

Imago Film Fest brings movies about faith, life to Judson campus-for a 10th time

By Dave Gathman
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Judson professor Terrence Wandtke says Christian filmmakers need to "get their hands dirty" in a world where moral answers aren't always simple.



ELGIN — The best movies about religious faith, Judson University prof Terrence Wandtke believes, don't clobber the viewer with a 90-minute altar call posing as a film drama that will likely be seen only by those who already call themselves Christians. So this professor of media at the Elgin Baptist university began holding something called the Imago Film Festival.

It caught on. The 10th annual Imago festival will be held Tuesday through Saturday, April 1-5, at Marjorie Thulin Performance Hall on the Judson campus. The name "Imago" sounds like a Latin verb. But actually, Wandtke says, it was composed to make the hearer think of "images" and also of "imagination."

When the festival started, he said, "we were reacting to various things in the culture in general. 'The Passion of the Christ' had become a big hit and the film industry was starting to identify 'Christian' as a genre of movie. That was exciting. But it came with its own dangers."

Too many Christian films that come out now, he said, are too stridently evangelical and may end up just "preaching to the choir." "They have to have Jesus as a character and have an altar call at the end. We're trying to get away from that as a film festival. We deal with films that aren't necessarily identified with the Christian genre — films that deal with faith issues yet can be appreciated by people who aren't already believers.

“Christian genre films often try to deal with issues of faith and meaning in a neat, tidy way. But I don’t think that’s the way it is. Storytellers dealing with faith issues need to get their hands dirty and reach out into the world.”

For example, when asked to name his own favorite movies about faith, Wandtke names two that many people might not even consider “Christian” films.

The first he mentions is “The Bicycle Thief,” the post-World War II Italian cineaste favorite about the perpetrators and victims of a theft in a world where one might have to steal to keep bread on the table. “At the end you’re still struggling with what good is and what bad is,” Wandtke said.

His second favorite is 1997’s “The Apostle,” in which Robert Duvall plays a preacher who makes his living by the gospel and apparently is genuinely committed to it, but is a fugitive from the law with a bent to violence and sin.

2014’s offerings

Wandtke said he originally wanted to show “Ragamuffin,” David Leo Schultz’s new biopic about Christian singer Rich Mullins, as the keynote offering in this year’s festival, in part because Mullins lived at Judson and recorded in Elgin during part of the last two years of his life.

But the rights to the music included in “Ragamuffin” do not allow it to be used in a film festival. So Wandtke arranged for Judson to show “Ragamuffin” in a special screening Thursday night, five days before the festival begins.

Evening events begin at 7 p.m. Tuesday through Friday. On Friday and Saturday workshops begin at 3 p.m. On Saturday, the red-carpet celebration begins at 5:30 p.m. and the evening events follow at 7.

Tickets are \$6 for Tuesday through Friday and \$10 for Saturday. A full-event pass is \$20. Tickets can be reserved by phone at 847-628-1131 or email at filmfestival@judsonu.edu.

This year’s offerings will include one movie shot in the Elgin

area. The short film “Recalculating,” starring Chicago actor Ron Dean, will be shown Tuesday, followed by a question and answer session with Dean. Other new films also will be shown.

Wednesday will feature a roundup of favorite films from the festival’s first nine years and more new ones.



“Cass,” the first feature-length movie by former Imago award-winner Hugh Schulze, will be shown Thursday followed by a Q&A with the director. The Judson-related band Tecumseh will play.

Actor Marshall Allman will lead an actor’s workshop Friday afternoon and speak on Friday evening. He has starred in movies such as “Blue Like Jazz” and “Jayne Mansfield’s Car,” plus TV series such as “True Blood” and “Prison Break.” New films in the competition will also be shown that evening and the Judson-related band Mass Anthem will play.

On Saturday afternoon Braden Heckman of Wanderlust Productions will lead a workshop on crowd-funding and his company’s successful Kickstarter campaign.

A red-carpet celebration will be held Saturday evening featuring food, a best-dressed contest and live music by Judson graduate Ben Calhoun from the band Citizen Way. Afterwards, a documentary about the festival’s first 10 years will premiere, the first recipient of the Imago Lifetime Achievement Award will be announced, and the award-winning films will be announced.

For detailed information about scheduled events, visit imagofilmfestival.com.