

## BRINGING OUT THE DEAD

US, 1999, d. Martin Scorsese



Frank is a burnt-out New York City ambulance driver. His desperation comes from feeling more and more responsible for not being able to save the lives of the people he attends. He is particularly haunted by the ghost of a young asthmatic woman who failed to respond to his treatment. He tries to get himself fired. However, he is continually requested to fill emergency schedules. He drinks, cannot sleep and has love/hate relationships with his fellow-drivers.

At the hospital Frank encounters a young woman named Mary. He has been unable to revive her father. He runs into her on and off when he returns to the hospital. She is a former drug addict. Frank comes to rely on her supplier (whom he later saves from falling from a balcony) for drugs to help him sleep. Mary's father keeps telling Frank to let him go. He finally does.

Frank comes to the help of a number of people, especially an addict whom his partner beats to death. Frank wonders where God is in his work. He also wonders what his own place is in the misery of the streets.

Director Martin Scorsese is well-known for his portrayal of the Mean Streets of New York city. These mean streets reappear in *Taxi Driver*, in *Goodfellas* and in these glimpses of a good-willed but exhausted ambulance driver. The misery of people on the New York streets is harrowing. The audience is drawn into sharing the anguish and despair of the hero, Frank (and he is heroic), played with depth by Nicolas Cage. Cage had already demonstrated his capacity for this kind of role in his Oscar-winning performance as the despairing alcoholic in *Leaving Las Vegas*. Cage's then wife, Patricia Arquette, appears as Mary.

The screenplay is by Scorsese's long-time collaborator, Paul Schrader, himself a director of distinction. Schrader's religious concerns are given prominence in Frank's discussions about the place of God and his own role in the lives of marginalised people. Frank speaks as a frustrated but hardworking and dedicated ambulance man who wishes at times he could be elsewhere. Yet, it is he who becomes the physical and even spiritual salvation for those he rescues. This is a very sombre film. It takes its audience into the depths of those who cry for help.

