

'The Mission' tells western side of colonization of primitive Brazil

"The Mission" has the distinction of being "the important" film to see this year, much like "The Color Purple" and "Amadeus" were in years past.

The reasons for this are obvious. From the epic photography in breathtaking locations and the swelling romantic score to the skilled acting, polished editing and "serious" subject matter,

Review by
Sean Axmaker



Courtesy photo
Rodrigo Mendoza (Robert De Niro), center, achieves spiritual conversion with the help of Father Gabriel (Jeremy Irons), right, in a scene from "The Mission."

"The Mission" is a fine picture in the classic tradition of quality set by the films of David Lean, Carol Reed and their epic cohorts.

Scratch the glossy surface of this richly hued tapestry, however, and underneath is found an "important idea" in capital letters. Written by Oscar-winning screenwriter Robert Bolt and directed by Roland ("The Killing Fields") Joffe, "The Mission" is conceived with the broad dramatic strokes of a well-meaning westerner telling the story of South America's colonization from the viewpoint of, well, a well-meaning westerner.

Set in the lands in and around Brazil in the 1750s, the film retells the true story of the Jesuits' fight to retain seven missions located in the lands ceded to Portugal by Spain in the Treaty of Madrid. Portugal had not outlawed slavery as Spain had (though in practice both were involved in the lucrative trade), and the Jesuits hoped to save their missions to protect the Indians from exploitation.

Jeremy Irons stars as Father Gabriel, who treks into the lands above the Iguazu falls (where an earlier priest had been crucified by the natives) and wins the hearts of the Indians with a single woodwind instrument. After returning to the city of Cartagena, he is charged with the salvation of ex-slaver and mercenary Rodrigo Mendoza (Robert De Niro), a man who loses the will to live after killing his brother in a street duel brought on by a fit of jealous anger. Gabriel brings Men-

doza with him and his acolytes to found the Mission of San Carlos, and soon Mendoza joins the Jesuit order.

Meanwhile the Papal Legate Altamirano (Ray MacAnally) had been sent to South America to diplomatically solve the situation brewing between the colonial powers and the Jesuits, not by fair adjudication but by actually removing the Jesuits from the newly transferred lands, more specifically the missions.

The focus of "The Mission" is on the conflict between the humanist actions of the Jesuits, an order hated by the European colonialists, and the political and economic reality of colonialism, namely the law of supply and demand and the need for a cheap work force. The Jesuits not only brought

religion to the natives, they brought organization, farming, production skills and an environment where they profited from their own labor. The landed Europeans needed submissive slaves. Instead, the Europeans were faced with effective competitors who "didn't know their place."

Yet good intentions aside, the presentation of these conflicts by Bolt and Joffe are placed in exclusively western terms. The relationship between the Jesuits and the natives is presented as paternal, with the Europeans as kindly fathers to the childlike Indians. Indeed, Mendoza's integration is shown primarily through the simple metaphor of a young pouting boy who, finally, smiles in acceptance of the

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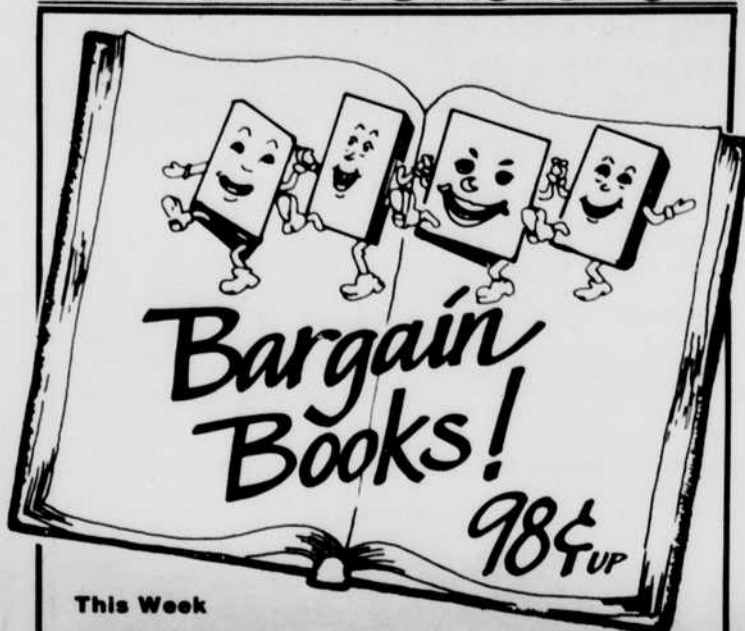
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