

Apostasy

9th May 2020

UK 2017

Directed by Daniel Kokotajlo

With Siobhán Finneran, Sacha Parkinson, Molly Wright

What a startling and bold debut feature this is, a thoughtful exploration of faith and, more particularly, fundamentalism – the hope of God and the potential prison of religion. Movies can feel most miraculous when you have no idea how they got made, and it's hard to imagine the pitch for *Apostasy*. Yet this intimate drama – about a mother and daughters bickering with each other, battling and being beguiled by faith – is one of the most assured and compelling British films in years.

The film has a wider relevance than illuminating the inner workings of a religious group considered by many to be a cult. In an age which feels almost mediaeval in its adherence to belief in the face of facts, *Apostasy* is timely and, frankly, somewhat scary. This is not an easy watch, but the severity of the atmosphere is leavened by the charisma of the three central performances. With its remarkable poise and control, this intimate and compelling drama manages to explore and expose authoritarian religion without, ironically, being judgemental.

Inventively shot by Adam Scarth, who keeps things off-kilter without being ostentatious, the film feels cinematic despite its dour urban environment. And there's no doubt why the characters would want to escape – seeking certainty and the hope of a better world beyond.

Empire

Recent years have seen a run of impressive low-budget British debuts hitting our screens. None is as personal or intriguing as Daniel Kokotajlo's Oldham-set story of a devout family of Jehovah's Witnesses tested by the eldest daughter's secular transgressions. Kokotajlo – himself a former Witness – presents a sensitive yet potent exploration of faith, grief and guilt, while expertly tapping into wider themes of love, loss and the psychological quicksand of an immovable belief which puts faith above a daughter's physical well-being. The even handling of the film as a whole speaks to Kokotajlo's great judgement and skill.

By focusing on all three women at the story's heart, he allows glimpses of humanity on both sides of the faith divide, maintaining a degree of dramatic

balance when it would have been so easy to resort to criticism and condemnation. And yet there is no denying the film's message about the dangers of indoctrination, which could be said of any strict social order. The idea that we should in some way mistreat the living to secure a future paradise is one shared by extremists of various persuasions, yet here the proselytising is measured not in rally-cries but in quiet, introspective moments.

Cinematographer Adam Scarth matches the film's subtlety with a creeping, claustrophobic aesthetic that allows for very little light. Much is shot in close-up, and the action never widens beyond the religion. Moments of colour, of humour, are jolting and fleeting.

Sight and Sound

In the Director's Own Words....

'Leaving the Witnesses took time; it didn't happen overnight. I went to university, which the Witnesses had tried to discourage, and started to go to church less often. Then I made the decision to move away from the community and from family. At university, I had a housemate who was passionate about British cinema and he introduced me to Mike Leigh's work, to Karel Reisz and the films of Free Cinema. There's something about Mike Leigh's work and his methods that really struck me. I love the way he's stuck to his style of film-making over the years, and British stories too, which is what I want to explore.'

'I didn't want my characters to just be mouthpieces for things I wanted to say. I really wasn't interested in sensationalising a world people knew very little about either. A lot of the dogma that the Witnesses have might seem extreme but the everyday manifestation of their ideas and the way they are discussed can be quite mundane. So the challenge was balancing the right level of day-to-day detail against the need to tell a compelling story.'

'The Witnesses are fundamentalists. It's a religion that's very literal in its interpretation of the Bible. There's a sort of visual emptiness that comes with that; homes and places of worship are hemmed in, with no iconography and hardly any flourishes. I wanted to replicate that aesthetic. I didn't set out to make an angry film. There are moments that are tense and frustrating, enraging even, but I hope I had enough objectivity not to let some of my more personal experiences cloud the storytelling.'

Sight and Sound

Next film: 'Shoplifters' on 30th May 2020

