

‘The Shack’ is About Spirituality, Not Filmmaking

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- [Avraham Aviv Alush](#) [2]
- [Christian](#) [3]
- [God](#) [4]
- [Graham Greene](#) [5]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [6]
- [Holy Spirit](#) [7]
- [Holy Trinity](#) [8]
- [Jesus](#) [9]
- [Lionsgate](#) [10]
- [Movie Review](#) [11]
- [Novel](#) [12]
- [Octavia Spencer](#) [13]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [14]
- [Radha Mitchell](#) [15]
- [Sam Worthington](#) [16]
- [Sumire Matsubara](#) [17]
- [The Shack](#) [18]
- [Tim McGraw](#) [19]
- [William P. Young](#) [20]



Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – To create spirituality from tragedy is like shooting the proverbial fish – a prominent symbol for Christianity – in a barrel. “The Shack” is based on a popular novel, and doesn’t try to do anything different or cinematic with a man encountering the Holy Trinity after a horrific incident.

This film is impossible to review from a basis of the spirit, because believers and lovers of the novel won’t care what a snotty critic has to say regarding the weird-but-soft encounter of a desperate man with God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. But I can judge it as a film, and it really needed more character development. The wife of the emotionally hurt man is nearly invisible, the religiosity of the family is never really explored and the next door neighbor, a presumably good Christian man, seems oddly clingy to his sad buddy. The two hour and fifteen minute film also could have used another pass in the editing machine, as the second act seems to last for an eternity. Director Stuart Hazeldine also was particularly enamored of a certain type of camera move, and to make an old SCTV reference, “is that a crane shot, LaRue?”

Mack Phillips (Sam Worthington) has a great Christian family, years after his own childhood was fraught with sorrow. He is married to Nan (Radha Mitchell) who has a unexplained predilection for calling God “Papa,” and three bright-as-a-sitcom children. After the introduction, Mack is seen during a snowy day, lost in a funk that even his neighbor Willie (Tim McGraw) can’t get him to shake.



The Line-Up: Avraham Aviv Alush, Sam Worthington, Octavia Spencer and Sumire Matsubara in 'The Shack'

Photo credit: Lionsgate

It turns out in flashback that Mack's youngest daughter was abducted and murdered by a serial killer. The snowy atmosphere matches his icy emotions, until he receives a mysterious note to "meet Papa at The Shack." The location is where his daughter was killed, and his obsession to arrive at the meeting results in meeting God (Octavia Spencer), Jesus (Avraham Aviv Alush) and the Holy Spirit (Sumire Matsubara). It takes a trio to heal the grieving father.

The biggest problem is the characters – outside the deities – appear in whole cloth without context, except perhaps that they are good Christians. Radha Mitchell, who once portrayed the title character in Woody Allen's "Melinda and Melinda," is particularly underused. Her appearances are secondary in nature, even though she lost the same daughter. Her habit of calling God "Papa," which was passed to that daughter, is creepily child-like, and adds little to her husband's journey.

Australian-raised Sam Worthington ("Avatar") can't seem to stay on point with the white-bread Christian American he is supposedly portraying. In his sorrow, he speaks in a talk/whisper, which is not good for hiding his obvious Aussie accent. He can't seem to grasp the character, a victim of child abuse, and the 18 years leading up to his daughter's demise is lost. My feeling is that director Hazeldine was too busy planning his "God's eye view" crane shot to worry about the acting.



Breaking Bread: Mack (Sam Worthington) and 'Papa' (Octavia Spencer) in 'The Shack'

Photo credit: Lionsgate

The three (and for a few minutes, four) actors portraying the deities come off a bit better. This won't play well with the Jesus-is-white crowd, for the Son of God is beatifically portrayed by Avraham Aviv Alush as a gentle man from the Middle East. Octavia Spencer can read the phone book and pull it off, so her God interpretation is calming and reassuring. The Asian actress (Sumire Matsubara) is ill-used, and is presented as an almost seductive character. There is no explanation, also, for the switch of Octavia Spencer to Graham Greene (a prominent Native American actor) as God, except that in the next pathway he journeys upon, Mack needs a dude instead of a lady.

Again, I cannot besmirch the spiritual element that is in the film, but it needed to present it better. Like a long church sermon or homily, that meanders until it gets to the point, "The Shack" needed to be leaner, shorter and less obvious. We all could use some deities in our lives, and whether it's God, Mohammad, Jesus, Buddha, the old Greek gods or even the Flying Spaghetti Monster... whatever gets you through the night is all right.

"The Shack" opens every where on March 3rd. Featuring Octavia Spencer, Sam Worthington, Tim McGraw, Radha Mitchell, Avraham Aviv Alush, Sumire Matsubara and Graham Greene. Screenplay by John Fusco, Andrew Lanham and Destin Daniel Cretton. Directed by Stuart Hazeldine. Rated "PG-13"



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[3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/christian>

[4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/god>

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[13] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/octavia-spencer>

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