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## 'Passion' Premiere Draws Crowds Across the Country

By BOBBY ROSS JR, AP



Gibson directs Jim Caviezel's Jesus in 'The Passion of the Christ.'

He said he was in tears during the film.

"It's the kind of crying knowing that somebody would do something for me, even though I didn't deserve it. It's the greatest love story there is," he said.

Elsewhere across the nation, some couldn't wait for morning screenings. More than 100 people watched the midnight showing of "The Passion" at the ArcLight Cinemas in Los Angeles.

### More on 'The Passion'



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PLANO, Texas (Feb. 25) - Even before sunrise, believers and nonbelievers alike poured into movie theaters around the nation on Ash Wednesday for the opening of Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ."

An estimated 6,000 people filled all 20 auditoriums at a Cinemark theater in this Dallas suburb to watch the film. All the tickets had been bought and donated by a local churchgoer.

"I hope everybody sees it with an open mind," said Rick Pierce, 53, a Baptist who sipped coffee and chewed on a breakfast burrito at the theater before the first showing.

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"I'm in shock. I'm physically weak. I'm emotional," said Joseph Camerieri, a 39-year-old paralegal student from Los Angeles who was trying to hold back tears after seeing the film.

"I think if you're a Christian it will increase your faith tenfold in what Christ has done for you. If you're not a Christian, you'll probably treat others with more love."

In the central Pennsylvania community of Bellefonte, about

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50 people attended a showing after midnight. Viewers groaned as Jesus was nailed to the cross, and muffled cries could be heard during more than an hour of Jesus' torture, crucifixion and death. In the end, as Jesus rises from the grave, some in the audience quietly celebrated.

"To me, that was the important part," said Aaron Tucker, an English major at Penn State. "I'm like, 'Oh, victory!' There's more

to this movie than just the violence. It's about triumph."

In Plano, Arch Bonnema, a financial planner, reserved the entire Cinemark Tinseltown 20 theater, spending \$42,000 of his own money on tickets.

"When you see the sacrifice that Jesus made, it makes you feel like, I have to do something better with my life," said Bonnema, 50, a lifelong Christian inspired to act after seeing a special screening of the movie.

Cory Galbreath and his wife, Kim, both 29 and members of Hope Fellowship Assembly of God in Frisco, were among those who attended. Kim Galbreath sobbed and was comforted by her husband as they left the theater.

"It's a little bit more brutal than you would think. I mean, there were times when you felt like it was too much. But I dare anybody not to believe after watching it," she said.

Popcorn and soft drinks remained on the concession menu - but theater managers bet that most early morning moviegoers would rather choose breakfast pastries and orange juice.

A cadre of ministers were on hand to reach out to moviegoers.

"Not to preach a sermon," said

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the Rev. Jack Graham, pastor of Prestonwood Baptist where Bonnema is a member and president of the Southern Baptist Convention, "but to sum up the message and meaning of the cross. ... We anticipate that there will be a tremendous outpouring of God's favor on this movie."

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Funded and directed by Gibson, the film has received decidedly mixed reviews from critics. Some have praised Gibson's total commitment to his subject: The Oscar-winning filmmaker says the movie is both an attempt to faithfully render the Gospels and a personal vision. Others see it as excessively bloody, obsessed with cruelty and unfair in its portrayal of Jews.

But following months of hype, curiosity about the movie is almost insatiable.

After seeing "The Passion" a few months ago, Bonnema called his wife, Sherry, and told her, "Honey, we've got to get as many people as we can to see this film because it's changed my life."

You asked: What will Mel Gibson do with the profits from "The Passion of the Christ"?

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With her blessing, he approached Cinemark about reserving a single auditorium. Theater officials told him that would be fine, but he would need to do so before regular operating hours.

"If it's before hours, aren't all of them empty?" Bonnema recalled asking. "So I called my wife back and said, 'What do you think about getting 6,000 seats?'"

She agreed, even though she hadn't seen the film herself.

The Bonnemas gave 3,000 tickets to their church and 1,000 to the Dallas Theological Seminary.

That left them with 2,000 - but not for long.

"I put out an e-mail to friends in the Dallas-Fort Worth area," Arch Bonnema said. "In three days, I had 23,000 requests."

Ordinarily, showing the same movie on 20 screens would be impossible because of a lack of prints, said Terrell Falk, spokeswoman for Plano-based Cinemark USA, which owns about 300 theaters in 33 states.

But in this case, Cinemark made special arrangements to borrow prints from its other area theaters.

"We'll show it early in the morning, then take them to the other theaters," Falk said.

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