



NATIVITY! (Cert U)

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Overview: A Primary School teacher competes with a rival's school to produce Coventry's best nativity play.

Director: Debbie Isitt (2009)

Producer: BBC Films

Length: 106 mins

Cautions: Contains no material likely to offend or harm (BBFC)

THE FILM

Ten years ago Paul Maddens (Martin Freeman), Jennifer Lore (Ashley Jensen) and Gordon Shakespeare (Jason Watkins) were fellow students at drama school. In the present Jennifer – Paul's now ex-girlfriend – is a Hollywood producer, while the men are both now primary school teachers; Gordon in a private school and Paul in a failing Roman Catholic School. For a number of years there has been rivalry between the two schools over their Nativity plays. Mr Shakespeare's school have the brightest and most talented children and so always come out on top in this contest.

This time Mr Maddens is driven to pretend to Mr Shakespeare that Jennifer is 'bringing Hollywood to Coventry' to film his school's Christmas production. This is the start of Maddens' problems, however, because this small lie is broadcast round the school and in turn around the city by Mr Poppy (Marc Wootton), Mr Maddens' eccentric classroom assistant.

As a result, Mr Maddens must whip his underachieving children into shape and decide whether to admit to his lie or turn it to truth by persuading Jennifer to fly across the world to make his children's dream come true.

FIRST REACTIONS

- The words 'British' and 'comedy' often sit uneasily together – unless the writer is Richard Curtis. *Nativity!* isn't *Love Actually*, but nor is it *Sex Lives of the Potato Men*. How well does 'British humour' translate to the big screen?
- For anyone who works in a Primary School, *Nativity!* bears little relationship to real life, but this should only trouble a viewer who thinks *Doctor in the House* was a documentary. However, the semi-improvised scenes with the children lend the film a degree of realism. Did you feel that the lifelike beginning of the film jarred with its ending?
- Mr Poppy, played by Marc Wootton, an actor who specialises in comic characters, is a strange creation: a child in a man's body and a caricature in an otherwise naturalistic drama. Can a comedy with an unbelievable character still be funny?

INTERACTIONS

- From what you saw of Mr Maddens' Nativity, did it strike you as a presentation of the Gospel?
- **Read Matthew 18.1–4.** What might Jesus have meant by 'unless you ... become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven'? Mr Poppy was 'like a child', but his childlike behaviour also caused a number of problems. What is the difference between being child-ish and child-like?
- In the initial auditions, at the end of the play performance and in the film's final credits, a number of the children showed off a number of their talents. It might be hard to find a place for some of these – e.g. armpit noises, turning one's face red and musical belching – but are we too conservative in recognising one another's gifts?

- The school's priest takes a hard line when Mr Maddens discusses the ethics of lying. He also looks on stony-faced for much of the children's performance. Should the Church 'lighten up' in its Christmas message if it wants people to listen to what it has to say?
- Mr Shakespeare's school's Christmas production centred upon Herod's mass infanticide. Did Mr Maddens' version sanitise Christmas? How do we make the Christmas story palatable to children while retaining its 'grittiness'?
- You might look at Nick Baines' book *Why wish you a merry Christmas?* (<http://www.cofe.anglican.org/news/pr11409.html>) regarding Christmas Carols and press comments about it: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/topics/christmas/6694395/The-spirit-of-Christmas-is-lost-on-Bishop-Nick.html>
- Mr Shakespeare made the accusation that Mr Maddens' production was a 'Chav-Fest'. Has the success of X Factor in the weeks leading up to Christmas changed the way children's Nativity plays are produced and, if so, is that a bad thing?

CLIP TO DISCUSS

When Mr Maddens goes to Hollywood to plea to Jennifer to come to his school, he finds that Jennifer is not a producer, but a clerical assistant. Nor does Mr Maddens get to see the studio's boss to make his request in person. When Jennifer asks the boss if he would do her a favour and visit the school in Coventry, he asks why should he go to see in England what he could see in countless schools on his side of the Atlantic.

- Is the scene set in Hollywood a realistic portrayal of life: disappointments, unfulfilled ambitions and no 'happy ending'?
- Are films more enjoyable when they reflect life or when they portray life as we would like it to be?

OTHER ANGLES TO TALK ABOUT

'Be sure that your sin will find you out.' (Numbers 32.3, NIV).

Central to this film's plot is the telling of a lie. Mr Maddens describes this as a 'white lie'. Are some lies worse than others? Is it ever right to lie? Have you ever told a lie that you have regretted?

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