

This Is It

Directed by Kenny Ortega
Rated PG

By Steve Norton
Rating: **** (out of 5)

This is it.

When he made these comments, Jackson surely had no idea that his words would serve a dual purpose. In context, he simply meant that his latest concert experience would be his final foray into the public music scene. Having signed for 50 shows in London throughout the summer, he was ready to move on. (Although rumours abounded that, should the shows be successful, they would inevitably lead to a massive world tour.)

Of course, after his death last June, we can now see that these words carried with them a sense of irony as well. Indeed, this cinematic journey is “it” per se. Built upon behind-the-scenes footage of Jackson’s rehearsals, director Kenny Ortega’s documentary serves as a final farewell to the man whom many have argued was the greatest musical entertainer of all time.

Really, the film is fascinating on a number of levels. On the surface, it is both a rare and intimate portrait of a truly talented artist at work. Yes, all the hits are there as Jackson claims that he wants to “play the songs his fans want to hear”. We are treated to experience elaborate and often eye-popping productions—albeit rehearsals—of his most popular tunes such as *Beat It*, *The Way You Make Me Feel*, and, of course, *Thriller*. Yes, he could still dance. Despite reports that he had lost a step, Jackson clearly maintains the choreography that made him a superstar. (He even throws in a short moonwalk near the end of the film.) Although, I believe that Ortega manages to accomplish more than simply compiling a ‘best-of’ playlist of Jackson’s catalog.

In many ways, Ortega’s documentary accomplishes exactly what it sets out to do—to offer a portrait of grace to a man who had been shamed by public controversy. Having had his career—and life—destroyed by allegations of sexual misappropriations with children, Jackson had become an ever-increasing shadow of his former self. Derided by the media and heavily in debt, Jackson had long since become a laughingstock in the public eye. However, *This Is It* isn’t about that. Ortega places the camera squarely upon Jackson the artist and his music and, in doing so, manages to remind the people why he was beloved in the first place. This is a raw picture of a man and his creative mind. There is no hint of a tainted past. Ortega seeks to demonstrate the genuine heart and soul of a man who had been written off and was seeking a fresh start. Author Philip Yancey describes grace as the ‘last, best word’ due to its ability to breathe new life into the lost. There is no question that this is what Ortega seeks to accomplish in this endeavour by separating Jackson from the controversies surrounding him. We all deserve a second chance—and Jackson is no different.

In addition, this portrait of Jackson also serves as an intriguing reminder of the nature of celebrity in our culture. Jackson has always demonstrated himself to be a global superstar of the musical scene. Although often vilified in North America, he was almost deified in other parts of the world. Make no mistake; this film takes

the latter position as opposed to the former. (Even his signature pose of holding his arms wide with his head back could be seen as a Christ-pose.) Jackson instills hero worship amongst the crew that clearly feel privileged to be collaborating with him. In fact, one of the most interesting moments in the film follows his performance of *Billie Jean* when director Kenny Ortega approaches him and claims that they just had 'church'. Ortega's comment here is intriguing to say the least. In doing so, he presents a viewpoint that is common to our culture by focusing its worship upon those who can entertain. After all, what really is the difference between a Coldplay or a Hillsong concert, other than the focal point of the artists and their fans? In a media culture where the mantle of fame is placed on everyone from Britney Spears to a boy in a balloon, the term 'celebrity' is thrown around generously. There is no doubt of either Jackson's musical genius or his cultural impact. Yet, Ortega wants to remind us that he was much more than that. To Ortega, Jackson was nothing short of an icon; a symbol of hope for those who needed comfort.

This sort of cultural symbolism is essential for us to understand as we engage our world for the Kingdom of God. In order to offer genuine hope, we must truly understand where our society places their value. *This Is It* is an excellent example of this. By reminding the fans of Jackson's cultural impact and importance, Ortega's documentary seeks to move beyond simple rehearsal footage to almost theological reverence for its subject. Nevertheless, in light of this, this film also offers a portrait of a man who simply wanted a second chance from those who had abandoned him. In short, it is a plea for grace from the disenfranchised... and that is a plea that cannot be ignored.

After all, this is it.