



‘The Stoning’: truth, drama and a film that really matters

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Many Catholics will remember Steve McEveety for his work as producer on *The Passion of the Christ*. Married, the father of four and serious about his Catholic faith, McEveety has a 30 year film career that began as a child actor and matured to include *Payback*, *Immortal Beloved* and *Braveheart* as executive producer, and *We Were Soldiers* and other major Hollywood titles as producer.

He also co-founded Mpower Pictures, which in 2007 released the extraordinary portrait of a young man's conversion, *Bella*. This year, McEveety and his Mpower colleagues bring *The Stoning of Soraya M.* (www.thestoning.com) to limited screens across the country on June 26. Don't let the summer go by without somehow seeing this film. Superbly written, directed and photographed, with compelling lead performances by two astonishing actresses, *The Stoning* is the most moving screen story I've seen in years. Once you've watched it, you'll never forget it.

Based on real events, the movie is adapted from the book of the same name by the French-Iranian journalist Freidoune Sahebjam. In the aftermath of the Iranian revolution, a husband grows tired of his young wife, who has borne him two sons and two daughters. Under Islamic law, a man may have up to four wives - but he's also obligated to care and provide for each of them properly. Interested in a potential child bride and unable to afford the added expense of a second wife, the husband maneuvers his wife into tending house for a recent widower. Then he falsely accuses her of infidelity, after blackmailing other male village elders, including the mullah - the town's religious leader -- into colluding in his lie.

The rest of *The Stoning* needs to be experienced to be fully understood. But it leaves an impact that will stay with viewers for days. An aunt of the wronged young wife recounts her niece's story to a passing journalist - Sahebjam (played by Jim Caveziel) - who smuggles it out of Iran and eventually publishes it. To this day, the Teheran regime denies that events like those reported by Sahebjam have ever happened. But multiple sources have confirmed that violence against women continues not only in Iran but in many countries around the world.

While *The Stoning* implicitly shows the deep differences between Christianity and Islam regarding the role of women, the film is not a critique of Islam. Quite the opposite: What happens to Soraya is an abuse of Islamic law fueled by revolutionary extremism, personal corruption and rural tradition. The film is clearly not for children; nor is the brutally graphic sequence of public "justice" near the story's end for the faint of heart. But as a work of truth and drama, *The Stoning* is simply an extraordinary piece of story-telling and motion picture craft.

During the years I served on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, I came to see in a new and vivid way how unusual our nation really is. For all its flaws, the United States has a respect for religious freedom, equality under the law and the dignity of the individual that very few other societies can rival. We need to take pride in those qualities. We need to remember the moral and religious roots from which they come. We also need to protect those qualities and advance them without apology in our dialogue with other cultures.

The Stoning of Soraya M. succeeds above all because it is a moving drama of abused innocence and eventual vindication. But it also reminds us of the soul-destroying power of a lie; how tempting and easy it can be to victimize the weak; how precious the truth is; and how vigilant over our own hearts each of us needs to remain if we want to be human -- even when we claim to believe in God.

"The Stoning of Soraya M." will screen at the Chez Artiste Cinema, 4150 E. Amherst, Denver, CO 80222, beginning June 26. Visit www.landmarktheatres.com for show times.