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Report from Sundance 2003: Religion in Independent Film

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Report from Sundance 2003: Religion in Independent Film

Abstract

This is the report from the Sundance Film Festival 2003.

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Introduction

Just like clockwork, Park City Utah came to life in January. People from all over the world came to Park City for Sundance 2003 - then days of film viewing, people watching and party going.

This was my first time at Sundance, and I was completely overwhelmed with the activity: producers making deals, film enthusiasts waiting in line for three hours just to get on a waiting list for a film, and filmmakers attending workshops to learn more about the independent film industry. Most of all, I was amazed by the buzz created by certain films.

I noticed there were some films that were consistently mentioned as must-sees and sure winners. Several of these admired films contain spiritual/religious themes and are discussed here. Clearly, there is something appealing, and maybe satisfying, in experiencing a story that explores power of the unknown and of ourselves.

The Pill

**(Directed by Chana Gazit and David Steward, 2002, 56 min.,
color and black and white)**

In the most complete account of the birth control pill's evolution, *The Pill* takes us back to the 1950s, when over half of the states in America banned the sale

and advertisement of contraceptives. Through the use of stock footage, archival photographs and recent interviews, the documentary describes the struggle to create and legalize the pill, and it deems this victory as the biggest gain for women's rights in the 20th century.

The Pill follows a chronological structure, as it begins by introducing us to Margaret Sanger, a staunch women's rights activist, who had seen her mother suffer through 18 pregnancies, most of them unplanned and unwanted. Sanger felt compelled to create a pill that would give women more control and freedom in making reproductive choices. Just as Sanger's desire for such a pill was at its peak, she came across a scientist, Gregory Pincus, who was primarily interested in performing research on reproduction. Though Pincus was more interested in promoting reproduction than preventing it, he had almost no money, and Sanger had the means to fund his research. Naturally, Pincus agreed to work with Sanger.

Pincus had great success, as he was able to prevent pregnancies in lab rats with his own formula. However, since Pincus was only a scientist, it would have been illegal for him to perform tests on humans. Thus, he turned to a physician by the name of John Rock, who also happened to be a highly religious Roman Catholic. Rock was very excited to work on such a project, and together, Sanger, Pincus and Rock conducted a test trial on Puerto Rican women. Overall, the trial was a great success. On May 11, 1960, the Federal Drug Administration finally

approved the use of the pill. For most people, the struggle was over, but for John Rock, it was just beginning.

During this period, 25 percent of Americans were Roman Catholic, and the overarching stance from the Roman Catholic Church on the pill, and on birth control in general, was vehemently against it. The Church felt that such an artificial control of reproduction went against the laws of nature, and thus the act of taking the pill was gravely disrespectful toward God. Despite the Church's opposition to the pill, many Roman Catholic women began taking it once it became legalized. Dr. Rock felt that the pill did not disobey Catholicism, which supports the natural use of birth control by having sex during your "safe period". Rock did not see any problem in creating an artificial safe period. After Rock spent years of fighting the Catholic Church, Pope Paul XI made a final pronouncement that procreation should be the only reason for sex, thus making the pill unnecessary. Feeling betrayed and devastated, after hearing this announcement, Rock gradually drifted away from the Church.

As *The Pill* gives a biased commentary in favor of the pill's use, it paints the Church as being old-fashioned and insensitive. It is almost as if the women in the film are the heroines and the Church is the enemy that they must destroy. Nevertheless, the film is objective enough to express the complexity of a religion's attempt to deal with progressive technology and bioethical issues. The

film also highlights the problem that is inherent in any text-based religion, which is that ethical decisions are always up to the reader's interpretation, and it is with society's increasing rate of change that such choices become more ambiguous for religious communities make. The film does not suggest any way to reconcile this discrepancy between religious tradition and technology. By failing to do so, the film implies that a separation between the two is more realistic, no matter how frustrating it may be.

To view this film contact: Daphne Noyes, American Experience, WGBH-TV, 617-300-5344, Daphne_Noyes@WGBH.org

Capturing the Friedmans

(Directed by Andrew Jarecki, 2002, 107 min., color)

We all know the theory: dramatic things happen when we least expect them to occur. But how many of you have experienced such a situation to the extent that it transforms your entire life? Andrew Jarecki's *Capturing the Friedmans* encompasses this idea, as it takes the audience through an intensely dark, gritty and true story. Throughout the film, the notion of the unexpected is constantly challenged and is always treated with the utmost integrity.

The documentary begins with an interview of David Friedman, the eldest of the three Friedman brothers. In this interview, David, a thirty-something

professional clown, discusses his immediate family (his brothers, Jessie and Seth, and his parents, Arnold and Elaine), and he touches upon the tremendous family saga that develops in the following scenes. In this opening confession, David expresses his sincere devotion and love for all of his family. He explains the fun times that they had when he was young - at the beach, at birthday parties and even just hanging around the house. David dwells on the notion that his family was just like any other middle class family in Great Neck, New York. But why would one dwell on such a seemingly inconsequential issue? It is this question that makes it apparent that something has gone very wrong.

The mystery soon begins to unfold, as we see footage from home videos, taken by Jessie, the middle child, and David. We are abruptly taken from family vacations to a knock on the front door from a policeman looking for Arnold. Elaine answers and finds out that Arnold has been accused of buying child pornography. She is greatly disturbed, but not shocked, as she mentions that her husband has always had sexual fetishes. Embarrassed and hurt, Elaine and Arnold begin to fight more often, as the children side with Arnold.

Several weeks later, an officer comes to the door again - this time to arrest Arnold and Jessie for child molestation. It turns out that many children from a computer class that Arnold taught to kids after school in his basement, had accused Arnold and Jessie of fondling and raping them during the class sessions. This

completely stuns Elaine, as she questions where she went wrong and how she did not see this coming. Arnold and Jessie, on the other hand, take the accusation in stride and find humor in the absurdity of it all. Seth refuses to get in front of the camera, and David struggles to prove the authorities wrong.

Despite Arnold's obsession with child pornography, the case for molestation appears extremely weak. The police did not find any physical evidence to support their case. Their only "proof" is from the accounts of children, who only claim to have been molested after police prod them for such responses. Nevertheless, the court finds both Arnold and Jessie guilty. The film concludes as Jessie reunites with his brothers after about 15 years in prison. Arnold died while behind bars.

This film is more about the ambiguity of truth than anything else. Yet, the distinct Jewishness of the characters brings another, more subtle aspect to it. Throughout the documentary, we see and hear many references to the Friedman's connection to their Jewish heritage. For example, Elaine exemplifies the stereotypical Jewish mother: nagging, dramatic and overbearing. We hear background comments about the Jewish food that is cooking, while the more apparent misheggas ensues. The brothers often wear T-shirts with Hebrew lettering, and in an interview, the Friedman's neighbor says that Arnold could not have committed such a crime, because he really is just a nebbish. All of these allusions

make the unthinkable very clear: sexual molestation, or the accusation of it, is not only for gentiles.

Whether Arnold and Jessie are guilty is not the question. It is merely the fact that the media has broached this issue that is shocking to the Jewish community, as such incidents have been traditionally hushed, making it appear as if American Jews are always on good terms with the law. Just as the accusation pulled the entire family out of their naive suburban lifestyle, this film should serve as a wake up call to American Jews and force them to acknowledge that they are not immune to such humiliation.

To view this film contact: Laura Kim, MPRM (West Coast), 323-933-3399, lkim@mprm.com; or Sara Finmann, MPRM (East Coast), 212-268-3080, sfinmann@mprm.com

Rhythm of the Saints

(Directed by Sarah Rogacki, 2002, 85 min., color)

In her directorial debut, Sarah Rogacki weaves together issues of single motherhood, adolescence, domestic violence and the power of magic into one compelling and emotional story. The plot centers on Rena Juarez (Daniella Alonso), a fifteen year-old tomboy who lives with her mother (Sarita Choudhury) and her mother's boyfriend, Ricky. As Rena's mother works the night shift at a hospital to make more money for her family, Rena often finds herself home alone

with Ricky, who often makes sexual passes and rude remarks toward Rena. In an attempt to avoid her home situation, Rena finds solace in "hanging out" with her friends and reading about the saint Santa Barbara.

One of Rena's friends has an aunt who is very involved with Santeria, and eventually Rena and her girl friends practice it on their own every day after school in an abandoned shack. When they convene, they sit in a circle around candles, chanting spells and prayers, while they throw random articles (i.e. pieces of hair and old photographs) into a flame. They also wear special bead necklaces to keep the evil powers far away. The girls encounter disapproval from their guy friends, who call them freaks but are really just scared of this mystical power that they don't understand.

One night, Ricky's behavior becomes too much for Rena to manage, and she and her friends decide to cast a spell on him for revenge. The group of novice witches meet at the aunt's house to perform an elaborate ritual, which consists of a bath, egg yolks and fanatical chanting. Soon after, Rena finds herself home alone again with Ricky. This time, her witchcraft has paid off, but in a very startling and traumatic way. Rena realizes that the spell created a much more horrifying result than she had planned, and she decides to run away to escape any punishment that might ensue. Despite her friends' attempt to conceal Rena's whereabouts, the authorities connect Rena to her deed after obtaining clues from the religious

paraphernalia in her bedroom. Eventually, Rena returns home and the spiritual forces gradually put everything back in the right place.

On its surface, *Rhythm of the Saints* is a story about the struggles associated with growing up in a one-parent household and the ways in which friends can fill the void of the missing parent. On a deeper level, though, the film shows how a connection to spirituality can bring a person a sense of unity, safety and peace. Thus, spirituality appears to be another way to overcome loneliness and a way to find oneself, a predominant need during adolescence and an upbringing like Rena's. If *Rhythm* makes any comment on the practice of Santeria, it is that one cannot underestimate its power, nor can one overestimate their ability to perform it. The film maintains that we are not in control of our destiny no matter how much we connect with a higher being. However, *Rhythm* shows us that with faith, good will prevail.

To view this film contact Laura Kim, MPRM (West Coast), 323-933-3399, lkim@mprm.com; or Sara Finmann, MPRM (East Coast), 212-268-3080, sfinmann@mprm.com

The Maldonado Miracle

(Directed by Salma Hayek, 2002, 99 min., color)

Here is another directorial debut, this time by the acclaimed actress Salma Hayek. Hayek debuts with an inspirational tale that takes place in the small and

dying town of San Ramos, California. The film includes several stellar performances in a story that is predominantly about faith and the means necessary to unify a community.

The film begins with shots of empty and dusty roads in the center of town. We are then brought into the communal gathering spots: a diner, a bar and the church, led by Father Russell (Peter Fonda). Conversation in San Ramos focuses on which family will be the next ones to leave town for better opportunities elsewhere. There is little resistance amongst the residents to the fact that their community will soon be nothing but a ghost town. Even Father Russell has made plans to be placed in another church in a more populated area.

Meanwhile, Jose Maldonado (Eddy Martin), an illegal immigrant boy from Mexico has been living in an empty shop in town. His mother died recently, and he is looking for his father, who he believes is working as a laborer nearby. The chief of the San Ramos police determines that Jose is illegal and spends most of his time chasing and looking for him to deport back to Mexico. During one of their run-ins, Jose runs into the church to hide and lies on top of the scaffolding above a statue of Jesus.

Soon after, a religious woman from town goes into the church and notices that the statue of Jesus has blood dripping from its eyes. She calls it a "milagro"

(miracle), and immediately the entire town is revived, as tourists from all over the world come to see this miracle. Father Russell is reluctant to call this a miracle and decides to get the blood evaluated. In the meantime, Father Russell discovers Jose and gives him a place to stay in the church. OSAP Logonnce Jose hears about the miracle, he tells Father Russell that he was bleeding the night that he hid in the church and that the blood on the statue is probably his own. This news drives away the tourists and turns San Ramos back into a dreary town. But, when the blood test results return, they arrive with some shocking and faith-renewing evidence.

The Maldonado Miracle illustrates that belief in miracles is the ultimate test of faith. The film suggests that faith in one miracle can bring about many others. For instance, many of the visitors to the statue, who truly believe that what they see is an act of God, experience personal miracles. For example, one woman is ecstatic to find out that she is pregnant, only one day after visiting the church. Another woman, who had been paralyzed for life, begins to walk right in front of the pulpit. Thus, the film proposes that faith at large can create personal fulfillment. It is this notion that makes Maldonado an inspiration to all, especially to those who face severe hardship.

To view this film contact Linda Brown, Indie, PR 323-964-0700, lbrownpr@aol.com

Song for a Raggy Boy

(Directed and written by Aisling Walsh, 2003, 93 min., color)

Aisling Walsh's dramatization of a true story that occurred at the boys Irish Reformatory School in 1939 brings to light an account that has rarely been told and holds extreme relevance today. *Song for a Raggy Boy* is a story of rebellion, love and sacrifice, as much as it is a wake-up call to society to fight injustice and question authority.

The narrative opens with a short sequence of the daily activities that occur in the reformatory. We see the priests/school masters beat students for not walking in a straight line. We hear boys whimpering out of pain from being hit with a flank board, and we watch priests rape the boys in a closed-off room and then whisper to them not to tell.

While these occurrences are typical, not all of the priests engage in this form of punishment, and it is the headmaster who decides that the school needs a lay teacher to lessen the brutality on the boys. The new teacher is William Franklin (Aidan Quinn), who is unlike any teacher that the children have known. Franklin tries a new tactic to motivate the students: getting to know them as people who have brains and hearts, rather than junk that needs fixing. By giving the students his trust in them, Franklin gradually shows the boys that learning can be a positive experience.

During the first few weeks of Franklin's stay at the school, the priests do a fair job of keeping their disciplinary actions a secret from him. But as the children begin to feel more comfortable with him, they open up and tell him about the abuses that they endure. Franklin, a veteran of the Spanish Civil War, has seen far too many cruelties occur and will not stand by and allow them to occur to these innocent children. Consequently, when he witnesses the most abusive priest, Brother John (Iain Glen), beat a child, Franklin punches him across the face in front of all the children. This incident almost causes Franklin to be fired, but it does not stop him from opposing this violence. The film climaxes during an act of extreme brutality that results in the firing of Brother John.

The issues addressed in *Raggy Boy* raise the question of how religious figures can feel justified in committing such horrifying acts of violence. This is not only a recent concern, as we can go back to the Crusades to find people perplexed over the same issue, and we can look to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to wonder again how religious groups see brutality as an answer. And closer to home, we can look at our own priests and feel confounded by their actions. Despite the longevity of this question, our ability to resolve it has not increased. *Raggy Boy* does not offer an explicit answer for us, but it does reassure us that we do have the power to protest, prevent and even put a stop to such inhumanity.

To view this film contact Kathleen McInnis, See-Through Films, 206-781-1077, k.mcinnis@att.net

Iran, Veiled Appearances

(Directed, written and photography by Thierry Michel, 2002, 94 min., color)

With September 11 still looming in our recent history, and with the possibility of war in the Middle East hanging in our future, Thierry Michel's *Iran, Veiled Appearances* clarifies and opposes many of our notions of Arab society. This documentary, which was shot over four trips to Iran beginning in August 2000 and ending in November 2001, is a survey of life in contemporary Iran. Michel introduces us to the wide range of sects, ages and mentalities that exist in a country troubled by a tumultuous past and facing the need to make a change in the coming years.

Throughout the course of the film, we are introduced to religious fanatics who strive to become martyrs, college students who want a more Americanized society, families of imprisoned rebels and individuals who feel that a woman's veil is the ultimate sign of respect toward Allah. Each of these brief encounters reveals a new aspect of the Iranian people, whether it is in terms of their history, ideas of freedom or ways in which they can become more involved the world community.

The film begins with a review of Iran's recent history. It describes life when the Shah was in control. The film is slightly biased to this pre-1980s government, in which many of the citizens felt as if they had more control over their lives. We then learn about the revolt that resulted in the government being controlled by religious leaders, which has continued to be the ruling authority in Iran. Despite Michels' bias, this takeover is treated fairly objectively, as he interviews individuals who fought on both sides of the rebellion.

The following sequence focuses on a group of young men who are training to become martyrs. We see them eat together, take martial arts classes together and pray together, almost as if we're watching a summer camp. But then, during interviews with these men, we get a much graver perspective of the situation. We hear men say such things as: It is our duty to kill all people who disagree with our government. We want to kill all Americans. And . . . My father was a martyr. My mother hopes that I will also become one some day. That is the best way to show my love for Allah. Hearing these men proclaim such thoughts with great confidence that their goals will come to fruition is by far the most frightening part of the film.

In one scene, we are taken onto a mountain, where Americanized teenagers "hang out" on Friday afternoons. Michel interviews an older couple on the mountain about their views of modern Iranian youth. The woman tells us that the youth has no respect for their culture, and she expresses great concern over the fact

that girls and boys date each other. Her biggest worry, however, is that many Iranian girls no longer wear the veil, which she believes to be an honor to wear. In the background, we see girls in jeans flirting with boys as they listen to rock music.

The film concludes with an account of a girls' hang-gliding club. The purpose of the club is to give teenage Iranian girls the opportunity to feel uninhibited, despite the fact that they are required to be covered head to toe. This final sequence suggests that there is hope that Iranian people will experience increasingly more freedoms in the future.

Although Michel's point of view is obvious, he does not ridicule the religious fanatics. He includes full accounts of their own suffering, which makes them appear to be at least somewhat sympathetic, and it allows us to see their perspective. While it is difficult for anyone to understand their own enemy, Michel helps to bring us into the world of America's enemy - the religious fanatics. Simultaneously, Michel demonstrates that our enemy makes up only a small minority of the Iranian population. Most of all, *Iran, Veiled Appearances* clarifies the relationship that Iranians have with their religion, their nation and their self.

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Moccasin Flats

(Directed by Randy Redroad, 2002, 24 min., color)

Randy Redroad's *Moccasin Flats* is the product of a video training project for Cherokee youth in Regina, Canada, who have not previously had any experience with a camera. All of the actors and most of the crew for the film were the participants in this summer program, which has since continued to become an extended program that will produce a six-part television series. The focus of this short film is on Justin and Kristin, and the troubled upbringing that they experience.

Justin is a high school senior, who is an award-winning Pow Wow dancer and has just been accepted into college, an anomaly for his poor and violent neighborhood. Kristin, also a senior, recently left her abusive boyfriend, Jonathan, for the more gentle Justin. At first, the couple deals with Justin's decision to attend college in another city. He wants to stay to protect Kristin from Jonathan and his gang of friends, but Justin's mom wants him to go, since her father was not allowed to enroll in college, as it was illegal for him to leave their reservation. Meanwhile, Kristin's old group of friends, who are notoriously violent and into dealing drugs, begin to threaten Justin.

As the violence escalates over the next week, Justin gives his best friend a necklace that was handed down to him from his grandfather. The necklace is supposed to provide strength. Ironically, the following day Jonathan stabs Justin's

friend during a fist-fight that got out of hand, leaving his friend dead and Justin devastated. For several weeks, Justin stays home, too depressed to talk to anyone. But when Kristin invites him to a party, where Jonathan will be, Justin shows up in his Pow Wow attire and does a Grass Dance in front of all the attendees. He dances with such intense fervor, that it is clear that he is dancing for his friend. This is his way of saying goodbye and working through his own sense of loss.

This Grass Dance is a part of Native American tradition, in which the dancer must think of a particular person and perform the dance to heal them. In fact, the actor who plays Justin has experienced a very similar situation in his own life; his brother was murdered several years ago, and he performed this dance in an attempt to heal his brother. The notion that a ritual can provide healing benefits exists in almost all religions. In Kabalistic Judaism, people place stones on certain body parts to reduce pain. In Catholicism, churchgoers go to confession to heal their morality. Rituals, through their repetitive nature and insistence on faith, often lead to healing by offering peace to those performing the ritual, which is how the dance functions in this film. By being in charge of the healing ritual, Justin finds peace within himself amidst his violent surroundings.

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Admirational

(Directed by Shane Lee Eagle Hannigan, 2002, 12 min., color)

With the help of the American Indian Film Institute's Tribal Touring Program, Shane Lee Eagle Hannigan brings the audience into the mind of a distressed Native American teenager. This short has no dialogue; instead we hear a voice-over of the main character. Scenes of this young man's life are arranged in montage fashion, as we see him struggle to make several difficult choices.

The film begins as the man walks into a cemetery, filled with crosses and Native American accessories (i.e. turquoise necklaces and native sculptures), and places a bouquet of flowers onto his grandmother's grave. He then goes to a convenience store and flirts with his girlfriend. As he gets into his car, we hear a voice, presumably of this young man. The man says such things as: Prove to me that you're a warrior. What should I do about college? What will my girl do? After these statements, the man goes back to the cemetery to think silently for a while.

The plot is simple, yet highly ambiguous as it draws a fine line between amateur expression and sophisticated creativity. The cinematic elements that pull this film into the arena of sophistication, however, are the symbols of spirituality that eventually can be used to explain the man's state of mind at the film's conclusion. Spirituality is emphasized several times throughout the story (i.e. the religious symbolism at the cemetery, the voice over asking for guidance, and the

theme of death). These allusions allow us to conclude that at the end of the film, when the man confidently approaches his girlfriend with his decision about going to college, that his faith in a higher being has led him to a stronger understanding of himself.

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The Hebrew Hammer

(Directed and written by Jonathan Kesselman, U.S.A., 2002, 82 min., color)

In a highly successful attempt to create a blaxploitation genre for Jews, Jonathan Kesselman wrote and directed *The Hebrew Hammer*, a film about a Jewish superhero whose duty it is to save Chanukah. The protagonist, Mordechai Jefferson Carver (Adam Goldberg), is anything but the typical Jewish movie character. Unlike the nebbishness of Woody Allen and far from the zaniness of Mel Brooks, Mordechai is confident, cool and in control. Despite his authority, Mordechai is not quite James Bond. Mordechai struggles through the same every-day tsuris (i.e. dealing with a nagging mother, keeping a girlfriend and a job) as does the rest of his community.

The film begins with the killing of Santa Claus by his evil son Damian (Andy Dick). Damian takes over his father's position and decides to destroy

Chanukah, so that Christmas has everyone's utmost attention during holiday time. Damian's plot soon makes its way to the Jewish Justice League's (J.J.L.) Chief Bloomenbergensteinthal (Peter Coyote), who calls for a plan of action. It is the chief's daughter, Esther (Judy Greer), who recommends that the J.J.L turn to Mordecai - The Hebrew Hammer - to take charge of the situation. Because of past conflicts with the J.J.L., Mordecai is reluctant to join the fight against Damian. However, Esther makes a secret pact with Mordecai's mother to be his girlfriend if his mom guilts Mordecai into helping the J.J.L (by complaining that he doesn't have a normal job, like a lawyer or a doctor).

Soon after Mordecai and Esther team up, they form an alliance with Mohammed (Van Peebles) of the Kwanza Liberation Front. It becomes evident that the three will have to take some drastic measures to save Chanukah. By this point, Damian has already handed out bootleg copies of *It's a Wonderful Life* to all the Jewish children, who then beg their parents to celebrate Christmas. With a lot of mazel, Mordecai is able to counteract the offense by distributing copies of *Yentl*, *Fiddler on the Roof* and *The Chosen* to the scarred children.

Unfortunately, things do not work out as well when Mordecai and Esther go to the mall to stop Damian from brainwashing more children. The couple poses as gentiles in order to earn a seat on Santa's lap. Once they have Damian to themselves and reveal their true identities, Damian has his elves and all the children

chase the two out of the mall and into the Underground Jewish Railroad, led by Harriet Tubbleman. Although the railroad leads them to safety, they have not made any progress in defeating Damian.

The most frightening threat comes when Damian tells the J.J.L. that he will destroy the Jewish Atomic Clock in Israel. By doing so, he will take back thousands of years of Jewish history and tradition. By the time that Mordecai and Esther arrive on the scene, it is near Shabbat, and since that is the day of rest, they fall into sleep for the entire day, making it impossible for them to stop Damian. Several more incidents ensue which answer whether or not *The Hebrew Hammer* is able to save Chanukah.

It is the subtleties of the movie, such as the Hebrew letters on subway signs and the intonation of Mordecai's mother's voice that only Jews recognize. Thus, most of all, the film provides Jewish audience members with the opportunity to poke fun at themselves, and their communal laughter evokes a sense of unity. Nevertheless, *The Hebrew Hammer* has something to offer non-Jews. The bizarre antics, comedic performances by Adam Goldberg and Andy Dick, and the exploitation of the superhero persona make the film a sheer delight for all.

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