

F I L M

Musing My Religion

Shuaib Mitchell's *Too Saved* contemplates conversion.

By Matthew Borlik

God works pretty fast in filmmaker Shuaib Mitchell's religious drama, *Too Saved*. In order to complete the film on schedule and within his limited budget, Mitchell had to work even faster.

"We shot the film in a total of three days," Mitchell says. "Two very long days and then another regular day of shooting in which we did pickup scenes and B-roll.... It was a true miracle."

Mitchell, a 45-year-old D.C. native who currently lives in Waldorf and serves as senior producer/director at the Department of Housing and Urban Development, has several screenplays, commercials, music videos, and documentaries under his belt; *Too Saved* is his first feature-length fiction

film. Originally conceived as a stage play in 2002 by Mitchell's pastor, John L. McCoy of the Word of God Baptist church, and released through Nubia Filmworks (the D.C.-based independent motion picture and television production company Mitchell founded in 1994), *Too Saved* was completed for about \$19,000.

"I was looking for something that could be done on a low budget, something that I could do the various fundraising myself," Mitchell says of his decision to adapt McCoy's script. "About a year ago... we had our first auditions. I had not even completed the adaptation."

The film follows the relationship between Bobby (James Johnson), a good-hearted ne'er-do-well, and Lisa (Lolita Clayton), his God-fearing girlfriend. Lisa's looking

to tie the knot, but she's unwilling to marry a man who hasn't accepted the Lord into his life, so she prays for Bobby to adopt her religious beliefs. Seconds later, he comes bounding into the church and joyously announces that he's found Jesus—but his conversion to full-time Bible-thumper isn't exactly what Lisa had hoped for. Instead, Bobby puts an end to their sinful premarital sex life, throws away a winning lottery ticket worth enough money to finance their wedding, and forces the Gospel down the throat of every friend and stranger he meets. It's a development that causes Lisa to question her own relationships with her boyfriend, her family, and God—and one that Mitchell says is all too common among converts in real life.

"[Bobby's character] was drawn from a combination of my experiences and my pastor's 20 years in the ministry," Mitchell says. "I recall with my first time accepting Christ myself, as a young man, I was very zealous—trying to proselytize and convert everyone. You find that very often with new converts—they're just so excited about what they're experiencing, sometimes they can go over the top."

The film premiered in early spring to a sold-out audience at the AFI Silver Theatre and Cultural Center. "There was a lot of excitement about the premiere,"

Mitchell says, despite the fact that the film has been promoted exclusively by word of mouth. Since then, *Too Saved* has gone on to screen in New York City as part of the Urbanworld/VIBE Film Festival and again at AFI; Mitchell has also submitted the film to various upcoming film festivals and has received an official invitation to the 16th Annual Pan African Film & Arts Festival in Los Angeles.

Currently, Mitchell is working on a documentary on the life and work of D.C.-based human rights activist Andrew Fowler. Mitchell's next feature-length project is a religious drama titled *Nocturnal Agony*, which he hopes to begin filming in May 2008. Like *Too Saved*, the film centers around a woman's relationships with her friends, family, and God. It may seem like familiar territory, but Mitchell sees no reason why *Nocturnal Agony* shouldn't enjoy as much success as *Too Saved*.

"Thanks to Tyler Perry, and other producers such as Mel Gibson, Hollywood is now aware of the enormous market potential of faith-based films," Mitchell says. "I think our work speaks to the same core audience.... Producers of films like *Too Saved*—who, just a few years ago, had no chance of securing a distribution deal—will at least get some consideration before they are dismissed by Hollywood executives." 