

Review: Doubt

Submitted by Kimberly Gadette on Fri, 01/30/2009 - 12:41.



Presenting *Doubt* or, considers **Kimberly Gadette**, a prayer for the lying.

Pointed fingers, whispered rumors, fabricated tales – lives destroyed on the shaky ground of veiled innuendo. Our cinematic past is rife with stories of unfounded accusation: *The Childrens' Hour*, *The Crucible*, *Atonement*.

But in these instances, the pointing finger belonged to an impressionable adolescent. In *Doubt*, the accuser is not only an adult, but a Catholic nun, committed to living a holy life in service to her God. Heavens. That's some nasty habit you just tripped up on, Sister.

Based on the Pulitzer and Tony Award-winning play of the same name, *Doubt's* playwright, John Patrick Shanley (*Moonstruck*, *Joe Versus The Volcano*) adapted and directed the project himself. With the leads worth their weight in Oscar gold, readily taking to Shanley's words as supplicants to the wafer, *Doubt* has accumulated a churchyard full of nominations and awards, including Meryl Streep's latest SAG win for Best Actress. So what's *Doubt* about?



Shanley called on his boyhood memories of his Catholic school days in the Bronx to relate a story about the societal, ethical and moral clash of wills within the overheated walls of a neighborhood parish, circa 1964. Father Flynn (Philip Seymour Hoffman), the well-liked priest at St. Nicholas Church, believes in keeping up with the times, a proponent of the latest precepts of Vatican II. He finds an adversary in head nun and school principal Sister Beavvier (Streep), who openly despises him for all he stands for: his break with tradition, his popularity and above all, his unassailable status as her superior. When young Sister James (Amy Adams) reports her concerns about the school's only black student to Beavvier, suspecting that there may be an unholy relationship between the boy and the priest, Beavvier can barely conceal her delight. "So ... it's happened," she says, her upper lip twitching as if she can almost taste Father Flynn's demise.

Her crow-like visage peering out from a body sheathed in black, flying enraged down the halls or perching above the schoolyard, Beavvier is the embodiment of literature's malevolent raven, a presage of doom: the filmmakers feast on the Dickens/Poe/Hitchcock iconography. In case we miss the message, the camera frequently tilts upward, taking in exterior shots of corvids outlined against threatening skies. With her flattened Bronx accent, using the consonant-ending 't' as a weapon of disdain, she's Torquemada with a 'tude. With her nun's bonnet acting as both physical and figurative blinders, she is shut off from any possibility of peripheral vision, of any perspective. It is ironic that while Beavvier thinks of herself as a staunch traditionalist, her impotent railing against the reigning male authority is prescient of far more modern times. In 1964, no nun could have shattered the diocese's stained glass ceiling. But it's fascinating to watch her try.



Blinders also affect Adams' Sister James, the young nun who first stirs up Beavvier's dormant suspicions. Sister James knows that she's causing trouble, yet exercises no restraint before lighting that particular Roman candle. As written, her motivation is unclear; as acted, Adams gives an uncharacteristically shrill, one-note performance, made all the more obvious in contrast to the two towering leads.

And then there's Hoffman's genial Father Flynn: kind, warm and smart, utterly baffled by the furious Sister Beavvier. No bonnets constrict his vision; he is clear-eyed and open-faced. Which makes his proclaimed innocence – if it is indeed an orchestrated deceit – all the more diabolical. Hoffman and Streep are two of the cinema's great modern titans; to see them battle is worth the price of admission alone. Lastly, there's the subtle heartbreak of Viola Davis' beautifully-rendered mother, whose sole scene with Streep brings in a much-needed note of humanity, even while Shanley is madly, concurrently sketching in the politics of the day in the background.

But unlike this season's other hit-play-turned-film, *Frost/Nixon*, *Doubt* smacks of the theatrical. Shanley only half-heartedly attempts to open up the film on two occasions: the opening throwaway scene, and later, with Viola Davis. Some of the more heated encounters, while engaging, are simply too wordy for the medium of film.

If *Doubt* had been handed over to a veteran director who was more comfortable with letting the ambiguities of the source material play out, it's possible that even more accolades could have piled up in its coffers.

Proving once again that the devil's in the details.

Rating on a scale of 5 trips to confession: 4

Release dates: US: December 12, 2008; UK: February 6, 2009

Written and directed by: John Patrick Shanley

Based on the play by: John Patrick Shanley

Cast: Meryl Streep, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Amy Adams, Viola Davis

Rating: US: PG-13; UK: 15

Running time: 104 minutes



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