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ENTERTAINMENT

MOVIES

Creators of abortion film say they want honest debate

The creator of a film about abortion says he hopes to stir honest debate on the issue, but some say his work leans toward the anti-side.

ROBIN ABCARIAN

It was an unusual field trip for the nearly 1,000 high school girls who spilled from yellow school buses in front of a Westwood theater one recent October morning. They came from all over the county: the tony enclaves of San Marino, Pasadena and Beverly Hills and the grittier reaches of Boyle Heights and South L.A.

The movie they had come to see, "South Dakota: A Woman's Right to Choose," had already been vetted by a handful of their administrators, who were satisfied with the film's depiction of teen pregnancy and abortion.

Afterward, they would have a rowdy town-hall discussion, moderated by Dolores O'Riordan, lead singer of the Cranberries, whose songs are used in the soundtrack. With no boys present, went the theory, girls would be more comfortable opening up.

"Do you think women should have the right to terminate a pregnancy?" O'Riordan asked the girls. In the past, the singer has harshly criticized abortion but said in an interview she prefers not to disclose how she feels. "Don't be shy, totally say what you think. It's your life, it's your future."

The girls, from four Catholic schools and 11 public schools, would need little prodding.

A handful spoke in favor of choice and a few were ambivalent. But the majority, including one who said she was the mother of a toddler, spoke passionately against abortion. One girl, from St. Monica Academy, led a cheer thanking her mother "for having me."

Fact and fiction

The movie, a blend of feature and documentary — which its 60-year-old neophyte director Bruce Isacson calls a "dramumentary" — follows the stories of two pregnant teenagers. One is based on the true story of a girl named Barb (Ralph Lauren model Piper Ferrone), a white, 14-year-old track star in South Dakota with a loving, long-term boyfriend. The second girl, Chris ("Veronica Mars" actress Tessa Thompson), is a composite character, an African American runaway from Philadelphia who was raped. She is taken in by Cat Megill (Emma Bates), a real woman who started the New York City group Haven Coalition, which finds beds in private homes for indigent pregnant women seeking abortions. The action is punctuated by historical footage as well as interviews with advocates and scientists on both sides of the debate.

Though legal abortion has been enshrined in law since 1973, the issue is certainly back in the news. In May, the Gallup Poll found that a slim majority of

Americans now describe themselves as "pro-life." The month, Kansas abortion doctor George Tiller was slain at a church, allegedly by an anti-abortion activist. In Washington, abortion is a focus of the clamorous healthcare debate. And while unplanned pregnancy is a well-worn subject in popular culture, abortion is usually avoided. The protagonists of recent hit films such as "Juno" and "Knocked Up" opt against abortion.

"People haven't been discussing this issue properly," said Isacson, who described himself as a Hollywood deal maker who worked on the "Ellery Queen" TV series in the 1970s, someone who only recently became aware of the country's great abortion divide. "Both sides don't express themselves well. Where is the information? Where is the intelligent discussion?" (Advocates might say he simply hasn't been paying attention.)

Isacson said his movie's purpose is to edify, inform and not take sides, but some may view "South Dakota," intentionally or not, as subtly weighted against abortion. The film's emotional highlight, after all, is the rescue of 14-year-old Barb by her boyfriend from an abortion clinic exam room and its grossly insensitive nurses. As for Chris, even the staunchest abortion foes usually concede that abortion is acceptable in the case of rape.

The movie was funded by private investors, said Isacson, who would not disclose the budget. (Iowa, where part of it was filmed, kicked in \$1.67 million. That state's film program has since been suspended and is now the subject of a criminal investigation; Isacson, who purchased a new Land Rover with Iowa funds, said his expenditures were appropriate.)

It is promoted by Motive Entertainment, which handled the grass-roots marketing for Mel Gibson's 2004 hit "The Passion of the Christ" and last year's "Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed," a documentary by Ben Stein exploring claims that science teachers who discuss

intelligent design face academic discrimination.

The Westwood screening and discussion was "a guinea pig for something we may do all across the country," said Motive Chief Executive Paul Lauer, whose website boasts of "targeted strategies" to reach "niche audiences" that include "350,000 churches and pastors . . . and thousands of organizations in the underserved 'faith market.'" Lauer, says the site, is "one of the most well connected

entrepreneurs in the family, values, and faith-based markets."

If the town halls generate enough press and word of mouth, the hope is that a distributor will become interested. But the film's executive producer conceded that may never happen.

"I'm not interested in making money," said Howard Kazanjian, a Hollywood veteran ("Raiders of the Lost Ark," "Star Wars: Episode VI Return of the Jedi") who in 2007 was named one of "Hollywood's most powerful Christians" by Christianity Today magazine.

The movie has already been shown to a handful of high-profile abortion foes, including James Dobson of Focus on the Family and Elisabeth Hasselbeck of "The View."

But Lauer said his marketing plan will focus equally on groups that support abortion rights. "In each market where we do the town-hall screenings," he said, "we will be inviting leaders, organizations and individuals who represent both sides of the debate."

The documentary elements that punctuate the drama include evocative videos of 16- to 22-week-old fetuses floating in utero, clips of impassioned speeches (Bill Clinton insisting that abortion be "safe, legal and rare"; Mother Teresa telling the United Nations that abortion is a "threat to peace") and interviews with a variety of thinkers and activists on both sides of the debate. Scientists offer divergent views on when a fetus is able to feel pain.

In one scene, feminist attorney Gloria Allred speaks of her own rape at gunpoint, subsequent abortion and lifelong commitment to abortion rights. She also describes the fetus as "a parasite" because it requires the mother's body to survive. At another point, an abortion doctor tearfully describes the death of her friend from an illegal abortion in Africa and later unemotionally describes how she might wrap an aborted fetus and leave it to die, even if it showed signs of struggling to take a breath.

By contrast, a sandy-haired boy who is identified as the real-life son of Barb, says he is grateful his mother did not abort him.

While Isacson remained adamant that the film evenly portrays both sides of the debate, Kazanjian confessed that the film's images of fetuses floating in amniotic fluid gave him pause. "I think that seeing a baby at 22 weeks would tell me that that is a baby and not a virus or a parasite," Kazanjian said. "It's not living out of the womb, but it's a real baby. . . . That might pull me over to the pro-life side."

Eternal debate

Such imagery made USC associate religion professor Lori Meeks, who supports abortion rights, dubious about the moviemakers' claims of neutrality. Meeks was invited by Isacson to co-moderate a town-hall discussion after a separate screening for adults that took place across the street from the teen screening. It was attended by the school administrators, teachers and chaperons who had accompanied their students to Westwood.

Meeks' co-moderator was William Hurlbut, a Stanford medical ethicist who



opposes abortion and is known for his embrace of a technique to create embryonic stem cells without destroying embryos. Hurlbut, who appeared in the film, said he was prepared not to like it but was brought to tears and found it "amazing." He said later he liked its "ambiguity."

Meeks, however, was uneasy. "I cannot help but wonder if [they] may be trying to attract anti-abortion audiences who will like the film because it allows them to feel good about reaching out to the other side without forcing them to challenge their beliefs in a serious way," she said. "It'll be interesting to see how the pro-choice advocates interviewed in the film react."

Thus far, no high-profile abortion rights supporter has seen it. Allred said she was eager to see the movie and has been promised an invitation.

In the town-hall-style discussion that followed the teen screening, two of the film's actresses, Bates and Thompson, joined O'Riordan. The students, who were urged to ask questions, were more focused on making statements, mostly against abortion.

"If you're not ready to have a baby, then you shouldn't be having sex anyway," said Gianna Halpin of St. Monica Academy.

"Yeah, that sounds like a good idea," O'Riordan said.

"I just feel like if you are woman enough to open up your legs and let some one come in, you should be willing to let something come out," said Jamie Sooniers of Westchester High School. "Abortions are just not right."

Bates seemed taken aback. "Let's take a minute to acknowledge we are lucky enough to live in a country where women can gather to discuss this stuff without risk of being killed," she said.

"I think it's OK to have an abortion, but only if you were raped or experienced something really traumatic," said Paige Baines of Crenshaw High. "But even then I think you still should take care of it because that baby could grow up to be someone important."

But, said Rose Kohn of Beverly Hills High, "Every girl should have the right to choose. . . . It's their right, it's their body, it's their choice."

Days later, some were still stewing about what they'd seen -- for very different reasons

"I thought the movie was very balanced," said Madeleine Lessard, a sophomore at St. Monica Academy in Pasadena. "I am very pro-life, so when that lawyer referred to a baby as a parasite and she referred to having to go through pregnancy as the last legal form of slavery, that struck me as absurd. The thing that ran through my mind is abortion is the last legal form of murder."

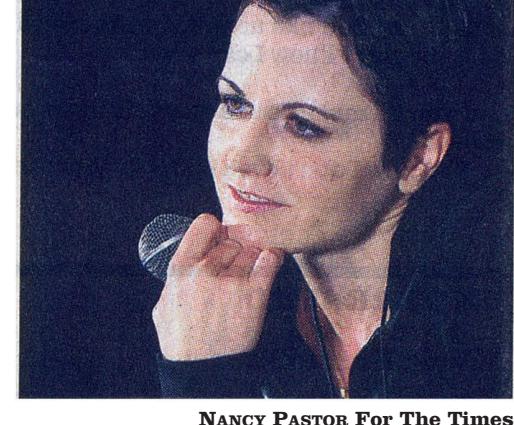
Liz Benichou, a Beverly Hills High School senior who favors abortion rights, said she thought the movie was "more pro-life than pro-choice. . . . They made it seem negative when abortion was brought up. When one girl had a baby, they made it seem so positive, but not every story works out that way."

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Lionheart Movies

TEENS IN A DILEMMA: Piper Ferrone is Barb and Mickey Zobel is her boyfriend, Shon, in "South Dakota: A Woman's Right to Choose."



NANCY PASTOR For The Times
SINGER: Dolores O'Riordan won't say how she feels about abortion.



NANCY PASTOR For The Times
CATHOLIC SCHOOL: Madeleine Lessard attends St. Monica.