

'Forever My Girl' explores forgiveness theme

If faith is meant for all people, then it is also meant for the box office.

Film producer Pete Shilaimon says films about faith aren't just for an exclusive few.

"I want the mainstream audience to go to faith-based films and I want the faith-based film audience to go to mainstream," said Shilaimon, whose new film *Forever My Girl* is filled with Christian themes.

"I feel like both of them are connecting with each other and I love that. I think that's what filmmaking and I think that's what art is. You can bring different cultures and different religions together in one setting and have them experience a story."

Shilaimon has produced 16 films since 2012, including high-profile faith films like *Risen* (2016) and the documentary *The Devil and Father Amorth* (2017). He has also produced notable mainstream films like World War II thriller *Anthropoid* (2016) and biopic *Jackie* (2016).

Forever My Girl, in theatres Jan. 19, follows the story of a famous country star who returns home to rekindle a love he left behind.

Tragedy brings Liam Page (played by Alex Roe) back home and his father, Pastor Brian, helps him confront the family and the community he ran away from 10 years ago.

Shilaimon said this film is a good example of the kinds of films he wants to make in Hollywood. The film, based on a 2012 novel by bestselling author Heidi McLaughlin, explores themes of forgiveness and reconciliation.

"I decided to make this sweet little movie about this Prodigal Son and forgiveness," said Shilaimon. "I think forgiveness is one of the greatest gifts you can give to another human being."

As a Chaldean Catholic, Shilaimon said his faith was an essential part of his upbringing. He was five years old when he and his family of six fled from Iraq to seek refuge in Athens, Greece, in 1977.

"I remember the day we left very vividly," he said. "I remember actually fleeing with my family at night and we only had one bag each. We couldn't bring anything that would give us away... All we really had was our faith and our family and that was it."

At six years old, Shilaimon remembers having to work at a shoe factory to contribute to the family's income. The family lived in the basement of a home

and shared an outhouse for a bathroom.

When his family was granted permission to come to the United States in 1980, Shilaimon described it as one of the happiest days of their lives.

Even after they settled in San Diego, Calif., Shilaimon said the family was on welfare for a long time, but his parents worked hard and kept the faith.

“Me and my family are still very strong in the Church,” said Shilaimon. “That’s the thing about Chaldeans, we’re survivors.”

After graduating from University of California, Irvine with a degree in theatre, he moved to Los Angeles in 1996. But for about 15 years, Shilaimon worked in the health and fitness industry.

“When I got here, I just felt like my calling wasn’t in the film industry. My calling was in caring for people’s health, so I decided to open up a gym and holistic centre,” he said. “It was an incredible 15 years in that role.”

He trained with many prominent celebrities and producers and through those connections, he fell into film producing. His first film credit was for a 2012 film, *Black Rock*, starring Kate Bosworth.

“I think the best part of the job is developing the projects and finding the subject matter you want to make a movie about,” he said.

Shilaimon believes all human beings have some sort of connection to a higher power, no matter their religion. At its simplest, this is the human experience he wants to express in his movies.

Shilaimon said *Risen* was the “game-changer” film of his career. The film followed the journey of a Roman soldier (played by Joseph Fiennes) searching for the missing body of Jesus Christ who rose from the dead.

The film grossed more than \$46 million worldwide, including a special screening in Rome where Fiennes, Shilaimon and fellow producers met Pope Francis.

“I think *Risen* really changed the way I make movies,” said Shilaimon. “*Risen* was just so powerful for me on so many levels, going to the Vatican and meeting the Pope, and being on set with incredible, incredible artists and having to work around telling an incredible Bible story. For me, my career, that was one of the films that changed my career and what direction I see my career going in.”

Shilaimon already has two more faith films he will be promoting this year. *I Can Only Imagine* (opening March 16) tells the story behind Christian band MercyMe’s most famous song. *The Miracle Season* (April 13) is about a high school girls volleyball team that must band together to win the state championship after the tragic death of a teammate.

“At the core of who we are (as filmmakers), we want to make entertainment. We want to make movies that help people, motivate people,” said Shilaimon. “I think the best part about my job is to help tell stories that change peoples’ opinions and help change the world.”