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States of Grace. Directed by Richard Dutcher.

Provo, Utah: Zion Films, 2005

Reviewed by Kent R. Bean

While leaving the theater after viewing Richard Dutcher's *States of Grace*, I could not help reflecting more on the film's audience than on the film itself. The film is the most daring expression to date of the Mormon film movement, and I wonder if many who went to the theater to see *States of Grace* were expecting something of a continuation of the spirit and fun in its predecessor, *God's Army*. Indeed, three characters from the first film have minor roles. Furthering the idea that this was a sequel, the film was first released in Utah as *God's Army 2: States of Grace*.

Because this film raises more questions than it answers, viewers will react in many ways to it. I saw a husband and wife, who I imagine were expecting a continuation of the more benign *God's Army*, leave the theater during an intense scene and did not return to see the last twenty minutes of the film. I was rather sorry that they did not return, for Dutcher provides a spiritual context for the harrowing incidents. In contrast to this couple, a middle-aged man whom I had never seen before approached me and my wife after the credits finished rolling. "Wasn't that great?" he exclaimed, "What a fantastic film!"

States of Grace begins with a bang—literally. Elder Lozano (Ignacio Serricchio) and Elder Farrell (Lucas Fleischer) are distracted by two bikini-clad women when they bump into a group of gang members who do not take kindly to their carelessness. One gang member threatens the elders and lifts his shirt to show them his gun. Seconds later, a car drives up and a rival gang member opens fire on everyone in sight. The elders make it to safety, but one of the gang members is now dead and the one who had flashed the elders his gun is bleeding to death. Without thinking, Elder Lozano strips his shirt off and plugs up the young man's wounds, thereby revealing gang tattoos on his own back that bespeak a troubled history previous to his mission.

Dutcher as a screenwriter and director has created a film that does not provide easy answers. For example, at one point the elders discuss whether to rescue a homeless man who lies sick behind a dumpster. Elder Farrell protests that it is against the rules to take him to their apartment. Elder Lozano counters, “We can keep the rules and leave him lying here on garbage, or we can break the rules and keep the commandments.” Dutcher gives a clear example of the differing perspectives that sometimes occur in spiritual matters. One perspective might argue that the letter of the law exists for a reason, for our protection. Others may assert that the law alone too often stifles goodness. Lozano demands of Farrell, “What would Jesus do?” Farrell says, I think honestly, “I don’t know!”

While it may be easy to identify with Lozano’s goodness, Dutcher does not let the viewer off so easily. Helping the homeless man is an act of charity, but it is also breaking the rules, and it sets in motion a chain of events that allows for grave sin to occur. Did the sin necessarily have to happen as a result of helping the homeless man? Dutcher does not allow the easy physics that believers too often attribute to religious faith: that if we do A then B will happen and all will be right with the world. Indeed, the title *States of Grace* is not without reason: we live by grace because ultimately we cannot completely control the trajectories of our existence. Influence it, yes; control it, no. The issues Dutcher raises in the film are important for us to consider as a community, one whose scriptures testify of grace but one whose members may often believe in the power of their own works.

Dutcher’s latest film can help Latter-day Saints and all Christians realize how often they as believers fail to live up to the beauty of Christ’s doctrines. When Elder Farrell testifies of God’s love to a non-LDS woman who believes that the whole world, including God, despises her, our heart cries out with empathy, reaffirming the words of his testimony. God *does* love her and has provided a way that she can be forgiven of any wrongdoing. But when a lifelong Latter-day Saint in the film falls from grace, he does not believe that he can receive forgiveness. As I sat in the theater, I had to chastise myself, for I momentarily wondered the same thing. Why did I doubt that the Atonement had power for both Mormon and non-Mormon?

The DVD is now available with English and Spanish subtitles and director’s commentary. If you choose to watch the film, I urge you to think hard about the questions it asks and leaves for you to answer.

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