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Holy Hell – A Disturbing Look Into The Workings Of A Cult

Evie Sullivan · Wednesday, August 3rd, 2016

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Holy Hell is a hell of a ride into the inner workings of a cult. It is a strong cautionary tale about the power of narcissistic people who proclaim their goal to lead people to freedom but in reality their only intention is to abuse those who trust them. The movie depicts the intimate journey of director/producer Will Allen and executive producer Julian Goldstein as well as other former cult members through twenty years of a rollercoaster ride called "Buddahfield."

Hollywood Star Jared Leto saw a clip early in the creation of the movie and joined the team as one of their executive producers. In his own words, it was a worthy cause to lend his name to: "*Holy Hell*, what a crazy movie! Wow! It's a beautiful film! I saw an early cut of the movie and I just wanted to lend my name to help to get some eyeballs on the film because I thought it was a really powerful, unique story that was told with a lot of passion. Documentary is a real passion of mine."

[embedvideo id="ZbDrDRpdQWo" website="youtube"]

Will Allen, a film school graduate, wanted to make movies since he was a boy. With his 8mm camera he created whimsical short movies where things blew up and Wonder Woman jumped through the air. But he was also a spiritual seeker, fascinated with the concept of life and death. When his older sister Amy found the group on Harper Street in West Hollywood, in the mid eighties she invited Will to a meeting. Here he found what he always had been looking for: a safe environment of loving, supportive, like-minded people who were open to being portrayed in his movies. His beautiful fellow practitioners of the non-distinct faith were not much more than character actors but the star was Michel, the man who had created the environment. Through Will's films, the guru was raised to the role of an elevated master. Will was the group's de facto filmmaker and his films became the perfect medium for sharing his guru's teachings. Will Allen calls himself "The Leni Riefenstahl of a Hitler."

*

Michel in 1997

The uniqueness of the story is mainly about how it's told. The filmmaker Will Allen was a young man of 19 when he stumbled upon a group of other beautiful, white people who seemed to live in

total bliss. It was the mid 80s and New Age religions sprouted all over the United States. The house on Harper Street was a hub for their self-appointed guru Michel called “Buddhafield.” The community wasn’t much different from EST or Osho groups. Dancing, laughing, meditating, sitting silently, eating clean, and expressing one’s individuality. There was an altar in the room with pictures of Jesus, Buddha, Krishna, and other spiritual teachers, and one picture of Michel right in the middle. It didn’t leave the slightest doubt whom to really worship.

Phillipe, Julian, Andreas, Chris, Sophia

In the course of the documented twenty-two years, Michel had changed his name three times to blur his identity for fear of being exposed to the authorities. Who Michel was and where he came from, was a riddle, but the community saw him as a God. He wore speedos exposing a well-trained dancer’s body, his eyes were heavily made up and in later years, he had his face altered grotesquely through plastic surgery. He strikes the viewer from the very start as some kind of a fake, even a vindictive, egomaniac. For his followers, this was not evident until much later when they mustered all their strength to leave “Buddhafield” behind. It was hard for every single one of them, “When I came to the group I thought that it was for life. It felt like a marriage,” a female Buddhafield member says in the movie.
How did intelligent, educated, mainly middle-class people fall for a man who demanded complete devotion to himself? Were they such extreme outsiders that they felt they didn’t fit into society? “The people were not outcasts,” says executive producer Julian Goldstein who had joined the group around the same time as Will Allen. “That didn’t mean that they didn’t feel like outcasts because they were gay or their families didn’t like their alternative ways and their meditative lifestyle.” he continues. “Many of Michel’s followers were at a transitional point in their lives. But let me tell you, there were worst cults around in the 80s!”

Julian Goldstein & Will Allen

Watching the movie, I couldn’t think of much worse than devoting oneself to a controlling charlatan who betrayed everybody who came into his orbit. Toward the end of the movie, his former identity as a gay porn star is revealed but by the time I had watched already too many destructive images and ridiculous scenes that the disclosure is totally irrelevant. It’s startling that *Holy Hell* director Will Allen and executive producer Julian Goldstein were members of this cult for two decades. What was the draw? “Maybe it was the people, the group, the family feeling. And he was extremely supportive of me, perhaps more so than he was with the other disciples,” says Goldstein. “He seemed very open-minded and accepting you would expect a spiritual teacher would be and he featured this as part of his appeal.” Nothing was authentic about this man. He took his teachings from many different sources but mainly from the equally controversial Indian Guru Bhagwan Shri Rajneesh, or Osho. He would change the wording of Osho’s ideas and made his own script. What emerged were beautiful teachings but they weren’t his. The love he propagated was not coming from his heart. Unlike many other self-proclaimed religious leaders he was not particularly money-hungry but he managed to get enough payment from his followers to live a comfortable life surrounded by beautiful people who fulfilled his every wish.

Serving him was an honor and a privilege for his disciples. Most people had to pay forty dollars a month for acting classes and fifty dollars weekly for therapy sessions he called “cleansings.” These therapy sessions ended for some of the more attractive male followers in forced sexual favors even though he called sex “a low energy” in his sermons. One guy in the movie says angrily: “I thought I was doing spiritual work and then he started saying ‘come closer

to me’ and I was in front of him on my knees.” One day, one of the disciples who decided to leave the group sent an e-mail accusing the guru of ongoing sexual abuse. One man after the other, gay and straight confessed of having been sodomized by the man they trusted. A devoted woman came forward telling that when she was pregnant Andreas, (that’s what he called himself at the time), ordered her to have an abortion or to leave the group. Children were unacceptable in the Buddahfield. It was a precaution. Children would have changed the energy of the group. When the group fell apart, Andreas moved to Oahu, Hawaii where he changed his name once again and created a new group that still exists. Over a hundred devotees let themselves be manipulated and deny themselves, to serve his ego. “There are cults in every town,” one man in the movie says. “Look around in your town. I bet there is one, too.”
Holy Hell is available on iTunes at https://itunes.apple.com/us/movie/holy-hell/id1132767088

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