Culture



Omar Epps stars as Malik, a Chicago West Side gang leader wrestling with his choices after being introduced to bandit-turned-saint Moses the Black by his grandmother, in "Moses the Black." (Fathom Entertainment)



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The power of Christianity to transform lives and society for the good has been undermined by the resurgence of Christian nationalism and ideologies that marginalize people of color. But a new film seeks to remind us that faith can, as the Black church often proclaims, "make a way out of no way."

Producer Curtis "50 Cent" Jackson's "Moses the Black" acknowledges both humanity's propensity toward violence and the transformative power of faith. Jackson brings together an imposing cast to tell this powerful story: Omar Epps ("Juice," "Love & Basketball," "Higher Learning," "ER"), Corey Hendrix ("The Bear"), the rappers Wiz Khalifa and Skilla Baby, Ahmad Nicholas Ferguson ("The Chi") and Kierra Bunch (Black Ensemble Theatre in Chicago).

Malik (Epps) is a Chicago West Side gang leader whose release from prison is accompanied by his desire to avenge the murder of his best friend, Sayeed. Epps delivers a magnificent performance as a man struggling with external evil forces and internal doubts about his life of violence. In word, gestures and facial expressions, Epps conveys tensions between revenge, guilt, remorse and doubt.

Moses the Black (Chukwudi Iwuji) was a bandit who led fearsome gangs in the Egyptian desert during the fourth century. He and his followers robbed, killed, abducted and raped at will. An encounter with the Divine and desert monks slowly transformed him from a killer to a saint — one recognized today in the Catholic, Coptic and Orthodox traditions.

Official teaser for "Moses the Black" (YouTube/Simeon Entertainment)

The two men's stories converge when Malik's grandmother, troubled by his gang life, gives him an icon of Moses the Black because "he is a saint that was once a gang member." Malik and his grandmother then get into a conversation about life and the afterlife. She tells him, "I know there is more … and you better believe it too." Though brief, this conversation sets the theme for the entire movie. Malik keeps the icon close, and images of Moses the Black accompany Malik's spiritual journey.

The life of Moses the Black is interwoven with Malik's in a series of encounters as Malik struggles with the violence around him, the desire for revenge and the pursuit of the life alluded to by his grandmother. This other life crystalizes when his

girlfriend Azziza (Bunch) inks a tattoo of the globe on his back and they speak of going to another place, to a paradise of peace and tranquility. This hope is juxtaposed against the violence of the streets. Malik, like Moses the Black, is torn between the life he leads and a life just beyond his grasp.

"Moses The Black" conveys the reality of gang life, guns and drugs on Chicago's West Side. Gang violence is real and Black-on-Black crime a traumatic reality. Black Chicagoans are 20 times more likely to be a victim of homicide than white residents. In one recent 12-month period, 396 black Chicagoans were homicide victims.

Yet, hope persists. In one poignant scene, Malik happens upon a grieving woman at a makeshift altar for a murder victim. As she sings "No More Weepin' and Wailin'," a slavery-era spiritual about longing for a world without tears and violence, we hear a prayer appropriate too for today's impoverished communities plagued by poor schools, unemployment, and the proliferation of guns and drugs.

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St. Moses the Black emerges as a figure of hope. Christianity has rich African roots, and lately there has been increased interest in the lives of African American Catholic saints. This film, and the potential canonization of other Black saints, could call us to emulate their courage and devotion.

While the influence of church on younger generations has seen a steady decline, it looms large in the movie. Malik drops in on what appears to be an Orthodox church, evident by the large icons on the walls. Alongside icons of Moses the Black are images of Isaac the Syrian, Macrina and Lydia. Those images remind us that alongside the violence and mayhem of street life, there is a different reality available.

When the closing credits roll, the film acknowledges organizations engaged in restoring hope and ending violence in Chicago and other cities. Death and violence do not have the last word. The film highlights Homeboy Industries, the Neighborhood Resilience Project, the Rocket Foundation, Project H.O.O.D. and Saving Our Sons. In addition, the producers and director/writer Yelena Popovic (whose most recent film before this was "Man of God," on the life of St. Nektarios of Aegina) thank several ministers and churches in the closing credits.

"Moses the Black" is a must-see film for our times. It reminds us that even as we are stalked by violence, the enemy within is more lethal. The film also reminds us that a different reality is always possible, through insight and courage. Violence and death coexist with peace and life, and "Moses The Black" allows us to confront both; whether in our streets, or in our own hearts.

"*Moses the Black*" *is now playing in select theaters.*