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**FAITH IN FILM / Passionate, not preachy / Act One trains scriptwriters who value quality as deeply as Christian themes**

By RICHARD VARA (Staff)

BARBARA Nicolosi is a former Roman Catholic nun turned Hollywood scriptwriter who wants Christians to see the big picture when it comes to filmmaking.

Six years ago she founded Act One, a Christian program to train screenwriters and Hollywood executives to produce quality films that entertain, inspire and connect with audiences of faith - even those who profess no faith.

"Honestly, I didn't start out to fix Hollywood," said Nicolosi, who has a master's degree in film from Northwestern University. "I started out to fix the church in the arts."

After two years of "reading hundreds and hundreds of horrible scripts" at a Catholic movie production company, Nicolosi concluded that Christian screenwriters were their own worst enemies.

"They had nothing but arrogance and ignorance, and self-righteousness to boot," the outspoken Nicolosi said. "They were screaming about how Hollywood was persecuting Christians. I realized Christians were not being martyred in Hollywood; they were committing suicide.

"We were being embarrassed by Christians who were writing works that were substandard and saying the Holy Spirit inspired them to do it."

A 1998 article she wrote for a conservative Catholic periodical attracted the attention of evangelical Christians who asked her to begin a training program for scriptwriters.

"Part of the genius of what Barbara did was locate about 30 professionals working in Hollywood who were Christians," said Chris Riley, who directs the writing program for Act One. "Many of us didn't know each other existed."

Among the volunteer faculty Nicolosi assembled are John Tinker, a staff writer for St. Elsewhere and executive producer for L.A. Law and Chicago Hope; Monica Macer, a former theater director who was a staff writer on ABC's Lost and is now a story editor on Fox's Prison Break; and Scott Derrickson, director and co-writer of The Exorcism of Emily Rose.

Working under the mentorship of professional Hollywood writers, each student completes a TV or movie script by the end of a monthlong summer training program or an eight-month weekly class session.

"There is a quality of training on a practical craft level that we are able to provide that is hard to find even in film schools," Riley said.

Nicolosi, who has one movie script of her own nearing production and is working on two others, said she modeled her program on Renaissance guilds of artists in which students were trained by master artists.

About 400 people have graduated from Act One, including 40 students of a year-old program that trains behind-the-scenes personnel such as script developers, producers and artist agents. Act One is based in Hollywood and has chapters in New York, Chicago and Washington, D.C.

Only one in 10 applicants is selected based on education, writing experience and talent.

"We try to get people who have really interesting things to say," Nicolosi said.

Screenwriter Cheryl McKay was one of the first graduates of the Act One program.

"I love Act One, and I hope they stay around forever," she said in a phone call from Los Angeles. "I see them really raising up writers who have good stories to tell or who want to write about truth."

McKay's movie adaptation of Jim Stovall's book *The Ultimate Gift* will be released in March. The film stars Drew Fuller and James Garner.

She believes Act One gave her better training than her college degree in film and screenwriting.

"The best part of being in Act One was that so many of the teachers and faculty were working in the industry," she said. "I was getting a lot more writing advice from people who were doing it."

TV writer Dean Batali (*That '70s Show*) was her mentor. "They assigned me to him in '99, and I have never let him go since. He continues to help me seven years later whenever I need his help or advice."

Just as important, the program teaches Christian writers who want to write for broad audiences, not just for church goers.

"We want to be writing movies that penetrate with really important truths but without preaching at an audience," she said.

Act One is not a factory for wannabe religious-movie writers, Nicolosi and Riley said. Nicolosi discourages writers who think only in terms of the Christian market.

"The goal of Christians in the arts is not to make stuff that is only for Christians," Nicolosi said. "The role of Christians in a secular world like Hollywood is to say there is beauty, and people long for it. There is truth. There is goodness."

She's is critical of films like this summer's church-produced *Facing the Giants* that extol acceptance of Christ as the solution to life's problems. She wants writers to produce scripts like *A Man for All Seasons*, *Ghandi*, *Chariots of Fire* or *Schindler's*

List. "Those kinds of films will be part of the dialogue for the ... human family, about things that are lasting, about human meaning," she said.

After the blockbuster success of *The Passion of the Christ*, Act One began receiving calls from studios looking for writers and executives, Nicolosi said. But she warns that Hollywood still does not understand the religious market or respect traditional morality or ethics.

"Let's face it, no one is writing a *To Kill a Mockingbird* anymore. That would require a letting go of the cynicism that has Hollywood in its grip. For Hollywood, there can be no heroes." But Nicolosi is also critical of the Christian community for supporting poorly made films simply because they are "Christian."

The religious community should accept that great dramas often involve evil and violence, she said. "We have to be able to talk about sin, and Christians should be comfortable with that," she said. "We have to have sin in our drama, but it doesn't have to be an occasion of sin for our audience."

*The Passion of the Christ* did more than change Hollywood's support for faith-themed projects; it also showed Christians the power of films "to be the means of doing good in the world," she said.

"The church set the standards for beautiful art, for music, for architecture back in the Middle Ages," Nicolosi said. "The church has to wake up and get back to excellence. I think it will happen."

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#### MOVIES WITH A MESSAGE

*The Passion of the Christ*: Studios have been searching for faith-based scripts and courting the sizable religious market ever since Mel Gibson's box-office success, says Act One founder Barbara Nicolosi.

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*The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*: The success of C.S. Lewis' children's classic is helping Disney Studios regain the family market and its trust, according to Nicolosi.

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*Unforgiven*: Chris Riley of Act One cites Clint Eastwood's Western as a good example of the human cost of violence.

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*Crash*: Riley says the movie realistically looks at the moral consequences of people's actions.

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Schindler's List: Steven Spielberg's movie is an example of how an ordinary individual can do the extraordinary, Nicolosi says.

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The Incredibles: Nicolosi says this family-oriented animated film is one of her favorites.

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#### ABOUT ACT ONE'S FOUNDER

Barbara Nicolosi "grew up in a family that was very much about the best movies ever made, and we watched them as a family."

Classics: Her father introduced her to films like Doctor Zhivago, Gone With the Wind and Casablanca.

Quote: "I was the only fifth-grader that knew the complete Keystone Kops repertoire."

Convent: For 10 years she was a member of the Daughters of St. Paul, a community of women dedicated to Christian outreach through media, including books, movies and audiotapes.

Before Act One: Worked for Paulist Productions in Hollywood.