

# Man Dancin' (2003)

DVD Not Rated—equivalent to R. Our ratings: V- 5; L-4 ; S/N -4. Running time: 1 hour 53 min.

*He was despised and rejected by others;  
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity...  
Isaiah 53:3a*

*“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!  
For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look  
beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead  
and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look  
righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and  
lawlessness.” Matthew 23:27-28*

Although this film can be seen in the US only on DVD, I was so taken with it that I am placing the review at the head of the long line of reviews of theatrical films in this issue. The few secular reviewers that I could find at IMDb.com describe Man Dancin' as a crime caper film, and a couple regret its religious theme. I prefer to set in that small genre headed by Denis Arcand's Jesus of Montreal, tales in which a central character stands in for Christ. For those looking for a hard-edged Passion story in a modern setting to show next Lent, this might be the film you are looking for.

The film begins with Jimmy Kerrigan (Alex Ferns) being released from a Belfast prison where he had served 9 years for gun running. He returns to Glasgow, Scotland, but finds neither his mother nor his brother Terry (Cas Harkins) at home. The former is at death's door in the hospital, and his brother is running from some thugs out to beat him up for dealing drugs in their territory. When Jimmy searched the streets and comes upon them, he offers to take the beating in place of Terry, which they proceed to inflict upon him. Clearly Jimmy is a changed man from the ex-boxer turned petty crook that entered prison nine years earlier, an observation that is repeated by numerous persons as the story progresses.

However, among those who believe that Jimmy has not changed are his former crime boss, Donnie McGlone (James Cosmo) and the corrupt Detective Inspector Walter Villers (Kenneth Cranham), who is allied with McGlone. Donnie, regarding Jimmy "like a son," believes that he will come back to his gang, despite the young man's current refusal of the money that the gang boss offers "to tide you over." Det. Villers believes that Jimmy is just lying low until he can set up his own crime operation. The one person who believes that there is goodness in Jimmy is Father Gabriel Flynn (Tom Georgeson), who not only serves as pastor of a Roman Catholic church, but also works with the Parole Board in managing an anger management program for ex-cons. Ordered to join the priest's group, Jimmy reluctantly submits.

The good Father also heads up a drama group in his parish that is planning a Passion Play. Seeing in Jimmy's file that he had participated in a prison drama group, Fr. Flynn invites Jimmy to join. Jimmy refuses at first, telling the priest that the only reason he joined the prison drama group that it was "either that or basket weaving." He finally agrees when given a similar choice by the priest—either accepting a part in the play or participating in the anger management group. To his surprise, Jimmy warms to the role, the priest unexpectedly

assigning him the role of Christ. Jimmy invites his new-found girlfriend Maria Gallagher (Jenny Foulds) to sit in on a rehearsal, and Fr. Flynn invites even her to join the cast. One of several women whose bodies are "owned" by the gang, Maria is cast in the unlikely role of the Virgin Mary. (Now here is a priest who certainly thinks outside the box!) The long-time group members are upset by this, and even more so by Jimmy's frequent objections to the wishy washy way in which their script depicts Jesus. Jimmy sees Christ as an angry iconoclastic prophet. He sets cries out the abrasive "woes" from Matthew 23 in modern terms that condemn the current corruption of public life in Glasgow.

McGlone's and Villers plot to bring Jimmy down so that he will be discredited in the church and community, but they do not count on the ingenuity Jimmy, who proves to be "as wise as a serpent and harmless as a dove." When their attempt to frame him goes awry (in a most amusing way), they resort to more brutal tactics, and their struggle between good and evil has repercussions in both the church and the wider community.

Although made by Christians, this is a hard R film with much swearing and a couple of sexual scenes (no nudity). The leader wanting to use the film should make this clear when publicizing the film. Also, tell the people to listen closely to the dialogue, which is not an easy task because of the strong Scottish accents and slang. The producers have helpfully included subtitles, but unfortunately these are sometimes flashed on for just a second or two, so that viewers will not always catch what was said. Because of this the leader should definitely watch the film again before sharing it with a group.

An especially interesting character we have not mentioned yet is the street singer Johnny Bus-Stop, well played by Tam White, who becomes an early supporter of Jimmy, and whose songs comment on the action. To their credit, the filmmakers do not have Jimmy wearing his faith on his sleeve or showing

characters, as in the old Billy Graham films, attending a rally and “accepting the Lord.” The symbolism might be obvious, but the religious sentiment is restrained. Like Jesus of Montreal, the film moves toward its inevitable climax, which is still both shocking and inspiring, making this, as I suggested before, a good one to show and discuss during Lent.

## **For Reflection/Discussion**

The following contains spoilers.

1) What do you think of Jimmy when you first see him being released from prison? How is he similar to such characters as the older brother in American History X or to Terry in On the Water Front?

2) What do you think of his taking the beating that his brother deserved? Compare this to the picture of the Servant depicted in Isaiah 53.

3) What are the pressures placed upon Jimmy upon his return? Those for the good? For the evil?

4) Compare Fr. Gabriel with Donnie McGlone and Detective Inspector Walter Villers. How is the priest an agent of grace? How do his choices in casting the play show that grace can be surprising (or amazing)? How is Jimmy himself an agent of grace?

5) How does the priest disappoint us later on? Compare him to the “waterfront priest” Father Barry in On the Waterfront. Which seems the more aware of what is going on beyond the walls of their church (though this comes late)? And yet the one does serve with the local parole board. However, does he ever take up the mantle of a prophet, as the other did?

6) Compare the two images of Christ—in the original Passion Play and the one that Jimmy rewrites? How popular is the Jesus, meek and mild” version? (Check out a typical “Bible

book store” and look at the syrupy sweet art so prevalent—or, in Catholic stores, the “holy cards” with their sentimentalized art.) How is the image of such a Christ a tame or domesticated one? What gospel passages can be cited that support such a “sweet Jesus” image? Whom did they think Fr. Gabriel would side with?

7) How is Jimmy’s concept of Christ iconoclastic? Compare it to the image of Christ in Pasolini’s *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* or to Arcand’s *Jesus of Montreal*. (The leader could do an extended study on the various ways that Christ has been portrayed in art and film, a suitable subject for a Lenten series.) How is Jimmy himself similar to Christ in his acceptance of societal outcasts? And for that matter, also Fr. Gabriel? How can the “sweet Jesus. meek and mild” image be reconciled with the angry Jesus of the “Woes” who drove out from the temple the money changers?

8) What role does Johnny Bus-Stop fill? Listen closely to his songs (which means watching the film again, a good practice because of the difficulty of dialect and brevity of subtitles).

9) What sense of community is created by Jimmy? Where or how do you see them supporting each other?

10) When Donnie McGlone tortures Jimmy what does the gangster quote?

11) How did you feel after the ending of the film? How is Jimmy’s fate inevitable, despite our wishes? How do the results resemble “resurrection” ? How do you think Terry will turn out as a result of his brother’s sacrifice? What significance do you see in the title of the film? Any connection between it and the folk hymn “Lord of the Dance” ?

12) If the “R” is a problem for the group, discuss how the “R” elements are dealt with in the film. Should a “Christian” film shun these elements? Or, must the filmmaker include them in

order to offer a realistic picture of both the world and the gospel?