

The District Line

Cult Film

The scariest movie in town is admission-free and continuously showing.

By Michael Colton

My afternoon quest for celluloid stimulation in Dupont Circle nears its fruitless end. Cineplex Odeon's showing *Hurlyburly* (too cynical) and *Little Voice* (too British). A few blocks north, the Janus has *Patch Adams*, but I've been warned it's a medically themed weepy that will make me physically ill. If only I could find something funny, thrilling, scary, and with a message—a superior piece of entertainment that will change my life. Like *Titanic*.

Across Connecticut Avenue, in an 11-seat screening room in the bowels of a stately red-brick mansion, I find my cinematic and spiritual salvation. It's a cute little flick called *Orientation*, a science fiction/comedy/human-uptift number filled with special effects, spine-tingling chills, and exotic locations. The cast is top-notch: John Travolta and Kirstie Alley together for the first time since the *Look Who's Talking* films, plus Anne Archer and Isaac Hayes, the soul singer now known as *South Park's* Chef.

And to top it all off, it's free!

The catch? Depending on whom you believe, it could be a tiny little thing called...your mind. That's because the screening room is inside the Founding Church of Scientology, and *Orientation*, while still the most compelling movie at any theater in town, remains a piece of slick, uniquely creepy propaganda. The film may emphasize that 65 court decisions around the world have concluded that Scientology is a true religion, but for my money, these guys know their way around a script.

Orientation, made in 1996 and shown at Scientology churches worldwide, is supposedly offered every other hour from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., but the church will screen it whenever a prospective member—me—happens to enter the building. In the cozy, wood-paneled lobby, I'm handed a glossary defining Scientology terms like "case gain" and "Class V," as well as difficult words that show up in the film such as "Internet" and "NFL alumnus."

The 36-minute film begins on an epic scale, with hurtling asteroids, religious imagery, and a voice-over about man's eternal desire for spiritual enhancement. A grandiose, upbeat score, consisting of syn-

thesizers and strings, provides appropriate bombast. At one point, a God-like character holds a monkey, but I don't catch what it's about. Then our guide appears: a beatific, clean-cut man who looks like a bland television personality.

And he probably is: All the Scientology officials in the film are played by generically attractive actors who appear vaguely familiar. These Stepford thespians are either Scientologists themselves or just really, really desperate for work.

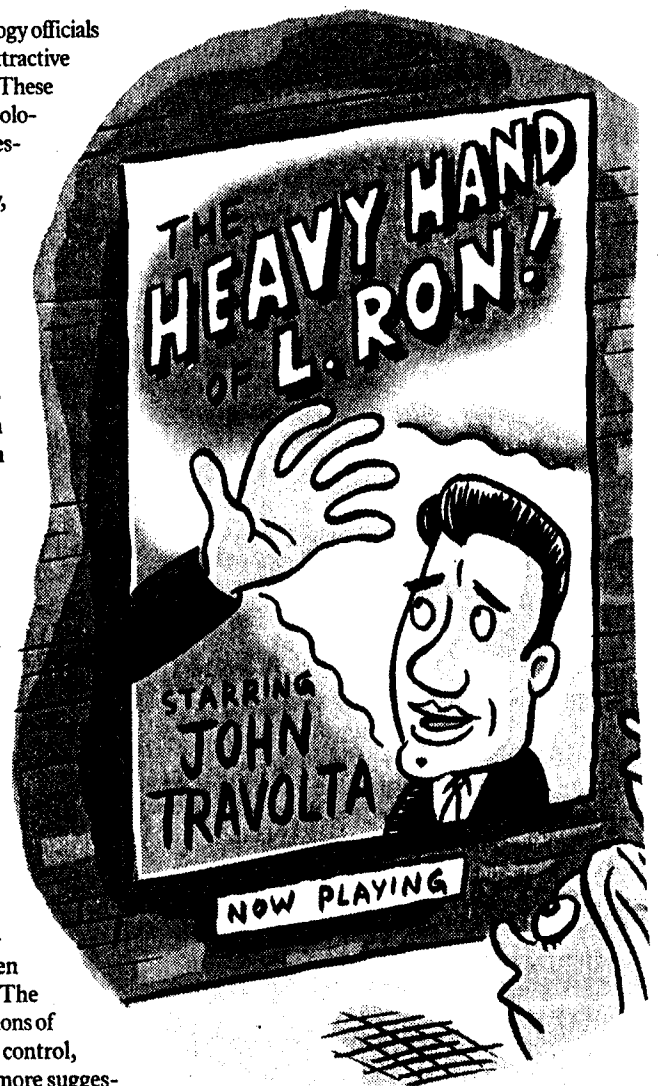
"Since Scientology is relatively new, you may hear the question asked, 'Is Scientology a bona fide religion?'" says the guide. (Never mind that Scientology is often described by former members as controlling and cultlike; apparently, it's scrutinized only because it's a recent invention.) We search for the answer to that question via a tour that starts at the L. Ron Hubbard Life Exhibition at Scientology's Celebrity Center International in Hollywood.

The hall showcases the controversial figure who founded the religion 45 years ago. Hubbard coined the words "Scientology," defined by the film as "the study and handling of the spirit in relationship to itself, universes, and other life," and "Dianetics," or "what the soul is doing to the body." According to the film, Hubbard was into some serious shit: "The government knew that [Dianetics] worked and wanted it for themselves to monopolize the field of the mind; they even tried to force Ron into service.... The government had been spending millions of dollars experimenting with mind control, all in a grand scheme to make men more suggestive, but Dianetics could undo their efforts to bend men's minds and brainwash them."

So far, so good. It's we the people versus a bad, bad government. Standard movie fare in the age of *The X-*

Files. But Scientology seems to have its own brain-washing apparatus, as we discover when we meet the director of processing. What he "processes," you see, are minds. He supervises the church's "auditing," one-on-one counseling in which Scientologists hold metal cans connected by electrode to an "E-meter" that measures "mental energy."

The director of processing whips out some fancy, Kinko's-style color-coded charts to show the therapy's effectiveness. "These graphs are done before and after a person has received 12-and-a-half hours of auditing," he says, pointing to various squiggly lines. "These are personality traits... Also, the person's IQ or intelligence increased, and he became 14 points



brighter." The charts are completely devoid of context: We don't know what the scale is, how scientific the results are, how "personality traits" are measured

or even defined. It's like those weight-loss commercials that offer instant results without ever really explaining how the results can be accomplished. But every film requires a certain suspension of disbelief.

The film neglects to mention that auditing can cost as much as \$1,000 per hour at the upper levels, instead focusing on its amazing upside. "With that increase in IQ, he must be finding it much easier to solve his problems," says the director of processing, "and this personality improvement must be making it far easier to get along in life." Who, after all, wouldn't want to get along easier in life?

Once we've been shown how Hubbard kept Scientology's powerful secrets away from a government conspiracy, the film introduces a new bad guy: psychotherapy, the sworn enemy of Scientologists everywhere.

The director of processing's face turns grave, and he speaks with solemn pauses:

"Psychology and psychiatry are proven failures: *Stone Age*. Their emphasis on drug-ging and punishing people just makes our job tougher." He dismisses these methods with a joke. "Only a raving lunatic would try to harm Dianetics and Scientology, or Scientologists, for that matter. They need psychiatric help," he laughs. "That would finish them."

Scientology scriptures describe critics as "suppressive persons" and "chaos merchants." But to save us from the chaos, Scientology provides a very '90s antidote: celebrities. (The religion was born in Southern California, after all.)

They come at the end of a long parade of testimonials from Scientologists identified only by their professions—"AUTOMOTIVE DETAILER," "ASIAN ART EXPERT," "MOTHER," and so on.

We're put at ease once the "ACTRESS" appears. "To tell you the honest-to-God truth, without Scientology I would be dead," says Kirstie Alley, who believes Scientology helped her kick drugs.

"ACTOR" John Travolta cuts to the heart: "Well, basically, there's no part of my life that Scientology hasn't helped." (The duo were more verbose when they appeared recently on ABC's *20/20* to defend Scientology after the organization was charged with two felonies—abuse or neglect of a disabled adult and unauthorized practice of medicine—following the death of an isolated, dehydrated member at the Clearwater, Fla., headquarters.)



Lloyd Dangle

If Travolta's presence is comforting—an Oscar-nominated actor can't be crazy!—an unnerving climax quickly spins *Orientation* back into orbit: Our guide walks slowly toward the camera while the music ominously intensifies. Our planet will eventually be extinguished, we learn—yet our souls are immortal. Scientology is our only hope for survival. "Now we could play this very low-key," the guide says. "We could sort of giggle and say, 'We can help you a little to lead a slightly happier life.' ... But that would be like offering someone a diamond and saying it was glass."

He continues, eyes steely and his tone threatening—like Rod Serling without modern contextual irony. "Right this instant, you are at the threshold of your next trillion years. You will live it in shivering, agonized darkness, or you will live it triumphantly in the light. The choice is yours.... [If you join Scientology] you open the door to your own future. If you say otherwise, you slam tomorrow shut in your face. I'm sorry, but that's the way it really is."

The backing music swells to something approaching a heavenly choir: "If you leave this room after seeing this film, and walk out and never mention Scientology again, you are perfectly free to do so. It would be stupid, but you can do it. You could also dive off a bridge or blow your brains out. That is your choice."

"But if you don't walk out that way, if you continue with Scientology, we will be very happy with you, and *you* will be very happy with you. You will have proved that *you* are a friend of yours."

As I ponder my alternatives—to blow my brains out or live triumphantly in the light—the film ends with a final word on the screen: "HELLO."

Before he became a symbol for all that's good and right in the world, L. Ron Hubbard was a science fiction writer. Travolta's trying to bring one of his novels to the screen, and it'd make a pretty good show, full of aliens and spaceships and the like.

Better yet would be a full-length feature version of one of Scientology's founding myths, one you won't find in *Orientation*: The story is that an evil ruler named Xenu implanted Thetans (or sprits) in volcanoes in Teegeack (now Earth) during an intergalactic Holocaust 75 million years ago. That'll beat a biblical epic like *Prince of Egypt*, with its prosaic parting of the waters, any day.

I'm confident, though, that neither of those films—what with their linear narratives and the like—would leave me as creeped-out as the high-tech infomercial inside the mansion's screening room. As I leave the theater, a Scientologist is ready to sell me introductory books, sign me up for classes, and demonstrate his E-meter. But I resist, promising to return within the next trillion years. **CP**