

Disney pitches 'Narnia' to a Christian market

By Elaine Dutka
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Walt Disney Studios is hoping that the same kind of church-based campaign that helped turn *The Passion of the Christ* into a blockbuster will convert C.S. Lewis' children's classic *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* into a big-screen franchise -- with *Lion King*-sized profits.

Directed by Andrew Adamson (*Shrek*), the \$150-million mix of computer-generated imagery and live action is due out Dec. 9 from Disney and Walden Media. Based on the first installment in a book series that has sold a combined 90 million copies over 55 years, the project seems tailor-made for the faith and family market.

Still, says Dennis Rice, Disney's senior vice president of publicity, the initiative is "only one arrow in a large quiver of arrows" as the studio prepares to unveil one of the largest marketing campaigns it has mounted. Among the companies with tie-ins: McDonald's, General Mills, Virgin Atlantic, Oral-B, Kodak and Taubman Centers, at whose shopping malls this season's holiday festivities will be *Narnia*-themed. More than 50 licensees are manufacturing items such as board games, porcelain dolls, trading cards and photo albums; HarperCollins is publishing more than 140 editions of *Narnia*, including six box sets and 31 audio versions, and a video game is due in November.

The push comes at a critical time for Disney. The studio is desperately seeking a blockbuster hit, and one that could deliver any number of sequels, along the lines of Warner Bros.' *Harry Potter* and New Line Cinema's *Lord of the Rings*. Not only is Disney lacking in the franchise department, but its onetime stranglehold on family animation has been weakened by a flood of competitors.

"This is a huge roll of the dice for Disney and Walden," said *Narnia* producer Mark Johnson. "But the payoff could be enormous."

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe tells the story of four children who are evacuated to the countryside during the World War II bombing of London, only to find a magical wardrobe that leads to an eternal world. Themes such as good versus evil, betrayal and, ultimately, forgiveness are woven into the tale. Some people regard a central character -- Aslan, the lion -- as a Christ figure tortured in place of a young human sinner. Others contend that Lewis' books should be seen as myth rather than biblical allegory.

"Everyone has his own take on the book, to which the movie is faithful," said Disney's Rice. "Rather than embracing any interpretation, we're remaining neutral, adopting the Switzerland approach."

A movie doesn't have to be overtly religious, though, to connect with the church-based audience. The promotional campaigns for New Line's *Secondhand Lions*, Universal's *Cinderella Man* and Screen Gems' *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* -- just for starters -- were directed at a grass-roots evangelical component. And Disney courted this demographic when releasing family-oriented fare such as *Miracle*, *The Rookie* and the recent *The Greatest Game Ever Played*, albeit nothing on the scale of *Narnia*, company executives say.

"Many people put churchgoers and Hollywood on the opposite sides of the equation," said Paul Lauer, whose Motive Entertainment orchestrated the *Passion* campaign and has been working on doing the same for *Narnia* since early this year. "But churchgoers are hungry for movies reflecting strong values -- like *Narnia*."

The 5-year-old Grace Hill Media, in which Jonathan Bock and Ted Gartner are partners, also has signed on to the *Narnia* campaign. The industry leader in church-based promotion, it has worked on 80 films, including *Lord of the Rings*, *Kingdom of Heaven* and *Bruce Almighty*.

Outreach, Inc., one of Motive's partners and a *Passion* veteran, is producing resource materials including a DVD aimed at ministers, educators and scout troops to help them integrate the movie into their respective curricula.

Disney also is reaching out to 40,000 youth ministers nationwide and has marshaled the support of leading clergymen. Group sales -- many organized by churches -- are in the works.

When it comes to connecting with young people, some clergy believe, story-telling is far more effective than an academic approach. While *The Passion* was "powerful and specific," *Narnia* provides some "very real answers to problems in the universe," said Ric Olsen, senior associate pastor at Harbor Trinity Church in Costa Mesa.

Olsen was contacted by Outreach to record a segment for Disney's promotional DVD on *Narnia*, one of his favorite pieces of literature. He's also conducting a series of pre-sermon talks about the movie and trying to rent the Irvine Spectrum for a night, just as he did with *The Passion*.

Hollywood has been wooing churchgoers since its early days. No matter that some of the clergy regarded movies as a tool of the devil. Legendary director Cecil B. DeMille, whose father had studied to become a priest of the Episcopal faith, reached out to that audience in the 1920s with biblical-themed films such as *The Ten Commandments* and *The King of Kings*.

While the Hollywood-church bond was strained at times, it ebbed and flowed over the years. The commercial success of *The Passion* increased studio openness to the church-based audience, Lauer said, as has the recent decline in box office. Other incentives include the widespread presence of red on the political map under President Bush and a

growing number of evangelicals.

Douglas Gresham, Lewis' stepson and a co-producer of the film, said the movie must walk a fine line. While it would be immoral to retreat from the message of the book, hitting religious themes too hard could turn people off, he said. (On the set, he was in charge of ensuring that the story and values were retained.)

"We never set out to make a 'Christian' movie," said Gresham, speaking from his home in Ireland, 60 miles south of Dublin. "The book taps different veins in different people. If we overstressed what little symbolism there is, we would have thrown away the project."

It's also important to keep the work in context, Gresham said. Lewis embraced Christianity around 1930, after an agnostic stretch -- and his values informed his writing. But, bemoaning the sorry state of children's literature, he and his Oxford University colleague J.R.R. Tolkien were less interested in allegory than in turning out a good story.

"(Lewis) viewed the book as a suppositional representation -- 'What might happen if animals and mythological creatures lived in harmony with God and saved the world from evil?' " Gresham added.

When Paramount Pictures abandoned its attempt to make a movie of the book in the mid-1990s, Gresham said, a host of studio and production companies made contact. He ultimately opted for Walden Media, he said, because of the company's family orientation and his regard for its owner, Philip Anschutz, the billionaire owner of the Los Angeles Kings hockey team and Regal Cinemas, whose film company's motto is "Educate, enlighten and inspire."

"I believe he's a man of faith, probably someone who's had some realizations in his life and is trying to carry them out," he said.

Walden Media eventually brought in Disney, with whom it had worked on James Cameron's documentary *Ghosts of the Abyss* and the feature film *Holes*. With the grass-roots *Narnia* campaign, says Walden Media President Michael Flaherty, the company is trying to put out the word that "fantasy can be a great door into reality."

"The story is about hope in a hopeless age," Flaherty said. "Lewis was a terrific spokesperson for faith based on reason."

It's too soon to say whether *Narnia* could become Disney's *Harry Potter* or *Lord of the Rings* -- or overtake *The Lion King*, which took in \$780 million in worldwide box office. Still, hopes are high.

"This is a risky project, the most expensive on which we've embarked," said Flaherty, whose most recent release was *Because of Winn-Dixie*, the story of a Florida girl and her Baptist father. "Box office-wise, we'd love to be *The Passion* -- though we could do without the controversy."