

# Christians in Hollywood: The good, the bad, and the ugly

Zoe Romanowsky | Sep 14, 2016

*Screenwriter Barbara Nicolosi gives Aleteia the inside scoop (Part 1)*

**A**fter more than two decades in Los Angeles, Barbara Nicolosi knows the Christian scene in Hollywood extremely well. The founder and chair emeritus of Act One, Inc., a nonprofit program to train and mentor Christians for careers as Hollywood writers and executives, Nicolosi has been a script analyst, production company executive, and consultant on scores of entertainment and media projects including *The Passion of the Christ* and TV shows like *Joan of Arcadia* and *Saving Grace*.

Nicolosi is a member of the Writers Guild of America-West and has written screenplays for production companies in and beyond Hollywood. Her most recent project is a feature-length adaptation of the memoir *A Severe Mercy* for Origin Entertainment. Her screenplay *Fatima* is scheduled to be shot in late 2016 in Rome. She is currently an Associate Professor in the Honors College at Azusa Pacific University in Azusa, California, and will receive her Ph.D. in Creative Writing at Bath Spa University in the UK in February 2017.

Back in 1998, when I first met Nicolosi, she was part of a secret group in Hollywood called InterMission, a fellowship group for Christians in the entertainment industry. And “secret” is no joke: the group’s meetings were kept under wraps and members’ names were never published or publicly discussed. If you were a Christian in Hollywood, you certainly didn’t proclaim it from the rooftops.

Then Act One was born, and eight years later, InterMission had ceased to exist. There were many reasons for that, but a big one was the success of Act One and other forward-thinking Christian groups that worked to legitimize Christians in Hollywood as smart thinkers on story telling, narrative, and beauty.

A lot has changed for Christians in Hollywood, but where *are* things today, exactly? How have Christians affected the entertainment industry, and what’s next? I caught up with Nicolosi recently and asked her these questions. Here’s the first of two parts of our conversation.

**Zoe Romanowsky: Christians have come a long way, but where exactly are we now?**

Barbara Nicolosi: When I first came to Hollywood no one in the mainstream industry wanted to touch a project that had any overt spirituality or religion in it. God was truly dead. I started in the business working for Fr. Bud Kaiser at Paulist Productions and he told me once that religion is the biggest killer in a movie. That was in a conversation about his movie *Entertaining Angels* about Dorothy Day that I worked on. I said, “There’s not really much of her motivating spirituality in this movie; it’s all about her as a social worker which isn’t an honest portrayal of her.” And he said that would kill the movie. Well, the movie died anyway.... mainly because of Martin Sheen’s really bad French accent... (laughter)... No, actually it was *Beavis and Butthead Do America* that opened huge the same weekend and we lost all of our theaters.

What changed things was this weird phenomena of *The Passion of the Christ*, *Narnia*, and *Lord of the Rings* being the biggest hits at the box office for five years in a row, and then everyone in town “got religion.” Everywhere the buzz words were “The audience of the *Passion* will love this.” So what has followed is a spate of really bad movies made by the Hollywood studios without any respect or real understanding of what a movie suffused with faith really looks like. Movies like *Kingdom of Heaven*, *Book of Eli*, *Noah*, *Exodus: Gods and Kings*. And the most recent disaster, *Ben Hur*. I remember walking into the junket for *Constantine* and the publicist, who knew me, said, “Barbara you’re going to love this; it has all your stuff in it!” And I thought, “My stuff? What does that mean?” Well, this was a movie with Keanu Reeves in which there were demons, ouija boards, holy water, crosses, incense, spiritualism... they jammed anything related to anybody’s religion into it. So, those kind of movies all failed, and what happened then was everyone in Hollywood started to say the faith thing was a fluke, it was all just the Mel Gibson phenomenon. But then we saw the rise of the Evangelical ghetto projects...

What happened was that the Evangelical world started guerrilla filmmaking for itself and found a way to turn a profit doing it. By comparison with mainstream movies, the numbers are generally small, but the studios noticed and have been very happy to distribute the films to the Christians and make a few bucks in that space. Every studio now pretty much has a faith division where they’re looking for content for that niche market. This is good and bad. The good part is the mainstream industry is talking to people of faith instead of thinking of us as what’s wrong with the world. The bad part is that it’s ghetto-ized us, such that when you bring a really good project like *Mary Mother of Christ* or *A Severe Mercy* to them they say: #1, “This is too smart for the Christians; they don’t want to be challenged,” and #2 “You can serve this audience for a lot less than this movie will cost.” I’ve had both things said to me by studio executives.

So, in other words, they say, “Why should we spend 40 million on a movie with faith or transcendent aspects when we can make it for two million with no stars, no great director, no good script, and all you have to do is put some Bible quotes in it and come out as a sweet little melodrama and it will make 30 million for us?” So that is devastatingly bad for the Church, for art, and for the society as a whole, because it’s keeping any beautiful faith-inspired work from getting a serious treatment.

And here’s another really bad thing: What the Christians have learned is that the way to make money in movies is to make movies political footballs. Make a really awful movie, but call it “God’s Not Dead,” and tell the faith community to turn out and support it to “show Hollywood.” They’re trying to find the political spot that makes a movie something the Christian audience will rally around, as opposed to trying to make something beautiful. The truth is we don’t need a rally, we need to experience compunction ourselves, and we need to attract people who don’t believe that we believe.

**So what you’re saying is art is lost here, beauty is lost.**

Yes, it’s not even the target. Which is hugely sad. Dostoevsky said beauty will save the world, but we’re not even aiming for that; we’re aiming to score points in a political struggle. Which we’ve lost.

**Is there a place for movies that speak to the choir and not the culture?**

Sure. But what we should be doing is making movies that speak to different groups of people on different levels. Flannery O’Connor did this masterfully. If you are a pagan, you can still be stung by the human conflict in her stories. If you are a Christian, you can pick up this whole other level about grace. And if you are Catholic you can feel both of that and also some smugness that she was one of ours... just kidding!

The kind of stuff we should be making should not seek to make our people feel better about themselves, but make us ashamed of how far we've fallen short. I remember reading a theology book years ago and it said the point of Catholic liturgy is to instill in the people a sense of the sovereignty and majesty of God, and also to instill in them the sense of their own neediness and brokenness. Just the first will make you haughty, and just the second will make you want to kill yourself and render you useless for evangelization. But if you have both, now you have discipleship. I think it's the same thing in the stories we should be telling.

I think the formula should be two things: Beauty needs to be married to one of our fundamental, defining presuppositions. There are some themes that *we* can treat with particular power and conviction, because they define as Christians. I've identified eight. One is O'Connor's "grace is always out there." So, for example, you make a movie where there's a haunting weird presence that's fighting for the people, just as much as the devil, the flesh, and the world. It's mysterious, but you can't completely explain it in terms of "the triumph of the human spirit." That would be a Christian movie if it's also beautiful. And what I mean by beauty is whole, harmonious, and radiant, according to traditional philosophy.

Another example, another one of our defining presuppositions, is "joy and suffering are inextricably linked." Pixar said this for us in *Inside Out* because we haven't been saying it, but that was the theme, that you can't have the fullness of joy unless you embrace the suffering. I almost fell off my chair, besides the fact that the whole structure of that movie about the memory boxes was the last section of St. Augustine's *Confessions*. So, it seems to me, when it comes to our stuff, it's not just, or even mainly, that "Oh, we need to make Bible and saint movies." No, we need to make stories that put into the world, in a haunting, nagging, beautiful way, the core of what we believe.

### **What about sacred art? Is there a place for it in the cinema?**

Yes, but it better not be banal crap! It should skew heavily towards the art

side as opposed to the narrative and entertainment sides.

### **Summer blockbusters fell flat this year; what was missing?**

The global audience is rejecting the blockbuster formula pretty much completely these last couple years. Thank God. We've seen this happening since 2012, and this year nearly all the studio tent-poles have been a disaster, with the exception of Pixar's *Finding Dory*. Moviegoers seem to have finally had enough of movies as action beats and spectacle.

In Aristotle's description of the elements of story, spectacle is the last of the six he lists. There's plot, character, theme, diction/dialogue, music/tone, and spectacle. In Hollywood, since *Jaws*, increasingly spectacle has been first, and then character — because it's a celebrity driven business — and then way down you get to matters of plot. And the last one these days is theme — what is this movie about and why should I care? This is the problem; the stories are not about anything today but the moment. And the audience is rejecting this *en masse*.

What will save the industry is theme, because most of the money has dried up in Hollywood, and the movies are being financed in global arrangements. Good, strong, universal human themes give the movies an appeal beyond the 18-35 year old male demographic which has been the target of the industry for decades. But the problem is — and I encountered this going through my in my doctoral program at one of the top creative writing programs in Europe — that the academy is pumping out people to be story tellers for the culture who are being fed that there's no such thing as human nature or story. Story is anything anyone wants it to be, which ultimately ends up meaning story is nothing.

But people are thirsty for story, because, as Aristotle noted, human nature is driven to it and they are going to the movies to find something to feed them. But most of the time, when we go to the movies hungry, we come away still

hungry and also disgusted. So why doesn't the church step in and fill the vacuum? Why don't we teach people how to make story? That's what we should be doing. The Church should serve the culture.

*Part 2 of Aleteia's conversation with Barbara Nicolosi [can be found here](#).*

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