**ARTS**

Blatty's new movie lacks the old spirit

The Ninth Configuration, written, directed and produced by William Peter Blatty, starring Tracy Keach and Scott Wilson. Opens today in the greater Boston area.

Jesus Christ in the guise of a United States Marine Colonel. He may sound rather unusual, but that is the premise of The Ninth Configuration, a new film written, produced and directed by William Peter Blatty.

At a press conference after the screening, Blatty, who is best-known as the author of The Exorcist, explained, "It's a film about God, and evil, and the universe; whether we are alone or not." That's pretty presumptuous for one feature-length film, and it is therefore not at all surprising that it falls so way short of its intended goals.

The story takes place in the late 1960's in a Gothic castle deep in the forests of Washington State (makes a lot of sense already, huh?), where marines who are believed to be faking mental illness in order to avoid combat are being confined for observation. Colonel Hudson Kane, played by Stacy Keach (right), is comforted after waking from a nightmare by the center's other medical officer, played by Ed Flanders.

Colonel Kane takes charge of the center and, for the first time, the men start responding to treatment. Kane takes special interest in Capt. Cuthaw, an aristocratic who abandoned a space launch for unknown reasons and who feuled the men in trying to drive him out as they did their other medical officers. But Kane's tolerance and constant good nature soon win Cuthaw's confidence and, in the end, his deep respect.

There are endless parallels between Kane and Christ. Cuthaw's main problem is his lack of faith in God, his anxiety that he will die out in space all by himself. Kane sets out to convinse him that God exists and that there is such a thing as completely sacrificing oneself in the name of love for one's fellow man. The Jesus symbolism is very audacious, from Kane's almost superhuman patience to one of the final scenes, where his body is crucified, not like, in Cuthaw's ads. These devices may be very original, but they also become rather tedious.

The atmosphere of the film is terribly melodramatic. The castle certainly doesn't help matters. When questioned about his choice of setting, Blatty replied, "The story would be much more difficult to dramatize in a hospital." He cited several reasons for choosing the castle. "I knew I had what bordered on being a theatrical piece. I wanted the audience to have the feeling of something exotic. It's also metaphorical -- it suggests the state of these men's minds." Frankly, he made it a bit too theatrical. And it's difficult to draw comparisons between the tortured-looking gargoyles leaning down from the wall and the guy with the big "x" on his T-shirt who keeps furrowing his brow and happily expanding.

"This looks like a job for Superman!"

The characterization of the "disturbed" men are, in fact, pretty true. The only apparent manifestation of mental illness is the tendency toward identity deformations. To add on to the whole Clark Kent, there's the guy who thinks he's a nun, the guy who thinks he's a director, and his friend who thinks he's a (female) nurse. And then there's everybody's favorite -- the guy who's staging a production of Hamlet with a dog. These men aren't really ill; they're lovably loony. It's like watching a screen full of Corporal Kliger's. Granted, they're funny -- but it becomes a bit too much after a while and considering the gravity of the rest of the film, it's all somewhat inapppropriate.

Despite the script, the acting was surprisingly good. Stacy Keach's portrayal of Colonel Kane was a remarkable characterization of a man tormented by his past. Scott Wilson countered him perfectly as the demerged Cuthaw. Jason Miller was highly amusing as the pompous doggie director. And Ed Flanders turned in a sensitive performance as Colonel Fall, the center's other medical officer.

During the press conference, a marine in the audience asked why a member of the USMC was used as a Christ figure. Blatty grinned, "I think the marines are terrific." Unfortunately, The Ninth Configuration isn't.

Linda Schlaff

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**ON THE TOWN**

The New England Conservatory Scholarship Woodwind Quartet will present a concert of works by Ligeti, Danzi, Elliott Carter and a selection of ragtime music, March 10, Jordan Hall, 8pm, free.

The Brandeis University Programming Board will present folk singer Priscilla Hardman, performing her original folk ballads. Admission $3 at the door, Saturday March 8, 8pm at the State Armory, Museum Square.

Saturday March 8, the Friends of New England Conservatory will sponsor Music is in the Marketplace, a full day and night of music and celebration in the Great Hall of Faneuil Hall Marketplace. For information, call 266-7455.

The Boston Globe Jazz Festival, featuring the likes of the Goodman Dixie College and Muddy Waters, will run through March 15. For info, 266-7455.

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**MOVIES**

Ballet performances of La Sonnambula, Ariadne, and Manon will be presented, by the Boston Ballet March 6-9. Tickets are $4 to $17. For info, call 242-3945.

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**MUSIC**

David Epstein, conductor, will lead The MIT Symphony Orchestra in an all-Ravel program. The pianist will be Adrianne Jor-...