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Friday October 26th, 2018

Apostasy (PG)

dir. **Daniel Kokotajlo**

starring: **Siobhan Finneran, Molly Wright**

sponsors: **Richard and Linda Hall**

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Synopsis: Oldham, present day. Teenager Alex visits her doctor to discuss her anaemia but Ivanna her mother, a devout Jehovah's Witness, reject his suggestion of blood transfusions. The family attend meetings at Kingdom Hall and visit local families to spread the message. Luisa, Alex's sister has doubts. When she becomes pregnant, it opens a rift in the family. She is rejected by the elders of the group. Alex is courted by Steven, a new elder, but falls ill and dies. Ivanna is devastated. Luisa tries to rejoin but fails. Her baby is born. Ivanna learns that it will not be raised as a Witness. She is horrified.

"I'm sorry, Jehovah." These three words, the first spoken in Daniel Kokotajlo's powerful feature debut *Apostasy*, set the tone for a sensitive yet potent exploration of faith, grief and guilt. Though his film takes place entirely within a Jehovah's Witness community in Oldham, Manchester, writer-director Kokotajlo - himself a former witness - expertly taps into wider themes of love, loss and the psychological quicksand of immovable belief.

Those apologetic words come from 18-year-old Alex (Molly Wright), and are heard during an internal conversation she has with Jehovah as she listens to her doctor advocate blood transfusions to manage her anaemia. This is the first instance of Alex voicing her inner dialogue at key moments, an approach that works as an insight both into her emotions and into the wider faith. There have already been films about the Jehovah's Witness community, including Marco Daniele's *Worldly Girl* (2016) and the documentaries *Knocking* (2006) and *Truth Be Told* (2012), but Alex acts as an essential touchstone for those unfamiliar with Witness practices.

As Alex's mother Ivanna (Siobhan Finneran) angrily explains why their Witness faith means that such medical intervention is utterly unthinkable, we understand the force of a faith that comes above everything, even a daughter's physical well-being. It's a theory that will be tested to breaking point. While Alex is moulded in her mother's image, speaking reverentially of the children who have sacrificed themselves for Jehovah, older sister Luisa (Sacha Parkinson) is increasingly less pliable. Alex spends all her time ensconced in the Witness community - at meetings, community gardening with fellow devotees - but Luisa's experience of college has begun to open her eyes to the wider world. When she falls pregnant by her Muslim boyfriend, her decision not to convert him to the faith sees her disassociated by the Elders. (That this self-governing body is made up entirely of men is a point that Kokotajlo doesn't need to hammer home.)

The rift this causes is immediate, with Ivanna and Alex forbidden to interact with Luisa beyond the most basic communication. This is



a particular kind of insidious cruelty; coming not via harsh words or from a place of hatred, it is a withdrawal of love and support at a time when it is most needed, all in the name of spiritual salvation. Alex is hard hit by this, but distraction comes in the form of new Elder Steven (Robert Emms) and the start of a tentative courtship, which has the blessing of both Ivanna and the community. (There is a sense, never vocalised, that this relationship has been orchestrated to keep Alex in the fold.) Yet even this chink of happiness cannot last. When Alex succumbs to her illness after refusing medical intervention, the tragedy puts yet more strain on Ivanna and Luisa's fractured relationship.

As Ivanna's grief causes her to retreat further into her religion, her internal conversations with God taking over from her daughters', Luisa's increasing isolation forces her to reconnect with the church. Yet, heavily pregnant and unable to convince the Elders that she truly wishes to repent, frustration overwhelms her and she walks away for good. "Do you think it's right how they make you treat me?" she sobs to her mother. Ivanna sides with the Witnesses.

The even handling of this pivotal moment, and the film as a whole, speaks to Kokotajlo's great judgement and skill. By focusing on all three women at the story's heart (and bolstered by powerful, nuanced performances from Wright, Finneran and Parkinson), he allows glimpses of humanity on both sides of the faith divide, maintaining a degree of dramatic balance when it would have been so easy to resort to criticism and condemnation. For an outsider audience, so much of The Witness faith seems damaging and contradictory, but we are reminded that for many it is also a genuine source of community, kinship and comfort.

And yet there is no denying the films' message about the dangers of indoctrination, which could be said of any strict social order. The proselytising is measured not in rally cries but in quiet, introspective moments. At Alex's memorial service, for example, elder Brian (James Quinn) paints her as some kind of martyr who will benefit from the spoils of the New World Order. Though his voice is calm, his words benign, the idea that we should in some way mistreat the living to secure a future paradise is one shared by extremists of various persuasions and is, too many of us, utterly chilling.

Cinematographer Adam Scarth matches the film's subtlety with a creeping, claustrophobic aesthetic that allows for very little light. Much is shot in close up, and the action never widens beyond the religion. Ivanna's home is functional, subdued; the scruffy Kingdom Hall where meetings take place juts out from the side of a motorway, modern life rushing past behind it; the sky is always full of clouds. Moments of colour (an neon-lit nail bar), of humour (one young witness speaks of demons in the attic, to much laughter), are jolting, and fleeting. This is an oppressive world of rules, in which suffering and sacrifice are payment for a future promise that is

unlikely ever to be fulfilled.

Credits

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|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Ivanna | Siobhan Finneran |
| Luisa | Sacha Parkinson |
| Alex | Molly Wright |
| Steven | Robert Emms |
| Doctor | Poppy Jhakra |
| Deborah | Claire Hackett |
| Sister Murphy | Jacqueline Pilton |
| Brother Jatin | Wasim Zakir |
| Elder Brian | James Quinn |
| Director | Daniel Kokotajlo |
| Screenplay | Daniel Kokotajlo, Charlotte |
| Director of Photography | Wise |
| Editor | Adam Scarth |
| Production design | Napoleon Stratogiannakis |
| Music | John Ellis |
| Sound | Matthew Wilcock |
| Costume | Dave Ratcliffe Lance Milligan |

UK 2017. 95 minutes

Even though the characters have big decisions to make, it's obvious from the vantage of the viewer in each case which way they should go.

The dreariness of the suburban Manchester setting enhances the idea that these people are wading through dismal lives, and so may seek this out as some kind of guiding light. Still, there is certainly some value in a story about the crossover between blind faith and emotional self harm in the peculiar epoch of Trump and Brexit.

David Jenkins: Little White Lies

Our next screening: Friday November 2nd, 7.30pm Thelma (Norway 2017 Cert 15)

Thelma, a shy young student, leaves her religious family in a small town on the west coast of Norway for Oslo and university. In the library one day, she experiences a violent, unexpected seizure. She finds herself intensely drawn toward Anja, a beautiful young student who reciprocates Thelma's powerful attraction. Thelma becomes increasingly overwhelmed by these feelings, which she doesn't dare acknowledge, while experiencing even more extreme seizures. These begin to have startling side effects and lead to the exposure of a long-buried family secret.

Another view

Less a film and more a public service announcement revealing how Jehovah's Witnesses are inhumane helldogs, Daniel Kokotajlo's bitter, polemical debut feature takes dead-aim at religious zealotry and empties out a full clip in a single, fluid stroke. Matters initially focus on the creed's most idiotic of laws – the disallowing of vital blood transfusions, even in the instance of saving a life.

Molly Wright's Alex battles against pariah status due to having accepted an urgent medical intervention in her youth, and even though her dead-eyed fellow parishioners – quietly stoical mother Ivanna (Siobhan Finneran) included – are bound by strict dogma, she somehow manages to keep the faith.

Her older sister Luisa (Sacha Parkinson), meanwhile, is starting to see through the ruse and wants out of this automaton lifestyle of faux spiritual purity. A seedy love match between Alex and one of the Church's up-and-coming elders emphasises just how docile and brainwashed this young naif is, even though he appears as a more progressive party within this cheerily extremist sect.

As the film ominously creeps towards its mid-point, inevitable disaster strikes and Ivanna is the one left with some major soul searching to do – is it possible to live by a set of rules which fundamentally contravene the messy realities of modern relationships?

While the elements of the script and the slow-burn nature of the drama are handled with due care and attention by Kokotajlo (whose film is based on personal experience), it too often feels like a hyperbolic soap opera in which characters are primed to be the most awful and ignorant versions of themselves. The coldly unflinching Ivanna is soon faced with a decision which seems absurd to the point of being unbelievable. The group of elders, who are unswerving in their dedication to this clearly crooked cause, become gruff, pantomime villains whose total lack of empathy makes it hard to view them as relatable human characters.

By refusing to explain, understand or communicate why normal, working class people might opt to give themselves over to something as patently absurd (per the film's own brutal definition) as being a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses, the film is too ready to answer questions before it asks them.