The Screen Savor: Fighting the Common Code

by Kimberly_Gadette

"The Da Vinci Code"

Anagrams being an oft-used device in this bloodless tale of bloodlines, rose lines and poorly-scripted flatlines, the urge to join in was too great to resist. Unwittingly (and that's part of the film's problem), the letters of "The Da Vinci Code" ("DC") spell out its own secret warning - DC: Avoid it Hence.

For the three of you who have been stuck in some sarcophagus since the international bestseller of the same name debuted in March of 2003, let's review: The curator of the Louvre is chased down by a gun-wielding Albino monk (Paul Bettany). Once the curator whispers the words that Silas the monk is seeking, Silas shoots him and runs, leaving him for dead. Harvard symbologist Dr. Robert Langdon (Tom Hanks) is called to the crime scene by Captain Fache of the French FBI (Jean Reno), ostensibly to help with clues written on and around the dead curator's body. The French police cryptologist Sophie (Audrey Tautou), who just happens to be the curator's estranged granddaughter, arrives on the scene. With Fache inexplicably certain that Langdon is the murderer, Sophie helps Langdon escape. Acting more like Inspector Javert than Clouseau, Fache is one mad bulldog intent on hunting down the Codifying Kids as they unravel the mystery of the curator's death, following one cryptic clue after another, hopscotching throughout Europe, to ultimately discover the deepest, darkest secrets of Christianity itself. Sounds exciting, no?

But no. One could almost hear the book's faithful insisting that all 454 pages be filmed to the letter. (At least we got snappy cliffhangers with the novel.) In this filmed version, for an additional helping of kill-me-now, the dry, overly-explanatory lectures on the origins of religion were augmented with flashbacks of gauzy, historic armies on the march. As a Roman soldier in one of those numerous flashbacks might say, "Et tu, Screenwriter Goldsman? (anagram = Wring treacled sermons), More than simple handcuffs, it's as if Silas' spiked chain, his cilice, is wrapped around the production as tightly as around his thigh. But in this case, it's the audience that's made to suffer.

Director Ron Howard (anagram = Horrid! Creator Down!) has too many successful movies to his credit to be excused with a penance of a few mumbled Hail Marys. With a canon of endearing and enduring films such as the prior Tom Hanks' vehicles "Splash" and "Apollo 13," Howard's been directing for almost thirty years, from "Cocoon" and "Parenthood" to last year's "Cinderella Man."

Mr. Howard, do you need to be reminded that as stated under the Gospel of Directing 101, the audience needs its tension served right along with a plot that moves? In an early scene, the police are about to catch Sophie and Langdon at the Louvre, yet there is no sense of immediacy. Instead, Sophie takes all the time in the world to emote in a farewell scene to dead GrandpapÃ¡. Was Ms. Tautou being paid by the minute? If so, even at minimum wage, at 147 long ones, she made out like, well, like the collection plate at Easter. Another particularly heavyhanded moment comes with the usually formidable Alfred Molina in a wasted role as the Opus Dei pope. Outraged, he cries to the papal council that blood has been spilled and as he vents, he purposely spills a goblet of wine on the table. Cut to a long, lingering close-up of the wine. I understand that there are many codes, rhymes, anagrams, secrets that have to be explained, but must everything be literally spelled out before us? What is this, The Da Vinci Code for the Remedial? The large print version?

In a much later scene with the couple and Leigh Teabing (portrayed by Sir Ian McKellen, doing his best to slap some life into this Corpse Christi), numerous enemies are about to interrupt the threesome's tea party. Yet the trio prattles on with historic theory and discourse, this scene as flaccid as the one before. McKellen got a big laugh from a full theater when, after Sophie apologizes for their extremely late visit to his home, he says, "So late it's almost early." Picking up their cues a lot faster than the actors onscreen, quite a few audience members then simultaneously dropped their heads to check their watches. There's a sign for you, Mr. Howard, as plain as the nose on a Mennonite's face.

As for Robert and Sophie (anagram = A Rebirth Snooped) Oh, Tom, hast thou forsaken me? I even loved you as Viktor Navorski in the unkindly criticized movie, "The Terminal." As the avuncular Langdon to Tautou's Sophie (and why avuncular? Couldn't we have a spark or two?), Hanks soddenly lumps through Europe as if he were channeling Eeyore â€¦ on a particularly dismal day. An actor's actor, perhaps he was secretly wearing a punishing thorny crown under that unwashed 'do. You never know. Audrey Tautou knows how to play lovely and earnest, but in her rendition of a vibrant, brilliant cryptologist, I fear her character was rather clueless.

Sadly, it seems the only real passion that was accomplished over the two-and-a-half-hour sin-ematic sojourn

was the frenzy whipped up by Silas the Self-Punishing Monkboy. You go, Silas.

Grading this movie on the curve of the Deschutes River: For wonderful turns by Sir Ian McKellen and both Jean Reno and Paul Bettany as confused zealots, for production values including a lovely tour of European churches and the Louvre, and because my sister insisted I give Ron "Happy Days" Howard a break: C-

Production Credits:
"The Da Vinci Code". Cast and crew: Tom Hanks, Audrey Tautou, Ian McKellen, Jean Reno, Paul Bettany, Alfred Molina. Directed by Ron Howard. Screenplay by Akiva Goldsman, adapted from the novel by Dan Brown. Rated PG-13. Running time: 149 minutes. Bend Oregon Central Oregon

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