

FILM

# Moon-struck

John Bluck goes to the movies and is mesmerised by a slice of magic realism, Kiwi-style

## THE INSATIABLE MOON

Not many movies deserve a whole column in *Taonga*, but this one does. Not only because it's the best result of our New Zealand film industry this year, even though the Film Commission got cold feet and withdrew their money. The film was finally made for about \$300,000 which is the price of a very small oily rag in this business where *The Hobbit* has \$300 million to play with over the next two years of filming.

*The Insatiable Moon* was shot in five weeks, though writer and theologian Mike Riddell and his wife and film director Rosemary (in her spare time she's a district court judge) have been working away on this project for eight years.

It's clearly been a labour of love. Gospel love. Because this is a film inspired by the Jesus story like no other New Zealand film I can remember.

And in our relentlessly secular Kiwi society, that makes *The Insatiable Moon* very difficult to finance, produce, market and review.

Especially review. *Tui Motu* magazine understood it, but all the other normally sensible, reliable reviewers I've read are completely confused by this movie.

They speak patronisingly about its size and budget and local production and dependence on volunteer labour.

They worry about what genre to slot this film into, without success. Nobody knows what to call a movie driven by the Gospel in a way that many so-called "religious" films are not.

It's not religious, said one well-known reviewer, but maybe it's spiritual.

Yeh right. This is a movie all about the Second Son of God meeting the Queen of Heaven. Not religious!

The beauty of *The Insatiable Moon* is that it doesn't preach, even though it's full of preachers. Riddell himself was one. The Baptist pastor in Ponsonby, back in the 80's where he learnt firsthand about the chaos that former psychiatric patients live in under "community care" in halfway houses, and the inspirational lives of those who try to support them.

Mike wrote a book back in 1997 based on his experience. Now the film brings it to life on the streets better known for lattes than lunatics.

Lunatics poetically, not psychiatrically. The magic effects of the moon are well embedded in this film, from the title to the romance between self-proclaimed Son of God called Arthur and social worker Margaret whom Arthur sees as the Queen of Heaven. Some reviewers balked at the implausibility of all that, just as they would struggle with the idea of transfiguration or resurrection.

Riddell uses the genre of magic realism, much more effectively than *Vintner's Luck* managed to do. This is *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* meets *Chocolat*.

The film is part fable, part fantasy, part gritty social documentary on media and real estate greed, all informed with a powerful but never preachy Gospel message about the cost and the redemptive power of

sacrificial love and forgiveness. No wonder it's so hard to categorise this movie.

Despite the fact that *The Insatiable Moon* has been flying under the radar from the start, audiences are slowly discovering it by word of mouth, and loving what they see.

The performances of Rawiri Paratene as Arthur and Sarah Wisemen as Margaret, Greg Johnson as Bob, the grumpy bad-mouthing boarding house proprietor, and Ian Mune as an old drunk are simply extraordinary. If Sir Peter can tease anything like that quality from his *Hobbit* team at a thousand times the price, he'll be doing well.

And the role of the Anglican vicar trying to do what he can to support the halfway house in a community determined to protect the beautiful people is well portrayed. Reviewers describe him as helpless and hapless. I'd call him brave, even if he is overwhelmed by the issues, as you would be.

The Riddells have given us a great story and a memorable film. Our churches are full of equally great stories. If we spent some of our surplus investments on making even three of them a year into movies like this one, the dividends for Gospel proclamation would be hugely valuable.

Anglicans have the stories and the money and the talent to make it happen. What we lack is the nerve and the imagination that the Riddells have displayed. ■

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