

America

The Year of Faith-Based Films

[In All Things](#)

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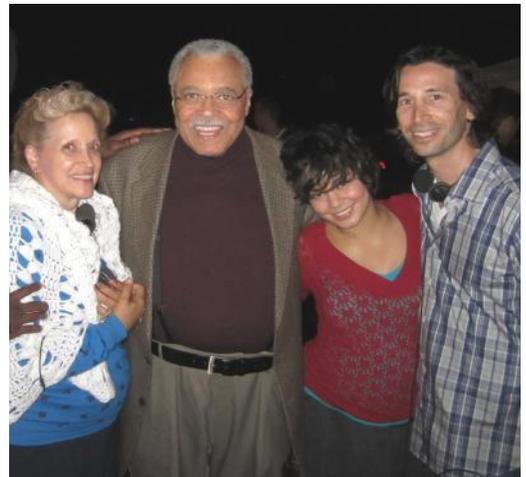
It's starting to feel like 2014 is the year of faith-based movies. At the very least, 2014 is the year Hollywood decided to court the Judeo-Christian film market for the first time in several years. Although "Son of God" and "Noah" have received most of the box office and press, small Protestant apologetic dramas like "Heaven is For Real" and "God's Not Dead" have also slipped through theaters, with considerably less successful results. And we still get to see Christian Bale as Moses when Ridley Scott's "Exodus" opens in December. But my favorite religious film so far this year is "Gimme Shelter," a heartfelt indie (see [America review](#)) that came and went in theaters with little fanfare in February, landed on DVD in April, and continues to bid fair as the Catholic entry of 2014 that nobody will remember.

That's unfortunate since "Gimme Shelter" strikes me as the most realistic, well acted and inspiring of these faith-based films. Some moviegoers who took a chance on "Noah" will recall the unreality of watching Russell Crowe and his talking rock monsters fight a bazooka-armed king. Others may remember the smarmy atheist professor played without fairness by Kevin Sorbo in the polemical "God's Not Dead." And many filmgoers will continue posting photos of the surreal Diogo Morgado, popularly dubbed the "hot Jesus" for his work in the high gloss remix that was "Son of God."

But "Gimme Shelter" keeps it real, giving viewers an in-your-face verisimilitude that is undeniable from the first scene. That's because there are really people in our world like Agnes "Apple" Bailey, the 16-year old girl who runs away from her abusive mother at the start of "Gimme Shelter," only to find herself pregnant and homeless on the streets of New York. Given a choice between talking rock monsters and Apple, which film would Pope Francis prefer?

Apple, portrayed convincingly by a near-unrecognizable Vanessa Hudgens, is not the film's only well-realized character. There are also people in our world like the sympathetic Father McCarthy (James Earl Jones) and the abusive mother (Rosario Dawson). And Kathy DiFiore, the compassionate social worker (Ann Dowd) who takes in Apple, most certainly exists. After trading an abusive marriage for homelessness, the real-life DiFiore founded the "Several Sources" homeless shelters for pregnant teens that inspired this film, which is based on a true story.

On its surface, "Gimme Shelter" is a faith-based drama about unwed mothers abandoned by society and the well-meaning Christians who try to help them; but on a deeper level it's about much more. It is an indictment of our depersonalized foster care system, which shuttlecocks troubled teens between state-run homes and abusive guardians, hardening their souls until they either age out or end up in jail.



Kathy DiFiore, on whom the movie "Gimme Shelter" is based, poses with stars of the movie James Earl Jones, Vanessa Hudgens and director-writer Ronald Krauss. (CNS photo/Roadside Attractions)

In spite of its Hallmark Channel subject matter, “Gimme Shelter” succeeds because of the soul-wrenching performances of its stars, capturing the harsh realities of life in a global society where many sink to the bottom while others rise to the top.

It might be the most heartfelt pro-life film since “Dead Man Walking,” but the film’s word-of-mouth marketing and limited release made it difficult to profit on its shoestring \$4 million budget. In fact, the film sat unreleased for about a year, as most of its stars (Hudgens, Jones, Dawson and Brendan Fraser) donated their salaries to DiFiore’s shelters.

Yet those who see “Gimme Shelter” might be surprised at its quality, despite some reviewers who savaged it on ideological grounds as [“pro-life propaganda.”](#) Richard Roeper of the Chicago Sun-Times, one of the few major critics to give a [positive writeup](#), pointed to the charisma of Hudgens. Roeper noted in his [video review](#) that the film was rich in great performances, believable interactions and uncomfortably accurate social commentary.

As a Jesuit who has worked with the poor, I was particularly moved by the film’s unflinching depiction of teenage poverty and by the subtle spiritual trajectory of Apple’s redemptive journey. So were my 16-year old Scripture students, many of whom were riveted when we watched the film on DVD in our theology class in April. Writer-director Ron Krauss, who previously explored the Los Angeles-based human trafficking of immigrant children in the short film “Amexica,” spent a year living in DiFiore’s shelter to get it right. Many of the girls who appear in “Gimme Shelter” are not actors, but homeless teenage moms from the New Jersey shelter where the story was filmed, and their scenes with Hudgens radiate authenticity.

Jones, as the weary but loving Catholic priest in civilian clothes, also portrays his hospital chaplain’s character in a believable way. A difficult scene where he suggests to Apple that God put her where she is might feel like a contrivance in the hands of a lesser actor, but Jones sells it with warmth and compassion, quietly matching the volcanic anger of Hudgens. According to Krauss, Jones once wanted to be a priest himself. His character reminds me of the hardworking priest-chaplains who labor faithfully in hospitals for many years, unknown beyond the sickroom walls. Like many people in this film, his character feels like a real person, and Jones does not appear to be acting.

Dawson, playing Apple’s drug-addicted mom, manages to be mentally unbalanced without going over the top. Some viewers might find her welfare-driven reason for keeping Apple at home with her to be hokey, but their mother-daughter scenes carry a ring of truth for anyone who has ever worked with drug-addicted populations trapped in poverty. Dawson’s searing performance is alternately pathetic and frightening, particularly in her final scene at a church.

But Hudgens, the former Disney star and current social networking idol, carries the film. Having lived in DiFiore’s shelter for two weeks and gained 15 pounds to transform herself into Apple, she stares out of hollow eyes and swollen piercings at the camera, her face a mix of self-loathing and cautious hope. She eats out of dumpsters, sleeps in unlocked cars and explodes in angry distrust at whoever offers help. It’s the most realistic depiction of teenage poverty I’ve ever seen on film.

Despite her carefree public image, Hudgens implicitly reminds viewers that she is a practicing Catholic, whom paparazzi have occasionally spotted attending Sunday Mass. “Gimme Shelter” begins with Apple’s effort to reconnect with her real dad out of desperation after she flees her mom. The dad, played with uptight complacency by Brendan Fraser, turns out to be a Wall Street stockbroker whose spoiled children and horrified wife (French actress Stephanie Szostak) want nothing to do with Apple. Alas, this portion of the film is the least developed. Fraser has some good scenes with Hudgens, but the relationships—particularly Apple’s conflict with his unfriendly wife—are somewhat underwritten.

This wealthy dad subplot also lightens the film’s otherwise gritty depiction of poverty. Fraser’s character provides Apple with a golden parachute not available to the other teen moms, who don’t have wealthy family members waiting in the wings. Whatever its basis in reality, this plot detail feels interjected from a different girl’s story to ensure a happy ending to the film rather than a realistic one.

Despite its charged subject matter, the film plays it safe with politics, presenting social injustices as a human rights concern rather than a matter of angry ideology. Krauss' screenplay offers a pro-life answer to crisis pregnancies, but never mentions the word abortion, focusing instead on Apple's personal motives.

Some viewers may therefore see the movie as a clumsy "anti-Philomena," inasmuch as it portrays the Catholic Church as a place that welcomes strangers, in contrast to the recent Judith Dench film (also based on a true story) where Irish Catholic nuns force an unwed mother to give up her baby for adoption. But the wrongdoing in "Philomena" takes place half a century ago, while the plight of unwed mothers in "Gimme Shelter" takes place today, making the latter movie feel more urgent. While "Philomena" may provide an understandable outlet for anger against the Catholic Church, its pre-Vatican II context is less contemporary. There are no nuns out there forcing unwed moms to sign adoption papers, but there are still authority figures who pressure girls to terminate unplanned pregnancies.

In its critique of the unjust social conditions of today's capitalist world, where the poor sink to the bottom while the rich get richer, "Gimme Shelter" may recall past films with a Catholic social justice theme. Hudgens herself alluded to economic disparities in early publicity interviews for the film. When Apple tells her dad in one scene that she wants "out of the system," one senses more than a hint of "Occupy Wall Street" in her plaintive tone.

At other times the movie feels like the excellent "Dead Man Walking" without its political moralizing, or like the sincere "Entertaining Angels" without its vague phoniness of too many Hollywood actors playing street people. Yet unlike these earlier faith-based Catholic films, "Gimme Shelter" wisely makes the victim its protagonist. If "Dead Man Walking" emphasized the perspective of the crusading nun over that of the condemned man, and "Entertaining Angels" highlighted Dorothy Day's view of the poor, then this film is unique in forcing us to adopt Apple's perspective. Rather than invite our admiration of the helper, it compels respect for the human dignity of those who are helped, disturbing us with the plight of those who suffer.

If the contemporary Catholic Church comes across in this story as a haven for people in need, the film is still not ultimately about the efforts of Kathy DiFiore or Father McCarthy to save the poor. It is about Apple's struggle to take responsibility for her own life. We discover that DiFiore's shelter doesn't fix the girls' financial plight, but gives unwed mothers a place of safety and support to begin turning their own lives around. Rather than relying on institutions, these pregnant teens gain a renewed sense of dignity by taking responsibility for their babies, and Hudgens plays her final scenes with a tearful joy over this revelation that is magnetic. In the end, grace prevails over anger, and patient suffering yields compassion.

That's what makes this film unique among the faith-based dramas hitting theaters this year. In his long career as a priest, Pope Francis has frequently spoken out against the exploitation of children and the elderly. In a broken world that ignores the poor, "Gimme Shelter" is the rare film that invites us to see life through the eyes of the exploited, moving us to accompany them before we try to fix them. It often seems to me that the best religious films aren't the ones that make money and win awards. They aren't the blockbusters with CGI explosions and stylized bloodletting. On the contrary, they are the quiet films of compassion and beauty that nobody remembers existing in the first place.