



# Lights, Camera, Acts of the Apostles

By Moriah Flahaut

A Review of *Angel In Chains*. Collegedale, Tenn.: Southern Adventist University Film School, 2004.

Southern Adventist University's newly created film school is currently celebrating the success of its recent release, *Angel In Chains*. The film, directed by Nathan Huber, is based on the true story of Arizona rancher Penny Porter and is, to my knowledge, the first Adventist film to achieve commercial viability. Huber and the film school deserve credit. They wring what they can out of the small, mostly amateur crew and create a technically sound, finished product.

Beginning with the opening scene, the screen is filled (quite literally) by bad boy Rip Lebeau (Don Pearson) and his hirsute motorcycle gang. LeBeau and company are on a highway to hell, which is made clear by the rock-and-roll track that blares each time the opening sequence cuts to show Rip and the gang cruising across the desert Easy Rider style.

When the clutch on Rip's Harley motorcycle suddenly gives out in the hinterlands of Arizona, he and the other members of the gang seek succor at the fortuitously positioned ranch of Penny Porter (Tana Lee Bristow). While

waiting for the bike to be repaired, Rip's hard exterior is softened by the friendship and love of Penny's young daughter, and he begins to rethink where his life is headed.

In a touching montage that illustrates the power of Christian innocence over tattooed cynicism, we watch Rip and the other bikers take on an avuncular role as they are warmed by the no-questions-asked friendship of Becky Porter (Chelsea Jo Claxton). Rip may have tattoos and an earring, but he also shows a side both contemplative and kind. The chemistry between Becky and Rip is undeniable



and, thankfully, they interact often with gusto. Sadly, however, the supporting cast does little to support.

Pete (Michael Mercurio) scowls throughout and manages to resist Becky's friendship, but in doing so he comes across as one dimensional. Pete smokes constantly and wears a skull-covered bandana around his head. Every time the camera catches him brooding, the score turns scary.

The character of Pete was added to the original story in order bring a dramatic element to the movie; however, the foreshadowing is so thorough that the viewer feels manhandled. Long before it actually happens, the nature of the main dramatic event is clear to everyone. When Pete finally attempts to rape Penny, it comes as no surprise to the viewers, or for that matter the other bikers.

Similarly, Penny has the potential to light up the film—after all, she is pretty and blonde—but she never does. Not only does she deliver lines that sound forced, one can't help but wonder why she doesn't worry more that her daughter continually leaves her sight to frolic with a stranger who also happens to be a two-hundred-pound drug dealer.

In the end, it is the naïve but thoughtful acting of

Chelsea Jo Claxton that saves the film. Her character, little Becky Porter, succeeds in being both cute and believable. Indeed, the high point of the movie comes at lunch, when Becky chastises Rip and the other hungry bikers for digging in without first saying grace. "Bow your heads," she orders, and then leads the entire picnic table of drug-running toughs in a prayer as honest and heartfelt as they come.

*Angel In Chains* joins the myriad films on the shelf espousing generic Christian values, but it is not uniquely Adventist. For example, Penny wears a necklace in the film—an accessory specifically prohibited by the Southern Adventist University Student Handbook. I, for one, await a film not only made by Adventists, but also about Adventists. Now that Southern has a flourishing film program, the wait shouldn't be long.

*Angel In Chains* retails for \$14.95 (DVD) or \$9.95 (VHS) and is available at Adventist Book Centers throughout the United States.

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## HOW TO START AN AAF CHAPTER

Members of the Association of Adventist Forums are invited to form local chapters by following three steps:

1. Convene at least five AAF members and plan some activities. These may be as simple as meeting now and then in homes to discuss a thought-provoking video, article, or book, and they may be as complex as organizing major conferences.
2. Forward to the *Spectrum* office in Roseville, California, the chapter's constitution. Model constitutions for local chapters are available upon request.
3. Forward to the *Spectrum* office in Roseville, California, contact information for the chapter's leaders that can be listed in the association's journal and posted on its Web site.

The purpose of local chapters, each of which is financially and administratively independent, is the same as the AAF and *Spectrum*: "To encourage Seventh-day Adventist participation in the discussion of contemporary issues from a Christian viewpoint." AAF officers are able and willing to assist local chapters.

## ADVENTIST TELEVISION TODAY

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cattle on a thousand hills. Our health work didn't have the money to buy Loma Linda, and look where we are now."

In addition to the international satellite channel and networks, there are regionally based channels and networks. Arkansas-based Safe TV is on the hospital channels of Adventist Health. Blue Mountain Television is a non-profit private station based at Walla Walla, Washington. Loma Linda Broadcasting Network was started initially just to broadcast the University SDA church service; it continues to develop and add more of its own programming.

### The Future of SDA TV

Roger Smith Jr. thinks that the Adventist Church tends to take something that works well and formalizes it. "Eventually we get into a rut and don't realize that God is working in dynamic ways that are different from what worked thirty years ago. We take a model like the Net series, and we keep pushing it over and over until it stops being effective, not realizing that God wants to do something new for the current generation."

Smith cites as an example the Adventist Global Communication Network. With all the downlinks for the Net series, it was the largest business satellite broadcaster in the world. Now home satellite dishes have made it obsolete in less than a decade.

Writer Steven Mosley does not believe that our religious programs have enough appeal for commercial TV, for the secular person. "We can't have better drama than ABC or better news than CNN. If we try to compete, we'll just end up making a more mediocre version. But faith-based TV shows can do something that no one else can—create intense, spiritual stories that portray God in a very vivid way in people's lives. Look at how some shows can make deer hunting look compelling. Surely we can show people what a difference having God in your life makes."

When asked about the current state of Adventist TV, writer Jeff Wood focuses on the intended audience. "There are two distinct sides to the issue: do we reach non-SDAs, or is our goal to nurture only SDA members?"

He is currently enthused about several projects he's working on. Along with his brother, writer Jim Wood, he is completing a script for the *Seventh Day*, a series of five documentaries that traces the history of the Sabbath. Hal Holbrook is the narrator and Pat Arrabito of LLT Productions is the producer. Shot on location in several countries, this series will eventual-

ly be translated into eleven languages. In addition, Jeff Wood and Don Davenport are currently writing another script for the Hallmark Channel.

## Conclusions

### 1. We Need News

The Church needs to lead out in communications 24/7 rather than just once a year in a Net series. News is an extremely crucial bond to keep this rapidly growing denomination together. More than 90 percent of our membership is outside North America and cannot afford subscriptions to the *Adventist Review* and does not have computer access to *Adventist Newslines*.

The slashing of the news budget should be reconsidered. Yes, news is old after a few days and cannot be recycled over and over like preaching, but it informs the members and draws us into what's happening around the world. Seeing is believing, and perhaps donations for missions would increase if the needs are clearly seen.

### 2. We Need a Variety of Approaches

There is room for traditional preaching, culturally diverse worship styles (high and low, organ and drums), talk shows, kids' shows, health classes, Bible study formats, drama, reality shows, and something innovative yet to be discovered.

Although older Adventists have depended on 3ABN to bring them worship services and encouragement with old-time gospel music, their grandchildren are leaving the Church while spending hours in front of computer, movie, and TV screens. The gutsy cutting-edge young writers and thinkers are out there. Let's find them and pay them.

If we speak with one voice, it can become monotonous. Liberal, conservative, boomers, and busters, we need each other to find our center, our common ground; otherwise it's too easy to be pulled off track. Dissension helps keep us accountable. The Lord speaks in silence and storm, through donkeys and prophets, children, women, and men.

Cooperation of the best and brightest could create a mighty fourth angel that would unify a global denomination to spread the gospel more effectively and rapidly.

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