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Putting Christ in Christmas: More Than an Old Chestnut

Ken Briggs | Dec. 18, 2009 NCR Today

A few night ago I joined a gathering billed as a "Christmas celebration." There were good eats, including a fabulous ice cream cake shaped like St. Nick, but the main feature was the showing of "Noel," the 2004 film pegged to the season.

Among the stars of the show are Susan Sarandon, Alan Arkin and Robin Williams who does an extended cameo.

The story is a festoon of sorrows. Sarandon strains to care for her elderly, Alzheimer-afflicted mother. A young couple's marriage falls to pieces because of the husband's jealousy. A man wanders in and out of insanity out of grief for his wife. Everyone paints a canvas of bleakness.

But serrendipity comes to the rescue and almost everybody ends up is touched by an angel.

I'm fairly immune to the sappy productions; they're hard to sit through but at least they don't pretend to do much else. This one, however, was downright irritating because it starts out as a genuine human drama, then resorts to cheap answers.

The film is set in New York where Christian symbols were much in evidence. The woebegotten actors play out their agonies among them. Yet the film was otherwise devoid of religious content.

Not that such content should have been heavy handed or that the story should suddenly have turned into an evangelistic revival meeting. But it seems entirely appropriate within the confines of a movie purporting to be about Christmas to make it known that behind those symbols is a conviction that the birth of Jesus offers an answer to the very miseries suffered by the characters. Viewers can accept or reject such a claim as they will but to deny that the claim is even there seems wholly negligent.

Indeed, "Noel" is content to be just another a modern tale of misery and self indulgence, where it's all about the sufferers.

Perhaps most "Christmas" movies suppose that we already know all that. Maybe, but I doubt it. Most of the time (I always have to defend my favorite, "A Christmas Story," at this point) film makers use Christmas as a heartwarming backdrop to do whatever they please. That's their right. I only wish someone would find the opportunity to suggest that the Jesus event can overcome the craziness all around, not just provide a platform for it.

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