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Bodies and Soul

by Amy Taubin

The Apostle
Written and directed by
Robert Duvall
An October Film release

Scream 2
Directed by Wes Craven
Written by Kevin
Williamson
A Dimension films release

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Like Robert De Niro, Robert Duvall is very good at playing characters whose rigid body armor is a defense against their feelings. While most actors are dedicated to getting in touch with their emotions, Duvall is most convincing when he seems most disassociated. Whether he's playing a nutcase like the major in *Apocalypse Now* or an ordinary neurotic like the L.A. detective in *True Confessions*, he doesn't quite compute. It's as if he's desperately trying to rouse something inside him that's missing in action, the something that even atheists like me imagine as a soul.

In *The Apostle*, Duvall plays Sonny Dewey, a Texas Pentecostal preacher who's so busy talking to God, he wouldn't be able to hear Him if He answered. Sonny's like a rooster, rushing around his flock of hens and chicks with his chest stuck out and his ass lagging behind, pumping his elbows like wings, clucking "Thank you, Jesus" at every step. A zealot who admits no opposition in his religious or his personal life, Sonny turns violent when crossed. His wife (Farrah Fawcett) is sick of his prayers and his physical intimidation. When she tells Sonny that she's leaving him and taking the kids, he responds by applying a baseball bat to the skull of the young minister with whom she is in love. Sonny's in big trouble, but rather than turning himself in, he goes on the lam, and, having asked God for directions, winds up across the state line in a tiny, mostly black Louisiana bayou town. With the blessings of the town's black minister, who's been sidelined by a bad heart, he rebuilds the local church, puts the word out over the radio, and attracts a full house of worshipers. But no matter how many souls he saves, he still has killed a man, and for that, he's damned to hell.

Written and directed by Duvall, *The Apostle* (which is 20 minutes shorter than when it screened in the New York Film Festival) is basically a character study of a religious fanatic. What's most interesting about the film is Duvall's obvious ambivalence about a guy who is possessed by a fundamentalist notion of God but lacks wisdom, tolerance, compassion, or moral fiber. Unlike the smarmy, sentimental *Sling Blade*, *The Apostle* doesn't try to win us over to its protagonist's side. Sonny does really horrible things: he brutalizes his wife, he kills her lover, he abandons his children, he refuses to go to the bedside of his dying mother (June Carter Cash) lest he be caught by the police, and he tries to seduce one of his parishioners (Miranda Richardson) without letting her know about the heavy baggage he's carrying. This is not a guy you'd want to have around the house. For him, the business of saving souls outweighs personal responsibilities.

Which is not to say he's not suspect in the evangelical

department as well. When a local redneck (who else but *Sling Blade*'s own Billy Bob Thornton) threatens to flatten Sonny's "nigger church" with his tractor, it takes only five minutes for Sonny to get him on his knees weeping and wailing and embracing Jesus Christ as his personal savior. But since the guy seems just as delusional after he's found God as he did before, anyone in his/her right mind knows it's as likely as not that he'll be back tomorrow to finish what he was distracted from today.

The scene raises more problems than Duvall wants to deal with. Until Thornton enters the picture, *The Apostle* seems to exist in an ahistorical never-never land where the politics of race, not to mention abortion, don't intrude in the house of the faithful. But Thornton's character is too unimportant to carry the entire burden of the racism that, however unconscious, compromises the film. *The Apostle* plays much too easily into a white racist agenda that wants to keep control of the church in the South. You have to ask yourself why the retired black minister never called up another black minister and asked him or her to take over his congregation, 90 per cent of which is black. Why did he just sit passively at home waiting for the white guy to save his church? You might also wonder why this strangely impotent minister is the only black character in the film to be named in the credits. I know we're all God's children, but it just seems a little bit unfair that when the pews are filled with black bodies, only white people have agency.

A copycat movie about a copycat killer, *Scream 2* tries to make derivativeness a virtue, but the film-buff reflexivity that was so winning without being exactly fresh in the original is seriously tired the second time around. Everyone who was left alive at the end of *Scream*--including Randy (the irresistibly sardonic Jamie Kennedy) and Deputy Dewey (the secretly glamorous David Arquette)--congregates on the campus of Windsor College, where Sidney Prescott (Neve Campbell), the resourceful heroine of *Scream*, is trying to get on with her life. Unfortunately for Sidney, ambitious TV reporter Gale Weathers (Courteney Cox) has written a book about the Woodsboro murders, which has been turned into a movie titled *Stab*. When *Stab* opens at Windsor College's local movie theater, it inspires a whole new round of murders and mayhem. The killer's first victims are a squabbling couple played by Jada Pinkett and Omar Epps. Since they're the wittiest actors onscreen, it's downhill after that.

Kevin Williamson's dialogue should appeal to everyone who's taken Film Studies 101, but Wes Craven's direction is heavy-handed and strictly by the numbers. If you don't guess the murderer within the first 20 minutes, you must be a virgin to the genre.

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