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From the Los Angeles Times

SCRIPTLAND

Milking the Bible for laughs

Director Harold Ramis hopes Jack Black and Michael Cera find humor amid the all the smiting.

By Jay A. Fernandez

Special to The Times

December 26, 2007

For many people, the holidays are a time for visiting with the extended family, reflecting on spiritual matters and relaxing by a toasty fire with something entertaining to read. In that case, the gleefully heretical "Year One" screenplay would have made a great stocking stuffer.

The story in its broadest terms involves a loony Old Testament road trip. Cocky, clueless Zed and his beleaguered friend Oh flee their isolated village and end up traipsing Forrest Gump-like through a mash-up of BC history. They have deliciously blasphemous run-ins with Adam, Eve, Cain, Abel, Seth and Lilith, and stumble upon Isaac and Abraham, who is suddenly struck by an impassioned commitment to circumcision.

Penned by writer-producers Gene Stupnitsky and Lee Eisenberg ("The Office") with director Harold Ramis ("Vacation"), the script has great anachronistic fun with the idea of applying contemporary characterizations and language to a biblical context, and vice versa (i.e. "I want to lay with her so badly" and "What happens in Sodom, stays in Sodom").

Ramis, who co-wrote and directed "Analyze This" and "Groundhog Day," here veers back toward the screw-loose zaniness of his early work in "Caddyshack" and "Stripes." "Year One" embraces all the raunchy exuberance that "Evan Almighty," which also played with Christian scripture, shunned (though it certainly shares some of Evan's juvenility).

It'll make a nice companion piece to Monty Python's "Life of Brian" and "Caveman," the grunting 1981 prehistoric comedy written by Rudy De Luca and Carl Gottlieb that put Ringo Starr, Shelley Long and Dennis Quaid in loincloths.

With a cast led by Jack Black and Michael "Superbad" Cera, "Year One's" irreverent material could beget big audiences. Zed is written so perfectly for Black that reading his dialogue is like hearing Black read the script to you (upon hearing that Sodom will be destroyed: "When do you think all this smiting is going to go down?")

Cera's vulnerable delivery was made for moments like Oh's response to a palace guard whipping him: "Why don't you try using your words for a change?" Filming on the Judd Apatow production will begin in January for a Columbia Pictures release in AD June 2009.

A formula for success . . . really

Warning to studio readers -- two marketing professors at the Wharton School could very well put you out of a job.

Actually, Z. John Zhang and Jehoshua Eliashberg (plus a bevy of coauthors) claim that their goal is merely to augment your special talents, not replace them. But the paper they published in Management Science magazine in June called "From Story Line to Box Office: A New Approach for Green-Lighting Movie Scripts" establishes a statistical model for analyzing screenplays and predicting whether a resulting movie will be successful at the box office. Which, if accurate, would render your silly personal judgments obsolete.

Greenlighting, or putting a screenplay into active production, relies mostly on the subjective intuition of readers and executives (plus a studio calculus derived from the budget and the past record of the film's genre and potential cast). It's a system that can produce, shall we say, spotty results. Zhang and Eliashberg hope to take some of the guesswork out of it. Their model combines textual analysis (paragraph construction, frequency and distribution of words, etc.) with structural analysis (a clear premise, a surprise ending, and the like) using 22 yes-or-no queries that are posed and then cross-referenced.

"There is no good tool that you can use to do the risk management for that business," Zhang said. "With our model, we could eventually help the studios to actually pick a portfolio instead of just one single movie. This is like picking stocks, and you have a certain combination that will give you the same kind of expected return but minimize your risk."

"It's more of an additive, a supplement to your own gut feelings," Eliashberg added. "But it makes you sleep better because this is sometimes a \$165-million decision."

Needless to say, reading the paper itself is like trying to decipher the plot of "The Big Sleep" with the sound off. (You can give it a shot by purchasing access on the Management Science website: <http://mansci.journal.informs.org/>.) And the whole premise -- that anyone or anything, scientific or not, could predict success at the script stage -- has its share of gaping plot holes.

But Zhang points out that the industry already does marketing studies to predict box-office success based on the combination of promotional resources employed during release.

Their new system merely attacks the question from the front end of the process and provides the added benefit of recommending scripts with hidden potential.

"It can help to identify all sorts of diamonds in the rough," Eliashberg said. "Things that for some reason, based on pure judgment, get eliminated. If we bring out a more objective approach, they will go through and the public will benefit from that."

Zhang and Eliashberg are working on a viable business model for their consulting efforts as private equity financiers, individual writers, independent producers and writing schools have begun submitting scripts and treatments. Prospective clients may first want to take into consideration that Zhang's favorite movie is "Dumb & Dumber."

Then again, that little gem grossed \$246 million worldwide.

Writers put in their two cents

Last week's column exploring the political undercurrents of the writers strike sparked some passionate responses, because so much of the town is deeply invested in the conflict's outcome. Here are excerpts from a few of those e-mails.

"Please do us WGA members a favor and keep the Bush Bashing out of the strike," e-mailed Denise Moss. "It's divisive and counterproductive. The issues are so clear-cut they don't need to be politicized. In fact, there are more than a few conservatives walking the line for the WGA . . . although in this town they prefer not to advertise it."

Actor Gary Grubbs ("Ray," "Will & Grace") wrote: "At the end of the day Hollywood doesn't own anything, the audience does. We all work for them and are just passing through, hoping to inspire, educate and entertain, while doing what we love. That is where the rubber meets the road, and where the artists not the executives make decisions with their hearts and minds, not on how it will affect a bonus or stock option"

"The value of the content aired on the Internet is not only the financial stumbling block to resolving the writers' strike, but it is the very mechanism that gives writers the ability to be heard on their own terms without a studio or network insisting on how something should be created. In the end, that is in many ways more appealing than making a few extra bucks on a download."

While several readers submitted thoughtful comments on the prevalence of a "mercenary corporate culture" and the "paranoia" on both sides of the dispute, reader Sam Rindge took a less diplomatic, though no less impassioned, position:

"No one cares about the writers' strike!" Rindge wrote. "Ninety-five percent of TV content is junk or worse. For those facing a loss of employment, there are several freeway offramps where oranges could be sold."

Ahhh . . . smells like Christmastime.

Scriptland is a weekly feature on the work and professional lives of screenwriters. Please e-mail any tips or comments to fernandez_jay@hotmail.com.

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