Daniel and the revised play? How is this a reflection of what is recounted in the Scriptures? Between whom was there conflict in the Old Testament? Who opposed Jesus according to the Gospels? Why? Worth re-reading and pondering: The chapter on Jesus and the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*.

7. How were others affected by the play? Compare the different reactions to the Gospel accounts.

8. Describe the temptation scene. Is this an effective way to present it in a modern city? Is what the agent describes bad in itself? Wherein is there evil? Compare this to the line in the title song of *Jesus Christ: SUPERSTAR*, "If you'd come today you would have reached a whole nation Israel in 4 BC had no mass communication..."

9. What were your feelings as a result of the "crucifixion"? Could there have been any other resolution of the conflict? Any irony in the ways that the two hospitals received Daniel? What do you think of the filmmaker's version of "resurrection"? How might this provide comfort or support for Daniel's disciples/fellow actors?

10. Compare this film with other presentations of the life of Jesus (See the special "Life of Jesus" section in the May, 1994 issue for brief reviews of ten, most being available in library videocassette collections.) Which are literalistic? Does Jesus seem human in any of them? Along with "Jesus films" filmmakers have produced films that have been influenced by the Passion Story of Jesus so that one of the characters can be seen as a "Christ figure". These are not literal retellings of the story of Jesus but are stories in which one character,

often at great sacrifice, brings redemption or salvation to one or more of the other characters. Compare Daniel of *Jesus of Montreal* to a Christ figure in: *Edge of the City*; *Cool Hand Luke*; *Zorba the Greek*; *The Year of Living Dangerously*; *Lilies of the Field*; *The Day the Earth Stood Still*; *The Mission*; *Matewan*; *To Kill A Mockingbird*; *Silkwood*; *The Great Santini*.

Caution: *The funny scene in which Daniel is looking for a "disciple" in a studio where a porno film is being dubbed includes swearing and brief sexual material, so forewarn viewers and be wary of using this with youth, unless parents are alerted.*