

Movie Review: Cloud Atlas

By John Mulderig

Catholic News Service

NEW YORK - For both good and ill, contemporary Western values underpin the sweeping screen version of David Mitchell's 2004 novel, "Cloud Atlas" (Warner Bros.).

Co-written and directed by Lana and Andy Wachowski and Tom Tykwer, the ambitious adaptation upholds many principles with which viewers dedicated to Judeo-Christian morality can agree - the equal dignity of all human beings prominent among them. But its implicit plea for the breaking down of racial and social divisions extends, under the familiar guise of universal tolerance, into an endorsement of behavior incompatible with a Gospel-driven life.

Tom Hanks leads an ensemble cast through the byzantine passageways of a narrative that interweaves six connected stories set at different times between the 19th and 24th centuries. Joining him are Halle Berry, Jim Broadbent, Hugo Weaving, Jim Sturgess, Doona Bae, Ben Whishaw, Keith David and James D'Arcy - all of them skillfully juggling multiple roles.

The messages conveyed through these half-dozen tales are mostly positive, if sometimes ponderously expressed.

Thus Victorian-era lawyer Adam Ewing (Sturgess) overcomes prejudice through his encounter with - and rescue of - a runaway slave named Autua (David Gyasi). In the dystopian mid-21st century metropolis of Neo Seoul, a "fabricant" called Sommi-451 (Bae) rebels against her fate as a being genetically engineered to toil her brief life away in a McDonald's-like fast-food restaurant.

Back in 1973 San Francisco, crusading journalist Luisa Rey (Berry) may have to risk life and limb to expose a potentially catastrophic conspiracy at nuclear power plant.

Christian moviegoers are bound to welcome cinematic parables affirming the bonds that unite us all or celebrating the courage that's sometimes required to do the right thing on behalf of others. But the writing trio's script ventures into more divisive territory via a segment set in 1936 Britain.

The first time we meet roguish young composer Robert Frobisher (Whishaw), the protagonist of this subplot, he's in bed with his lover Rufus Sixsmith (D'Arcy). Robert deviates from their relationship - portrayed sympathetically throughout - long enough to make a cuckold of Vyvyan Ayrs (Broadbent), the distinguished melodist to whom he's apprenticed himself. His casual adultery with Jocasta Ayrs (Berry) is treated as essentially harmless.

Other problematic elements include the debunking of a fictional faith - 200 years after her own time, Sommi-451 has been turned into a goddess. Since the cult surrounding her is obviously idolatrous, its downfall is certainly a triumph for truth. But it remains unclear whether the incident is intended as an attack on real-life religion.

Additionally, there are hints in the dialogue that some of the characters may be reincarnations of people we've gotten to know in the earlier sections of the vast chronology.

The film contains considerable gory violence, including torture and a suicide, a benign view of homosexual acts and adultery, graphic premarital and nongraphic adulterous sexual activity, upper female and rear nudity, a same-sex kiss, a few uses of profanity, at least 20 rough terms and occasional crude language. The Catholic News Service classification is O - morally offensive. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R - restricted. Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian.

Mulderig is on the staff of Catholic News Service.

CLASSIFICATION

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