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The Errand of Angels. Directed by Christian Vuissa
Excel Entertainment and Mirror Films (2008)

Reviewed by Dennis R. Cutchins

Let me begin by stating that I thoroughly enjoyed this film. Yes, *The Errand of Angels* is yet another LDS missionary film, but eight years after the release of the groundbreaking *God's Army* (2000) the genre has matured a great deal. The drama in the film is subtle. No one dies, for instance, or turns from the faith, and there are no gang members terrorizing the neighborhood. Writer and literary critic William Dean Howells suggested that realism should not deal with what is possible but with what is probable, and this film definitely meets that standard. It is a mature Mormon movie. Viewers who have served LDS missions will likely recognize many of their own experiences on the screen. Moreover, this is not an “inside joke” film that only LDS audiences will understand. Rather, it is about people and relationships. In that respect, this is not exclusively an “LDS film” in which religion is the major issue. It is, rather, a film in which the principal characters happen to be Latter-day Saints and happen to be serving missions. Director Christian Vuissa notes that “understanding relationships and showing the process of discovery and realization are driving forces when I write a screenplay.”¹ Those relationships, both between the missionaries and with their investigators, form the dramatic backbone of the film, and despite a lack of “action movie” action, there is plenty here to keep your attention.

Based on an original story by Heidi Johnson who served a mission to Austria in 1993, *The Errand of Angels* follows the mission of Sister Rachel Taylor, a new American missionary in the Austria Vienna mission. Taylor, played by Erin Chambers, is young and immature but is dedicated to her faith and willing to work. She soon discovers, however, that her companions, played by Americans Rachel Emmers and Eunicia Jones, Austrian Bettina Schwarz, and German Katrin Mayer, are vastly different people, and she struggles to understand them and to get along with them well enough to do her work. This process is complicated by having to deal with

investigators who often do things that are completely incomprehensible to the green missionary. In one wonderfully uncomfortable scene, the sisters are invited into a home and given treats, only to discover that the “investigators” have made an embarrassing mistake and have invited them in assuming they were missionaries from a different church. All of Taylor’s struggles are made more difficult by her attempts to speak a foreign language. Some of the funniest moments in the film come as a result of reading the subtitles as she does her best to speak German. There are a handful of subtitled scenes, but for the most part the characters speak English and the subtitles never get in the way of the narrative.

The film is carried, in large measure, by Erin Chambers’s outstanding performance as Sister Taylor. Chambers has a delicate beauty onscreen that is matched by her character’s determination to be a good missionary. Although Vuissa does not resort to extensive point-of-view shots, his narrative is definitely told from Taylor’s point of view. This creates a sympathy for the character that is not necessarily always deserved. Thus viewers like me may find themselves recognizing their own culpability in Taylor’s mistakes. Bettina Schwarz and Rachel Emmers deserve particular recognition for their supporting roles in this film. Both actors create believable and memorable characters and give wonderful performances. The film is well edited and moves quickly, although it spans most of Sister Taylor’s mission. Vuissa accomplishes this time compression effectively by using still photos and journal entries as transitional elements.

Like many LDS films, this production, which was made for an incredibly modest \$200,000, relies on the goodwill and kindness of Latter-day Saints. Interior scenes were filmed in an apartment building owned by an LDS family in Austria, for instance, and viewers will see cameos by a handful of real missionaries working in the Austria Vienna mission. That being said, this is a thoroughly professional production. *Errand* does not look like a small-budget, indy film at all. Brian Wilcox, the director of photography, deserves a good deal of the credit for this. Wilcox has thirty years of experience as a cameraman and director of photography, and that experience certainly shows. *The Errand of Angels* was filmed in high definition video, but the images look like the best 35-millimeter film. The colors are deep and gorgeous, the camera work is slow and gentle, and the scenery is nothing short of spectacular. This is one of the most beautiful films of the year, and though most viewers will likely see it on DVD, the full effect can only be seen on the big screen. Vuissa says he loves to scout and film on location, and that is pretty clear from the film. Most of *Errand* is shot on location and out of doors. As an Austrian, Vuissa was apparently keen to show his country in its best light, and he certainly does that. All of

this is even more impressive when you learn that the film was shot in only fifteen days.

If the film has a weakness, it is the ending. Vuissa uses a voiceover and montage to recount major events and tie up many of the narrative's loose ends. As I sat in the theater, it seemed a bit abrupt. Still, I definitely recommend this film. Its beautiful cinematography and very human storyline perfectly complement each other. It is appropriate for younger viewers, although the narrative may move a little slowly for preteens. But prospective missionaries, particularly sister missionaries, will get a fairly realistic idea of what it means to serve a mission, and viewers will be counting their euros to see if they can afford a trip to Austria.

The DVD was released on December 2, 2008. Special features include outtakes, an interview with the director, and subtitles in English, Spanish, and German.

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1. *The Errand of Angels* Press Notes, <http://www.errandofangelsmovie.com>.