Rating: ««««

out of «««««

Running Time: 126 minutes

Searchlight Pictures will be releasing this feature in theaters on Sept. 17.

The 1980s were a strange decade. As a child, I can remember being at home and flipping channels on the television, only to come across a strange syndicated program called, “The PTL Club.” It was quite surreal to witness, at first coming off like an overly elaborate and gaudy variety show before morphing into an extended pitch from the hosts asking viewers to call in and send them money. As one might have expected, a series of scandals eventually arose when the IRS started to investigate the ministry and its finances.

“The Eyes of Tammy Faye,” is a biopic that tells the story of the central participants in the series and what inspired their criminal acts.

Told from the point-of-view of Tammy Faye LaValley (Jessica Chastain), the story begins with the lead attending a Minneapolis bible college. She meets and begins a relationship with the modest, but charismatic Jim Bakker (Andrew Garfield), an aspiring televangelist who professes his belief that God wants his followers to attain wealth and success in life. The two eventually

marry and create a successful Christian-themed puppet show for children. After drawing the attention of famous religious TV personalities like Pat Robertson (Gabriel Olds), they are given their own program.

However, they soon decide to break away and start a new venture. As "The PTL Club" grows in popularity and influence, the two begin spending less time together and conflict arises as their personal problems, lavish lifestyle, and grand plans for the ministry become unsustainable.

The real-life figures are as big, grandiose, and eccentric as the programming on the show, which provides a great deal of dramatic material to work with. Chastain and Garfield do their best to try to humanize them, at least to a degree. The focus is on Tammy Faye and naturally she fares the best, particularly in her attempts to promote kindness and understanding toward the gay community during the AIDS crisis. And we see an interesting transformation, if not in overall personality, then at least in terms of her lifestyle.

The figure changes from modest student to a TV star who begins to adopt her on-air character and appearance in real life. Her physical change from beginning to end is bizarrely compelling to witness.

It is also fascinating to see what is going on behind the curtains and get a peek at the behind-the-scenes trials of the show. Viewers see the over-the-top delusions of Jim Bakker and Tammy Faye being realized, as well as the splintering affect that endless work and time apart has on their relationship. The leads have run-ins with various members of the televangelist community, including Jerry Falwell (Vincent D'Onofrio) and it's intriguing to see backstabbing among noted religious leaders. There's plenty going on and several of these elements are entertaining.

The characters themselves are selfish and their behavior is exaggerated, which does make them difficult to relate to and presents minor problems. Even with their big dreams and Tammy Faye's attempts to help the underrepresented, it's evident from the outset that their "Prosperity theology" and desire for people to enjoy riches applies only to themselves. When the two confront one another privately on personal issues, they always appear to be "on" and acting in an insincere manner. This could easily have been their authentic behavior, but we never fully see beneath the surface.

And since there is a great deal of material to cover, the movie does extend itself longer than it needs to, particularly during the final act.

"The Eyes of Tammy Faye," may not provide a clear rationale for exactly what was going on deep inside the minds of its central personalities, but it is extremely well-acted and does try to show some of the hardships experienced by the title character, as well as the good she did manage to accomplish during her time on-air. And some of these figures still have a following. Bakker returned to television in 2003 and was recently charged with selling a modern-day snake oil formula to help treat coronavirus. This exposé also serves as a fitting warning … take evangelists and their claims with an enormous grain of salt.

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