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T.D. Jakes takes a big screen leap

Will audiences pack theaters for a movie about sexual abuse?

05:43 PM CDT on Friday, September 24, 2004

By **IRA J. HADNOT** / The Dallas Morning News

Bishop T.D. Jakes is facing one of the biggest challenges of his long career in ministry: putting out a movie about sexual abuse that he hopes will open a door to healing.

Will the acclaimed Dallas preacher achieve the same success in cinema that he has in books, television and gospel music? Will he get churches actively engaged in talking about a subject that many people still regard as taboo? *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* opens Friday in theaters across the country. The movie is based on Bishop Jakes' best-selling 1993 book of the same name.

The pastor of the Potter's House is taking a gamble that

More about T.D. Jakes and his film

- ▶ **COMING SUNDAY:** Life has changed dramatically for Tommy Dexter Jakes.
- ▶ **COMING FRIDAY:** A review of the film.
- ▶ **ON WFAA:** See more on Bishop Jakes on *Metro* at 11:15 p.m. Oct. 3 on WFAA-TV

audiences will embrace an R-rated movie about a woman who was sexually abused as a child. He said he hoped the movie would provide spiritual healing for the hundreds of thousands of women who are sexually abused or assaulted each year in the United States. (The movie's Web site,

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www.wtalmovie.com, predicts that it will be, for many, "a life-changing motion picture event.")

Some experts fear that such "cinema therapy" could trigger painful memories for victims in an inappropriate setting, reopening psychological wounds rather than salving them. They add that sending abuse victims to the counsel of ministers – many of whom acknowledge that they're not qualified to provide such therapy – might, in the long run, not prove to be productive.

Others, however, call Bishop Jakes' latest undertaking groundbreaking and predict that the movie will become an important teaching and healing aid.

From a purely commercial perspective, Bishop Jakes is swimming upstream. He's hoping for a lasting hit in a year that was disappointing for many movies with much cheerier story lines, much bigger marketing budgets and much bigger stars – from *Catwoman* starring Halle Berry to *King Arthur* with Keira Knightley to *Around the World in 80 Days* with Jackie Chan.

The independent film was directed by Michael Schultz, whose small-screen credits include episodes of *Everwood*, *Boston Public*, *Felicity* and *Ally McBeal*. It stars Kimberly Elise (of *Beloved* and this summer's remake of *The Manchurian Candidate*).

The movie lacks the slick veneer of a high-end Hollywood production, and with good reason: It was shot in a mere 12 days. (Bishop Jakes, who plays himself in the movie, has declined to say what it cost to make.)

"I am in a David and Goliath position," Bishop Jakes, 47, said this month at a screening in Washington, D.C., for religion writers and ministers.

Still, a man with T.D. Jakes' national reputation and connections, to say nothing of his years as one of the country's most charismatic preachers, has a few stones in his pouch.

Oprah Winfrey, who has made no secret of the abuse she suffered as a child, is scheduled to do a show (and maybe two) about the movie next week. *Time* magazine, *The New York Times*, ABC News and other national news outlets were planning stories around the release date.

To promote his project, Bishop Jakes has visited 22 cities. The movie was screened

at a pastors' conference this week at the Potter's House attended by more than 2,000 ministers from across the country and abroad.

Borrowing a marketing ploy that helped catapult ticket sales for *The Passion of the Christ*, Bishop Jakes is appealing to ministers to get their congregations to pack movie houses. *The Passion's* release was timed to coincide with Ash Wednesday; *Woman* is coming out on the first day of October, which is Domestic Violence Month.

And like Mel Gibson's movie, this one can be tough to take in spots.

"This is not a Kool-Aid version of sexual abuse," Bishop Jakes said.

He said he thought a movie would make a particularly powerful vehicle for his message.

Recounting Jesus' instruction to his apostles to go forth and convert the masses, he said: "The Great Commission tells us to go into the world. And all the world is going to the movies."

While the cast is mainly African-American, he said, "This message is for everyone. This problem is everywhere."

And while he notes that men as well as women can be victims of abuse, the movie is clearly aimed at the "broken" women his ministry has historically appealed to. Women make up a large percentage of those who attend his 30,000-member church and his popular regional and national conferences. His best-selling books, in addition to *Woman, Thou Art Loosed*, include *God's Leading Lady* and *The Lady, Her Lover and Her Lord*, both aimed at a female audience.

The 90-minute movie is based on "composites" of women Bishop Jakes has counseled. It tells the story of Michelle Jordan (Ms. Elise), whose life is a "dark abyss of drugs, prostitution and prison," the result of her having been sexually abused as a child by her mother's boyfriend.

While in prison, she writes to Bishop Jakes and asks him to visit. After they talk, the minister arranges for her early release, on one condition: That she attend a three-day revival he's leading. Eventually, Michelle makes peace with her past, her mother – and herself.

Dr. Frederick Engstrom, a Vermont psychiatrist who has used movie clips to help treat patients for more than 20 years,

said the film could get some women onto the path of recovery – but only as a first step.

"The movie itself is not going to heal the spirit," he said.

While movie clips can be "excellent devices that spark discussion with a therapist," he said, those discussions should unfold "in a safe environment, where the person can react freely. I don't know if that can be accomplished in a theater with 500 strangers."

Dr. Engstrom added that seeing the movie could "trigger a memory of trauma" in an unprepared victim, which could prove detrimental.

The movie's Web site includes links to resources for those who have been abused, and those who want to help abuse victims. Similar information was expected to be included in the movie's trailer. Bishop Jakes also has prepared a pastors' guide to help clergy members answer questions spurred by the film, a spokeswoman said.

During screenings, some ministers have expressed concern that they may not be qualified to counsel women about sexual abuse. Experts on assault said that's a valid worry.

Robin D. Stone, an author and former editor at *Essence* magazine who was sexually abused when she was 9, said she was uncomfortable with the notion of women rushing to discuss their painful past with "clergy members who do not have enough training to handle someone who is talking to someone for the first time about what happened." Ms. Stone wrote of her experience, and that of other abuse victims, in her book, *No Secrets, No Lies*.

"Rushing the person to forgive and forget can cause more injury," she said. "The issues of shame and guilt are so strong, coupled with years of secrecy, that church officials are going to need specialized training to address these issues."

In addition, she said, "in the black community, because of the legacy of sexual abuse during slavery and stereotypes about the sexual behavior of black women and black men, you have an environment where the men who do these things are sometimes protected.

"There is such distrust of the criminal justice system and a keep-strangers-out attitude about counseling that this huge problem just never gets addressed."

Experts on abuse applauded Bishop Jakes for setting his tale of abuse close to home. Like the star of the movie, they note, most abuse victims are attacked by relatives or people they know.

This betrayal by friends or relatives causes those victims later in life to "retreat inside," said Liz Hodges, a social worker at the Family Place in Dallas. "A film like this could help," she said.

Bishop Jakes said he wished young children could see the movie. "I am not happy with the R-rating," he said. "The damage to these young souls starts early and there is often a family history, a generational vulnerability to abuse."

He said ministers should examine the family background of abusers and abuse victims – a "family's spiritual DNA" – just as medical doctors look at a patient's family history.

"We know that molesters create other molesters," he said.

Bishop Jakes said "a spirit of victimization" can repeat itself, generation after generation, unless confronted. In the Bible, he said, David's "sexual promiscuity" was passed to his sons. "Amnon rapes his sister, Tamar."

So a religious movie about sexual abuse, to him, makes perfect sense.

"The Bible is violent," Bishop Jakes said. "How can we do Christian films that do not deal with these issues?"

Dr. Engstrom, the Vermont psychiatrist, said abuse victims often "disconnect from their God," refusing to believe that a just deity could allow something so horrible.

Healing, when it occurs, starts with the body and mind, he said. The spirit is often last.

That's what Bishop Jakes hopes to remedy.

"Anger and depression keep you disconnected from God," he said. "It is the love of God that brings people back to an awareness that they deserve to be happy and free of torment."

And as in the story of David and Goliath, "A giant they thought they could not defeat will fall by the force of God's love and redemption," he said.

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Using movie scenes is an emerging form of treatment known as "cinema therapy." Its roots are in "bibliotherapy," a technique developed in the 1930s, in which books are used in discussion of emotional and psychological afflictions.

Here are some movies used in therapy sessions by Dr. Frederick Engstrom, a Vermont psychiatrist and leading proponent of cinema therapy.

DEPRESSION

Ulee's Gold, The Last Picture Show

BIPOLAR DISORDER

Lone Star, Good Morning Vietnam

BEREAVEMENT AND GRIEF

Shadowlands, Saving Private Ryan

SCHIZOPHRENIA

A Beautiful Mind

ANXIETY DISORDERS

The Fisher King, Midnight Run, Broadcast News, Four Weddings and a Funeral

PERSONALITY DISORDERS

Play Misty for Me, Cape Fear

ISSUES IN THERAPY

Silence of The Lambs, Good Will Hunting, Grosse Pointe Blank

REALLY TOUGH ISSUES IN THERAPY

Scent of a Woman, Frances, Dressed to Kill, Analyze This

RESOURCES FOR VICTIMS OF ABUSE

The Web site for *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* (www.wtalmovie.com) suggests that abuse victims seek help through the following agencies:

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence

www.ncadv.org

FaithTrust Institute

www.faithtrustinstitute.org

U.S. Justice Department, Office on Violence Against Women

www.ojp.usdoj.gov/vawo/

Into the Light

www.jist.com/kidsrights/index.asp

The Family Place

www.familyplace.org

The Potter's House Counseling Center

www.tdjakes.org (Click on "Ministries," then on "Counseling.")

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