

Animated film chronicles prophet Muhammad

NEW YORK (AP) — Forget about dancing genies, buxom harem girls and dashing heroes in mythical Arab lands bent on saving ravishing princesses. In this animated movie, the issue is one of divine love, devotion and a struggle for God.

But "Muhammad: The Last Prophet" is more than a 90-minute animated feature chronicling the life of Islam's founding prophet, say its producers and distributors. It's about a struggle that began 1,400 years ago and is still being waged in places as glitzy as Hollywood and as gritty as Fallujah.

"In a volatile political climate such as today's, there is a lot of interest in learning about Islam and Muslims and the legacy of the prophet,"

said Oussama Jammal, chief executive of Joliet, Ill.-based Fine Media Group, the movie's North American distributors. "There's also a need to try to explain the religion and the prophet in a historically accurate way. Hopefully, this movie can help."

Jammal carefully timed the film's U.S. debut to coincide with Eid al-Fitr, a celebration marking the end of Ramadan. It was the ideal time to release a movie "that will hopefully help Muslims celebrate their history," he said.

But making a movie about Islam's prophet — even in the most tranquil of times — is a difficult undertaking. Islam bans depicting Muhammad or his closest followers and the film's pro-

ducers were careful to not show his face.

Many of the scenes were shot to allow viewers to see the images through his eyes, and such care earned the film the thumbs-up from the clerics at Cairo's Al-Azhar University, the foremost theological institute in the Sunni Muslim world.

To enhance its mass appeal, Badr International, the British Virgin Islands company that produced the \$10 million film, also enlisted American director Richard Rich, whose animated films include 1981's "The Fox and the Hound" and 1999's "The King and I."

The movie begins with a couple and their young daughter meeting a destitute old man whom they bring

home in the spirit of charity advocated by Islam. At their home, they begin to tell the story of Muhammad, starting with the first revelations on Mount Hira when the Angel Gabriel is said to have appeared to the then 40-year-old prophet and said: "Read."

Muhammad, who tradition says was illiterate, responds: "I cannot read."

"Read, in the name of your Lord who created, created man from a clot (of blood) ... He who taught by the pen, taught man that which he knew not," says Gabriel, as quoted in one of chapters of the Quran, the Muslim holy book.

The story unfolds with Muhammad, a merchant in Mecca, first doubting the revelations, but quickly finding support and encouragement from his wife, Khadija — the first to convert.

At the time, Mecca was a pagan center, and the new faith challenged the authority of the city's rulers. But Muhammad's message that there is but one omnipotent God — that of Abraham, Moses and Jesus — under whom all are equal, increasingly won favor among common people.

With Muhammad winning over more followers, the ridicule with which he was initially greeted gives way to persecution — laying the foundation for his flight to neighboring Medina and the battles that would secure Islam's hold on the Arabian peninsula.

The film makes a point of showing the respect with which Muhammad held other monotheistic faiths. Twice there are references to Islam's God also being the God of Jews and Christians.

It's a message of tolerance that viewers who recently attended a screening said is painfully absent today, both on the part of extremist Muslims and many in the West.

"This movie is important to bring out the message of peace that Islam teaches," said Firaz Shaikh, a 51-year-old native of India who lives in suburban New York with his wife and two children.

"It's a great way for the children to learn about the religion in a constructive way and to truly understand its spirit and the prophet's message," said Shaikh, who saw the movie with his family.

The movie debuted last

week for a four-day run in 37 North American cities. Now Jammal hopes for a second release in the United States, and has his sights set on Europe.

The movie has already appeared in the Middle East, where one scene was cut by Egyptian censors. They argued that the images of Muslims destroying pharaonic-looking idols in Mecca could spark a backlash against Egypt's rich archaeological heritage.

Some Arab critics also argued that certain events were omitted — likely to make it more palatable for Western markets.

The film would do much to shatter stereotypes responded one family.

"The people here are ignorant. They just see (Osama) bin Laden, and to them, that's what Muslims are," said Marie Edwards, referring to the Al-Qaida leader who masterminded the Sept. 11 attacks.

Her husband, David Edwards, however, was more optimistic.

"Islam is terribly misunderstood... Personally, I think it's a good religion," he said. "And I'm an atheist."

Documentary revisits 1974 kidnapping of Patty Hearst

By Kam Williams
Sentinel-Voice

On February 4, 1974, Patricia Hearst, grand-daughter of newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst, was dragged kicking and screaming from her Berkeley apartment by the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA), a small band of self-styled revolutionaries devoted to the violent overthrow of the U.S. government. The 19-year-old student had been kidnapped for ransom after being identified by SLA member Emily Harris, a hippie radical who had a day job in the school's registrar's office.

Although the original plan was simply to exchange the heiress for two of their comrades already in custody for murder, the ensuing, worldwide TV coverage led to a change of plans, as the gang realized they had indeed struck hostage gold. Instead, like modern-day Robin Hoods, they began manipulating the media circus, issuing communiques criticizing the rich and making increasingly unreasonable demands on behalf of the poor,

such as ordering million-dollar, free food giveaways in the Black community.

Yet what most surprised the authorities trying to crack the case over the course of the 592-day ordeal was that the so-called Stockholm Syndrome affecting hostages would take such an unthinkable toll on Patty. For she would come to sympathize with her captors, not only taking one, Willy Wolf, as a lover, but even participating in SLA bank robberies, being caught on surveillance cameras brandishing an automatic weapon.

This protracted saga, which held the entire country in its thrall for almost two years, is the subject of "Guerilla," a 20-20 hindsight documentary directed by Robert Stone. Courtesy of reams of film footage and revealing, present-day interviews with surviving SLA members, except Hearst herself, the picture serves as a fascinating examination of grim realities cloaked in that overwhelming regret of lives long since ruined by an irreversible recklessness left unchecked in youth.

Excellent (4 stars); Unrated.



SAYING GOODBYE TO A FRIEND

Singer Mariah Carey stands by the casket of rapper Russell Jones, otherwise known as Ol' Dirty Bastard (O.D.B.), before his funeral in New York, November 18, 2004. Jones, a founding member of the rap group Wu-Tang Clan, collapsed and died inside a New York recording studio on Saturday, Nov. 13.

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