



HEAVEN IS FOR REAL is a March, 2015 LVCA dvd donation to the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library of the Heritage United Methodist Church of Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Below is Kino Ken's review of that dvd.

Canada 2014 color 99 minutes live action feature drama Tristar Pictures / Sony Entertainment Network / Roth Films / T. D. Jakes Productions / ACTRA / DGC Producers: Joe Roth, T. D. Jakes, Andrew Wallace, Kim Winther, and Phyllis Laing

9 of a possible 20 points

**** of a possible *******

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates juvenile performer

Points:

- 1 Direction: Randall Wallace**
- 0 Editing: John Wright**
- 1 Cinematography: Dean Semler Aerial Photography: John Trapman**
- 1 Lighting: John Clarke**
- 1 Screenplay: Randall Wallace and Christopher Parker**
Script Supervisor: Elspeth Grafton
- 1 Music: Nick Glennie-Smith Music Editor: Mark Jan Wlodarkiewicz**
Music Recording: Tom Hardisty and Kevin Globerman
Orchestrator: Benoit Groulx
- 1 Production Design: Arvinder Grewal**
Art Directors: Larry Spittle, Jody Clement

Set Designer: Dean O'Dell

Set Decorator: Steve Shewchuk

Set Dressers: Chad Giesbrecht (Lead), Kim Hamin, Rachel Kendall, and Allan McGowan

Scenic Artist: Lloyd Brandson (Key)

Props: Mark Stratton and Ryan Berzuk

**1 Sound: Sean McCormack, Kami Asgar (Supervising Sound Editors),
Sound Mixer: Leon Johnson**

1 Acting

1 Creativity

9 total points

Cast: Greg Kinnear (Todd Burpo, father of Colton), Kelly Reilly (Sonja Burpo, mother of Colton), Conor Corum (j) (Colton Burpo), Margo Martindale* (Nancy Rawling), Thomas Haden Church* (Jay Wilkins), Lane Styles (j) (Cassie Burpo), Jacob Vargas (Michael), Thanya Romero (Rosa), Danso Gordon (Ray), Rob Moran (Dr. O'Holleran), Nancy Sorel (Dr. Charlotte Slater), Darcy Fehr (Lee Watson), Vivian Winther (Katherine Watson), Pete Hudson (Old Man Watson), Ursula Clark (j) (Painting girl in Lithuania), Mike Mohrhardt (Jesus), Bryan Terrell Clark (Turce), Randy Apostle (Slim Forrest), Julia Arkos* (Newspaper Reporter), Candace Smith (Pay Clerk), Michael Mills (Marine), Kevin Anderson (Mr. Baxter), Jon Ted Wynne (Mr. Jackson), Darren Felbel (Mr. Parker), Mike Bell (Bubba), Blake Taylor (Loner), Mike Palmer (Fire Chief), others

Is heaven just a concept? A whimsy? Or a reality? To young Colton Burpo it is an actual environment, one which does not require death for admission.

At the age of four, a ruptured appendix threatened to snuff out Colton's life. Despite fears of operating personnel, Colton hung on doggedly, buoyed by a desire to prove himself brave enough to let a tarantula crawl over his hand. If his sister could face that ordeal at the Denver Zoo, he could also. Her being older was not a relevant factor, in his opinion.

Another source of survival strength was an unwavering belief angels had sung to him while he was on the operating table. That could only have occurred logically if he visited heaven then. Right?

Bit by bit a curious father extracted a series of strange revelations from Colton. It seemed incontestable to him that something had happened which could not be rationally explained. How did the boy know about Dad's anger at God in a hospital chapel during his operation? Was it just coincidence a girl in Lithuania painted a face of Jesus corresponding with the Nebraska child's description of his host in heaven? When the youngest Burpo claimed to have met an older sibling there, where had he acquired such knowledge about Mom's stillborn offspring? Had he truly encountered a paternal great-grandfather during a vision?

Since no proof other than preschooler asseverations is ever offered, viewers will credit or discredit supernatural claims according to preset religious beliefs. Cynical doubters will not be persuaded about existence of divinity and afterlife friendships. Believers will latch onto reinforcements for faith. As Colton's father, a minister, eloquently reminded his congregation at a Sunday service, each individual has a unique understanding of heaven, generally molded by childhood church experiences. What his son communicated was a potential challenge to security of adult members. It could be construed by people feeling threatened as insanity. Or a divisive strategy to destroy congregational unity.

Colton himself stayed neutral, only reporting when asked what he experienced. The kid portrayed here was a paragon of honesty and compassion. That could not be said about all adults exposed to his messages.

Peers were not always friendly, either, possibly reflecting parental anxieties. When a pair of youngsters whacked older sister Cassie with a ball on the playground, their victim retaliated in a decidedly aggressive manner. Mom found that deplorable. Dad savored it as entertaining act of heroism. Was it a Christian response? Screenwriters treated the affair simply as protection of a younger family member. Hardly. The ball hadn't been thrown at Colton. Rather, its hurler hoped to intimidate Cassie. Odd. That Burpo wasn't making any special assertions on behalf of either herself or Jesus. Nor were her parents. All strange, unnatural testimony comes solely and directly from Little Brother.

Events depicted here were supposedly authentic occurrences. No one forced acceptance of them on outsiders. That harmonizes with Christian behavior, though running contrary to Christian evangelical activism. It suggests leading by example, rather than exhortation. Shared love trumps good conduct inspired primarily by fear.

Shrewdly stopping short of literal description smacking of clichés, HEAVEN IS FOR REAL presents a strong argument for further research. With personal life and death stakes involved, caution and judgment are warranted. Colton's truth, inspirational to many, may actually be relevant only for himself. Much of what he divulged reflects traditional church teachings, which might or might not be absolutely correct. Unlike revelations at Fatima, there were no political overtones, no plea for world peace or universal brotherhood. A mantra of "don't worry, be happy" would easily dovetail with the Burpo youngster's statements.

Each viewer must draw his or her own conclusions.

Technically, the movie also follows a middle path, neither eye-popping nor defective. Lighting, sound, music, editing, and production design are adequate, not exceptional.

In fact, a loopy narrative structure, which basically ends at the beginning and vice versa, undercuts characterization of the leading player. Colton is observed for the most part during and after extraordinary conditions. Conditions that may have significantly altered his personality. Viewers are treated to a handful of family scenes showing interaction within a domestic setting. How Colton behaves in social contexts outside the home is largely unknown. Even in the first zoo scene, he is cushioned within a supportive family, keeping safe distance from zookeeper and alien animal. Thrown into agitation by malfunctioning internal organ, he makes a transfer from earthly home refuge to heavenly one. His alternative haven is peopled with anonymous inhabitants devoting themselves attentively and exclusively to him. Rather an egocentric visualization of heaven. Though quite normal from a four-year-old's perspective.

Nor is much insight provided into viewpoints and values of sister Cassie. A bit miffed at all the attention Colton received, she otherwise was a tabula rasa,

thoughts kept locked tightly inside her head. Dialogue was all too frequently denied her, as if the girl were incapable of meaningfully expressing herself.

Conflict generated from divergent reactions of Mom and Dad to Son's pronouncements. Mom credited them to overactive imagination. Dad perceived them as inspired messages, notes Mother resisted consistently until an emotional barrier toppled. Receiving news about the pleasant existence of a lost daughter in another world won her over through emotional susceptibility, not logic. That conversion made, the remaining task was rallying dubious auditors at church. Pastor Todd, Colton's father, succeeded in vanquishing reservations by tracing verbally his own struggles with incredulity and their outcome: conviction through faith and witness.

As portrayed by Greg Kinnear, Todd is credible, sincere, trusting. He's also an expert wrestling coach, effective volunteer fireman, skilled carpenter, pushover parent, and capable mechanic. Note the possibly fatal personality flaw. Todd follows the flow where his children are concerned, letting them take the lead at every turn. This assures popularity, possibly sealing his doom. He has no wish to antagonize his kids. An accusation against either of dishonesty is unthinkable. Though this is implied, Kinnear doesn't quite project it adequately. There is at least one layer of tolerance in Mr. Burpo that escapes analysis here.

All disciplining and boundary-setting is done by mother Sonya. With the children, she is direct and commanding. Handling of spouse is done very differently, through oblique suggestion and patient erosion of resistance. A complicated personality with her own set of principles, not always matching those of her mate, Sonya is played satisfactorily by Kelly Reilly.

Why is she nearly always paired with Cassie? That favoritism, if it corresponded to reality, would guarantee a divided family. Males versus females. Is that how Burpos operated from day to day? Probably not. Director Wallace's blocking suggests otherwise.

Excellent use is made of Thomas Haden Church as Jay Wilkins and Margo Martindale in the role of Nancy Rawling.

The former substituted the local church for a failed marriage. He very nearly cut himself off from a rewarding friendship by starting to let an abstraction take precedence over a human soul. Church is marvelous as a boorish, obnoxious

tyrant, a power freak using every available means to create indebtedness and acquiescence. It's easy to see by his actions how a wife could have been repelled, fearful of losing independence of will. Todd avoids the same trap, demonstrating willingness to distance himself from creditors when their demands compromise his own integrity. Jay, taken aback at the other's frankness, recognizes at last what a dangerous dependency he almost foisted on his pastor. Letting him go his own way, think his own thoughts, required ceding power to an employee. For once in his life, Mr. Wilkins relinquished the upper hand, let the roulette wheel spin where it might. The privilege of choice was not one he could remove trivially. A hard lesson apparently learned at last. To Church's credit, this transformation of behavior is enacted with complete success, more eloquent than an accompanying booster line of script.

Nancy was locked in grief over her Marine son's early death, finding greater satisfaction in discomfort than hope. She wanted to treasure the past at the expense of welcoming a possibly cheerier future. With conservatism a primary objective, Todd's infusion of unorthodox afterlife theory into weekly sermons became unbearable. Nancy lashed out in retaliation, censoring her minister for creating a pool of uncertainty and doubt where before a completely reassuring nebulosity prevailed. Nobody talked about heaven. It was taken for granted everyone went there eventually. That was all good worshippers needed to know or care about.

What she had cherished for years was inadequate consolation, as the woman bitterly realized once confronted with Colton's specific details about reunion with loved ones. The child made her realize what she was missing by feeding hurt and frustrating hope, confusing absence with loss, looking down at dark earth when there stretched out broad and radiant sky above.

Margo Martindale makes the bereft mother's pain clearly a hindrance, preventing closure and spiritual revival. It needed shared. Just like love. For her, survivor guilt displaced resignation to reality. What couldn't happen overpowered what could.

Buttressed by a screenplay mincing no words about the phantom of inadequacy's undercutting effect on healing wounds, this picture's chief supporting actress provides a powerful portrayal of tardy redemption.

Is HEAVEN IS FOR REAL a triumph of cinematic art? No. A worthwhile investment of time? Absolutely. Set aside preconceptions for a bit. Take a journey while still alive into unknown and unknowable territory.

HEAVEN IS FOR REAL is suitable for family viewing. Though the MPAA regards it as toxic fare for children, it definitely is no such thing. They are more likely to find it comforting than disturbing.

Special features of this Sony Pictures Home Entertainment dvd are a four-minute featurette titled "Cotton Goes to Heaven," six deleted scenes totaling a little over eight minutes, and subtitles.

HEAVEN IS FOR REAL is now available to borrow from the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library.