

***Doubt*: Poignant Performances in a Story Well Told**

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"Doubt can be as powerful and sustaining a bond as certainty," proclaims Father Flynn to his full mass of attentive parishioners. His pithy and intellectually honest sermon transforms a troubling theological ambiguity into an opportunity for compassion and reflection.



The middle school students of St. Nicholas' Catholic Church and School light up when this youthful priest thoughtfully fields questions about dancing with girls or offers tough love tips about basketball and life. Father Flynn also wants to liven up the Christmas program by introducing a secular tune or two. Why? "Because it's fun," he says.

In the days before Vatican II, Father Flynn believes in a welcoming

congregation and progressive education. With a wink and a smirk, he undermines the domineering discipline of his stylistic nemesis, Sister Aloysius. He understands that good teaching starts with compassion. "There is nothing wrong with love," he admonishes.

The Catholic Church of the 1960s needs priests like Father Flynn. And yet, he may be a child molester.

So goes *Doubt*, the new film adapted and directed by John Patrick Shanley from his Pulitzer Prize- and Tony Award-winning play.

As the only African-American student at St. Nicholas' in the Bronx, young Donald Miller craves paternal attention; Father Flynn (Philip Seymour Hoffman) takes an interest. St. Nicholas' dictatorial principal, Sister Aloysius (Meryl Streep), already suspects her cocky and younger superior of blasphemous tendencies due to his soft edges and aversion to moral certainties. When an idealistic young teacher, Sister Jane (Amy Adams), reports that Donald returned from a private meeting with Father Flynn visibly upset and with the smell of alcohol on his breath, the stern principal pounces.

The resulting verbal and spiritual battle raises more than a little doubt about Father Flynn's innocence, Sister Aloysius' motives, and the impact that vigilance toward sin has upon the faithful.

When an acclaimed play becomes a film, critics fall over themselves decrying how poorly the effort survives the transition. Either it appears too "stagy" on film or film washes out the theatrical qualities that made it so good on stage. The intimacy and immediacy of live theatre

a tight ensemble of four gifted actors. Still, fans of the play should be grateful for this transposition to film. Now millions may experience Shanley's capably modified meditation on the virtues and perils of uncertainty.

And there are differences. While the play refers to the students only through adult conversation, the film repeatedly shows classrooms simmering with repressed adolescents. Once suspicion arises, every seemingly innocent interaction between the blue-uniformed youths and Father Flynn takes on disquieting resonance. The addition of classroom scenes also permits the idealistic Sister Jane (played with adorable doe eyes by Adams) space to interact with her students. Her deep compassion for her young learners balances their rascally ability to exploit her naïveté.

Other positives of the filmic approach include the exterior shots of the 1960s Bronx, all red brick and pre-white flight. The slow pans across working-class Irish and Italian neighborhoods prefigure the racial divisions simmering within the drama and the country. This place is about to explode, in more ways than one.

Shanley takes wise advantage of film's ability to cross cut to contrast the gender gap existing within the Catholic religious orders. A shot of priests swigging alcohol, stabbing slabs of nearly raw prime rib, and guffawing like fraternity brothers immediately precedes a shot of aging nuns stoically waiting for an oblate to pour them milk before eating in obedient silence from their perfectly proportioned plates. Through juxtaposition, the divide between the constructed worlds of Father Flynn and Sister Aloysius becomes a cultural grand canyon. Only one of them can survive this story.

Although more dispersed in the film than in the play, the juicy acting roles survive. Is there a better actor working today than Philip Seymour Hoffman? As Father Flynn, he rides an uncanny teeter-totter, appearing innocent and guilty, benevolent and petty, paternal and creepy—sometimes within the same frame. It is a nuanced and subtle performance.

As Sister Aloysius, Streep shows less restraint. Although lethally funny in the role of the austere battle-axe, she chews on the scenery pretty hard. Fortunately, a few flashes of understatement, such as the subtle humiliation Streep reveals when Father Flynn belligerently sits in her chair, level the performance. Also, Shanley's screenplay provides enough human moments to stave off parody. We witness the otherwise indiscreet Sister Aloysius maternally cover for an elderly sister going blind. And her sheer conviction repeatedly reminds us that, in spite of cruel tactics, Sister Aloysius may be saving a young boy from a pedophile.

The most riveting performance in *Doubt* arguably comes from the smaller role of Mrs. Miller (Viola Davis). As the alleged victim's mother, Davis receives only a few minutes to respond to Sister Aloysius' reports of sexual misconduct. She uses her modest screen time to muster a wholly compelling expression of maternal love. Mrs. Miller's unexpected efforts to protect her young son are both difficult to reconcile and impossible to forget.

The authentic portrayal of Christian faith is an important feature of both the film and play versions of *Doubt*. No major character can claim moral perfection. Sins of weakness, pride, and worse infect them all. What seems remarkable about Shanley's depiction, however, is that these broken creatures unabashedly endeavor to live their faith. They engage in the liturgical rituals of Catholicism not for show or fancy, but to grow closer to their creator. Not a whiff of hypocrisy comes off of them. Like the film as a whole, the central characters in *Doubt* take their faith and their community seriously.

Often, such highbrow dramas treat Christians as either misguided idiots or Machiavellian hypocrites. I, for one, find pleasure in thoughtful representations of Christians as we more often are: sincere, broken, well intended, and desperately in need of God's grace.

The Catholic Church still needs the progressiveness of Father Flynn. It also needs the kindness of Sister Jane and the strength of Sister Aloysius.

And the larger church needs more dramas like *Doubt*.

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