



## Mike Rich: Forging Faith in Hollywood

by Carey Clark

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The idea came much like those for movies he'd written in the past. But after that, the process of writing the screenplay of *The Nativity Story* was far from business as usual for screenwriter Mike Rich. Sparked by copies of *Newsweek* and *Time* magazines with their cover stories on the nativity in December 2004, Rich took the idea to his pastor and asked to be put on the church's prayer chain. "I always knew writing this story was

going to be a far different experience than say writing *The Rookie* or *Radio* just because of the subject matter. It was a little more intimidating, a little more daunting. I think I approached it with a healthy combination of faith and fear...to make sure we got it right."

After 11 months of research into the culture and history of Bible times, Rich was ready to write. He finished the screenplay December 29, 2005. So it's incredible to him to see the finished product today. "As a writer you always hope that the image on screen will exceed your expectations, and this one certainly does. I'm grateful to Catherine Hardwicke for her direction and for taking what we put down on the page and elevating it visually."

Rich says the time is right for *The Nativity Story*. While a handful of Hollywood studios showed interest in the film, he doesn't think that would have been the case just a few years ago. He says filmmakers of faith owe a debt of gratitude to Mel Gibson and *The Passion of the Christ* for breaking ground in Hollywood, and thinks the time is right for him and other writers to create stories of faith for the big screen. In the case of this movie, he says, "I think New Line responded to the approach that we took, which was that these characters really come alive, especially Mary and Joseph, and we see them as very human and very complex characters." The kind of characters Rich is famous for writing about.

While this is the first biblical story Rich has written, he has always maintained a Christian witness in Hollywood. He says writing for Tinseltown doesn't mean a writer has to compromise principles of faith. "I still live in Portland," he says. "I'm not down in L.A., and frankly, I've had just incredible support from the studios, and they have always been supportive of the ideas that I have and the approach that I take. I think the [character-driven] approach that I take to telling stories really speaks to the average person." So he's hopeful that this film sends a message to people of all faiths, and to nonbelievers as well.

Because of the open door in Hollywood for this type of movie, Rich says he's going to be on the lookout for more biblically-based stories. He sees the narratives of John the Baptist and Paul as potentially good material, and says a movie made about the time period between the resurrection and the ascension would be fascinating. If there is a theme that is consistent across the stories he's felt inspired to write, it's that they are stories of ordinary people doing extraordinary things--stories of inspiration.

Rich's journey to *The Nativity Story* has been a blessed one. There are no unproduced screenplays sitting dusty in his desk drawer. He was writing short stories and dabbling with screenwriting when his first film, *Finding Forrester* propelled him to recognition in 1998 after winning the prestigious Nicholl Fellowship. From there, he went on to write more movies including *The Rookie* (2002), *Radio* (2003).

What's next for Rich? "This last year has been mind boggling. To have a film made in a matter of months is really, really unusual. Right now, I'm going to kind of catch my breath and relax a little bit, enjoy my family, and then the early part of next year begin the process of figuring out the what the next project is going to be."