

ARTS



Steve Carell, left, stars in a scene from 'Evan Almighty', in which God commands a Congressman to re-enact the story of Noah's Ark

Photo: CNS

Not much laughter on the Ark



Evan Almighty

PG CERT, 95 MINS

Family films always have a vaguely Lefty message, mainly because lower-middle class Tories aren't as cuddly as penguins, and inheritance tax and the law of unintended consequences don't make eye-watering PG movie subjects. This often lends them a slightly sinister air, and there is no subject of child indoctrination creepier than the environment.

In one scene in *Evan Almighty*, God (played by Morgan Freeman) shows junior congressman Evan Baxter (Steve Carell) how beautiful his neighbourhood in northern Virginia might look without all those ghastly suburbanites' homes spoiling things. I'm as good a Nimby as the next man, but this seems like overkill on the Green Belt front: Freeman's Almighty, however, would like to recreate one of his greatest moments – Genesis, chapter 6.

And so we have a biblical tale reworked with a green message. The

Flood is already a story that anthropic environmentalists can really appreciate: Mother Earth is cleansed of the plague of men by an enormous catastrophe, the equilibrium of the ecosystem is restored.

In the original God fantasy, *Bruce Almighty*, Jim Carrey played a lowly reporter given God-like omnipotence, which he largely used to indulge in adolescent toilet jokes. Though poorly received, *Bruce* proved the big break for comedy actor Steve Carell, in a supporting role as newsreader Evan Baxter.

Four years later Baxter, now a Congressman with vague plans to "change the world", has become the protagonist. This time God gives the subject a rather less attractive offer, instead of becoming all-powerful, he has to re-enact the story of Noah by building a 430-foot long ark.

Naturally Baxter tries to ignore the suggestion, as anyone would if Morgan Freeman started appearing to them and claiming to be God. But with his infinite power, and expensive special effects, he commands the animals to follow the unwilling new Noah, and further reinforces the point by forcing him to grow a beard and wear biblical clothes.

Baxter's increasingly wacky behaviour sets him at odds with his former mentor, Congressman Long (John Goodman), a fat, sweaty, earth-violator with financial interests in turning rainforests into homes for CEOs. After an appearance in a House Committee where a bearded Baxter

explains that God has warned him of a great flood, the former hot shot becomes a national laughing stock. Even worse, his great ark breaks planning laws. It all culminates in a stand-off between the Baxter family and the police, a Feds-versus-religious wacko scenario that seems to resemble one of those FBI raids popular in the 1990s.

But will Freeman's mellow, obviously Democrat-voting, Almighty really go through with the flood, especially as the Republican hinterlands

The studio spent £100m on this film. It looks like about £3.50 of that went into the script

will largely survive unscathed anyway? You'll have to see it, and help the studio reap back some of the £100m it's spent on the film, the most expensive comedy in history.

It looks like about £3.50 of that went into the script. Most of the rest went on special effects, and the massed animals are impressive; they used 177 species of real animals and recreated 300 with computer-generated imagery, neatly sidestepping the age-old flaw of the Ark story: how the foxes and chickens managed to both survive the trip.

Bruce Almighty was a slapstick affair with toilet humour; the sequel

resembles how bad an adult comedy would look with all the risqué jokes removed. Most of the humour is timelessly unfunny, which might explain why they overdosed on slapstick (although the sight of a baboon carrying a lump of wood was certainly worth the effort involved).

Even children's films need some suspended disbelief, but this has a plot thin enough to fit through the eye of the needle. Baxter has no character development, he seems like a bland, likeable guy, who might spend too much time working rather than playing with his kids (who doesn't?) and discourages his youngest son from adopting a stray Rhodesian Ridgeback (who wouldn't?), but is otherwise inoffensive. While Goodman's character exudes the banality of evil, when the film is crying out for a camped-up Alan Rickman baddie.

No one does schmaltz like the Americans and a good family film should have enough sugar poured in to give the audience diabetes. It should have us smiling despite not wanting to; you'll leave this with a face like a poker champion.

But it might be a significant production in other ways: *Evan* was NBC Universal's first film to offset its carbon emissions. The producers planted over 2,000 trees, cast and crew were required to use biodegradable and the sets were broken down and recycled. The storyline and characters, however, will end up on the more traditional great landfill of failed ideas.

An awesome feast for eyes and soul

ART REVIEW
Christopher Lloyd

Renaissance Silver

WALLACE COLLECTION, LONDON W1

Spirit and Life

ISMAILI CENTRE, LONDON SW7

Selections from two remarkable collections of world renowned rarely seen in public in this country are on view in London during this summer. *Renaissance Silver* from the Schroder Collection at the Wallace Collection (until October 14) includes 73 spectacular items illustrating the full range of the silversmith's art during the 16th and early 17th centuries. *Spirit and Life: Islamic Art* from the Aga Khan Museum Collection at the Ismaili Centre in South Kensington opposite the Victoria and Albert Museum (until August 31) is a timely and diverse display of over 160 examples of Islamic art dating from the ninth to the 19th centuries.

Renaissance Silver complements the rich holdings of the Wallace Collection perfectly and is accompanied by an exemplary exhibition of the relevant techniques. An additional attraction of *Spirit and Life* is that it allows an opportunity to see inside the Ismaili Centre (designed by Sir Hugh Casson partnership) that is not otherwise easily accessible. The Aga Khan's collection will eventually be shown permanently at a specially designed museum in Toronto due to open in 2010 after its present tour.

Great collections of early silver exert their fascination in three ways. First, there is the miracle of survival, since a vast quantity of silver was melted down and recycled. Secondly, there exists a division between the ecclesiastical and secular spheres within both of which even further distinctions can be made on the basis of use and cost. Thirdly, there is the sheer inventiveness of the artists using an intractable metal sometimes in combination with materials as varied as rock crystal, enamel, precious stones, porcelain, stoneware, or nautilus and coconut shells. Most of the silver preserved today was made for utilitarian purposes including ecclesiastical utensils which have not survived in such great numbers in comparison with domestic wares.

Renaissance Silver opens with a group of chalices, double cups (made as wedding gifts), pots, tankards, beakers and jugs that unite simple functional forms with increasingly elaborate designs as in the Windmill Cup (c. 1610). The Dolgellau Chalice and Paten (c. 1230-50) is a work of

outstandingly simple visual elegance, but so in its way as the Tazza (1571) decorated with motifs inspired by drops of water. However, the Schroder Collection is famous for its examples of silver made specifically for display either on a buffet or in a treasure (*Schatzkammer*) as in the Green Vault at Dresden. Such pieces are dramatically and deliberately ostentatious, made by the best craftsmen with the most expensive materials and intended to impress in terms of wealth, prestige and power. This was essentially a court art extending throughout Europe and a number of items in *Renaissance Silver* have suitably impressive provenances including several from the House of Hanover and an exceptional piece known as the Aldobrandini Tazza (c. 1550-60). Yet, for the art of conspicuous consumption and artistic ingenuity look no further than the Calvary Salt Cellar (1550), the Baldwin Mechanical Celestial Globe (1575), or the Schwarzenberg Net (1580) which are breathtaking.

The selection for *Spirit and Life* has a didactic purpose made "at a time which calls for enlightened encounters amongst faiths and cultures". The exhibition is divided into two parts – the Word of God and the Power of the Sovereign, which incorporate in outline the essential religious and historical aspects of Islam with a pronounced emphasis on court life. The range of objects on view – including sculpture, textiles, manuscripts, ceramics, musical instruments and curiosities – is particularly rewarding and there are some remarkably striking items from widely differing dates: a folio from the Koran in gold kufic on blue parchment (ninth-10th century), the calligraphic composition on a sweet chestnut leaf (19th century) and a Mongol robe (13th-14th century).

More than these, however, there are several important reminders of the intellectual and aesthetic sophistication of Islam throughout history. These include the folio from the Houghton Shamsa (1522-5), which is "universally acknowledged as one of the most remarkable of all Persian manuscripts, and among the greatest works of art in the world" and a volume of a very early copy (1052) of *Avicenna's* (Ibn Sina) *Canon on Medicine*, which is described as "the most important encyclopaedic corpus of medieval medical knowledge in the Islamic world". There are also two strongly drawn folios from the Arabic translation made from the Greek in Iraq (c. 1200) of the *De Materia Medica* by Dioscorides. The use of calligraphic inscriptions as decorative motifs in the early ceramics is also of the greatest interest as well as being visually arresting.

Both these exhibitions are a feast for the eye and both are equally exciting and challenging. *Renaissance Silver* induces a sense of wonderment, whereas *Spirit and Life* creates a sense of awe.

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Power and the glory

THEATRE REVIEW

The Last Confession

THEATRE ROYAL, HAYMARKET

Conspiracy thrillers are very good for the box office. The plot in high places has always been popular entertainment and you can't get much higher than the Vatican. Popes and cardinals have provided playwrights with endless villains for their melodramas ever since the Renaissance. But murder in the Vatican? Surely not?

The Last Confession is not a melodrama written by John Webster. Roger Crane, a New York lawyer, is not writing a play about the Borgias. He is writing about John Paul, the smiling Pope, who died in 1978 only 33 days after his ordination, the shortest pontificate in modern times. Was the Pope's death by Divine Providence or human intervention? Crane's cardinals – a seemingly ungodly lot, bitchy, arrogant, and devious – are far more interested in power than in faith. Was John Paul too radical and too liberal in his views on birth control and revolutionary priests in South America? Was he taking too much interest in the Vatican's banking? Was he murdered because he was about to fire three reactionaries? Crane's speculations are likely to cause offence.

David Suchet is cast as Cardinal Bellini, who was instrumental in getting John Paul elected, and then failed to give him the support he needed to fight the Curia. His own worldly ambition to be pope took precedence over his desire for a proper investigation into the death. Suchet, who is well-known to the public for his many performances as Hercule Poirot on television, has his best role since he played Sailer in Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus*. Sailer, you will remember, "murdered" Mozart by denying him work. Crane raises the question whether John Paul could have been "murdered" by a member of the Curia simply and deliberately overworking him?

David Jones's production has a striking set by William Dudley which, with its iron railings, makes the Vatican look like a prison. The cast is exceptionally strong. Suchet has authority. Richard O'Callaghan, patently a good man, is excellent as John Paul. Charles Kay, Bernard Lloyd, Michael Jayston and Clifford Rose are all quite admirable. Jayston's gaunt Confessor looks as if he to be painted by El Greco.

Lady Be Good

REGENCY'S PARK OPEN AIR THEATRE

"Oh, Dickie," says the heroine, "it's going to rain!" The audience laughs nervously. The actors have brought their umbrellas on stage! George and Ira Gershwin's first international success, premiered on Broadway in 1924 and seen in London in 1926, was a showcase for

the talents of Fred Astaire and his sister, Adele. The musical is an early example of the sophisticated screwball comedies which were so popular in the late 1920s and 30s, offering glamorous escapism from the Depression. Everybody on stage is brightly lit and out of those who are down-and-out at the start are frightfully rich by the end of the show. The plot is very silly. A brother and sister, evicted from their home, are so broke they have to sleep on the sidewalk. Will Dick marry a rich heiress rather than his true love? Of course, not! Will Susie marry a hobo? Well, yes, since he's really a millionaire. If only life were as simple as Broadway musicals. Paul Farnsworth's stylised set – a gigantic grand piano with a staircase of piano keys, plus a gigantic double bass and drums – pays tribute to Busby Berkeley's interpretation of the 1941 film version of the hit number, "Fascinating Rhythm", a song which will always be synonymous with the Jazz Age.

The high spots are provided by Bill Deamer's stylish and exuberant choreography. Richard Gurnet as a crooked lawyer, who can talk himself in and out of any situation, deftly surfs the corn. His description of a bullfight – the man has obviously never seen a bullfight in his life – is a comic classic worthy of Groucho Marx.

Robert Tanitch

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