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Angels, redemption and Grace

Heidi Schlumpf | May. 21, 2010

Grace Hanadarko (Holly Hunter) talks with her best friend, Rhetta Rodriguez (Lara San Giacomo, left). (TNT)

I am not ?into? angels. I don?t collect them as tchotchkes. I don?t celebrate their feast days. I didn?t even pray to my guardian one as a child. Quite honestly, I don?t really believe in them.

That puts me in the minority. Surveys consistently find that more than half of Americans -- even those who are not religious -- not only believe in angels but think they have been personally protected by one at some point in their lives.

Not me. Though I once dressed as an angel for Halloween, I am not one of the multitudes mesmerized by these winged messengers.

And I certainly don?t care for them as characters on the screen, big or small. I was untouched by ?Touched by an Angel,? and in my opinion ?Highway to Heaven? was a dead end, despite the popularity of both series.

Frankly, the angel-who-comes-to-earth-to-save-an-individual-or-the-world plot gets old. It?s hard to hate Clarence from ?It?s a Wonderful Life? or Dudley in ?The Bishop?s Wife,? but by ?Dogma? even an irreverent angel like Ben Affleck got a little tiring.

So it was unlikely I would become a fan of the TNT series with the obvious title ?Saving Grace,? which debuted in 2007, featuring Holly Hunter as a hard-living cop haunted by a last-chance guardian angel. But, just as the network execs plotted, I was too lazy to change the channel after ?The Closer? and got sucked in.

Now, with the series scheduled to end this summer, I am sad to see Detective Grace Hanadarko and her offbeat angel, Earl, go -- and curious to see how the writers will wrap up Grace?s story. Will she be ?saved? or not? And if so, what will her salvation look like?

From the pilot episode, the show has not had a traditional take on angels. Earl is a scruffy tobacco-spitting guy (played by Leon Rippy) who works for a nondenominational God. He?s assigned to offer redemption to Grace, a gutsy but messed-up Oklahoma City cop who accidentally kills a man while driving drunk.

Earl gets Grace?s attention by responding to her cry to God for help, but Grace will have nothing to do with organized religion. Earl?s response? ?Who said anything about church? You can go to temple, go to a mosque, heck, Grace -- go sit in a dang tree if that?ll get you closer to God.?

But Grace is not just another ?spiritual but not religious? former Catholic. As we learn in the second season, she has good reason to hate the Catholic church -- and it has to do with sexual abuse. That story line, aired before the most recent explosion of sexual abuse allegations, was incredibly sensitive, portraying even the pedophile priest as a human being in need of redemption.

It is in such serious examinations of sin and grace, faith and doubt, that convinced me -- and millions of other fans, many of whom are lobbying for TNT and the creators to extend the show?s life -- that ?Saving Grace? is not only an enjoyable way to spend an hour on Monday nights, but a richly religious, deeply thoughtful and seriously theological piece of popular culture.

It?s also downright Catholic.

Although set in the Bible Belt with its share of evangelical Protestant characters, as well as Native Americans who practice their spiritual traditions, most of the main characters are Catholics or former Catholics. Grace has a brother who is a priest (Tom Irwin), and her best friend (Laura San Giacomo) -- a scientist, ironically -- is a devout believer.

That?s not surprising, since the show?s creator, Nancy Miller, is a practicing Catholic who says she sees God as a healer, not a rule-enforcer -- a divine image that is reflected on the show.

?We don?t try to explain anything, because we don?t have the answers,? Miller told Beliefnet.com [1]. ?If I had God sitting across from me, what would I ask him? That?s the sort of thing that we want to explore. But we?re not going to have any answers because we don?t know. And that has to be enough.?

The show also isn?t afraid to address issues of faith with humor -- or with a realism that frequently has Grace drunk as a skunk and/or naked and engaged in some pretty wild exploits with her married partner or a string of one-night stands.

The explicit sex, language and other serious sins prompted the Catholic News Service reviewer to quip that the

series ?could use some divine intervention.?

But these external evidences of Grace?s internal demons are what make her character so real and so believable. A victim of sexual abuse whose sister died in the Oklahoma City bombing, Grace drinks and sleeps around to numb herself from the past and any future pain.

It?s that buried guilt, grief, hurt and pain that Earl -- and God -- want to save Grace from.

Will she be redeemed before the show ends next month? Chat boards buzz with predictions of Grace?s death and fears of an unrealistic ending that makes Grace a saint or martyr. The final season begins with a miracle but quickly descends into the issue of darkness.

With an average audience of 3.5 million viewers and two Emmy nominations for Hunter, I?m surprised I haven?t heard more about ?Saving Grace? among religious folks. Even the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, which usually complains about any portrayal of Catholicism that isn?t an EWTN Mass, has been silent about this show.

It would be too easy to complain about the portrayal of the church as less than perfect or about the explicit sex, violence and language. But the whole point of those admittedly graphic scenes is to show that while Grace?s partying life can be fun, it also has kept her heart closed -- and that only God can help open it.

And if it takes a winged angel to deliver that message, so be it.

[Heidi Schlumpf is the author of *While We Wait: Spiritual and Practical Advice for Those Trying to Adopt* (ACTA Publications).

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