

Prodigal son returns to glory in spiritual drama

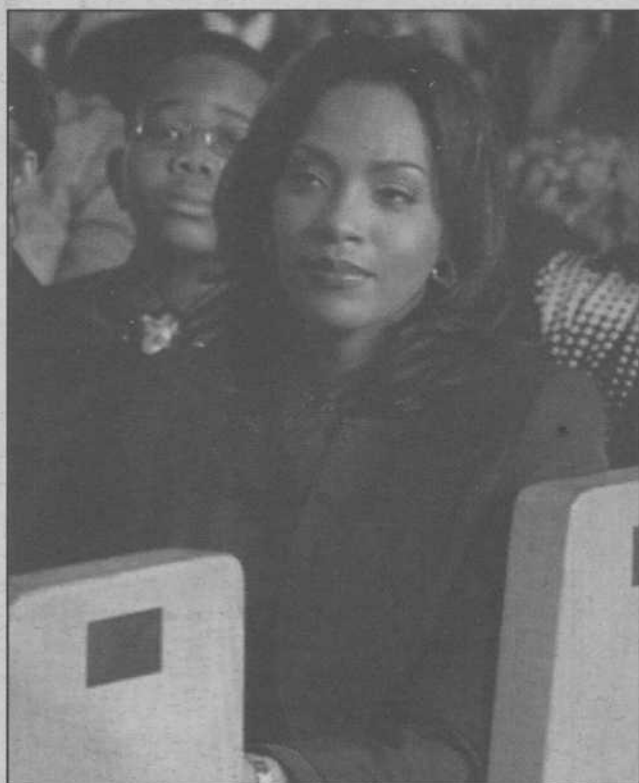
By Kam Williams
Sentinel-Voice

It should come as no surprise that a flood of faith-based films would start arriving in theaters in the wake of the astonishing, \$400+ million box-office magic of Mel Gibson's, independently-produced, "The Passion of the Christ." But what probably couldn't have been predicted, is that a major Hollywood studio might create a wholesome, Christian-oriented, family picture as engaging and entertaining as "The Gospel."

Ostensibly-inspired by the parable of the Prodigal Son as found in Luke 15:11-32, the movie was written and directed by Rob Hardy. Now unless Mr. Hardy has been born-again, it's more than a little ironic that he's the brains behind this moving morality play, since he's previously best known for "Trois," "Trois 2" and "Trois 3," a steamy trilogy of thinly-veiled skin flicks passed off as psychological thrillers.

Be that as it may, "The Gospel" is set in present-day Atlanta, and features an ensemble cast headed by Boris Kodjoe as David Taylor, the son of the much-beloved pastor (Clifton Powell) of the New Revelations Baptist Church.

With the help of an impassioned choir, Bishop Taylor has managed, for years, to keep his loyal congregation on its feet most Sunday mornings.



Nona Gaye and Boris Kodjoe, right, power "The Gospel."

Soon after the opening credits, we learn that, although David had once envisioned following in his father's footsteps, he's long-since abandoned a spiritual path for a secular one, finding fame and fortune as a pop singing sensation. Now a teen idol, he currently has a Top 40 salacious hit climbing up the charts, salaciously entitled "Let Me Undress You."

By contrast, during David's conspicuous absence, his childhood friend Frank (Idris Elba) has emerged as the heir apparent to his father's pulpit. For not only is Frank an ordained

minister, but he's married David's cousin, Charlene (Nona Gaye). The problem is that the young couple is already estranged due to her infertility and his transparent aspirations to become a televangelist by turning her uncle's fledging church into a media empire via a money-making infomercial.

The plot thickens when Bishop Taylor is stricken with an advanced cancer and left little time to get his affairs in order.

When David learns that his father is terminally-ill, he puts plans for his next concert tour on hold and returns home to take care of his dad,

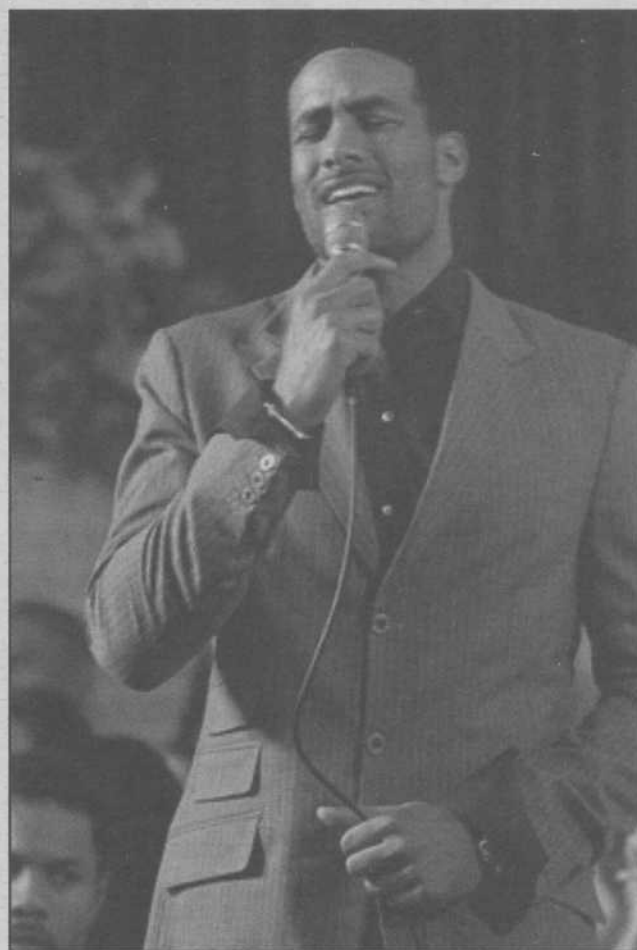
over the objections of his avaricious hangers-on.

Though he had been living life in the fast lane, this return to his roots has the superstar rethinking the many selfish and materialistic choices he's made.

The redeemed ladies man even thinks of settling down, especially after he sets his eyes on Rain (Tamyra Gray), a single-mom raising an adorable 5-year-old (China Anne McClain) with the help of her forever-meddling sister, Maya (Keshia Knight Pulliam).

While "The Gospel" introduces more characters than necessary to deliver its simple message about the importance of faith and family, its salient points get delivered despite the clutter of a few too many subplots. The script, though occasionally given to religious asides which might bother non-Christians, deals mostly with commonly-confronted, everyday issues of a universal nature.

The best reason to recommend this movie might be its infectious, irresistible spiritual soundtrack, guaranteed to have persons of any faith swaying in their seats. The



uplifting music was arranged by Kirk Franklin and imperceptibly woven into the storyline by adding a number of Gospel greats right into the cast, including Yolanda Adams, Fred Hammond, Donnie McClurkin and

Martha Munizzi.

Expect to dab away a few tears as you dance up the aisle.

Excellent (3.5 stars). Rated PG for several adult-related themes, suggestive material and mild epithets.

Poetry anthology fulfills

By Kam Williams
Sentinel-Voice

The Oxford Anthology of African-American Poetry

Edited by Arnold Rampersad; Associate Editor Hilary Herbold; Oxford University Press; 424 pp.; Hardcover, \$32.50
ISBN: 0-19-512563-0

"I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers."

— Excerpted from "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" by Langston Hughes


Let's be honest, we live in an age where gangsta' rap is the predominate form of poetry which the average member of the Hip-Hop Generation has been exposed to, committed to memory, internalized and likely emulates. This probably helps explain the concurrent explosion of so-called slams, the spoken-word equivalent of karaoke, live rhyming contests staged at coffeehouses and clubs where entrants take turns trying to outdo each other at the mike in return for exposure and a chance to disseminate their ideas, and, if they're lucky, a cash door prize.

Let's just not forget that prior to the explosion of rap, for over 200 years, African-American poets addressed their attention to issues other than bling and booty-calls. Those dedicated artists labored assiduously to create relevant, lyrical verse which gave expres-


sion to the full panoply of emotions and experiences which reflected the Black condition in their day. In the face of cultural repression, they subtly expounded on subjects ranging from slavery, resistance and protest, to love, religion and spirituality.

We all owe a debt of gratitude to those whose words appear on these pages, prophetic trailblazers who sensed the importance of putting pen to paper to preserve the essence of their core realities, regardless of the potential risks and personal costs. So, if you mention names like Langston Hughes, Mari Evans, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen and Gwendolyn Brooks to your kids, and get a blank stare, may I recommend "The Oxford Anthology of African-American Poetry," edited by Arnold Rampersad and Hilary Herbold.

Rampersad, a professor at Stanford University, is perhaps best known for "Days of Grace," which he co-authored with Arthur Ashe, and for his other award-winning biographies of Langston Hughes and Jackie Robinson. This encyclopedic anthology includes hundreds of entries by dozens of the best, Black poets of each generation. If the editors' goal was to present a rich, multi-layered, faithful portrait of the African-American as seen through the eyes of some of the community's most-inspired thinkers; I say mission accomplished.




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