

MISSIONARY IMPOSSIBLE -

If you think philanthropy is just for the rich or saintly, think again... . John L. Peters may be an earnest preacher, but he's also a lazy, absent minded jokester from Oklahoma. He marches through the ravaged jungles of World War II Philippines to his own unique rhythm, befriending Christians and Atheists, American foot soldiers and Japanese commanders. He is a man before his time, he just doesn't know it yet.

Set in war time, this inspiration true story has shades of the seminal film, *Mash*, mixed with poignant personal liberation seen in recent Oscar winner, *The King's Speech*...

One page synopsis

This dark comedy reveals the remarkable true story of John L. Peters, a naively arrogant, mediocre young Oklahoma preacher, who goes from angry conscious objector to leading hymns on the front lines of World War II. In a series of revelations and inconvenient surprises, this awkward man discovers that he has a gift for lifting people's spirits. Still, no one could have guessed that this bumbling fella would create one of the world's first international relief organizations, helping 25 million people in 45 countries, and get nominated for the Noble Peace Prize... twice.

The film opens with a tease, as the audience gets a quick glimpse into the future: John in a remote African village convincing a skeptical tribesman that he can help them without actually interfering with their way of life, "I'm just not sure how yet."

We then cut back to John as a young boy with his perfectionist mother who tells the young delusional casanova, "you are no better than anyone else... but of course, no one else is any better than you." And we meet his caustic grandparents who simultaneously try to steer him toward life as a lawyer or a preacher. At twelve years old, he chooses the latter, only to be completely humiliated in his first sermon when he freezes before the congregation and runs off stage. In these pre-war scenes of Act One, John seems to be a deer-caught-in-headlights from the altar at his wedding to his job moonlighting at the post office where he shoots and nearly kills a colleague.

In Act Two, John is forced to face himself head-on in the war-torn jungles of the Philippines. As platoon chaplain, he quickly discovers that he and his motley group need much more than traditional bible studies. Struggling to find meaning under gunfire, his humorous folksy approach gradually wins over everyone he

encounters: Christians and Atheists, American foot soldiers and captured Japanese commanders.

When one soldier contemplates suicide upon learning that his wife is having an affair, John encourages him to go through with it, reminding him that "your wife and that old boy will get \$10,000 from your GI life insurance and then they can really go to town." His practical wisdom prevails.

For John, the turning point comes when a new recruit from Tennessee receives a letter from the draft board back home informing him that he is 4-F, meaning that, as the sole able bodied man on his father's farm, he is declared exempt from service. With no time to reflect on this irony, the young man is hit and killed by shrapnel just hours later. Suddenly, John find's his belief in God shaken to the core as he questions his very existence and makes a foxhole promise that he will one day make sense of all this suffering.

Set in a volatile time in history, the movie explores timeless issues of work and family relationships and how they must adapt to survive. The shocking and poignant scenes between soldiers at war are punctuated by cuts back to Oklahoma where John's patient but brutally honest wife, Kay and their young son Don maintain strength in his absence. We watch Kay open John's letters, one after another, with little Don in the background, missing his father. His family is his foundation, but as John's global crusade grows larger, can they continue to support him when matters at home become more difficult?

Even after John returns home to his family, his gnawing curiosity and natural restlessness prevent him from settling into a quiet life of husband, father and small town preacher. Don is taken ill and John becomes increasingly depressed as he struggles to fit into a post war existence. Their marriage's solid foundation is threatened as Kay and John begin arguing. He clings to a macho military mentality, and she questions his ability to soften and be the husband and father that she once knew.

In Act Three, John once again finds himself speechless before a blank faced congregation. For a moment he appears to be frozen just like he was as a boy, until he catches the eyes of his loving wife, discards his prepared remarks, and speaks eloquently from his heart. The foxhole promise made to the fallen soldier from Tennessee finally makes sense. With this newfound confidence, John shares his vision of a world where we are all neighbors helping each other. At this time in history, his ideas are revolutionary: John demands that third world countries be given a hand-up, not a hand-out.

John finishes his speech to thunderous applause and returns to the comfort of

his easy chair, satisfied that he has inspired others to action... until his momentary peace is interrupted forever. The entire congregation of Saint Luke's Church has followed him home. These wealthy Oklahoma business men loved his message, offering him money and connections... with one condition: that John L Peters lead this bold new crusade. To quote John, "I felt like a quarterback who had just thrown a perfect pass and was then suddenly asked to dash down the field and catch it."

His family rallies around him as Kay and Don finally see for themselves John's charismatic power to truly transform the lives of others. Their renewed faith and support enable him to found one of the first international relief organizations, World Neighbors. Somehow, they manage to locate and bring closure to the Tennessee soldier's family. Lastly, we cut back to Africa where the tribal leader admits "I don't really like my neighbors." Still, John wins the hearts of the tribal leader through his sheer sincerity and sense of humor.

Never a dull moment as this funny, inspirational and heartwarming film follows the engaging journey of an unlikely hero, his family and the realization that we are all neighbors no matter how far apart we might be. And in today's global village, the John L. Peters story is more relevant than ever.

Gail Thomas
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