

VARIETY

New U.S. Release

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The Celestine Prophecy

A Celestine Films presentation of a Celestine Films and Barnet Bain production. Produced by Bain, Terry Collis, James Redfield, Beverly Camhe. Executive producer, Salle Merrill Redfield. Directed by Armand Mastroianni. Screenplay, James Redfield, Barnet Bain, Dan Gordon, based on the novel by Redfield.

John - Matthew Settle
Wil - Thomas Kretschmann
Marjorie - Sarah Wayne Callies
Julia - Annabeth Gish
Father Sebastian - Hector Elizondo
Father Sanchez - Joaquim Almeida
Jensen - Jurgen Prochnow
Miguel - Obba Babatundé
Charlene - Robyn Cohen
Prof. Dobson - John Aylward
Father Jose - Castulo Guerra

By DENNIS HARVEY

advertisement

An initially self-published sales sensation in the mid-1990s, James Redfield's novel "The Celestine Prophecy" offered introductory New Age metaphysics packaged in pulp thriller form -- just as more recent print phenom "The Da Vinci Code" wrapped quasi-historical/Biblical theorizing in the same. Latter's film version will benefit from maximum Hollywood muscle. This belated, self-produced and self-distributed "Celestine" pic, on the other hand, is likely to fly well under mainstream radar. After brief theatrical life, its real audience should emerge with DVD release, when it can be watched sans pesky snickers from the unwashed.

While fans of the tome (plus its several sequels and spinoffs) may lament the skimping on mystic/philosophical specifics here --such things don't translate well onscreen, especially within a 100-minute dramatic framework -- they are definitely the target demo. In fact, they may be the only sympathetic viewers "Celestine" will get. For one thing, they will come prepared to accept the plot's nonstop "coincidences." Anyone unfamiliar with the book's basic ideas will probably choke on their popcorn, agog at so much windy spiritual mumbo-jumbo floating in a woozy stew of action-adventure absurdity.

Those who already "get it" will find a simplified but affirming illustration of their higher beliefs in the film, while "average" moviegoers may think they've discovered a gaga camp classic.

John (Matthew Settle), rudderless after being laid off from the teaching job he'd once held idealistic hopes for, receives a out-of-the-blue call from an old friend alerting him to the purported discovery of ancient scrolls in Peru said to reveal nine linked, universal life "insights."

John impulsively boards a plane to Peru, meeting Professor Dobson (John Aylward), who's traveling for the same reason.

But in Lima, high-ranking church and political forces are bent on suppressing the manuscripts, which threaten their established power structures. Dobson and Father Jose (Castulo Guerra) are promptly grabbed for interrogation by armed police. John escapes, running right into Wil (Thomas Kretschmann) -- on his way to meet other allies of the banned scrolls.

They drive to rural mountain and jungle destinations, often pursued by military or fired on by guerrillas. (Written in early '90s, tale still milks that period's Peruvian climate of civil violence and terrorism, which will irk any latter-day resident viewers.) En route to discovery of the as-yet-unfound Ninth Insight, John meets people who each conveniently help him understand the successive "insights."

With its constant talk -- and unsophisticated f/x illustration -- of synchronicity, "energy fields," their relation to mankind's evolution so far, and our post-materialist, spiritually-focused future, "Celestine Prophecy" demands all skepticism be left in the lobby. That's a leap few may be willing to take -- few beyond those millions who bought the book, that is.

Prior converts will be pleased if not quite thrilled by a reasonably faithful, compact screenplay adaptation; the efficient though uninspired direction of telepic veteran Armand Mastroianni; and a cast that's earnest if a tad bland. Kretschmann ("King Kong," "Downfall," "The Pianist") comes off best, mixing dash and humor with a credible spark of enlightenment.

Shot in Florida and Costa Rica, feature (financed largely by Redfield himself) has a widescreen look that suggests Peru less than it suggests a tropical theme park with luxury resort interiors. Whether this heightens pic's essential silliness, or its allegorical hyper-reality, is a matter for each viewer to decide. Other tech/design elements are OK.

Camera (color, Panavision widescreen), R. Michael Givens; editor, Maysie Hoy; music, Nuno Malo; production designer, James L. Schoppe; set decoration, Vera Mills; costume designer, Suzy Freeman; sound (Dolby Digital), Trip Brock; assistant director, Carl Ludwig; casting, Andrea Stone. Reviewed at Lumiere Theatre, San Francisco, April 19, 2006. MPAA rating: PG. Running time: 98 MIN.

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