

Grooming Hollywood's New Talent

Booted from a convent for thinking outside the box, Barbara Nicolosi moved to Hollywood and founded a successful program to mentor Christian screenwriters—some of whom have earned their big break.

by Mark Moring | posted 03/21/06

In *The Sound of Music*, Maria is clearly not an asset to the abbey, obviously destined for other things.

Related:



Barbara Nicolosi

"Many a thing you know you'd like to tell her," the Reverend Mother sings in "How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?" "Many a thing she ought to understand."

- [Behind the Screen excerpt](#)

"But how do you make her stay and listen to all you say?" replies one of the nuns.

"How do you keep a wave upon the sand?" replies the Reverend Mother.

Barbara Nicolosi was once that "wave upon the sand." Young, eager, and strong-willed—much like Maria—Nicolosi thought she wanted to be a nun for life. But her out-of-the-box ideas weren't a great fit, and in the end, she was asked to leave the convent.

Initially distraught, Nicolosi finally found her calling—to Hollywood and, eventually, to teaching. In 1999, she founded Act One as a means of helping Christian scriptwriters hone their craft and find their way in the entertainment jungle.

According to its [website](#), Act One was founded "to address the most serious problems reflected in the work of Christians who set out to write for mainstream entertainment: a sense of artistry, a commitment to professionalism, and a network with other industry professionals. In addition, Act One provides Christian writers with guidance in focusing and maintaining their spiritual growth, enabling them to better integrate faith with industry professionalism."

Act One alumni have gone on to secure jobs in TV and film—including one grad who helped write the script for *Curious George*, now in theaters. Act One also now mentors budding executives and is branching out to other specialties.

Nicolosi, the executive director, teamed with other Act One faculty to write [Behind the Screen: Hollywood Insiders on Faith, Film, and Culture](#), a collection of essays that give us a behind-the-scenes glimpse of how Christians are making a difference in Hollywood.

We recently chatted with Nicolosi about the book—and about Act One, the definition of a "Christian movie," and about what's right, and wrong, with the industry.

How's this for a first question: You were really kicked out of a convent?

Barbara Nicolosi: Yeah.

How come?

Nicolosi: I think what it came down to was that I was arguing that we should be engaged in speaking to the broader culture, but the convent climate was very much about catechesis—you know, instructing the faithful. I was much more, I guess you could say, focused on evangelization. It finally came down to, "Well, that's not what we do." And I was like, "Well, that's what we should do." And then the superior said to me, "We think God's calling you somewhere else." So I came out and applied to film school.

You felt the lure to Hollywood?

Nicolosi: Not so much right away. I just went into survival mode when I got out of the convent. It's kind of like a divorce, only worse. Your whole life is focused, your future is all laid out—and all of a sudden everything is taken from you. I was 30 years old. I had no credit history. I couldn't rent an apartment, I couldn't get a loan, I couldn't open a checking account. So I wasn't thinking of saving the world; I was just trying to get my life going.

How would you define Act One and its purpose?

Nicolosi: The purpose has evolved as our understanding has grown. Right now, we're trying to create a *community* that would be creative. We figured out that the artist is not an isolated freak on the fringes of culture. I think artists have been told that they need to be isolated—like this freak on the fringe, bursting onto the public consciousness every few years with some real outlandish stuff. But I think it's insidious to tell young artists they have to be isolated, because they have really nothing to comment if they're isolated, other than their own innards and guts. And Lord, we've seen too much of that—all the dark things artists can think up because they're by themselves.

I think there is an isolation aspect to creativity that's crucial, but you have to draw them out and get them producing. Otherwise, their isolation will just eat them up and consume them with its loneliness and insufficiency; they're never good enough for their own vision. Also, they become socially freakish and unhappy. All their relationships become tests of, "Do you love me because I'm so weird?" It doesn't have to be that way.

What do you *do* with these young artists at Act One?

Nicolosi: We're about identifying genius and then training it, giving it to habits of discipline. How do you nurture it and tough love it and sometimes pamper it? We try to do that in the context of community. But the real emphasis at Act One is not with the beginners; it's on the alumni.

In the context of screenwriting?

Nicolosi: Not just screenwriters; we now have [executives](#) as well. And we also have plans on the books to train actors, directors, producers, critics, and pastors, with our four keynotes—artistry, excellence, professionalism, and spirituality.

So, is it working?

Nicolosi: It really is. We didn't realize how much we were going to have to be patient and wait on the artists. That's something the church has to understand about art; it's a patient thing. How many strokes of a brush does an artist have to do before they actually get something that's really beautiful or haunting? How many notes do you have to sing before you can really sing something that's going to make people rise up out of their chair?

It's the same with screenwriting—and we didn't expect that. We gave them everything they needed and then we just kind of stood back and said, OK. We didn't realize there was going to be a spiritual component, an ethical component, a companionship component. Now we do. But it's working.

Give me an example.

Nicolosi: One of our [alumni](#) just won the [Disney Fellowship](#), which means we've won it twice in three years. This is a very competitive contest—over 2,000 people apply and they choose five. It's kind of astounding that a program so small like ours, training only 30 people a year, has achieved this.

One of our students just won the Cosby Fellowship over at ABC—the top minority writing program in the world. We have eight alumni working on television shows, and we have two in features coming out this year—including *Curious George*, a major studio release. One of our former students, [Clare Sera](#), was on the writing team.

An alumnus who wrote for *Curious George*? What's "Christian" about that—and please note my tongue-in-cheek tone!

Nicolosi: (laughing) Ha! There's definitely going to be a need for Christians to do more sacred art—art that is overt in saying who we are and what we believe. When Christian artists have done that at a high level of craft in the past, the whole world has come looking.

Hopefully we're going to get there (in film), but you have to walk before you can run. I think we have to become proficient at good storytelling and good character development on a human level before we really start trying to translate a spiritual vision through a visual medium. We've seen this time and time again in the Christian community, the schlock that we write. When you're not really good at craft, when you try to talk about God it comes off as being very superficial.

For example?

Nicolosi: *End of the Spear*, for example. The writers had every excuse to do a little overt articulation of our faith—but they don't do it. Maybe they were afraid it would be done badly or it would come across as hokey. But as a result, the movie doesn't make any sense, because the martyrs have no reason to be martyrs if there's no gospel. You just turn them into social workers.

I've had that problem myself in writing a movie about a saint. I realized if you strip the gospel out, his life makes no sense at all because you reduce it to something that's just human. To me, that is just going to the other extreme of an error—where we're going to tell a Christian story, but we de-Christianize it so it will be palatable to the mainstream. The way to get palatable to the mainstream is to make something fabulous, excellent, deep and very high craft. But we're not there yet.

You're saying it's possible to make a movie *by* Christians, primarily *about* Christians, but that will appeal to a widespread audience.

Nicolosi: If you make something really cool, they will come. They'll say, "Wow, maybe I don't get everything that was going on here, but what an amazing story."

How did your book *Behind the Screen* come about?

Nicolosi: You know, it's not the book that we wanted to make. We wanted to make "Act One: The Writing Program" in book form, for people who couldn't get into the program or couldn't come to the program. We pitched it all over, and it was amazing how many Christian publishers said there aren't enough Christians interested in the movies for this to sell. I'm like, "Are you smoking crack?" Because we ten times as many applicants for every spot [in Act One] that we can fill.

But if it was going to read like a curriculum book for screenwriters, I can see why publishers might have been wary. There are tons of Christians who love the movies, but how many are really interested in becoming screenwriters?

Nicolosi: Millions. I give speeches at Christian colleges, and for these kids, this is their art form. But despite the fact that there are 500 books on screenwriting in the secular market, we couldn't convince the publishers that there would be room for one with a Christian emphasis. So we had to backtrack from that and ask what could we say to the broader Christian world? We basically asked our faculty, "What do you wish the folks back home knew about Hollywood?" We got 18 essays, and went back to one of the publishers and said, "Now we have a book that is of interest not only to people who might want to come here, but also to people who are just consumers."

Let's zero in on your chapter about Christian cinema, which we've [excerpted](#). Picking up on part of that, how *do* you define a Christian movie?

Nicolosi: There's a distinction between sacred art and what I would call "just art." Great art has to be beautiful, a harmony. Part of the harmonizing is what the message of the

thing is. A movie like *Munich*, for example, is high art in craft and technique, but its heart is nihilistic and so it's ultimately a lie. I think it's a very important movie to see, but is it a Christian movie? I would say no, because in its heart, it's a lie.

Now, when you're talking about things that are going to overtly articulate a lynchpin of Christian dogma, that's when you're talking sacred or Christian art. But any great art, in its beauty, can point to the divine; it's still God creating through that.

When it comes to "Christian movies," I think we should be doing one tenth of what we do for ourselves and nine tenths for secular people as seeds to try and get them questioning. Unfortunately, the opposite ratio is true. Probably nine out of ten Christian artists are working just for Christians, and maybe one in ten are working for the mainstream.

What are some good examples of mainstream movies that you would call "Christian," or at least informed by a Christian worldview?

Nicolosi: [In the Bedroom](#) and [The Straight Story](#). Have you ever seen a better movie about reconciliation than *In the Bedroom*? They actually have a priest talking about the connection of forgiveness to your soul. This movie says, *We don't forgive for the other person; we forgive because if we don't, we'll go mad.* Just an amazing film. And *The Straight Story* is a movie about reconciliation between brothers, where there's literally got to be this dying to self act between the two. *In America* is another amazing film that deals with Christian themes without necessarily overtly telling people, "This is Jesus talking." It absolutely can be done—and the cool thing is that all three of those movies were made by non-believers.

So it's possible to make a "Christian" movie without having a Christian on board?

Nicolosi: Yes, but to me, those aren't Christian movies, not in the way like *End of the Spear* or *To End All Wars* or *Left Behind*. But those are all bad movies in terms of craft. So you have this interesting problem of movies that have their heart right, but they're so badly executed in terms of all their decorations that they end up being a lie too. The lie there is that God is a God of mediocrity, because there is no excellence in those films. You end up having an actor say God is awesome and sovereign, but the movie itself says God is mediocre and kind of banal. That's a problem.

I try not to talk too much about these efforts from Christians in cinema right now, because I understand that we've got to make these things to get to the point where we can then start making something really profound. But it's going to take us a few years.