The Mission (1986 film)

Original movie poster

Directed by Roland Joffé
Produced by Fernando Ghia
David Puttnam
Written by Robert Bolt
Starring Robert De Niro
Jeremy Irons
Ray McAnally
Aidan Quinn
Cherie Lunghi
Liam Neeson
Music by Ennio Morricone
Cinematography Chris Menges
Editing by Jim Clark
Distributed by Warner Bros.
Release date(s) 16 May 1986 (Cannes)
Running time 126 minutes
Country United Kingdom
Language English
Budget $24.5 million
Gross revenue $17,218,023 (United States)

The Mission is a 1986 British drama film about the experiences of a Jesuit missionary in 18th century South America. The film was written by Robert Bolt and directed by Roland Joffé. It stars Robert De Niro, Jeremy Irons, Ray McAnally, Aidan Quinn, Cherie Lunghi and Liam Neeson. It won the Palme d'Or and the Academy Award for Best Cinematography. In April 2007, it was elected number one on the Church Times Top 50 Religious Films list.[1] The music, scored by Italian composer Ennio Morricone, was listed at #23 on AFI's 100 Years of Film Scores.
Plot

The film is set in the 1750s and involves the Jesuit Reductions, a programme by which the Catholic Church sought to Christianise and "civilise" the indigenous native populations of South America. Spanish Jesuit priest Father Gabriel (Jeremy Irons) enters the South American jungle to build a mission and convert a Guaraní community to Christianity.

The Guaraní community above the perilous Iguazu Falls ties a priest to a cross and sends him down the falls to his death. Afterward, the gentle Father Gabriel scales the falls and reaches out to the Guaraní. Entering the jungle, Father Gabriel sits and plays his oboe. The Guaraní warriors prepare to kill him, but they are captivated by the music and allow him to live.

A mercenary and slaver, Rodrigo Mendoza (Robert De Niro), makes his living kidnapping natives and selling them to nearby plantations. He cares both for his brother Felipe (Aidan Quinn) and his fiancée Carlotta (Cherie Lunghi). Carlotta reveals she has fallen in love with Felipe. Mendoza subsequently finds them in bed together. In his anger he kills Felipe in a duel. Acquitted of the killing, Mendoza spirals into depression. Father Gabriel, who has temporarily returned from his mission and learned of Mendoza's situation, visits and challenges Mendoza to undertake a suitable penance.

Mendoza accompanies the Jesuits on their return journey, doggedly pulling a bundle filled with weapons as the party scales the Iguazu Falls. After Mendoza collapses, one of the Jesuit priests (Liam Neeson) cuts away the bundle. Mendoza recovers and re-ties the bundle, resuming the grueling journey. The priest discusses with Father Gabriel that he and the others believe Mendoza has suffered enough, but Father Gabriel replies that only God and Mendoza may decide that. When they reach the Guaraní camp, a member of the tribe cuts the ropes of Mendoza's burden. Symbolically absolved of his brother's murder and his past transgressions against the Guaraní, Mendoza weeps and then begins to laugh.

Father Gabriel's mission is depicted as a place of sanctuary and education for the Guaraní. Moved by the Guaraní's acceptance, Mendoza wishes to help at the mission and Father Gabriel gives him a Bible. In a voice-over, Mendoza reads 1 Corinthians 13 as he interacts with the Guaraní, particularly the children. Mendoza takes vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and becomes a Jesuit under Father Gabriel.

In Spain and Portugal, the Treaty of Madrid is signed, which reapportions the land in South America. The Portuguese colonials seek to enslave the natives, and as the independent Jesuit missions might impede this, Papal emissary Altamirano is sent to survey the missions and decide which, if any, should be allowed to remain.

Under pressure from both local plantation owners and the politicians in Europe, Altamirano is forced to choose the lesser of two evils. If he rules in favour of the colonists, the indigenous peoples will become enslaved; if he rules in favour of the missions, the entire Jesuit Order may be condemned by the Portuguese and the European Catholic Church could fracture. Altamirano visits the missions and is amazed at their industry and success. In his report, he states, "Your Holiness, a surgeon to save the body must often hack off a limb. But in truth nothing could prepare me for the beauty and the power of the limb that I had come here to sever." At Father Gabriel's mission of San Carlos he tries explain the reasons behind closing the mission and instructs the Guaraní that they must leave. The Guaraní question his authority, and Father Gabriel and Mendoza state their intention to defend the Mission should the plantation owners and colonialists attack. They are, however, divided on how to do this, and they debate how to respond to the impending military attack. Father Gabriel believes that violence is a direct crime against God. Mendoza, however, decides to break his vows in order to militarily defend the Mission. Against Father Gabriel's wishes, he teaches the natives the art of war and once more takes up his sword.

When the colonialists attack, the mission is initially defended by Mendoza and the Guaraní. They are no match for the military force. As the colonial soldiers enter the mission village, they are slowed by the singing of Father Gabriel and the Guaraní women and children, who march toward the troops unarmed, singing and holding a cross and monstrance with the Blessed Host. In spite of this, the soldiers' commander orders the attack and all the priests and
most of the Guaraní, including women and children, are gunned down. Only a handful escape into the jungle. In a final exchange between Altamirano and a Portuguese official, the official laments that what happened was unfortunate but inevitable because "we must work in the world; the world is thus." Altamirano replies, "No, Senhor Hontar, thus have we made the world. Thus have I made it." Days later, a canoe of young children return to the scene of the Mission massacre and salvage a few belongings, including a broken violin, that one of the children plays. They set off up the river, going deeper into the jungle. A final title declares that Jesuits and others continue to fight for the rights of indigenous people. The text of John 1:5 is displayed: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

**Cast**

- Robert De Niro as Rodrigo Mendoza
- Jeremy Irons as Father Gabriel
- Ray McAnally as Cardinal Altamirano
- Aidan Quinn as Felipe Mendoza
- Cherie Lunghi as Carlotta
- Ronald Pickup as Hontar
- Chuck Low as Cabesa
- Liam Neeson as Fielding
- Bercelio Moya as Indian Boy
- Sigifredo Ismare as Witch Doctor
- Asuncion Ontiveros as Indian Chief
- Alejandrino Moya as Chief's Lieutenant
- Daniel Berrigan as Sebastian
- Rolf Gray as Young Jesuit
- Álvaro Guerrero as Jesuit
- Aoife Rosso as young violin girl

**Soundtrack**

*The Mission* soundtrack was written by Ennio Morricone. Beginning with a liturgical piece (On Earth as It Is In Heaven) which becomes the "Spanish" theme, it moves quickly to the "Guaraní" theme, which is written in a heavily native style and uses several indigenous instruments. Later, Morricone defines the "Mission" theme as a duet between the "Spanish" and "Guaraní" themes. Other themes throughout the movie include the "Penance", "Conquest", and "Ave Maria Guaraní" themes. In the latter, a huge choir of indigenous people sing a haunting rendition of "Ave Maria" in their native language.

An excerpt from the soundtrack is used during the final episode of the American TV series *The Wonder Years*.

**Historical basis**

*The Mission* is based on events surrounding the Treaty of Madrid in 1750, in which Spain ceded part of Jesuit Paraguay to Portugal. The film's narrator, "Altamirano", speaking in hindsight in 1758, corresponds to the actual Andalusian Jesuit Father Luis Altamirano, who was sent by Jesuit Superior General Ignacio Visconti to Paraguay in 1752 to transfer territory from Spain to Portugal. He oversaw the transfer of seven missions south and east of the Río Uruguay, that had been settled by Guaranis and Jesuits in the 1600s. As compensation, Spain promised each mission 4,000 pesos, or fewer than 1 peso for each of the circa 30,000 Guaranis of the seven missions, while the cultivated lands, livestock, and buildings were estimated to be worth 7-16 million pesos. The film's climax is the Guaraní War of 1754-1756, during which historical Guaranis defended their homes against Spanish-Portuguese forces.
implementing the Treaty of Madrid. For the film, a re-creation was made of one of the seven missions, São Miguel das Missões.[2]

Father Gabriel’s character is loosely based on the life of Paraguayan saint and Jesuit Roque González de Santa Cruz. The waterfall setting of the film suggests the combination of these events with the story of older missions, founded between 1610-1630 on the Paranapanema River above the Guaíra Falls, from which Paulista slave raids forced Guaranis and Jesuits to flee in 1631. The battle at the end of the film evokes the eight-day Battle of Mbororé in 1641, a battle fought on land as well as in boats on rivers, in which the Jesuit-organized, firearm-equipped Guarani forces stopped the Paulista raiders.[3]

Awards and nominations

Academy Awards

• Best Picture – Fernando Ghia and David Puttnam (nominated)
• Best Director – Roland Joffé (nominated)
• Best Art Direction – Stuart Craig and Jack Stephens (nominated)
• Best Cinematography – Chris Menges (won)
• Best Costume Design – Enrico Sabbatini (nominated)
• Best Film Editing – Jim Clark (nominated)
• Best Original Score – Ennio Morricone (nominated)

BAFTA Film Awards

• Best Film – Fernando Ghia, David Puttnam and Roland Joffé (nominated)
• Best Director – Roland Joffé (nominated)
• Best Actor in a Supporting Role – Ray McAnally (won)
• Best Original Screenplay – Robert Bolt (nominated)
• Best Cinematography – Chris Menges (nominated)
• Best Costume Design – Enrico Sabbatini (nominated)
• Best Film Editing – Jim Clark (won)
• Best Film Music – Ennio Morricone (won)
• Best Production Design – Stuart Craig (nominated)
• Best Sound – Ian Fuller, Bill Rowe and Clive Winter (nominated)
• Best Special Visual Effects – Peter Hutchinson (nominated)

Cannes Film Festival

• Palme d’Or – Roland Joffé (won)[4]
• Technical Grand Prize – Roland Joffé (won)[4]

Golden Globe Awards

• Best Motion Picture - Drama (nominated)
• Best Director – Roland Joffé (nominated)
• Best Actor in a Motion Picture - Drama – Jeremy Irons (nominated)
• Best Screenplay – Robert Bolt (won)
• Best Original Score – Ennio Morricone (won)
See also

- São Miguel das Missões (called the "San Miguel Mission" in the film)
- Guaraní
- Jesuit
- Iguazu Falls

References


External links

- The Mission (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0091530/) at the Internet Movie Database
- The Mission (http://artsandfaith.com/t100/2005/entry.php?film=53) at the Arts & Faith Top100 Spiritually Significant Films (http://artsandfaith.com/top100/) list
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