

'Dogma' takes cynical, comic look at religion

BY JON KATZ
SPECIAL WRITER

Carl Reiner's "Oh God" (1977) gave us George Burns and a Borscht Belt take on the Old Testament. In Kevin Smith's profound and profane comedy-fantasy "Dogma," the Lord is angst singer Alanis Morissette. If you can accept that, the rest of the often clever, quite pro-faith plot may make perfect sense.

Loki (Matt Damon) and Bartleby (Ben Affleck) are fallen angels of death. Expelled from Heaven, they've been commanded to live in Wisconsin for the length of human existence. This is some cruel God we're talking about here.

The two discover a loophole that will allow them back into Paradise if they can pass through the doorway of a newly rededicated church in New Jersey. But for two fallen angels, to return home would prove an infallible God to be fallible; this would negate everything and everyone — starting, we assume, with New Jersey.

To prevent Armageddon, the Voice of God (Alan Rickman) is dispatched to enlist the aid of a human to save all humankind. They choose an abortion clinic volunteer, Bethany (Linda Fiorentino). No random choice, Bethany is — stand back, now — the great, great, great (repeat a few dozen times) ... niece of

Jesus. It seems that Mary and Joseph did a bit of begetting of their own.

And there's more, lots more. The 13th apostle, for example. He's an angry young man named Rufus (Chris Rock), who literally falls from the sky to help out. Did he really know Jesus, asks Bethany. "Knew him? He owes me 12 bucks." Apparently they listen to "2000 Year Old Man" albums up there, as Rufus rips off old Mel Brooks punchlines with no remorse. And why haven't we heard of him? "I was left out because I'm black." Just what we need, an apostle with an attitude.

"Dogma" takes on a lot, and spends a lot of screen time



Comedy-Fantasy: Matt Damon and Ben Affleck in a scene from director Kevin Smith's latest effort "Dogma."

explaining Catholic doctrines such as plenary indulgence, which is an eternal amnesty of sorts. At the heart of the film, however, is writer/director Smith's assertions that an idea is better than a belief and it doesn't matter what you have faith in as long as you have faith.

For all its controversy, planned or not, "Dogma" is as pro-Bible as it is anti-religious religion. There is a real "Wizard of Oz" sweetness there if you dig far

enough below the sophomoric language and "Lost in Space" effects (a demon from the bowels of the earth is a poop-monster that emerges from a toilet).

Affleck and Damon do the Butch and Sundance routine as well as any contemporary duo could; Rickman and Rock are each hilarious in delivering their very different types of humor. George Carlin as a cardinal is great casting, as it was Carlin's original comedy monologues on his parochial school upbringing

that inspired Smith.

Florentino as the modern-day Dorothy brings nothing special to the role. And Smith, himself, teams up with Jason Mewes for the fourth time in his films ("Mallrats," "Clerks" and "Chasing Amy") as hipsters Jay and Silent Bob.

Many of those who flock to this film may find Jay's unceasing foul mouth funny. It may or may not be a sin, but it has long ago stopped being funny.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

Scheduled to open Wednesday, Nov. 24

"FLAMELESS"

Comedic drama of a retired security guard who suffers a stroke and is assigned to a rehab program which includes singing lessons with his neighbor, a drag queen. Stars Robert De Niro and Philip Seymour Hoffman.

Scheduled to open Friday, Dec. 10

"THE GREEN MILE"

Remarkable story of a guard in a Southern prison's death row in 1935 and one of the inmates over which he has charge. Based on the 1996 serialized novel by Stephen King. Stars Tom Hanks.

Scheduled to open Saturday, Dec. 25

"LIBERTY HEIGHTS"

A dramatic look at the life and times of a Baltimore family in the mid 1950s which focuses on issues of religion, race and class distinction written and directed by Barry Levinson. Stars Adrien Brody, Bebe Neuwirth and Joe Mantegna.

Scheduled to open Wednesday, Dec. 22

"ANY GIVEN SUNDAY"

Drama about an aging star quarterback who is induced to play hurt

ger, Gabriel Byrne, Robin Tunney and Kevin Pollack.

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Drama about an aging star quarterback who is induced to play hurt

Film lacks believability, focus

BY JON KATZ
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Some husbands put their wives on a pedestal. French filmmaker Luc Besson put his (model/actress Milla Jovovich) on the big screen with thousands of extras. A few husbands may think of their wives as a saint. Besson's was cast as one. And then, to believe the tabloids, she left him.

Frankly, their off-screen lives may prove more exciting than this latest retelling of Joan of Arc.

Before the details, one warning is in order. "The Messenger" is not the film to take your catechism student to. He or she will learn about Joan, all right, but also about the language the English used to describe her. It is very plain English, not how we thought they talked in the pristine 15th century. A growing audience seemed to agree.

If you're still interested, "The Messenger" is an ambitious effort that is visually attractive and graphically detailed. Young peasant girl Joan witnesses her tiny French village overrun and her older sister raped and murdered during the bloody Hundred Years' War. A deciding factor in the war was who would control the city of Orleans. Only one thing could save France ... a miracle.

Soon after, Joan hears voices from the sky and has strange visions. She is, she is told, the chosen one who will restore France and give aid to the Dauphin Charles so that he might be crowned king. To do



In battle: Milla Jovovich is Joan of Arc in "The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc" in theaters now.

so, she must wear men's clothing, bear arms and lead an army.

Joan convinces Charles (a prissy John Malkovich) and his mother-in-law (Faye Dunaway) of her divinely blessed mission, and indeed wins a series of battles before being betrayed by her own people and burned at the stake as a heretic in 1431.

Besson ("The Fifth Element") presents Joan as a petrified kid, shivering and stammering things like, "I am the drum on which God is beating out his message." She is quick to lose her temper, foolish in battle and lacks confidence. Now all this might well have been true, but something told those soldiers to follow her; the viewer is just not as convinced as they were.

Jovovich in armor is out of her element. As an actress, she's a terrific model. And what's the deal with her hair color? She's a sunny blond to begin with. Somewhere in the middle, after cutting her long

locks, she's a redhead. She tells the English troops lined up against her outnumbered forces, "I have a message for your King Henry from God - go home!" Well sorry, but she looks like Opie telling the school bully that his father's the sheriff. Finally, at the burning, she's plainly a brunette.

The battle scenes are well staged, albeit quite graphic (a head is severed, limbs are scattered about), but the troops and their uniforms all look alike. At least you could tell Spartacus from the Romans.

Where "The Messenger" is meaningful is in Joan's prison scenes, where she is confronted by her conscience (a hooded and bearded Dustin Hoffman). Only here is Joan's uncertainty believable, but the fact that her conscience is so much smaller than she is becomes confusing. At one point she says "Get thee behind me, Satan," which only adds to the muddle that is "The Messenger."

GUIDE TO THE MOVIES

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