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The Believer

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The Believer

Abstract

This is a review of *The Believer* (2001).

Winner of the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival, *The Believer* is a daring portrayal of a young Jewish man living a hopeless contradiction as a neo-Nazi. Darkly disturbing at times with its ironies, the film is ultimately an exposé into warped double mindedness and the spiritual hell reserved for its suitors.

Danny Balint (boldly played by Ryan Gosling) is a twenty-two year old man with TNT in his veins who belies a youth that found him a star pupil in Jewish grade school. As a rising star in New York City's fascist circles, Danny finds purpose in attacking synagogues and spewing hateful rhetoric among a devoted band of followers. But, while directing all his reserves toward destroying impure races, Danny is wooed back to Judaism in positively schizoid ways.

The inconsistency at Danny's core - he both wants to embrace Moses' law and instigate hate crimes against his descendants - as well as the film's inherent lack of tidiness, make *The Believer* about as compelling and artful as they come. Director Henry Bean (*Internal Affairs*, *Deep Cover*, and *Enemy of the State*) is able to pull off the remarkable job of converting viewers into caring about Danny who, in the film's opening minutes, is venomous in his intimidation and subsequent assault of a meek Jewish man quietly sharing Danny's subway commute.

Gosling is electrifying in housing the extremes of Balint's torment. Joining him in the cast is Billy Zane as a hate activist well versed in nuance, Theresa

Russell, and Summer Phoenix as Danny's love interest. The plotlines weaken at times when the local fascist movement makes some odd connections and improbable forays. But overall, Bean and company provide a gem that locks you in from the outset.

One of *The Believer's* most gripping directorial tools surfaces in a recurring flashback Danny has throughout the film. Its source stems from his personalization of chilling accounts from Holocaust survivors encountered in a court-ordered sensitivity training class. Tastefully portrayed in black and white, these haunting scenes progressively offer viewers keys to unlock a stubborn door into Danny's psyche. As the mystery of the flashback unfolds, so does insight into his conflictedness.

Amid *The Believer's* relative gloom, viewers aren't left merely dark and flat. The film offers redemptive glimpses as we discover, with Danny, that hate cannot breed life. This discovery holds particular relevance in our age of wanton religiosity where perceived transgressions are leveraged in justifying a resulting toxicity in accounting for them. Through such a misapplied dichotomy, Danny possesses an all-or-nothing mindset that places him in perpetual inner warfare that is a prelude to his demise. I find that *The Believer* reveals the agonizing futility one experiences through blind adherence to law over love.

Fans of *American History X* will fall right in line with this film. Edward Norton fans be warned, young Ryan Gosling brings the heat with a presence that fills the screen. If it can be said that *X* ties on too nice a bow at its end (a rather daring claim, mind you), then it can also be said that *The Believer* is, well, prone toward unwrapped gifts. By the way, this film is based on true events from the mid-1960's whereby a reporter threatened to expose a fascist's Judaism. Wow!