

10/15/2005

“Wasn't all that bad, it just wasn't great...”

by Abdul Malik Muhammad

Kingdom of Heaven was released on DVD October 11. By Thursday night October 13, you could not find one copy of the movie along the Wasatch front. Target sold out of every DVD version. Wal-Mart was selling the movie for 19.95; they dropped their price to be competitive with Target who was selling the movie for 14.95. Babak and I road around Thursday night for about an hour and a half trying to find the movie. We wondered what would make this movie sell out in two nights. Was it the fact that heart throb Orlando Bloom played the leading role? Was it the fact that all of the advertisements came off as a story about a victorious Crusade over Jerusalem in 1184? We discussed within the hour and a half quest how Ridley Scott skillfully lures all audiences into the movie. To catch the typical audience early on he shows a battle where Balian has to kill an older Arab soldier. This battle basically sets the tone for the movie. The older Arab Soldier tried to unjustly take Balian's horse. From that point forward the movie last for over 2 hours going through the dynamics of what went on in the battles placed in the vicinity of the Third Crusade, conducted by Philip Augustus, King of France, and Richard Coeur-de-Lion. In the end, this movie shows the temperament and dignity of the Muslims, particularly Salah-ud-deen after they defeated Balian and his Army. One of its best scenes -- in which Salah-ud-deen explains how Jerusalem means both "nothing" and "everything" to all involved -- is a very compelling argument for the growing contention that the city should be internationalized and administered for all faiths by the United Nations. Scott knows how to direct a historical epic. GLADIATOR is one of my favorite films. It is blessed with wit, strong dialogue, emotional drama, and grand visuals. Russell Crowe knows how to deliver an emotionally riveting performance without compromise. KINGDOM OF HEAVEN echoes many of startling visuals of GLADIATOR; however, due to the fact that the Crusades was an ongoing, bloody religious war between Islam and Christianity for control of The Holy Land, here Scott and his screenwriter, William Monahan tells a moral story of the balance in allowing everyone to worship together in Jerusalem. Revisionist history now says the Crusades were about currency, economy, and booty. They draw the audience in with the noble character of Balian in the beginning of the movie then shock the audience with a depiction of Christians and their clergy mostly as villainous buffoons. This is an unusual view of Christians and Muslims so it should warrant some pretty interesting reactions and comments in the future. If one dismisses what most audiences will see as a historical slant, KINGDOM OF HEAVEN is an architectural success. All the trappings are in place: a fascinating subject with big name recognition, a beautiful star, a strong supporting cast that really supports the star, and opulent visuals. It is amazing to see how siege and warfare was done in the Middle Ages.

The problem, of course, with a typical audience is the story. Muslims won control of Jerusalem. The key is not who won but what was done once they gained control. Jerusalem is for everyone! More than ever, Hollywood has become a cinema of fantasy and escapism. But every so often, a powerful director comes along to make a statement or impart a vision that's courageously relevant to what's going on in the real world.