



## ANGEL-A (Cert 15)

**Reel Issues author:** Ian Maher

**Overview:** Stylish romantic fable – an unconventional angel arrives in Paris to save the soul of a man in debt to the French underworld.

**Director:** Luc Besson (2005).

**Produced by:** Optimum Releasing.

**Caution:** The film as a whole contains some strong language and some scenes of a sexual nature.

### SUMMARY OF PLOT

André (Jamel Debbouze) is a Parisian hustler, down on his luck and in considerable debt to those who are chasing him. Pondering the hopelessness of his situation, André decides that it would be preferable to take his own life rather than give his pursuers the satisfaction of killing him. He sets out to throw himself from a bridge into the River Seine. But, as he prepares to jump, he notices someone else on the bridge also intent on suicide.

After a brief exchange, the stranger, a beautiful blonde woman, beats André to the jump and plunges towards her doom. André instantly forgets his own suicide plans and dives in to rescue her. He discovers that her name is Angela (Rie Rasmussen) and they strike up an unlikely relationship, accentuated by their physical dissimilarity. André is short, with a somewhat shady demeanour; Angela is tall and leggy and could have stepped straight off the catwalk.

As the plot unfolds, Angela tries to convince André she is his guardian angel (hence 'Angel-A'), sent to earth in order to help him go straight and restore his sense of self-esteem, by appearing as just the sort of woman to whom he would be attracted. At first, André believes Angela to be completely unhinged but it soon becomes apparent that there is more to her than

meets the eye. She proves more than a match for André's pursuers, outwits the head of the mob, and quickly raises the money to pay off his debt. (Apparently, by prostituting herself to what seems like the entire male population of a nightclub, though we later discover these assumptions were wrong.)

Somewhat predictably, André falls in love with Angela and she starts to fall for André, even though her celestial origin makes the relationship impossible (or so it seems). Tearfully, she prepares to return to the heavenly realm. Is there a happy ending? You will have to watch the final chapters of the film to find out!

Filmed in black and white and incorporating stunning photography of Paris, *Angel-A* is a gem. It is light-hearted with features strong dialogue, as André wrestles to find a meaning and purpose for his life, and Angela discovers something of what it means to be human.

### SOME KEY ISSUES

**Angels** – *Angel-A* presents a somewhat unconventional portrayal of an angel. Angela confounds the popular image but the film nevertheless draws attention to an enduring belief in the existence of angels.

**The supernatural** – André's initial struggle to believe that he has met an angel has more to do with his thinking that such a thing could not happen to him than with any refusal to believe in a spiritual realm. Many people have an active interest in the supernatural, but caution is needed.

**Self-love** – André's self-worth is at such a low ebb that it pushes him to the brink of despair. Only the intervention of the mysterious Angela prevents him from taking his life. Through her, André begins to accept that he is not worthless and this becomes the

catalyst for change in his life. Self-love is an important factor for all of us in being able to accept our uniqueness as people made in God's image. The more we appreciate that for ourselves, the more we are likely to treat others accordingly.

### **Clip 1 – DVD chapters 2 to 3 [to 00.19.40] (approx. 9 minutes)**

*André is at his wit's end having run out of options to pay off the gangsters to whom he owes a considerable amount of money. About to throw himself in the Seine, his suicide attempt is interrupted by a stranger with the same idea.*

The short exercise that follows is designed to get people thinking about their understanding of angels before the next clip raises the issues more directly.

#### *Post-it note exercise*

- Give each member of the group three post-it notes and ask them to write down three things that come to mind when they hear the word 'angel'.
- Gather in responses. This can be done either by asking people to call out what they have written and recording the responses on a piece of flipchart paper; or, if there is a suitable area in the room to do this, ask people to stick up their post-it notes and then encourage people to go and read them.
- Draw attention to any common responses that emerge (e.g. 'wings', 'messengers', 'white robes'). Ask people where such impressions have come from.

Or

#### *Small groups task and feedback*

- Flipchart paper and some marker pens are needed. The task is to draw a representation of an angel. Artists not required! A large stick person will suffice, but the important thing is to include representations of characteristics that people in the group associate with an angel.
- Each group to explain their drawing.

### **DVD Clip 2 – Chapter 7 (approx. 9 mins)**

*At this point in the film André has just lost money raised by Angela for him to pay off his debts. André had incorrectly assumed that Angela, despite his protests, obtained the money by selling her body at a nightclub (the truth emerges later) and was trying to win enough money on a horserace to repay her. No doubt André's perception of Angela then makes it all the more difficult for him to believe what she says to him when they go for breakfast.*

#### *Small groups sharing and feedback*

Here are some questions to help get people talking. There may be very different opinions in the group so it will be important to encourage people to allow responses to be shared without fear of criticism. For instance, some people might believe literally in angels whereas others may argue that there is no such thing. Give people the opportunity to share their views.

- Do angels exist and, if so, what are they?
- Would we recognise an angel if we saw one – would our response be similar to that of André's in the restaurant?
- What purpose do angels/stories about angels serve?

Give each group the opportunity to feed back the key points from their deliberations. Draw attention to any striking similarities or differences.

### Small group discussion

- Identify as many examples of angels as expressed in popular culture as you can think of – for instance, in books, art, film.

Examples of films about angels include: *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946); *Heaven Can Wait* (1978); *Wings of Desire* (1987); and *City of Angels* (1998)].

For modern examples in art, see [www.gateshead.gov.uk/Leisure%20and%20Culture/Angel/Home.aspx](http://www.gateshead.gov.uk/Leisure%20and%20Culture/Angel/Home.aspx) for images of Anthony Gormley's Angel of the North sculpture and see [www.kitestudio.com/angels.php](http://www.kitestudio.com/angels.php) for angel kites used for Swindon town centre Christmas decorations, commissioned by Bible Society.

- What do you think accounts for this enduring presence of angels, even within a secular society?

Angels point us towards the existence of a spiritual realm beyond the material world. There is, however, a dark side to the supernatural as people who dabble in different aspects of the occult sometimes find to their cost.

- Why are so many people fascinated by the supernatural?
- Can you think of examples that you have heard of in the media where interest in the supernatural has proved harmful to someone?
- Do you think that the dangers associated with an interest in the supernatural are understated or overstated, and why?

### Clip 3– DVD chapters 10 & 13 (approx. 10 minutes)

*Angela's task to help André accept and love himself pays off when she encourages him to look at this reflection in the mirror. André starts to see beyond those aspects of his life about which he is ashamed to the qualities of his humanity. It is as if he catches a glimpse of how God sees him, not distorted by the mess of his life, and André's crippling sense of self-loathing begins to melt away. In the final part of the clip the fruit of Angela's work becomes evident as André talks about wanting to turn away from his life of lies and foregoes the opportunity of revenge against the gangland boss who had pushed him to the brink of suicide. André also declares his love for Angela.*

### Wordstorm

- In making André gaze upon his reflection, Angela was helping him to see his uniqueness and worth as a human being. What are the things that get in the way of self-acceptance and contribute to people finding it difficult to love themselves?
- Write up responses on a piece of flipchart paper.

### Whole group discussion

- When all the responses have been recorded, give the opportunity for people to expand on their responses. You can help this along by asking for one or two volunteers to say more about what lies behind their wordstorm response.

### Individual exercise

- Imagine that, like André in the clip, you have an angel at your shoulder prompting you to look at your reflection in a mirror. In your mind's eye, what do you see? Look closely, and remind yourself that you are unique. There has never been anyone like you before, nor will there ever

be again. You are a one-off; unique; truly original. What are the positive qualities and characteristics that you carry which make you glad to be you?

Or (*in the case of an established group that are not meeting for the first time*)

- As above but have several mirrors available to provide people who wish to do so to actually look at their reflection in a mirror.

#### *In twos or threes/small groups*

- Share with each other the positive qualities and characteristics that you identified in yourself. This may not feel an easy thing to do because people tend to be more ready to highlight their faults than acknowledge their qualities. But persevere. Your contribution will also help others in your group to value themselves.

### GOD'S STORY

References in the Bible to angels can, quite literally, be counted in hundreds. Sometimes they appear unmistakably as beings from another realm; at other times it seems that they are recognised as such only in hindsight (see below). But perhaps the most important thing to bear in mind about angels – whatever our beliefs about them might be – is that the Bible portrays them as God's messengers. This is, in fact, what lies behind the word 'angel'. They are sent by God to help make his will known to humankind. Even in an off-beat film like *Angel-A* this theme is portrayed as Angela is sent to help André learn to love himself. Perhaps the challenge set for us by stories of angels is to open to the fact that God might sometimes be speaking to us through the most unexpected of people. Our angels might just have dirty faces.

- Here are some biblical references to angels. Have a look at these sets of references. You may want

to ask people to read them aloud. Tackle one set at a time and ask people what can be learnt about angels from the references (e.g. their purpose and appearance).

**Matthew 1.18-22; Luke 1.26-33; Luke 2.8-14** – (Angels as heralds of good news; appearing as heavenly beings)

**Genesis 19.12-17; Matthew 2.19-21; Mark 16.1-7** – (Angels in human form, not recognised immediately; giving advice and instruction)

**Genesis 28.10-17; Mark 1.9-13; Acts 12.6-11** – (Angels as emissaries between heaven and earth; acting on God's behalf)

- Last, but not least, read the following reference and ask people to share their responses about what these verses mean to them.

**Hebrews 13.1-2** – (Angels without wings!)

A common feature of these readings is that angels are sent by God and not called or summoned by human beings. Perhaps this offers us an important principle in relation to the supernatural. To acknowledge the existence of angels is to recognise the reality of a spiritual realm beyond our material existence, but our focus should be on seeking to know God, not on seeking encounters with other spiritual beings.

- Have a look at the following verses. They provide some stern warnings about the danger of 'dabbling' with the supernatural. What do you see as the risks in ignoring such warnings?

**Leviticus 19.31; Deuteronomy 18.9-12; Galatians 5.19-21**

- Why do you think there is such a fascination for the occult? If it is part of people's search for spiritual fulfilment, what more could the churches be doing to address this need?

One of the most destructive things for anyone to experience is a lack of self-worth. All too often this can end up being with self-loathing and sense of worthlessness. It is not surprising that many people's humanity is diminished in this way in a world that tends increasingly to value human beings in terms of possessions, productivity, and profitability. Yet, we are of infinite and intrinsic worth for *who* we are, not *what* we are (or do, or have). Every human being is special. We are made in the image and likeness of God and nothing can erase that fact even though – like a priceless painting encrusted with grime – our human sinfulness might sometimes prevent us from recognising that image in others or ourselves. The lives of many are diminished because they have forgotten this essential truth – or have maybe never even heard it before. We need to remind ourselves and others about this. In doing so, we might be God's 'angel' for someone needing to love him/herself again – or maybe even for the first time.

- What do the following verses tell us about what it means to be a human being?

**Genesis 1.26-31; Psalm 8.3-8; Psalm 139.13-16; Mark 12.28-31; John 3.16.**

- Now consider this: All of those things apply to each and every human being – including you. Spend a few quiet moments to allow that to sink in. You are special in God's sight. Let that knowledge become the mirror in which you see your reflection, and love yourself as God intended.
- When Jesus was asked the question 'What is the greatest commandment?' he replied that the first was to love God, the second was to love your neighbour as yourself (see Mark 12.29-31). Notice those final two words as yourself. Why do you think Jesus makes that link?

This was not about unhealthy navel gazing. Jesus knew that a distorted view of self would inevitably lead to a distorted view of other people. In contrast, a healthy sense of self-worth enables us to recognise in others the same indelible hallmark of the divine that we have acknowledged in ourselves.

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