



Scenes from 'The Judas Project'



'The Judas Project'

...A 13-Year Dream Comes To The Screen For Holden Beach Man

BY LYNN CARLSON

James Barden is a different kind of movie mogul. Oh, he can talk the talk, but it's not the "love-your-latest, my-people-will-call-your-people" kind. Barden sounds more like a Billy Graham than a Cecil B. DeMille, but there's a little of both kinds of vision behind his dream-come-true.

That dream, 13 years in the making, is "The Judas Project," of which Barden is writer, director, executive producer, and soundtrack composer/performer. The 97-minute, PG-13-rated film, which opened in Wilmington and Fayetteville last week is, at a cost of \$7 million, is "the largest budgeted independent film ever made on the life of Christ," Barden says proudly. He adds that it passed the million-dollar-gross mark last week, all the while continuing to elicit praise from Christian periodicals and pastors who have accepted invitations to advance screenings.

"The Judas Project" was partly written at Holden Beach, where Barden and wife Emi have put down roots, though Jim's ties to the South Brunswick Islands—which he calls "my little piece of heaven"—go back as far as he does. He is the son of longtime Holden Beach property owners Lib and the late J. Hunter Barden of Fayetteville.

The movie's premise: "What would happen if Jesus Christ were to appear for the first time today instead of 2,000 years ago?" Its poster shows a long-haired man wearing Levis and a crown of thorns being spotlighted by Black Hawk helicopters against a background of skyscrapers and lightning bolts.

A press kit describes the story this way:

"The Judas Project" takes place in present-day America and recounts the exact same series of events that surrounded the last three years in the life of Christ.

Jesse, the hero of the film, battles corrupt politicians, intellectual leaders and pseudo-religious figures in a fight to save the world from an increasingly violent and decaying society. World leaders try to manipulate and control him and, finally, through the betrayal of his own disciple, Jude, they destroy him. The story culminates in one of the most mesmerizing crucifixion scenes ever filmed.

How did a nice boy from Fayetteville get into the picture business? Nothing less than divine intervention, Barden would say, beginning with a near-death experience in his teenage years.

At 17, young Jim Barden was hospitalized with a lethal blood disorder and had developed staphylococcus pneumonia in the center lobe of both lungs. He'd already made medical history, having been born with four spleens. He was being treated at Duke University Hospital by a leading hematologist when the pneumonia developed. His family was given no hope for his recovery.

"I had been given last rites. I said a prayer and closed my eyes, never expecting to open them again." But open them he did, soon to fully recover—with an unexplained newfound aptitude for music. "I'd never even



STAFF PHOTO BY LYNN CARLSON

"When there's a barrier, it's not Satan trying to punch your lights out. It's God trying to get your attention."

—Jim Barden, pictured with wife Emi

played the piano, but I was writing concertos. God healed me and let me live for music."

That musical talent led him to Los Angeles and the record industry. He recorded for RCA records and as a music publisher was responsible for recordings by performers such as Rod Stewart, Glen Campbell, Cher and Barbra Streisand.

He stayed in California 15 years and "made several hundred million dollars for three companies." He bought an L.A. home once owned by Greta Garbo.

But life at the top of the material heap didn't last. He and Emi at one point lived in what he described as a "shack with no heat," but he chooses not to explain that radical lifestyle change other than to say, "I spent everything I had trying to force a vision."

"By 1973-74, I had met every goal I had set for myself and lost interest. I met Pat Robertson in Atlanta, and on Dec. 3, 1976, I was born again." He became a director of the Virginia-based Christian Broadcasting Network and was a force behind the development of the

musical genre known as Contemporary Christian.

Since 1980, Barden has dedicated "100 percent of my time" to "The Judas Project." Much of that time was devoted to The Big Challenge—raising enough money to make a movie. And "not a grade-Z movie," as Barden says, but a slick professional production with seasoned professional actors, respected musicians and expensive high-tech special effects. The "best people in the industry," as Barden calls them, don't work cheap.

His faith was tested at many turns, he said, especially when he approached multi-millionaire Christians "who said they could not see anything in this project to invest in, not even \$5,000 to tell the Word of God." By that point he'd already had plenty of Hollywood doors slammed on his toes by powerful people with no interest in his kind of vision—but it was different being rejected by Christians he had fully expected to have firmly in his corner.

Little by little, the money came together, as did the script and the locations and the music. "It was a struggle

to get it done this way," he said. "It was the first time I'd directed actors or written a screenplay or scored a film. I wanted to quit a thousand times."

But Emi—a native of the former Yugoslavia, "where God is dead"—wouldn't let him. "If it wasn't for Emi, I'd never have done it. She never said stop, no matter how much rejection or how hard times got."

Emi helped him learn to have "a childlike faith in God," and that "when there's a barrier, it's not Satan trying to punch your lights out. It's God trying to get your attention." But Emi, as giggling and playful with her husband as if they were adolescents in puppy-love, simply says, "He did everything."

The result of all that trial and error, searing tribulation and sweet success, is a movie Barden says "looks like it cost \$22 million, which is what it would have cost if I'd made it in Hollywood." Instead, he took the long way home, raising the money over time, doing what he could afford as he could afford it, filming on location—mostly at Tybee Island, Ga.—and keeping the faith.

And even though Barden is adamant that he didn't do any of it for money or fame, there's a good chance that "The Judas Project" will return buckets of both. It's "the only movie in the world" for which the production owns the rights of every kind. Believers and curious non-believers are filling theaters in the Southeast and making "The Judas Project" surpass big-bucks, superstar Hollywood pictures in markets where they compete.

But what makes Barden proudest is that he made a movie which let him "show God I could give his son a heart on film for the first time, and show his humanity. He was just like us. I wanted to show how Jesus would have thrown His arms around people in a bear hug, or squeezed their shoulder or given them a pat on the back."

The film's PG-13 rating was assigned because of the realistic crucifixion scene, accomplished using a \$148,000 replica of the actor's body which breathes and has visible veins. "It's the first time the crucifixion has been graphically depicted on the screen," Barden says, and insists that it was necessary for viewers to "see the spikes go in and the blood come out." Otherwise, "There's more violence in Saturday cartoons than in this movie," he adds.

His next project? "All I'll tell you is that it'll have a \$60 million budget and be a 3½-hour epic. I've got four film crews ready when I get the money together."

He expects all his future projects to be "Biblically-based," as well as "real adventure films, love stories, first-class, positive, dealing with the heart, highly entertaining and involving the best talent—people who are fed up with the kind of garbage you usually have to do to make a living in this business."

But for now, it's off to Tulsa, Enid, Santa Fe, Albuquerque and other points west. There are pastor screenings to be conducted, media interviews to endure and bookings to be made, as "The Judas Project" opens on new screens, 125 at a time, with an ultimate goal of 3,000 from coast to coast.

As Barden says with a faceful of unrestrained bliss, "If you believe and you don't give in, God will allow you to vindicate yourself."

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