

New Netflix film wants to make Mary accessible to all

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Noa Cohen in the title role in "Mary," which depicts her on the run from King Herod's soldiers after Jesus' birth. (Photo courtesy of Netflix)

Catholic Hollywood director D.J. Caruso set out to tell the story of Mary as seen through her own eyes, in a new film available on Netflix December 6. "You may think you know my story," Mary tells viewers at the start of the film. "Trust me, you don't."

Caruso's *Mary*, starring veteran actor Anthony Hopkins as King Herod, takes viewers from Mary's own birth to the delivery of her son, Jesus, to the holy temple of Jerusalem. Alongside familiar scenes from the Christmas story—the annunciation,

the manger birth, the visit of the wise men—the film offers a more harrowing look at the dangerous reality Mary and Joseph faced as Herod’s forces pursued them to kill the infant Jesus.

But amid the high stakes of the tale, Caruso wanted Mary and her husband, Joseph, played by relative newcomers Noa Cohen and Ido Tako, to come across as relatable to all viewers.

“The world needs to see Mary, and they need to see her in a new light,” Caruso said in an interview. “My goal was to see if I could present Mary in a beautiful way, in a way that a younger audience could see her and relate to her as not just this beautiful, iconic holy mother, but as a young girl who had to make sacrifices and struggle and deal with things that a lot of the contemporary youth are dealing with today.”

While the movie is made from a Catholic perspective, the director said he hopes the film makes Mary “accessible to all beliefs, to all Christians, to Muslims, to everybody, and even to those who don’t have faith.”

Some controversy has surrounded the feature. Critics on social media have called for a boycott of the film for casting Israeli actors to play major roles, arguing they should have been Palestinian instead. Meanwhile, Catholic conservatives have voiced qualms on Facebook, complaining the movie does not reflect the ideas of Mary they were raised with.

Caruso understands that making a movie about such a pivotal religious figure can be controversial but said he focused on what people agree upon in their devotion to Mary—not their disagreements.

“If you make the movie from love and adoration for, you know, the greatest woman that ever walked this planet, and that was my approach, then I feel like, until people see the movie, they’ll understand and appreciate what we’re trying to do,” he said.

Cohen and Tako are still generally unknown to the public. Caruso said he wanted the characters to be played by actors “with no cinematic baggage,” to allow viewers to focus on the story instead of the stars on the screen.

This wasn’t the case for Herod. At 86, Hopkins is reflecting on his spirituality and faith, Caruso said, and he offered a portrayal of Herod as an old man coming to

terms with his mortality, and God, despite his earthly power and achievements.

“It just made Herod that much more complicated than just being the bad guy,” he said.

Caruso said he attempted to make “every frame a painting,” with the use of light, texture and lenses. “If I’m going to make a movie about Mary, I’m going to make it the best movie I can possibly make as a gift to God,” he said.

Despite a low budget, the movie delivers a rich and textured aesthetic. This is in large part thanks to costume designer Tina Kalivas, who combined the draping usually associated with biblical stories with the billowing fabrics of ancient Japanese clothing.

For Caruso, the world needs Mary now more than ever. During the scene of the annunciation, when Mary tells the archangel Michael that she accepts God’s will for her to bear Jesus, he said he was moved to tears while operating the camera.

“That is a perfect message for the young people, to surrender it all to God,” he said.
—Religion News Service