

Scorsese's 'Temptation' passionate and long-winded

★ ★ ★ The Last Temptation
Of Christ
Center

Early on, we can sense the immense challenge facing director Martin Scorsese. The apostles, as always, are squabbling amongst themselves when they settle down for the night. "Move over Simon and Peter," says one, "I want to lie down." "Go away," they reply. "Sleep by Matthew." "Shut up," he answers and the audience laughs.

It's funny because the idea of the apostles as living, breathing humans who had foibles and fears seems novel to people who know the stories of the gospels so well that they have forgotten them.

Making Christ's sacrifice on the cross meaningful and vital to contemporary audiences was clearly the intent of this passionate, but long, film. It is certainly not scripturally accurate — the movie states as much itself in the very beginning — but it is sincere.

We follow Jesus through his preaching and eventual Crucifixion. But this is not the soft-spoken, beatific man of earlier biblical epics. The emphasis in Paul Schrader's script is completely on the human side of Christ's duality. He is weak, uncertain and fearful of his eventual fate.

This certainly makes the story more accessible and dramatic, but for a movie that breaks so cleanly with earlier religious films, *The Last Temptation* maintains a lot of hoary traditions.

Satan is represented as an angelic little girl with a British accent, a talking snake, a talking lion and a talking pillar of flame.

Even more damaging is the uniformly weak supporting cast. Willem Dafoe struggles valiantly in the title role, but he is surrounded by an uninspired Barbara Hershey as Mary Magdalene and Harvey Keitel as a Judas with a New York accent. Only David Bowie redeems himself as a smart, reflective Pontius Pilate.

The highly controversial "last temptation" — in which Christ is offered the opportunity to come down from the cross to marry and raise a family — is also a wash, taking far too long to make its point.

But for all that, this movie has moments of grandeur few films even attempt. The Sermon on the Mount sneaks up on us in a simple, understated manner and the raising of Lazarus from the dead is terrifyingly convincing.

Above all, there is the searing, stunning Crucifixion scene. Christ suffered and died on the cross, but no work of art has ever captured that simple truth more powerfully. The nails are driven into his wrists and feet, people gather to jeer, an eerie silence falls and for one brief, beautiful moment we are brought a little closer to God. That alone makes this a noble and worthy accomplishment.

By Michael Giltz

"My principal anguish and the source of all my joys and sorrows from my youth onward has been the incessant, merciless battle between the spirit and the flesh.

"Within me are the dark immemorial forces of the Evil One, human and pre-human, of God — and my soul is the arena where these two armies have clashed and met."

From the novel,
"The Last Temptation of Christ"
by Nikos Kazantzakis