Culture



"Heretic" follows two Mormon missionaries, Sister Barnes (Sophie Thatcher) and Sister Paxton (Chloe East) as they visit the home of Mr. Reed (Hugh Grant), who begins questioning the religious beliefs of the women before subjecting them to a claustrophobic roster of horrors that test their beliefs. (A24 Press)



by Zachary Lee

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Few films get at the heart of what makes religion and horror films such a frightening pairing than "Heretic," out in U.S. theaters Nov. 8.

A cat-and-mouse thriller and theological procedural all in one, "Heretic" follows two Mormon missionaries, Sister Barnes (Sophie Thatcher) and Sister Paxton (Chloe East) as they weather a coming storm to go to the house of Mr. Reed (Hugh Grant), a man who had previously indicated an interest in learning more about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The two women are initially hesitant to step into his sprawling estate, citing that per dictum, they can't enter a house alone with a man. Mr. Reed waves away their concerns with a promise that his wife is in the kitchen baking a blueberry pie. As the minutes tick by and no pie (or wife) is in sight, Mr. Reed begins politely, albeit firmly, questioning the religious beliefs of the sisters, challenging them to consider whether they only believe because they were indoctrinated to do so.

Paxton and Barnes try to escape Reed's house, to no avail, and their mendacious host subjects them both to a claustrophobic roster of horrors that put to test the beliefs so eagerly held at the film's opening.

"Heretic" is the culmination of a 10-year journey for directors Scott Beck and Bryan Woods, who meticulously researched religious history (as well as Mormon history) as they wrote the film's script, which — at least for its first act — consists of many theological and spiritual debates.

"We have a lot of connections to the Mormon community, so to make the film personal we had to get it right," Woods told The National Catholic Reporter on the red carpet of the Toronto International Film Festival. "When we started writing this project, we felt like we needed a bigger foundation of religious knowledge and so we paused the movie, started researching different religions and then kind of wrote some other movies. A lot of the questions that are explored in this film draw from the real anxieties we both had about what happens when you die."

Official trailer for "Heretic" (YouTube/A24)

Thatcher, who grew up Mormon, shared that it was important for her to draw on familial history and for the diversity within the Mormon community to be reflected. "I left the church when I was young. It wasn't a purposeful thing. … I was about 12 and doing theater and working eight shows a week, which meant there wasn't any opportunity to go to church," she explained to NCR.

"But my mom still goes to church and plays the organ in the church choir. Chloe [East] is also very connected with modern Mormons," she said. "I've seen and interacted with a lot of different worlds so when it came time to approach playing Barnes, I consulted those people who were still connected to the church."

Thatcher also shared that she identified with Barnes' recalcitrance and hesitation, especially when compared to Paxton's fervor. "Barnes is a character who converted to the faith later on in life and I felt like I could tap into that feeling of measured excitement but also nervousness at this new faith," she explained.

If Thatcher plays Barnes with some measure of hesitation, East's portrayal of Paxton is all too eager to entertain Reed's hypothetical questions and thought experiments before realizing that her earnestness won't protect her. East is no stranger to playing characters with religious fervor, having done so most recently in Steven Spielberg's 2022 film "The Fabelmans."



Sister Barnes (Sophie Thatcher, left) and Sister Paxton (Chloe East) are pictured in "Heretic." "We have a lot of connections to the Mormon community, so to make the film personal we had to get it right," co-director Bryan Woods told NCR on the red carpet of the Toronto International Film Festival. (A24 Press)

"Oddly enough, I feel like I'm always playing the crazy Christian … I'm here for it though. I think at the beginning you think Paxton is this zany, Jesus-loving character but it kind of turns into something more grounded later," she smiled. On how the role supported her own internal dialogues about faith, East said:

> One of my favorite parts about this movie is that it opens the door to such rich conversation. I had a lot of thoughts about "Wait am I, Paxton?" Paxton grew up in a belief and [as the film progresses] has to decide if this is something she believes in or not.

Indeed, once "Heretic" kicks into full gear and Paxton and Barnes realize that Reed may have taken Jesus' call to "welcome the stranger" a little too seriously, it's

evident the film has more on its mind than jump scares or cheap thrills. Paxton, Barnes and Reed discuss a gamut of theological issues, from the problem of theodicy to spiritual abuse in the church, and their discussion reveals the horror of when our faith is forced to be made sight. What happens if, when trials and tribulations come, we must question whether we ever had any faith at all?

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The thrills simply wouldn't work without Grant's devilish performance; there's an innate charm present even when Reed is at his most menacing. It's eerie to see Grant channel the warmth and charisma of his famed rom-com roles, only to subvert it into something sinister as he toys with Barnes and Paxton. Grant's performance is nuanced enough to clue audiences into the fact that there's deep angst undergirding his pontification and pain beneath his wrinkled smirk.

"I do think you have to find the damage and the pain at the heart of every character," Grant told NCR. "Especially for these bad guys. Otherwise, they become sort of a cliche, mustache-twirling type. I certainly tried to do that for Mr. Reed; tried to find what upset him and why he developed such a strange and terrifying coping mechanism."

Beck and Woods are adept at writing movie monsters: they are responsible for "A Quiet Place" (2018), "The Boogeyman" (2023) and "65" (2023). And while "Heretic" may wear its spiritual inquiries on its sleeve, the film never sacrifices thrills. "The one thing we love is provoking audiences from a very visceral level … whether that's aliens on a farm, or dinosaurs or Hugh Grant," Beck quipped.

The pair believes that the thrills of the genre don't have to be at odds with the deeper questions they — and their audience — are asking. "As long as there's layers to what we make, that's what's exciting," Beck said.

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