

"Seven Days in Utopia": Gentle but uneven film barely makes par

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Sep. 2, 2011 NCR Today

Texan Luke Chisholm (Lucas Black) is an amateur golf champion who is on the brink of turning pro. His dad Martin (Joseph Lyle Taylor) is his life-long trainer and caddie. Martin stomps off when Luke ignores his advice and loses the game and his chance at getting a place on the pro golf tour.

Luke has an angry meltdown and goes his own way. He runs his car off the road in to avoid hitting a bull and discovers he is in the tiny town of Utopia. A rancher, Johnny (Robert Duvall) comes to his aid and brings him to the town diner where he meets Sarah (Deborah Ann Woll) and her mom Lily (Melissa Leo) at the diner; they all think of Johnny as a kind uncle. Sarah's sometimes-boyfriend Jake (Brian Geraghty) is immediately jealous of Luke.

Johnny invites Luke to his ranch bed-and-breakfast to be tended to by the rather peculiar manager (played by an uncredited Kathy Baker).

Johnny, a retired pro golfer, senses that Luke is on the verge of giving up golf or worse. He invites the young man to stay for a week, promising that in seven days he will change Luke's game.

Luke reaches into his Texas gentleman upbringing and agrees to stay and to do whatever Johnny says.

Day one, Johnny gives Luke a notebook to write about who he is. In the next days they paint, go fly-fishing, ride horseback, play rodeo poker (which was the funniest part of the film), and talk.

Sarah, who wants to be a horse-whisperer, is the romantic interest who offers her own words of wisdom and kindness.

Let there be no mistake about it: "Seven Days in Utopia" is a Christian film. While there is brief mention of the Bible in the dialogue, the camera is in love with two things: close ups of Lucas Black and the Bible. Both are overdone and detract from the artistic value of the film.

However, for anyone who has ever made a retreat, there is much to like about this gentle film beginning with the seven-day structure. To examine one's life, to articulate one's identity, is always a salutary practice. To become aware of the world and others, to forgive and reconcile, to be open to wisdom, are well presented in the story. The cinematography, especially in the opening sequences, is beautiful.

The conflict is all within Luke's heart, his remorse over how he treated his dad, and between him and Jake who sees Luke as a threat.

The golf tournament (for my "I'd rather watch water boil" non-golf eyes) shows that golf really is a sport that takes place in your head and heart and requires talent, conditioning, and discipline. The filmmakers made an extra effort at authenticity and I think they have been successful. The film had the full support of the PGA and the Golf Channel. K.J. Choi, the most successful Asian golfer in history, plays Luke's rival at the tournament.

Did you know that more than 20 million Americans play golf? I didn't.

"Seven Days in Utopia" is based on the book "Golf's Sacred Journey: Seven Days at the Links of Utopia" by David Cook, PhD, a well-known sports psychologist and writer.

Utopia means an imagined place where everything is perfect, not unlike a retreat destination. "Seven Days in Utopia" was filmed in Utopia, Texas. Like all sports movies, it moves beyond the game to a person's character, spirituality, family, relationships -- and faith.

The ending is a surprise for a sturdy but not great film. And though it is uneven and the script suffers by not coming full circle, "Seven Days in Utopia" has all the makings of a course of spiritual exercises. I can see using it in retreat settings for teens and adults. The cast is strong and will probably save the film with the general audience because they don't overact; they keep it simple and real.

If only they didn't "hit us over the head" with all the close-ups and hand pats on the Bible.

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